CHAPTER III

W. H. Auden: An Acute Analyst of a Disordered Decade

W. H. Auden (1907-1973) of the nineteen thirties was formed by the tone and temper of a devil's decade of political and social crisis. The prevailing conditions in the thirties were hardly conducive to the happiness and harmony in man's life; they were rather at the root of much of the social and spiritual decay of the day. The Orators, An English Study (1933) presents the pivotal question of Auden's poetry of the decade as a whole:

What do you think about
England, this country of ours
Where nobody is well? 1

Auden tried to ascertain the causes that were responsible for the state of degeneration. He reacted sharply against the state of things which disturbed him deeply, and he rose above his contemporaries in delineating the nature of civic disorder and political anarchy, and the general mood of despondence, panic, fear, and frustration. The following is one of many such examples:

Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,
Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:
This land, cut off, will not communicate,
... Near you, taller than grass,
Ears poise before decision, scented danger.

(Poem III, Poems 1927-1931)

Poem XXVIII, Poems 1927-1931 is another example which aptly portrays the sense of fear and anxiety, waste and despair, that is character-
istic of Auden's poetry of the thirties:

Nor even is despair your own, when swiftly
Comes general assault on your ideas of safety:
That sense of famine, central anguish felt
For goodness wasted at peripheral fault.

Auden was intent on making the reader deeply aware of the complex problems of the day. He wanted to bring about a regeneration of the sick individual in order to establish an ideal society. Auden's poetry also expresses the poet's indignation at the social inequality of the time. It is often satirical and, now and then, has the vehemence of propaganda. There are three aspects to his reading of the scene: psychological, social, and economic, and it will be seen in the course of this study that all the three are interlinked. Combining an intense interest in the human mind with an equally keen desire to reform society, Auden, the son of a physician, himself assumes the role of a healer, making elaborate diagnosis of the social and personal ills.

This habit of outlook manifests itself in Auden from the time he visited Germany in 1928. The influence of John Layard and Homer Lane convinced him that an illness was psychological in its origin; that, for example, lying caused tonsilitis and sore throat; that obstinacy brought on rheumatism and that stifled creativity caused cancer. This last psychological belief is reflected in the manner of slap-stick humour in the ballad 'Miss Gee'. The grim conclusion regarding repressed old maids is that they end up with cancer:

'It's as if there had to be some outlet
For their foiled creative fire.'

(Poem XI, Poems 1936-1939)

Christopher Isherwood reports in his Lions and Shadows(1937)
that Homer Lane and Layard taught Auden that disobedience to the inner law of nature resulted in crime and disease. They believed that instincts were natively healthy and that when they were stifled, they turned man into an inhibited neurotic creature:

Born free, the instincts lay everywhere in chains in modern society, and illness, both cultural and personal, followed with all such malignant symptoms lumped collectively under the heading of death-wish.\(^2\)

In more recent times, W.W. Robson has stated that, Auden had become convinced of the underlying identity of physiological and psychological ills. And this psycho-somatic diagnosis he extended, ambitiously, into the political and social mal du siecle.\(^3\)

The idea that modern urban culture atrophies the very essence of life and vitality, that the result is disease and death, and that the cure lies within the individual, was already familiar to Auden from his study of D.H. Lawrence and Blake, and was further confirmed by his study of the theories of George Groddeck. The influence of Freud also upon him was considerable. Auden came to believe in the Freudian concept of the 'id' as the life-force which, when repressed, results in ill-health and disease - symptoms of a general death-wish. The life-force's enemy is the rational mind, the 'super ego', which Blake referred to as the 'will'. Thus, the individual was conceived of as the battle-ground between 'id' and 'super ego'. It was this part of Freud's theories that influenced Auden most. In his early poems, we have, in the words of Justin Replogle,

a psychological maker, immersed in a psychological way of looking at things. Society and individuals are sick because men and their culture have repressed vital human for-
ces. The super ego has nearly defeated the 'id'. Cure demands a change of heart, a change in the individual. The power of the super ego must be overthrown and the languishing 'id' released from its fetters. This is the most obvious message of Auden's early poetry. ... This is the 'Freudian' climate of the work from about 1928 to 1933. Auden concludes that when vital forces are repressed, they turn inwards and become self-destructive, and, the evolutionary process, life's upward drive, is halted. Instead of progression there is retrogression, symptomised by neurosis and disease. The life-force becomes the death-force - the Adversary or the Supreme Antagonist, which twists and warps the human psyche. For Auden, the healers who fought the Adversary, one way or another, were

Freud and Groddeck at their candid studies
Of the mind and body of man.

(Poem XXXVII, Poems 1931-1936)

and

Lawrence, Blake and Homer Lane, once healers in their English land.

(Poem XXXI, Poems 1927-1931)

The Adversary may appear as the "dragon" - the devourer (Poem XXIV, Poems 1931-1936), "the hump-backed surgeons / and the scissor man" (Poem XI, Poems 1931-1936), and in various other frightfully vague shapes. For Auden, these are, in the words of Richard Hoggart, images for the enemy, the destroyer of life and love, whose agents are malaise, coward-ice, inability 'to cope', inertia, the longing for death, frustration, the ingrown will, reason without emotion, self-regard; the Enemy is all the fear and negation which helps to dry and deaden.
Thus Auden justifies the urgent need for cure. But, as pointed out by Justin Roplogle, cure demands a change of heart in the individual and the destruction of the super ego to release the vital forces. Auden arouses an awareness in man of the necessity to choose between life and death. Those who choose to live are urged to challenge and to transcend above the mortifying forces within themselves, to encounter the Adversary with boldness, and to destroy it. But those who allow themselves to be chained by their diffidence are reprimanded as cowards who

Wheel death anywhere
In [their] invalid chair.

(Poem XXII, Poems 1927-1931)

Such types who are averse to change are further charged thus:

You're a long way off becoming a saint
As long as you suffer from any complaint:
But if you don't there's no denying
The chances are that you're not trying.

(Poem XXXII, Poems 1927-1931)

and again,

... no one goes
Further than railhead or the ends of piers,
Will neither go nor send his son
Further through foothills than the rotting stack
Where gaitered gamekeeper with dog and gun
Will shout 'Turn back'.

(Poem XXXV, Poems 1927-1931)

They turn back to become slaves of the Adversary. This Adversary first appears in Poem IX, Poems 1927-1931, who "put too easy questions / On lonely roads". It is owing to its inverse nature that

... excellent hands have turned to commonness.
One staring too long, went blind in a tower,
One sold all his manors to fight, broke through, and faltered.

In Poem XXX, Poems 1927-1931, the enemy appears as the "Supreme Antagonist", who works upon the minds of the descendants of aristocratic families and of economic tycoons. Auden shows that it is in the middle and upper classes that the super ego is nurtured most, and, as a consequence, behind all the facade, they remain thoroughly sick. The reader is urged to consider bourgeois civilization from a distance — "As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman", to view the "garden party" and the contemporary scene at the Sport Hotel, linked by radio to the countryside and the farm houses. The bourgeois lot with all their class trappings, go through the proper forms of behaviour, but they are centrally weak and confused, and emotionally and spiritually sterile. So they are

Supplied with feelings by an efficient band
Relayed elsewhere to farmers and their dogs.

Auden accepted the left-wing observation that capitalist society was in decay. He refers to the "high born mining-captains"; the ruined boys - "Those handsome and diseased youngsters"; the lonely women - "solitary agents in the country parishes" who are all afflicted by the "Supreme Antagonist". The financier will no longer need his typist, for

The game is up for him and for the others,
Who, thinking, pace in slippers on the lawns
Of College Quad or Cathedral Close,
Who are born nurses, who live in shorts
Sleeping with people and playing fives.

All such doomed people will discover that their time is up. The "Supreme Antagonist" that Auden talks of here, is a force which
functions both as an internal as well as external force of destruction. Internally it works as the death-wish in the bourgeois "Seekers after happiness". Its external working is seen in "silted harbours, derelict works / In strangled orchards and the silent comb." Such industrial stagnancy will make them realize their part in producing it, and of its grave consequences.

In the final section of the poem, Auden warns the middle class escapists that their attempt to get away by means of motoring and its pleasures, will only lead to frustration:

You cannot be away, then, no
Not though you pack to leave within an hour,
Escaping humming down arterial roads:
The date was yours; the prey to fugues,
Irregular breathing and alternate ascendancies.

The last few lines confirm the fate of the bourgeoisie - their final moment of destruction:

After some haunted migratory years
To disintegrate on an instant in the explosion of mania
Or lapse forever into a classic fatigue.

In Poem V, Poems 1931-1936, the Enemy personified as "the white death" keeps a vigilant watch "on all those people about us, leading / Their quiet horrified lives".

Poem XVI, Poems 1931-1936, reveals the fate of the ruling class that refuses to adopt the changing conditions of life. The genetic pattern is so repeated that it is seen as public evidence of the death-wish of a whole class:

'Already behind you your last evening hastens up
And all the customs your society has chosen
Harden themselves into the unbreakable
Habits of death.
Has not your long affair with death
Of late become increasingly more serious;
Do you not find
Him growing more attractive every day?
You shall go under and help him with the
crops,
Be faithful to him, and to your friends
Remain indifferent.'

Again, in Poem XXI, Poems 1931-1936, Auden makes mention of "The common wish for death" as an admonition of its danger.

Auden's description of the working of the death-wish ultimately portrays a landscape of the living-dead, much akin to that of Eliot's Wasteland:

He who was living is now dead
We who were living are now dying
With a little patience.

(V, 'What the Thunder said')

Deeply concerned about the plight of the especially neurotic, Auden refers to the lost, the unhappy, and the lonely:

So many have forgotten how
To say I Am and would be
Lost, if they could in history.

... No wonder then so many die of grief
So many are so lonely as they die.

Another reference to this aspect is to be seen in Poem XVI, Poems 1931-1936, where Auden describes the prevalent situation thus:

It is the isolation and the fear,
The mood itself;
It is the body of the absent lover,
An image to the would-be hero of the soul.

Once again, we may compare this frightfully negative aspect - the loneliness that haunts individuals - with the mood reflected in the following lines of Eliot's Wasteland:
'My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad.
Stay with me.
'Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

(II, 'A Game of Chess')

However, it is Auden who makes the most extensive analysis of the displaced persons of the heart.

Auden has presented a precise record of his diagnosis of a moribund culture in the charade, *Paid on Both Sides* (1930). It is a fantasy of psychic malady centering on the mutual hatred of two families, the Nowers and the Shaws, both sides avenging the death of a member of the family. The charade is an ingenious piece of synthesis between politics and psychology. Its political implication is that the decayed capitalist society is largely to blame for the continued family feud. As W.W. Robson observes,

Through a cryptic story of hereditary feuds it conveys the poet's sense that English bourgeois civilization has struck an 'air-pocket' of history.

But the underlying theme is of universal hatred and violence. Auden has shown here that the basic psychic weakness of hatred leads to the destruction of love, and that jealousy, as influenced by mothers, is the root of such hatred. Auden uses this mother-son relationship as a symbol of the power of the past, as a claim of nature that excludes the mind, and as the extreme possessiveness of one person over another for the sake of survival. Auden employs the technique of personifying the life-force - 'Man-Woman', which infers that the individuals of a diseased society are sick, as they have failed to be guided by love as a creative force. At the end, the chorus sums up the moral of the charade thus:
Though he believe it, no man is strong.  
He thinks to be called the fortunate,  
To bring home a wife, to live long.  

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

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

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

Auden has made an aggressive attack on the state of England  
and the English Establishment in The Orators, An English Study  
which evokes the England of a troubled decade reeling under eco­nomically depression, social inequities, and the threat of war. He has  
analysed the psychological ailments of the individuals of that dis­tressed age, against the background of a social disorder, and has  
envisaged a transformation of the decadent society through righteous­ness in thought and action.  

The theme of psychic weakness and failure is used extensive­ly in this work. In Book I, called 'The Initiates', Auden aims at an  
awareness of the realities of the present world, and confronts the  
reader with a series of rhetorical questions:  

What were the dead like? What sort of people  
Are we living with now? Why are we here?  
What are we going to do?  

He, then, presents a list of some odd types of people who include  
those who have been guilty of excessive self-love, those who show  
excessive concern for others, "the defective lovers" characterised by  
inertia, and the perverted lovers. The frailty of each of them has
been sharply stated.

In The Orators, Auden has also examined in depth the political and economic issues of the day. For the convenience of treatment they are referred to in the later part of this chapter, in so far as they are relevant for the present study.

Auden's sardonic satire on the social system of his day can be seen in another of his works, The Dog Beneath the Skin. Here the writers present before us the ruling class as seen from a 'dog's eye view':

As a dog, I learnt with what a mixture of fear, bullying, and condescending kindness you treat those whom you consider your inferiors, but on whom you are dependent for your pleasures.10

It is an exposure of fascist tendencies at work in the lower levels of society. Commenting upon the passage, Valentine Cunningham remarked:

At first glance, the ills, the neuroses, the looniness of European politics appear to be the main concern of The Dog; closer scrutiny reveals the play to be far more animated over the intrusion of fascist militarism into this 'English village'.11

The irony of the situation is all too obvious. The predicament of the ruling class who look down upon the working class on whom they have to depend upon for their livelihood, is sharply focussed here.

In The Ascent of F6 (1936), A Tragedy in Two Acts, written in collaboration with Isherwood, Auden throws the suggestion of an Oedipus Complex afflicting all England. The work is a psychological exposure of motives, presented in an allegorical guise. The critical undertone of the work is not lost upon the reader.
In Poem XXIV, *Poems 1927-1931*, Auden reveals the hidden weaknesses of the subconscious as symptoms of a failing will. Life appears meaningless to the protagonist, who is unable to decide and do anything positive:

It's no use raising a shout.
No, Honey, you can cut that right out.
I don't want any more hugs;
Make me some fresh tea, fetch me some rugs.
Here am I, here are you:
But what does it mean? What are we going to do?

Poem XII, *Poems 1927-1931*, affords us a glimpse at characters with psychic disorders. They are the tourists seeking heroes who will deliver them from their boring and uneventful lives. But, just like those who retreat to the chapels and hills to pray, the tourists are actually indulging themselves in fantasies, an attitude which itself testifies to their neurotic state. They are,

The summer visitors
Still come from far and wide,
Choosing their spots to view
The prize competitors,
Each thinking that he will
Find heroes in the wood,
Far from the capital.

Auden tells them unequivocally that all true leaders have migrated to "Cape Wrath" to prepare for the impending world catastrophe.

In Poem 11 of 'Choruses and Songs' (*The English Auden*), the neurotics appear as "nervous people who will never marry" and as living "upon dividends in the old-world cottages / With an animal for friend or a volume of memoirs". They are self-restricted people, bound to lead a closed, inhibited, and miserly life. The neurotics are basically failures, averse to healthy, developmental changes, to the responsibilities of adult freedom, and to the inescapable demands
of the human condition. They are rendered aimless because of the shattering of the will. They look upon life with cynicism and hate, and always try to evade issues. They are escapists who feel the need to compensate for the insufficiency in themselves by taking up various defence measures. There are many examples of such escapism in Poem 10 of this work:

Some turn to the time-honoured solutions of sickness and crime: some to the latest model of aeroplane or the sport of the moment. Some to good works, to a mechanical ritual of giving. Some have adopted an irrefragable system of beliefs or a political programme, others have escaped to the ascetic mountains or taken refuge in the family circle, among the boys on the bar-stools, on the small uncritical islands.

Sickness is nourished and sometimes induced as a pretext for escape and compensation. Minor ailments such as cold and headaches, and habits such as nail-biting (The Orators) are defence measures against heavy odds. Religious escapism is yet another symptom of cultural decadence. In Poem XXVIII, Poems 1927-1931, the life-force tells a doomed neurotic:

Your shutting up the house and taking prow
To go into the wilderness to pray,
Means that I wish to leave and to pass on.

Auden refers to the religious idealists as the "stork-legged heaven reachers" (Poem XXII, Poems 1927-1931). In Poem XII, Poems 1927-1931, the speaker announces that,

... bravery is now
Not in the dying breath
But resisting the temptations
To skyline operations.
It is the mountain that appears to be the utopian haunt for all those health seekers, who wish to be above the ungenerate living in the valleys. But Auden's mountain-dwellers seldom find the miraculous cures they expect. The old diseases make their presence felt again. This happens because the travellers are self-deceived exiles who, instead of rebuilding a sick world, reject it. To them the mountain is only a mirage that casts a "shadow" across their lives:

So many, doubtful, perished in the mountains
Climbing up crags to get a view of islands.

(Poem XIII, Poems 1931-1936)

In Poem XX, Poems 1936-1939, significantly titled 'The Voyage', Auden raises the question to the voyager whether his journey is still worth it: "When the mountains swim away with slow calm strokes .../ ... Does it still promise the Juster Life?". The voyager believes that somewhere the "Good Place" does exist. But,

... he discovers nothing: he does not want to arrive.
The journey is false; the false journey really an illness
On the false island where the heart cannot act and will not suffer:
He condones the fever; he is weaker than he thought; his weakness is real.

The solution to this malaise seems to lie in the sincere meeting of hearts: "Where hearts meet and are really true". This note can now be seen as the forerunner of the later Auden.

Auden believed in the revolutionary process in which the old orders give way to new ones. Poem XXIV, Poems 1927-1931, presents a vivid picture of the sick individuals of a diseased society, suggesting the idea of rebirth in a decaying world. Man's state of utter
despair is depicted by the figure of the solitary man "weeping on a
bench, / Hanging his head down, with his mouth distorted / Helpless
and ugly as an embryo chicken". The idea of the stagnancy of life
is suggested by "The death by cancer of a once hated master". Part
III of the poem shows the lonely individual's life narrowed down to
the confines of "the infectiousness of disease" and to "the malicious
caricature of drunkenness". Part IV presents the ideological conclu-
sion of the poem, with the psychologically diseased individuals
driven to the stage of final madness:

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

Underlying all these poems is the tacit assertion of the poet that the
right perspective must be chosen for overcoming all the ills of indi-
viduals in a degenerate social set-up. Towards the end of the poem,
Auden emphasizes once again that a culture already moribund, and a
society that is completely rigid - 'the old gang' - must be destroyed
for a fresh lease of life. To convey this idea of regeneration, he
makes use of the Biblical image of the grain:

... we know that love
Needs more than the admiring excitement of
union,
More than the abrupt self-confident farewell,
The heel on the finishing blade of grass,
The self-confidence of the falling root,
Needs death, death of the grain, our death, (emphasis
Death of the old gang. added)

The same idea is present in Poem XXXII, Poems 1927-1931:
Where old authority resigns we see
The new small life beginning to be.

Auden observes that modern men are unable to keep pace with the evolutionary process because of their stifled instincts. Poem XXXVI, Poems 1927-1931, shows modern man's inability to remember the answer to the question posed by evolution: "But the answer / Is hard and hard to remember". They have forgotten how to live enriched by human instincts: "What has been dark and rich and warm all over". They are unable to find any substantial solution, and seem unable also, to profit by their evolutionary past. Hence they fall back upon their old stagnant ways. Such decadent types can at most cling to an idealism for support ("Windy skies"); sometimes, give in to self-destruction (The "water" of an earlier evolutionary stage), and at other times, surrender to authority ("Obedience for a master"). Then there are those obstinate holders of the status quo, with completely wrong notions. The taleological force plays a dual role - by first destroying the mistaken culture with sickness, and then recreating a society where human instincts and love can be revived. For such regeneration to become a reality, those stalwart defenders of the political, economic, moral, emotional, and sexual status quo - those "Holders of one position, wrong for years" (Poem XXVIII, Poems 1927-1931) must perish.

Auden sums up his theme of psychic imbalance and his hope in the regeneration of society in Poem XXIII, Poems 1927-1931. In a manner rather abrupt and ambiguous, it opens with an address to a supreme being, who may be either God, or the spirit of Lane, Blake, Layard, or Lawrence - the supreme "Healers". This benevolent
moral authority is "no man's enemy", and is the very embodiment of the Christian virtues of love and charity. He forgives all psychic disorders, except the negation of the will, resulting from man's pride in his ratiocination, which stifles human instincts and desires. Auden invokes the supreme being to destroy the old order - to replace "the house of the dead" with "new styles of architecture". He further invokes it to bring about a "change of heart" by guiding modern man towards an acknowledgment of essential things. Auden's petition is not only for a change of the human heart, but for a change of the social order as well. In this sense, the poem marks a transition from Auden's psychological phase to the beginning of a Marxist one.

About the year 1933, a kind of intellectual change came over Auden, and the psychological atmosphere of his poetry began to give way to a new political fervour. Now it was Karl Marx with his socialistic views who became for Auden the guiding spirit of his work, and he began to emerge as a leader of the literary left.

However, this change of Auden's stance was not abrupt. Also, there is a substantial mixture of Freudian philosophy in his Marxism. The Freudian recommendation for a change of heart, only gradually gave way to the Marxian call for a change in the social environment. As Justin Replogle observes,
The complex intellectual situation of the 1930s was clearly defined by C. Day Lewis in *A Hope for Poetry* (1934). "It is a truism" he says, "that a sound society makes for sound individuals and society is undeniably sick". According to him, there were two alternative cures - both revolutionary. One was the psychological doctrine of D.H. Lawrence with emphasis on the individual. The other was the communist one, with emphasis on the environment.

Thus, the point of agreement between the Freudians and the Marxians was that the cause of disorder in the individual psyche, as well as in society, was repression; and that it was in the middle and upper classes of society, in whom such forces were most manifest.

Auden's essay *I Believe*, brings to light his mature, logical conception of the obstacles of social stability. As he observes,

The first great obstacle is the size of modern communities. By nature, man seems adapted to live in communities of a very moderate size; his economic life has compelled him to live in ever-enlarging ones. Many of the damaging effects of family life described by modern psychologists may be the result of our attempt to make the family group satisfy psychological needs which can only be satisfied by the community group. The family is based on inequality, the parent-child relationship; the community is, or should be, based on equality, the relationship of free citizens. We need both. ...

The second obstacle is social injustice and inequality. A man cannot be a happy member of a community if he feels that the community is treating him unjustly; the more complicated and impersonal economic life be-... (emphasis added)

Auden, along with other intellectuals of his generation, perceived
that the prevalent civic disorder was a result of the accumulation of social injustices under high capitalism. They were profoundly concerned about the evils of capitalism and felt the need for a radical stand to help liberate the oppressed and exploited classes. The attraction of Marxism lay in its recommendation of the destruction of the decadent social order and in the promise of a new and better one. Marx appealed to Auden because, in his view, communities are based upon the physical conditions and the forms of economic production. Also because he believed that a true government is formed by the people who own the instrument of production. Richard Hoggart observes that

Auden was drawn to Marxism all the more because it offered a strict intellectual discipline, a creed apparently untouched by 'religiosity'.

Auden firmly believed in the necessity of evolution and change in the environment for the attainment of greater moral freedom, which is continually superseded by a new one. This is the philosophical aspect of Marxism, so important to Auden's poetry. Marx's philosophy is an empirical one. It puts squarely on man the responsibility for choosing what to do. The Marx-Engels philosophy rests on the notion that men must choose, if they are to rise above the slavery of spontaneous animal behaviour. Auden has referred to Engels' famous definition, "Freedom is consciousness of necessity" in 'Morality in an Age of Change', and again in Notes to New year Letter. The philosophical content in Auden's poetry from 1933 to 1938 is that freedom comes with our control of nature. Thus, in The Dance of Death, the chorus sings:
We shall build tomorrow
A clean new town
With no more sorrow
Where lovely people walk up and down.  

This is indicative of an attitude of hope - a feature that is common in the poetry of the thirties. For the left-wing idealists of the decade, this hope springs from their dream of a utopian world in the near future, where an alternative economic system would be the basis for a better society. It will be seen that this note of hope for a better future comes very close to the one expressed in Day Lewis's poetry.

Auden's sonnet sequence In Time of War (1939), portrays the history of man from creation to the present. Auden reveals that modern man, by failing to act, has failed to gain knowledge and to control his surroundings; in other words, he has lost his freedom:

Though earth may teach our proper discipline,
At any time it will be possible

To turn away from freedom and become
Bound like the heiress in her mother's womb,
And helpless as the poor have always been.

(Sonnet XV)

Instead of asserting control over his surroundings, modern man has become a marionette to inanimate things and objects:

A telephone is speaking to a man;
Flags on a map assert that troops were sent;
...

And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now:

((Sonnet XVI)

In an interesting prose parable 'The Sportsmen : A Parable' (1938), Auden presents a situation which suggests that Sportsmen
(Poets) should help villagers clear away the trees (to improve society):

The villagers replied that the first thing necessary was to fell the trees and clear away the undergrowth and they suggested that the sportsmen should lend a hand with this.\footnote{19}

However, they are not to try to combine duck-shooting and tree-felling, which remain quite separate occupations. This implies that though the poet should take his responsibilities as a citizen seriously, he is not to allow poetry to degenerate into political propaganda. Propaganda streamlines the course of action, but poetry presents a situation and gives us the freedom to decide on our attitudes and actions. This is Auden's message in the Introduction to The Poet's Tongue\cite{1935}:

Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.\footnote{20}

It is precisely this kind of political and social meaning that informs his poetry of the nineteen thirties.

Auden's Airman ('Journal of an Airman' of The Orators) has listed the crimes of the whole upper middle class:

arson, barratry, coining, dozing in municipal offices, espionage, family skeletons, getting and bumbling, heresy, issuing or causing to be issued false statements with intent to deceive, jingoism, keeping disorderly houses, loitering, mental cruelty, nepotism, onanism, piracy on the high seas, quixotry, romping at forbidden hours, sabotage, tea-drinking, ...\footnote{21}
In the end the Airman undermines his own fantasies and comes to terms with "absolute humility". He realizes that the enemy is essentially a projection of his own unconscious inner self. Lillian Fedder comments:

The poet has invented a 'band of limited angels' themselves infected by the disease of society they explore and condemn; his myth thus explores the ambivalent nature of its own heroes, their naivete and egotism as well as their courage and intelligence in seeking physical and psychological health as social values.\textsuperscript{22}

In the last section of The Orators, titled 'Six Odes', Auden once again functions at the level of the Airman's fantasies. In Ode III, for instance, dedicated to Edward Upward, a school-master and writer, Auden celebrates a return to school in a tone of school-boy hilarity. But, apart from the excitement of picnics, skating and curling at Christmas, the charades and the ragging, the poem also contains sinister hints of the "sad posture", "slight despair", "the marginal grief", "gun in a drawer", and "the shadow of death". Ode IV celebrates the birth of a son to Rex and Francis Warner. John Bull, walking through the cities of England, is horrified to see the plight of the "proletariat", who are ugly, dirty, empty-minded, uninteresting, and hopeless. "As for (the) upper class", they too, "won't pass". The question is who can save England. The common masses have been hoodwinked into believing that MacDonald, Hoover, Baldwin, and Briand are "giants" - the great saviours, but they are "pygmies" in fact. Mussolini, Pilsudski, and Hitler are noisy and boring. The youth of England are the only hope. But, "most of them are dummies who want their mummies". So, it is "John, son of War-
-ner" who shall come to the rescue. The poet concludes with a call for a "change of heart" amidst "the falling wage and the flight from the pound", to unite the two worlds of the rich and the poor, the employed and the unemployed, town and country. Ode V is addressed to Auden's former pupils who are now in enemy camps. He reveals that the enemy against whom they fight is really the downtrodden poor of their own land:

The headlands we're doomed to attack; snow
down to the tide-line:
Though the bunting signals
'Indoors before it's too late; cut peat for
your fires',
We shall lie out there.

Significantly, this ode was later called "Which Side am I Supposed to be On?" At that stage it seemed a difficult question for Auden himself to answer:

The Orators, a multi-dimensional work, conveys in elaborate terms Auden's analysis of his times, and rightly deserves to be called a critical document of a decade in disorder. It has drawn the attention of a number of critics. The opinion of G.S. Fraser on the work as a whole reads as follows;

If Auden's solutions were often fantastic, his eye for the problem is unerring, "What do you think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well?" And he was right to seek the roots of that illness in misdirected and inadequate love, in the wrong use of the spirit. He was right also to harangue and clamour. In a sort of detailed social remedies that it suggests, The Orators may be far off the mark as Carlyle's Past and Present, but like that book, it stirred the consciences of intelligent young men in a bad time.23

Among his poems, perhaps the earliest in which Auden strove
to stir the consciences of men and women of his generation, is Poem XVI, Poems 1931-1936. Through specific economic reports, Auden conveys the frightening and depressing condition of Europe in the thirties:

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

A solid breakdown in the social machinery itself, proved too heavy a burden for 'disciplined love' to handle. Thus, the environment, rather than the heart, needed change. The speaker stresses on the urgency of action which alone can redeem society:

These moods give no permission to be idle,
For men are changed by what they do.

It is worth noting that such threatening expressions were inspired by actual events of the thirties. To quote Stephen Spender,

From 1931 onwards, in common with many other people, I felt hounded by external events. ... No wonder that the literature of this period is time-obsessed, time-tormented, as though beaten with rods of restless days.24

The images of "discharge of alarm" and "the pulse of nervous nations" (Poem XIV, Poems 1931-1936), evoke explicitly the atmosphere of a troubled decade, of the threat of the impending war in the mid-thirties. Another brilliant example of a poem that expresses the threat of war is 'The Barbed Wire':

Across the square
Between the burnt-out Law Courts and Police
Headquarters,
Past the cathedral far too damaged to repair,
Around the Grand Hotel patched up to hold
     reporters,
Near huts of some emergency Committee,
The barbed wire runs through the abolished
city.25

In 'Spain 1937' (Poem VIII, Poems 1936-1939), Auden's emphasis on
the necessity of struggle gained impetus from what was happening to
Spain during the civil war. Again, 'September I, 1939' (Poem XLI,
Poems 1936-1939), reveals that "Imperialism" and the "International
Wrong" were the gruesome facts that caused immense uncertainty and
fear. The poet says that the "anger and fear" of the decade were
"Obsessing their private lives".

Auden portrays most vividly the contemporary landscape of
barrenness and worthlessness in order to enable the reader to make a
dispassionate re-evaluation of himself and his time. A clear insight
into the contemporary wasteland is afforded by Poem XV, Poems 1936-
1939 ('Dover 1937'):

   Steep roads, a tunnel through the downs, are the approaches;
   A ruined pharos overlooks a constructed bay;
   The sea-front is almost elegant; all this show
   Has, somewhere inland, a vague and dirty root:
   Nothing is made in this town.

Despite the note of indignation apparent in the line "Nothing is made
in this town", this poem does not strike us as a particularly politi-
cal poem. However, to contemporary readers, it must have been an
eye-opener. Dover, the port linking England with Europe, is present-
ed as a barren rather seedy snob resort for the rich, the point of
departure for migrants, the pleasure-ground for soldiers. It is a
town of bureaucrats and experts, of the selfishly lonely individuals, and of soldiers, as frivolous as middle class schoolgirls:

Soldiers who swarm in the pubs in their pretty clothes,
As fresh and silly as girls from a high-class academy:
The Lion, the Rose or the Crown will not ask them to die,
Not here, not now. All they are killing is time,
Their pauper civilian future.

Keeping to this low-keyed conversational style, Auden insists on the decadence of the old order - a stagnant economy, a middle class education, and a farcical soldiery. Tucked in comfortably in the fast-fading elegance of such an order, the bourgeois are blind to the ominous political future:

Above them, expensive and lovely as a rich child's toy,
The aeroplanes fly in the new European air,
On the edge of that air that makes England of minor importance.

It will perhaps be an exaggeration to call this poem an optimistic call to a socialist future, but it is clearly a left-wing lament. It ends on precisely such a note:

And the cry of the gulls at dawn is sad like work:
The soldier guards the traveller who pays for the soldier:
Each one prays in the dusk for himself, and neither
Controls the years. Some are temporary heroes:
some of these people are happy.

It is in Poem XIII, Poems 1931-1936, that Auden makes a fervent appeal to man to stop languishing for illusory islands and to take an active part in making his own history:

And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands.
It is with such penetrating lines that Auden intends to make the reader conscious of his involvement with existing personal and social problems. It is this Marxian, critical self-awareness that Auden's poetry demands on the part of the reader.

To the leftist liberal that Auden was in the thirties, the rise of fascism and a crumbling democracy were causes of great concern. Hence, again and again, his leftist ideology urged the liquidation of the old order for the emergence of a new one:

The fishes are silent deep in the sea,
The skies are lit up like a Christmas tree,
The star in the West shoots its warning cry:
'Mankind is alive, but Mankind must die.'

(Poem VI. Poems 1936-1939)

Auden's radicalism is again evident in Poem XXIV, Poems 1927-1931. Although, as a radical humanist, he was disturbed by the prevalent terrorism,

... anxiety at night,
Shooting and barricade in street,

he nevertheless anticipated the prospect of a proletariat revolution:

Walking home late I listened to a friend
Talking excitedly of final war
Of proletariat against police --

In Poem XXXI, Poems 1927-1931, Auden's powerful warning to the bourgeois to change themselves or die, comes through in the concluding lines:

Drop those priggish ways for ever, stop behaving like a stone:
Throw the bath-chairs right away, and learn to leave ourselves alone.

If we really want to live, we'd better start at once to try;
If we don't it doesn't matter, but we'd better start to die.

The fact remains, however, that although Auden contemplates various changes in social conditions, his basic demand is for a "change of heart" among the bourgeoisie. And, significantly, being a member of the bourgeoisie himself, he does not really incite a worker's revolution, but makes a petition to his own class. It may be added here that in this attitude itself, we find a clue to his later development.

During the thirties, this kind of ambivalence pervades many poems that Auden wrote. As J.G. Blair has put it,

The third fund of imagery, that of war and frontier, serves to emphasize what is at stake, and the urgency of the situation. It is never very clear in these poems just who is fighting and for whom. At most it is a sort of hereditary feud as in 'Paid on Both Sides' (1930). Still the threatening possibility of defeat by an uncertainly known enemy is a successful matrix of imagery to communicate the sense of urgency Auden intends. 26

Auden's most openly left-wing poem is 'Brothers, who when the sirens roar' (Poem VIII, Poems 1931-1936), originally titled 'A Communist to Others' (New Country). The liberal-minded intellectual addresses the proletariat from "office", "shop" and "factory", and makes common cause with them:

On you our interests are set
Your sorrow we shall not forget
While we consider
Those who in every county town
For centuries have done you brown,
But you shall see them tumble down
Both horse and rider.

The bourgeois lot are handsome and confident, but they are warned that their future will not be as secure and comfortable as before:
The future kissed you, called you king,
Did she? Deceiver!
She's not in love with you at all
No feat of yours can make her fall,
She will not answer to your call
Like your retriever.

Auden exposes the falsities in their attitudes. The "Dare-devil mystic" who advocates religion to the starving, is actually a coward, secretly craving for the luxuries of the rich. The "wise man full of humour" is an enemy, for he remains aloof from all the misery, and holds that the trouble is lack of money. As for the Cambridge liberals, their attitude can be most harmful, for they show the poor

That wealth and poverty are merely
Mental pictures, so that clearly
Every tramp's a landlord really
In mind-events.

The note of indignation rises in the poem, as Auden, finally, lays down a barrage in a language of sharp invective, flinging curses at them unequivocally:

Let fever sweat them till they tremble
Cramp rack their limbs till they resemble
Cartoons by Goya:
Their daughters sterile be in rut,
May cancer rot their herring gut,
The circular madness on them shut,
Or paranoia.27

However, for Auden, as for the other poets of his generation, the leftist ideology based on Marx and Lenin was one thing, but identification with the workers was another, the latter being a far more difficult task than envisaged. At most, theirs was a sympathetic attitude towards the down-trodden. Christopher Caudwell rounds it up precisely:

There is no classless art except communist art and that is yet to be born.28
Of all the poems that Auden wrote during the thirties, 'Spain 1937' reflects best the apprehensions of a whole generation of young men and women, of the dangers of fascism. The outbreak of war in Spain was a cause for real horror. To Auden and the other left-wing poets of his time, the Spanish war was, to use the words of Hugh D. Ford,

the intellectual and emotional climax of the nineteen thirties and to a few of them it became the turning point of their lives.29

Auden looked upon the Spanish war as the final chance to redeem the optimistic social reformer's faith in the future, and in 'Spain 1937', he lent a voice to the inarticulate longings of the ordinary masses. Whether the civil war would signal the final triumph of progress or of the forces of evil was a question that gnawed at the hearts of many during the thirties, but there was infinite hope for justice and world peace. Auden explains in the poem that such hopes cannot be realized unless men decide firmly to make a rational and moral choice. Nations cry to the life-force to intervene; they invoke the Holy Spirit in the form of a "dove", God as a father-figure("A furious papa"), and the spirit of science("a mild engineer"), to restore peace. But the life-force does not come to the rescue. Rather, it urges man to take on the responsibility of building his own destiny, and it is his action that is going to decide:

'What's your proposal? To build the Just City? I will.
I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic Death? Very well, I accept, for I am your choice, your decision: yes I am Spain.'
This is the choice that Auden presents before us in a pattern which brings the past, present, and future together. He explains that in the past, the force of the human race made civilization ("The language of size / Spreading to China along the trade-routes"). The future may have better days ("...all the fun under / Liberty's masterful shadow"), but the opportunities for tomorrow cannot be had unless to-day's problem is solved. All these illustrations sum up Auden's view that the present is the most significant moment in the course of history. It is the republican struggle against fascism, which will determine the future course of history, not only of Spain, but of the entire world. Therefore, it is imperative to act, in order to gain freedom:

- To-day the inevitable increase in the chances of death;
- The conscious acceptance of guilt in the fact of murder.

Auden does not glorify war. War is accepted as an inevitable evil. To him, organizing support for Spain is a dull routine of

- ... expending of powers
- On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

The personal life of the soldier is reduced to

- ... the makeshift consolations; the shared cigarette;
- The cards in the candle-lit barn and the scraping concert,
- The masculine jokes; ...
- ... and unsatisfactory embrace before hurting.

But to the Auden of this crucial period, the resolution to act is the only way man can create history, and Spain is the symbol of this possibility. Man's history is ultimately determined by each indivi-
dual's lonely struggle with his own conflicts. To the individual,

The stars are dead; the animals will not look.

Essentially alone as he is, he will have to make the final judgement:

We are left alone with our day, and the time
is short and
History to the defeated
May say Alas but cannot help or pardon.

Auden's insistence on the necessity of action makes him appear partisan. As a matter of fact, his belief in the necessity of evolution and change in society is an influence of Marxian thought. Drawing on the Marxian concept of the freedom of the will, Auden leaves a rational and moral choice for the reading public of his time.

However, the influence of Marxism on Auden's poetry should not be over-emphasized. Auden himself was aware that he failed to reach a truly proletarian audience. In the essay Poetry, Poets, and Taste, he admits that "the kind of poetry he should like to write but can't is 'the thoughts of a wise man in the speech of the common people'."

In the nineteen thirties, the only audience he could communicate with was that of the educated middle class with left-wing or revolutionary sympathies. But it does not mean that he was a communist simply because he desired to change the status quo and opposed fascism. According to Stephen Spender,

Auden had a firmer grip of Marxist ideology and more capacity to put this into good verse than many writers who were closer to communism. This led to the legend that he went through a communist phase. But his poem 'A Communist to Others' is an exercise in entering a point of view not his own. It is his summing up of conversations with Communists rather like the ones I used to have.
As a revolutionary poet, Auden felt that the middle-classes, of which he himself was a member, must change. As Geoffrey Thurley puts it:

Auden was Marxist (in so far as he was Marxist), less because he felt Marx was right about economic history than because he was sure that his own class were in the wrong.

Thus, Marxism was only an indirect influence on Auden's poetry. Basically, he was a liberal humanist who desired to bring about some kind of regeneration in the individual, and in society. In spite of the apparent Marxism that surfaces with the line "But to-day the struggle", Auden tries successfully to save the poem from degrading into propaganda. In this way, 'Spain 1937' marks a turning point in Auden's ideological stand.

'September I, 1939' (Poem XLI, Poems 1936-1939), also represents this divergence in Auden's attitude. He begins the poem by branding the thirties as a "low dishonest decade", as dishonest efforts were made to reach a compromise with Hitler's Germany. The outbreak of World War II, as Hitler attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, was an event that sparked off other invasions and fear:

Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

The tall buildings and such other signs of collective power reflect the wrongs and injustices inflicted upon the people. Thus, "Imperialism's face / And the international wrong" have completely disillusioned the poet about his "euphoric dream" of a better and healthier
Auden perceives that the "error bred in the bone" is the human desire for selfish love, and like everyone else, he, too, craves for Eros. But tortured by "Negation and despair", he eventually reaches for an "affirming flame". He now wishes to give to the world a message of hope, that 'Agape' or universal love alone can save it from disaster. This is Auden's affirmation of faith in the Christian concept of human love. To quote J.G. Blair,

The closest Auden comes to propagandizing is to suggest that 'Love' is the answer to the dilemmas he sees in both individuals and society. A number of poems are, in effect, attempts to define how love might be the basis for an ethic. But until his return to Christianity about 1940, the concept remains so vague and uncertain, apparently even to Auden himself, that the reader, if he sought one, could find no positive programme for action.

Auden's best political poetry has a central ambivalence which arose from his difficulty in trying to reconcile religion with rationalism. To him, the inherent human imagination was spiritual in the first place, and social in the second. It was this divided personality of Auden that resulted in the personal tensions in his poetry. In Poem VI, Poems 1931-1936, Auden indicates that the desolation of an island is evident in daily life:

In bar, in netted chicken-farm, in lighthouse, 
Standing on these impoverished constricting acres, 
The ladies and gentlemen apart, too much alone. 

But there is hope within the individual, in his potential for the restorative powers of love, that can save England in a period of danger:
And out of the Future into actual History,
As when Merlin, tamer of horses, and his
lords to whom
Stonehenge was still a thought, the Pillars passed
And into the undared ocean swung north their prow,
Drives through the night and star-concealed dawn
For the virgin roadsteads of our hearts an unavering keel.

Another example of Auden's ambivalence is seen in his revolutionary zeal for social remedies, and, at the same time, cherishing middle-class security and good breeding. He was genuinely concerned about the victims of capitalism, but, being a member of the bourgeoisie himself, he esteemed the advantages and privileges of its culture. He was fully aware that all he basically valued, namely - peace and order, would be destroyed with a workers' revolution. This was his apprehension of working class vengeance, so subtly evoked in 'Doomsday Song'(No. VII of 'Ten Songs', Poems 1939-1947):

Once we could have made the docks,
Now it is too late to fly;
Once too often you and I
Did what we should not have done;
Round the rampant rugged roads
Rude and ragged rascals run.

The emergence of fascism posed a great threat to the cause of the revolutionaries, but Auden feared that their ideological struggle for justice and order might itself take a drastic turn. The possibility of such an event was so profoundly disturbing to Auden, that it made him search for a more meaningful ideal. It was this quest that finally led him to the acceptance of religious faith and to the conviction that life remains a blessing. His poem beginning 'Fish in
the unruffled lakes' (Poem XXXIII, Poems 1931-1936) and the last sonnet, No. XXVII of In Time of War, help us to come to an understanding of the philosophy that life must be accepted with all its imperfections:

But we are articled to error; ...
And never will be perfect like fountains.

Thus, Auden's poetry of the thirties shows a man ingenuously pursuing his psychological and social interests. It shows, particularly, a man of acute intuitive and critical perception. All the reactions associated with a critical temper - protest, indignation, denunciation, and exhortation for establishing a social and moral order, are inherent in his poetry of this period.

Auden's religious upbringing and his amorphous culture did come into conflict with his political ideologies, but his poetry reveals that, in him, there was always a keen resolve to create an order in his experience, and an insistence on the necessity of re-establishing contact with the public world.

Auden's poetry of the decade also shows a man uneasy with himself, owing to the events then prevailing, and the situation in which he found himself. He was keenly aware of his own position in society as a member of the bourgeoisie, and that he, and his class, were in the wrong. Though this "leaning-tower" attitude made him resent the upper class, nevertheless, a nostalgia for his private and public past is a subtle aspect of his poetry.

Auden's initial excitement of a proletarian cause reminds one of the fervency with which Wordsworth and other romantics upheld the idealism of the French Revolution. Like the romantics, who, later
met with disappointment, Auden and his contemporaries, too, experienced a gradual disillusionment. Their zeal for a revolutionary cause slowly gave way to a deeper religious temper. This new humanitarian attitude clearly manifested itself in Auden's poetry of the forties, but it had many earlier intimations as well. Towards the later part of the thirties, we see Auden developing an attitude of humility and poetic honesty, and emerging as a humanist, as his social, psychological, and religious ideas are all blended together.
Notes and References

1. The English Auden. P.62

2. Lions and Shadows. (New Directions, Norfolk, 1937) P.300


6. Collected Shorter Poems, 1930-1944. (Faber And Faber, London, 1950) P.57

7. op.cit., P.128

8. The English Auden. P.17

9. ibid., P.63

10. The Dog Beneath the Skin. (Faber And Faber, London, 1935) P.173

12. op.cit., P.5


15. op.cit., P.113

16. 'Nation!' December 24, 1938. P.687

17. *New Year Letter.* (Faber And Faber, London, 1941) P.81

18. *The Dance of Death.* (Faber And Faber, London, 1933) P.9

19. *The English Auden.* P.369


These lines will instantly remind the reader of King Lear cursing Goneril for her ingratitude:

Hear, Nature, Hear! dear goddess hear!
Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
To make this creature fruitful!
Into her womb convey sterility
Dry up in her the organs of increase,
And from her derogate body
never spring
A babe to honour her! If she must teem,
Create her child of spleen,
that it may live
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her!
Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth,
With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks,
27. (cont.)

Turn all her mother's pains and benefits
To laughter and contempt.

   (Macmillan, London, 1937) P.288

   (Oxford University Press, London, 1965) P.25

30. The English Auden. P.360

31. op.cit., PP.247-48

32. The Ironic Harvest: English Poetry in the Twentieth Century.
   (Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd., London, 1974) P.55

33. op.cit., P.48

34. Collected Poems by W.H. Auden. ed. Edward Mendleson, (Faber
   And Faber, London, 1976) P.213