CHAPTER VI

THE POETIC DIMENSIONS AND

THE SECRET OF SURVIVAL

"To us he is no more a person
now but a whole climate of opinion."

From the very beginning, we see Auden as an artist in search of his own standpoint. There was a break in the English poetical tradition after the War and Auden presents the modern poet's dilemma. The usual modes of expression and the traditional contents of poetry had become stale and a genuine artist had to reject them in order to assert his individuality. Fed up with reacting against the didactic pessimism of Eliot, the post-war poets were in search of living modes of speech and a new poetic attitude. Auden's "Poems" (1930) proved to be the answer to their quest, but it created a new problem—of an audience. The question appeared before the writer: "For whom was he going to write?"

Auden's audience consisted of a small group in the beginning. Then a lot of adverse criticism came to his lot. His ambiguity acquired a universal reputation. The rapid changes in his attitudes and ideas made his poetic sincerity doubtful. Then in the 'Forties and the 'Fifties, some balanced criticism came to his rescue and gradually he came to acquire the position of being not only a major poet of his generation but also of a highly challenging writer of this
Auden's attitudes towards art, particularly the poetic art, were characteristic of his genius. The lines along which he moved were as straightforward and direct as much of his poetry is. It is an anti-emotive view of poetry that he follows persistently. The function of art as presented by Aristotle through his celebrated term 'Katharsis' was not favoured by Auden. He held that purgation of human emotions can be brought about by various other, minor means and not by a good work of art. He once wrote:

"If I understand what Aristotle means when he speaks of Katharsis, I can only say he is wrong. It is an effect produced, not by works of art, but by bull-fights, professional football matches, bad movies and, in those who can stand that sort of thing, monster rallies at which ten thousand girl guides from themselves into the national flag."

Auden belongs, truly speaking, to that class of writers which sees that distinguishing nature and value of poetry in the way it handles words and the way reality is explored through the exploitation of certain potentialities of language. Above all, he was a great inventor of poetic fantasies, images, parables, symbols, myths etc. such as Mortmere, Quest, Hawk, Wanderer, Truly-Strong Man, Voyage
Island, Landscape, Mirror, The Adversary and many more. The vigour of his language, the exciting novelty of images and ideas, and his striking modes of expression proved fascinating to many major and minor poets. Mentioning his various poetic devices and attitudes Cecil Day-Lewis writes:

"— all this proved so infectious that my own verse became for a time pastiche-Auden."³

To his contemporaries, he always seemed more penetrating and relevant than all others!

There is something too direct and bleak about most of his writings. He had what Stephen Spender calls "some tragic quality of isolation."⁴ But, it is notable, that this element of melancholy got mingled with that of Comedy, or (since 'comedy' is a vague word) a certain frivolous chattiness, a lightness of touch and tone. In "Letter to Lord Byron," Auden has called Byron 'the master of the airy manner' and regretted that light verse 'is under a sad weather.' Himself, he has produced quite a considerable part of it. In fact, the light, relaxed tone has been a part of his style from the earliest and is not an ingredient of his later "special style" alone as thought by Dennis Davison.⁵ Strangely funny and gossipy things are scattered in his early writings. For instance, the casual, colloquial style we meet in "On Sunday Walks":

"That Roman nose

Is noticed in the villages,"
And father's son
Knows what they said
And what they did."

CSP, p.41

And the still more lively and chatty tone of which the whole "Letter to Lord Byron" is so characteristic. Lines like:

"Indeed one hardly goes too far in stating
That many a flawless lyric may be due
Not to a lover's broken heart, but 'flu."

CP, p.78

are simply delightful and illustrate how Auden was capable of expressing himself in any medium he pleased.

It is, however, true that in Auden's later poetry, where his interests in psychoanalysis or current politics have almost faded away and he has found bliss and solace in religion, his light, relaxed and a bit 'comic' style gets its full expression. A very typical poem of Auden's late style is "In Praise of Limestone", regarded as "one of Auden's comic masterpieces" by Justin Repogle. It is not 'comic' in the prevalent sense of the term but its mild, soft and interesting style rightly entitles it to being one of the most lovely of Auden's poetic compositions. It first appeared in "Horizon" (July 1948) and was, later on, included in the volume "Nones" (1952). Its careful reading and appreciation lead us to an awareness of the poet's mind in the late 'Forties and the 'Fifties. It is graceful, subdued and
profound. In a conversational and languid manner, Auden
describes the physical features of a landscape for which we
"the inconstant ones" are homesick. Our attention is drawn
to the "rounded slopes" covered by the fragrant thymes and
having under "a secret system of caves and conduits,"
reminding of the dream-world of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" with
its "dancing rocks," "sinuous rills," "many an incense-bearing
tree," "deep romantic chasm" and above all of "caverns
measureless to man." Auden's landscape is "of short distances
and definite places" and is compared, in its different aspects
and forms, to human beings:

"What could be more like Mother or a fitter

background

For her son, for the nude young male who

lounges

Against a rock displaying his dildo, never
doubting

That for all his faults he is loved----"

CSP, p.239

Nature is thus used as metaphor for Man, her varied
charms crystallizing gentle human relationships.

The limestone men enjoy a simple, carefree and
'Aesthetic' existence for it is a place devoid of ever-
questioning and ever-restless intellectuals and power-mad
politicians. Also, no religious despair is found here. It is
not a place for poets, saints-to-be and "intendant Caesars."
It is a residence of simple, unspoiled people who live solely
for pleasure, indifferent to ethical good and evil. Though
to lead such a totally detached and self-centred life is also of
a sin yet the poet's comparative preference for it is evident.
He, obviously, has special affection for the inhabitants of
this landscape, for ethically they are harmless. The poem
ends beautifully, giving vent to the personal wishful
thinking of the poet. The limestone landscape resembles the
happy world of poet's dream, conceived long back by himself
and his dear friend Isherwood together, termed as 'Mortmere'
by them. This place fully reflects that idealized place,
embodiment of that perfection which, alas, is not the human
lot and that future whose craving only expresses human
innocence :

"-- but when I try to imagine a faultless
love
Or the life to come, what I hear is the
murmur
Of underground streams, what I see is a
limestone landscape."

CSP, p. 241

It is subtle and profound, and as is characteristic
of Auden's manner, this profundity is an outcome of a careful
use of words. Auden's language is always accurate and
beautifully compressed. To quote Spender:

"We can be grateful to Auden for the
intricate, complex, handsome engines
of language he produced, like the
Another characteristic poem, representative of the achievements of Auden's later style, is 'Lakes', which forms part of a series called "Bucolics" and was first published in "New Poems by American Poets" (1953), and reprinted in "The Shield of Achilles" (1955). Its manner is informal, plain and lively. In comparison to the 'estranging sea', lakes are considered more homely and human. Lake-fool are regarded as peace-loving people, leaving hatred and war "to ill-bred romantics." But "Lakes" exhibits best how Auden's humour often grows absurd and far-fetched. For instance, here, Foreign ministers are advised to meet beside a lake, for, the 'physical compassion' a lake arouses in human beings, would help them forget their differences and unite their armies!

"Precious Five" (1950) is the summing-up of Auden's message he conveys in the poetry of his final phase. In spite of its sufferings and vulgarities which enfeeble human nature and behaviour, life is accepted and its blessedness is celebrated. Though the contents are solemn, they are conveyed mildly and illustrate Auden's much-celebrated 'genteel humour.' The five precious organs of human body are, in a friendly way, addressed and advised to "do as you are told." The nose which is said to be a bridge from "mouth to brow" and which senses the difference between the past and the present, is advised to make the best of the present and should draw content from what there is. The "lively ears"
are called the "spoiled darlings" of a "concert-going" age. They should undergo great training and acquire discipline to face the vulgarity of a cheap age. They should be able to distinguish between the really beautiful and the vulgar. Hands are told to be civil, for it is they which 'give.' So 'by making and by giving' — even to those hands "you cannot see" — they should secure the title of 'true hands.' Eyes are considered the means of reflecting modern spiritual 'deadness.' Hence, they should not express death but liveliness. By seeing truly they should believe in what they see and learn to love both the shameless and the shameful eyes — even "those eyes you cannot see."

It is in his compliments for the tongue, that Auden conveys his theme. She is advised to praise the Earthly Muse—perhaps addressed in deliberate contrast to Milton's 'Heavenly Muse.' Auden's Earthly Muse is that Ruling Power which governs over life on this earth. The tongue should praise and thank Her for what exists. In spite of its shortcomings, Life should be accepted and praised, for it is always a blessing. "Bless what there is for being" is Auden's memorable tribute to the Earthly Deity and the Life offered by Her!

A very moving composition of the 'Fifties is the title poem of "The Shield of Achilles." The mythical technique has been effectively used to present the contrast between the heroic world of the past and the unheroic and inhuman present world. Thetis, the mother of Achilles in Greek
mythology, looks at the Shield of her son made by the divine blacksmith, Hephaestus, for beautiful orchards, well-governed cities, religious rituals, happy athletes and joyful men and women. But these were the things of the happy past. Hephaestus had carved a perfect picture of the modern world there with all its bleakness, horrors and shallowness. The crowd there was a congregation of 'unintelligible multitude' without expression. It is a world without faith and noble qualities of heart like Love, Compassion, Sympathy and Tolerance. People are unaware,

"Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept."

CP, p. 455

Innocent girls are raped and mass-killing has become a common practice. In short, it is a place of such inhuman activities and brutalities as to make great gods ashamed of their creation! No wonder, if Thetis 'Cried out in dismay' to see the ghastly sight of an ugly world.

"Shield of Achilles" best illustrates how simple and dignified Auden's art can be if he wanted. It is one of his memorable social documents and demonstrates that his social interests abided till the last.

In Auden's poetry of the 'Sixties the mild, modest and prayerful tone of the late 'Forties and the 'Fifties gets its culmination. The contents are not new and the style is not unfamiliar. The poetry of the 'Sixties is a further celebration of the religious attitude, modesty and
Innocence are required from human beings for they alone can lead to Perfect Joy, owned by animals and birds only, since they are free from guilt. The tone is that of acceptance and hope. "City Without Walls" (1969) best represents his ideas during this phase of his poetic career. Really speaking, these are the ideas—or the expansion of ideas—which have been favourite with Auden from the earliest days. What is new is the tone of the poet. It is gentle and serene. Not like the earlier dashing and uncompromising tone ("We must love one another or die") but pleasing and pleading, polite and quiet. Now he invokes love as:

"But round your image
there is no fog, and the Earth
can still astonish."

The title poem, "City Without Walls" metaphorically describes the modern, technologically and materially advanced, infinite world which is highly limited, self-centred, and where "no one cares what his neighbour does," and what are needed most are "newsprint and network." Inwardly, they suffer from boredom and frustration which is a result of their complete alienation from others and a loss of good social values. What they see is "vulgar rubbish" and what they listen is "witless noise" but it protects them from "the basilisk-like glare of Nothing." Auden's observation of this spiritual Waste Land is perfect and profound:

"Thereupon, bored, a third voice:
'Go to sleep now for God's sake!'"
You both will feel better by breakfast-time!

A note of tranquillity which results from maturity and wisdom prevails over Auden's poems of later years. The mood is reflective, the style meditative and the contents didactic. It is wisdom gathered from great observation and understanding of human world and society and the various forces which affect them and form their destiny. In fact, the ideas in his writings of the 'Sixties are the outcome of the musings and broodings of a poetic mind which had seen history in its making. "Thank you, Fog," Auden's last collection of poetry, published posthumously in 1974, is a very appropriate Epilogue to a poetic career started in 1928 by a hand-print version of poems published by Spender, blurtin out much psychology and psychoanalysis. Between this considerably long span of nearly forty five years, Auden produced a bulk of writings, passed through the realms of Psychology, Politics, Marxism, Philosophy, Religion and what not, changed his nationality and reached finally his native soil to meet his end. The mood of the poems of the last volume is of perfect joy and festivity. The anxieties of the world are left to themselves and he is happy to see that "now native knowledge returns." Fog symbolizes the English winters and consequently England herself. The acceptance that "our earth's a sorry spot" is there, yet, in the final analysis, Life on it, is regarded good and blessed. For the festive and restful interim he has in England, she is thanked. It is, in fact, Auden's final and glorious tribute to a land
which brought him up!

Auden, as is clear, is a prolific writer and it is simply impossible to assess critically all of his significant poems. A few selected poems, which are characteristic of his later ideas and style, have been analyzed so far, so as to form a link between them and the earlier works particularly those of the celebrated 'Thirties. One can see properly in this way a natural development and progress of a significant poetic career. There is a clear difference between the stylistic modes, the accent and tone of the early and late Auden. There is not much change, however, in the contents and the ideas. Some of them are mere extensions or further developments of early ideas as the ideas of the hollowness of modern culture, a resulting dissatisfaction and a sense of boredom. Some are elaborations of early ideas. For example, the celebration of Christian theology in the poems of the 'Fifties and the 'Sixties is an elaboration of the themes of the 'Forties. And finally some ideas of this later phase, such as the belief in the blessedness of life and a sane of acceptance of it were the expected climax to the parable of Quest for order and peace in human society.

Besides its variety of themes, Auden's poetry gives the impression of being vast and prolific in the field of modes of expression too. The versatility and variety of the poetic forms used by Auden is striking. It reminds of what Dr. Johnson has said about Oliver Goldsmith's art that he left no field of writing untouched and whatever he touched
he adorned. No other poet of his time has shown greater virtuosity in assimilating various styles from his predecessors. The various poetic techniques, allegorical images, personifications, archaic imagery, terse and subtle irony, poignant satire, short declarative statements, witty definitions, long catalogues, public and private (mostly private) references, allusions to history, art, ancient literature and mythology are the triumphs of Auden's style. They stand hand in hand in his poetry, as if, presenting an open challenge to the intellectual capacity of a reader. One of his hostile critics is rightly tempted to declare:

"We never step twice into the same Auden."

An awareness of Auden's artistic devices and the conceptual achievements and thematic contents leads us to the final (and much-debated!) question: What is the real scope for the sort of poetry Auden composed? And it is the one question which brings a lot of queries in its train. Does his kind of poetry have a lasting appeal? What is its true worth and significance? Does it achieve anything really memorable?

Before attempting to answer any of these questions, one should, first of all, know one's limitations. To answer them satisfactorily is not an easy task. Neither literary criticism nor Auden himself can be of much help in this regard. There exists a bulk of good or bad criticism on Auden, but it is, on the whole, highly baffling. Auden, except in a very few places in his essays, has not left any
authentic documents explaining his own thoughts in this matter. Often, he deliberately answered questions of academic and biographical nature in a very ambiguous or light vein, as he once remarked that he chose the vocation of writing because a friend suggested that he should! Above all unlike MacNeice or Isherwood, he did not write an autobiography. And it was, perhaps, for the good. His mental development and intellectual set-up was beyond the reach of any autobiographical document. Biographical continuity did less to shape his poetic mind. Most of the details of biographical nature related to Auden came through his contemporaries. But, as has been observed earlier, Auden's art has the quality of personal detachment to an extra-ordinary degree. Spender rightly remarks:

"I have come to think that Auden wrote his poetry out of a personality of which his friends knew much less than they supposed."

There remains only one way-out. If we want to know the real dimensions and scope of his art we should go to his poetry itself and get ourselves informed about the cultural, social, political and philosophical environment of the Times in which it was produced. And the impartial judgement, formed after taking all his successes and failures into account, ultimately and unquestionably goes to Auden's favour. His poetry has good chances of survival. It has a unique scope and opportunity to fascinate posterity, mainly due to its
two abiding virtues - its relevance to the contemporary situation and its challenging nature. His deeper concerns are for society:

"Whether the world has improved is doubtful, but we believe it could..."12

As long as society believes in human values, Auden's poetry will maintain its durability. In the world around him, he perceived great uncertainty and dissatisfaction and saw it running madly in different directions. In his poetry, he discussed, at length, the subject of Man and his relation to God, to society and to his own self. He had an awareness, to an unusual degree, of the anguish of existence and was always in search of means which could lessen it. His final affirmation of joy and faith in Christian theology would forever remain a great solace and an invaluable gift to humanity.

As regards the challenging nature of his poetry, it can be stated that with Auden it will always be a positive quality - the one which enhances its appeal and charm. The main currents of thought in numerous branches of knowledge were known to him and he successfully assimilated all these in his poetry. Naturally, his poetry asks for an intellectual awareness from its readers. Often, his art tends to become elusive but this elusiveness and a certain unpredictability about his poems add a curious fascination to them. If Auden's poetry is accepted as a challenge to our understanding, it offers an interesting reading and compensates largely our
endeavours made in the directions of its understanding. Besides, it too is wholly unjust to believe that he is always 'very difficult.' The charge of obscurity makes sense only when one goes through his early writings. Quite a bulk of his writings of mid-career and later years is wonderfully clear and charming. One should only remember that the writer of the "Poems" (1930) and "The Orators" (1932) is also the author of "Letter to Lord Byron," the lyrics of "Look! Stranger," and a number of light poems which belong to his final phase.

The basic question in judging any artist's achievement is 'What are the constituents of a good work?' Defining the essentials of a good poem, Auden had once said:

"One demands two things of a poem. Firstly, it must be a well-made verbal object that does honor to the language in which it is written. Secondly, it must say something significant about a reality common to us all, but perceived from a unique perspective. What the poet says has never been said before, but, once he has said it, his readers recognize its validity for themselves."¹³

Auden's poetry uniquely shares these two qualities. The way he used words and concentrated on making his poems a chiselled
and cogent piece of writing is an affirmation of his deep regard for language and its scope. And as for the other quality, in Auden's case it is the foremost feature of his poetry. The validity of the common truth he portrayed — that a principle of selfless love is universally needed for the regeneration of a 'dead' society — is simply unquestionable. It is the very centre around which his art revolves. In a chaotic age, after asserting himself as committed to it, he did his best. Extolling the 'noble despair of the poets,' he declares:

"--- it is silly
To refuse the tasks of the time
And, overlooking our lives,
Cry, 'Miserable wicked me.' 

Poetry, he thought, was his natural way of communication and he spoke plainly, profoundly, movingly and, of course, at places, obscurely. He was a witty aphorist, a social critic, a firm humanitarian and above all, a word-juggler, who held, that though Art is not magic in itself, yet no artist would dislike his art being used as magic. And this magical medium should not only assert the possibility of order but command men to turn that possibility into a reality. To those who, though impressed by his striking doctrines, complained that ideas are vaguely conveyed in his poems, he addressed softly and convincingly:

"Each year brings new problems of form
and content, new foes to tug with."
At twenty I tried to vex my elders; past sixty it’s the young I hope to bother. "15

In fact, Auden is a poet who cannot be judged by conventional standards. He has a style of saying things which is highly personal and original. For many, much of his writing at a surface reading may sound eccentric. But once we understand his individual way of saying things, what he wrote becomes highly forceful and adequate. It was, after all, the compelling voice of a great master – a spokesman of his generation. In an age when Men of Good Will, the reformers, themselves had turned to be wicked, the pioneers of human values had "adapted themselves/To the night and the nightmare"16 and the Political Giants had learned "To reply to terror with terror/With lies to unmask the least deception."17 Auden represented the genuine voice of poets in whose strength he had put his faith much earlier in "Brothers who when the sirens roar." He did prove that only an artist has, by the grace of some inner powers or celestial blessings, the capability of separating lies from truth.

As regard the never-ending controversy: "Whether he is an English or American poet", the possible solution is a mid-way acceptance that he is partly-British and partly-American. Though, at first glance, its simplicity gives an impression of a child-like ignorance and may sound only a chronological or biographical truth, yet the real connotation of the statement signifies much more than this. It has been
fashionable among Auden's English and American admirers to see supremacy of either works over the other or to regard him, on certain grounds, 'more English than American' or vice versa. Establishing the supremacy of his English writings over the American works, the British admirers, for example, argue that most of his remarkable ideas and themes are presented in his English creations. The American defenders, on the other hand, hold that almost all of his significant long poems were produced after his migration to America and it is in his American productions that his religious themes got full expression. A balanced criticism would regard both views as sound.

Charles Osborne, Auden's well-known biographer, has left the account that in the late 'Thirties Auden used to talk about "the need to free himself from English literary life in the way one speaks of a need to break away from the suffocating embrace of parents and family. Indeed, he tended to equate the literary scene in England with a cozy parish life of gossip and inconsequence. "18

But, interestingly enough, a closeness with the English soil abides till the last. In an interview of his late years he admitted:

"I feel I have my roots in nineteenth century English poetry. I also learnt from Horace and Virgil. "19

and still further:

"I admire Pope greatly. However, simply
stylistically I am closer to Dryden. "20.
And to the ultimate question: "Whether an American writer or a British writer living in the United States?", Auden himself answers very clearly:

"I have lived in America for over thirty years, but I don't think I can call myself an American.
--- In some ways, I feel more British today than I did when I was in England."21

However, his concern with new techniques and forms of poetry displays his Americanism, for, it is a peculiarly American concern. He has also made a considerable use of American slang. In fact, his is an interesting case, metaphorically speaking, of a British seedling, nourished in American air:

Auden's achievements will always be judged as sincere efforts by a major poet of English language. A Chapter, dealing with the scope and impact of his art, should be ended with a frank statement of one of his contemporaries:

"Without him many of us would have never happened
But would have gone on being Georgians or worse."22