CHAPTER VII

AUDEN'S PLAYS:

A CONTINUATION OF HIS POETIC IDEAS

This is, in fact, a sub-chapter or a supplement dealing precisely with the major themes in Auden's Plays. Their study as stylistic achievements is avoided, and, this Study being chiefly a work 'with special reference to Auden's social and political commitments,' great emphasis is laid on the contents of his plays and to see how written during the Great 'Thirties, they are mere extension or continuation of those very ideas which are forcefully expressed in the poetry of these years. And it is interesting to note that here too, more than politics or psychology, the social concerns are of supreme importance. In fact, politics and psychology serve the function of unmasking social degeneration. Hence, this Chapter makes a modest attempt at exploring Auden's social preoccupations which, though, always profound and significant, were most accurately exposed in the writings - poetic as well as dramatic - of the 'Thirties.

Why did Auden turn to play-writing? - is a question which needs investigation. Yet to single out any conclusion is difficult. For many reasons, he is fascinated by this unique medium of expression. Many at that time, including Eliot, were making successful attempts in writing poetic drama - pointing out its wonderful possibilities to voice forth their
spiritual, moral and social dilemmas. In the mixed passages of prose and verse, with the obvious advantages of a story, plot and character, Auden saw the possibility of having ample scope for direct preaching and pure social and political criticism. He must have also foreseen the opportunity of addressing a wider mass of audience. And above all, it was his social consciousness which drew him to dramatic writing. Creating a highly pathos-laden situation (as, for example, in the final scene of "On the Frontier"), it was possible for him to use much forceful social satire mingled with psychological and political outbursts. However, it should be mentioned, that story and character were of secondary importance (in fact of no importance!) to Auden. Except Michael Ranson, his plays are lacking in powerful character-creation. Neither do they present a highly gripping story. The sole aim is to clothe ideas of mixed qualities — often appealing, often recurring and at times obscure due to an excessive amount of politics and psychology. But to Auden, they are of supreme concern, and the plays have been written with the specific purpose of giving a clear vent to them.

Auden's first really remarkable venture in this field is "Paid on Both Sides," called "a Charade" by him. A charade is a game — a theatrical form which is private and non-realistic and, with its ample amount of fun and clownishness, it is meant for amusing. Auden, probably, wanted to stress its distinctive nature as compared to the usual productions of the theatre of the day. Yet, in spite
of having all the traits of a charade, it is not formally a charade at all. It is, though too full of improbabilities and obscurities, a serious short play giving full expression to Auden's social, political and psychological preoccupations.

The subject-matter in "Paid," with its bloody feuds, abundant violence, killings in ambush, revenge-tricks etc., at once evokes the Icelandic sagas and tells of Auden's nostalgic return to his childhood-world. But the scene is placed amid the contemporary English north, which makes "Paid," a work which strictly belongs to its time. The story is centred round a strange feud between two mill-owning families -- the Nolers and the Shaws who are residents of the North of England. The play begins with the death of John's father by ambush by the Shaws. John is born prematurely from shock. Joan, his mother, enjoins upon him to avenge his father's murder, and, out of respect and obedience to a sorrowing mother, John continues the feud, though, at heart he dislikes it, and even encourages Dick, a friend, to emigrate:

"If you have really made up your mind, Dick, I won't try and persuade you to stop."¹

Later, he falls in love with Anne -- the daughter of his enemy. It seems the feud would come to an end. But the mother's persuasions continue and John cannot hurt her by refusing to fight. He kills Red Shaw, the killer of his father, and orders to shoot a spy who is the son of the enemy-
house. Thus, after pacifying a mother's wrath and following her theory of 'blood for blood,' he turns to the dictates of heart and marries Anne. But now it is (again) the turn of the enemy's mother who compels her son to kill John. John is shot by him on the wedding day and the feud is resumed again.

It is with an appeal for Love and Pacifism that Auden makes his entry into the chaotic political scene of the 'Thirties. The much stressed feud and blood-shed are used as weapons to enhance the plight of the situation and depict the urgency of a kind and peaceful atmosphere. Both John Nower and Seth Shaw — the leaders of the rival groups who avenge themselves of the wrong done to their families — are at heart pacifists and continue the feud reluctantly. The latter even plainly refuses to kill John — who is going to be his brother-in-law. Before a furious, revengeful mother who commands him to kill John, he says:

"I can't do that. There is peace now; besides he is a guest in our house." 2

It is only when she reminds him of his brother's death ("- - - taken out and shot like a dog") and chides him ("- - - I have a coward for a son") painfully that he gives in ("I shall be as you like") and takes to fighting.

John's justifications for resuming the feud too are feeble and hollow. "We cannot betray the dead" — he assures Father Christmas but himself contradicts it later by loving passionately the daughter of his enemy, and soothes her.
anxious and fearful soul by uttering:

"But let us not think of things which
we hope will be long in coming."³

Expressing his deep desire for love and peace, he says:

"Could I have been some simpleton that lived
Before disaster sent his runners here."⁴

One of John's companions, Trudy, best sums up their
general dislike for the feud which is a curse from the past
for them:

"I am sick of this feud. What do we want
to go on killing each other for?
We are all the same. He's trash, yet if
I cut my finger it bleeds like his."⁵

"Paid", though not itself a political work, is a
significant parable meant to foretell a lot and guide a
politically turbulent decade. Auden's political intentions
are clear and consistent. As has been illustrated, his
characters in "Paid" hate the tradition of violence but are
helpless to destroy it.

On the psychological level too "Paid" offers much
profound stuff. John Mower's is a pathetic case of a good
leader - in Auden's favourite term - the Truly Strong Man.
He represents such a hero's possibilities and limitations,
freedom and restrictions and strengths and weaknesses. He is
an exceptional man in the sense that he can foresee, beyond
his obedience to his mother and loyalty to the dead ancestors,
the sheer futility of an old feud and the infinite virtues
of love. He wishes heartily to act in favourable directions, yet he can't act as he desires. This obvious contrast between his revolutionary zeal and the incapacity for action, gives his character a pathetic touch, and offers us a glimpse of the individual operating within the group, and the flaw at the heart of all human action is put bare. To carry on a meaningless action (the feud) is destructive yet necessary for John. The tragedy is obvious but inescapable. As a leader of his tribe he can't act otherwise. His suffering, in this way, is much profound and takes an exalted position. Indirectly, the play advocates a need for action, for shunning the past in order to enter and face heroically an uncertain future. The past is useless for the present and unable to mould the future for the better. Only the present can offer a sensible guidance into the future. "Paid" thus becomes an epitome of the general confusion and uncertainty prevailing in the young minds in the beginning of a crucial decade, for which, it is a perfect parable pointing out the disastrous consequences of misdirected strength, the inability to act properly and the wrong choice of action! It also brings out the malignant influence of the mothers who, in "Paid", constantly try to evoke the spirit of fighting and killing in their sons and compel them, much against their own wishes, to continue a hazardous feud. Mother-fixation performs a significant role in destroying a sensitive personality by forcing upon it an unnatural course of actions!

As is typical of Auden, all these political and
psychological connotations are meant to add force to the sociological aspect of the play. In order to create a new (Marxist?) society and to enjoy a happy existence, traditions of all sorts must be rejected. The past, however significant it may be, should not be allowed to weigh heavily on the present however trivial it may seem! We, no doubt, owe great obligations to the past for it gives us many gifts. But we owe a still more great and important duty to the present which would shape our future. The past would always remain unchanged, while the future and present are changeable, hence, our obligations to them are greater!

"Paid on Both Sides" was followed by "The Dance of Death" (1933) — one of those productions of Auden to whose lot much censure came! Perhaps it was its oversimplification which gave it a touch of being unlike-Auden, for, he could seldom have written more easily. What is it about, has not been left to the readers to judge but is rather too directly summed up in the opening sentences of the Announcer:

"We present to you this evening a picture of the decline of a class, of how its members dream of a new life, but secretly desire the old, for there is death inside them. We show you that death as a dancer."

on which Gavin Ewart, a young contemporary poet, commented:

"There are very few passages in the rest of the play as good as these opening lines."
Leaving all reservations aside, one can say that more than any other work of this decade "The Dance of Death" gave expression to Auden's growing interest in Communism and established his image as a Communist, for, what follows the Announcer's opening words is pure Marxist propaganda and a Marxist allegory of a society on the rocks because though it secretly appreciates the New (Communist) Order, can't rid itself of the old life. The fate of the bourgeoisie is too directly lamented and their decadence openly satirized, until a gleeful Karl Marx himself comes to their help with 'two young Communists' and is reverently addressed as, "O Mr Marx, you have gathered/All the material facts/You know the economic/Reasons for our acts," and a beaming Marx exclaims over the dead dancer, "The instruments of production have been too much for him. He is liquidated."^8

In an untitled essay in "I Believe", Auden remarks: "--- Marx seems to me correct in saying that sovereignty or government is not the result of a contract made by society as a whole, but has been assumed by those people in society who owned the instruments of production. "^9

The ideas that a change in environment and a free exercise of the will of the individuals in society are necessary for changing the human condition and that the structure of capitalism can be liquidated by its own 'instruments of production' were by all means peculiar to Auden in the early
'Thirties and "The Dance of Death," more than a play, is like a political document, preaching much on behalf of Auden's Marxist leanings. With Marx's entry on the stage, the Chorus heralds the coming of a new dawn in social and political life:

"We shall build tomorrow
A new clean town
With no more sorrow
Where lovely people walk up and down."

Auden's singing somewhat too loudly and zestfully for the Communist cause, his direct statements on the futility of a weak and exhausted system and his pitiable assertions on the decadence of a doomed middle-class, together, make his satire too obvious and consequently less powerful and give the play an impression of being a work 'of lower intensity,' endowing its creator, who had yet not committed his political intentions, with a reputation of being 'almost a Communist.' Non-committedly, he participated in contemporary politics and, promoting Communism as a literary phenomenon, provoked his contemporaries' interests in it. An extract from one of Julian Bell's letters would suffice to prove how a sort of transformation took place in the writings of the 'Thirties' writers by their political awareness and how they looked up to Auden as their leader in this regard. Bell writes:

"In the Cambridge that I first knew, in 1929 and 1930, the central subject of ordinary intelligent conversations was poetry. As far as I can remember we hardly ever talked
or thought about politics —

By the end of 1933, we have arrived at a situation in which almost the only subject of discussion is contemporary politics, and in which a very large majority of the more intelligent undergraduates are Communists, or almost Communists. As far as an interest in literature continues it has very largely changed its character, and become an ally of Communism under the influence of Mr. Auden's Oxford Group. Indeed, it might, with some plausibility, be argued that Communism in England is at present very largely a literary phenomenon — an attempt of a second 'post-war generation' to escape from the Waste Land. 12

"The Dance of Death" was Auden's first bold and eloquent assertion of his Communist leanings. The facts that many of its pronouncements produced either a tedious and ridiculous effect of crude propaganda, or were taken merely as an adolescent's sentimentalism, and that with its dancing and singing and parodies of popular lyrics it was received, more than a short serious play, as a burlesque and a revue, do not lessen its significance as a work which stands at a very crucial turn in Auden's thinking and which is a valuable document of his social and political vision in the 'Thirties.
This vision is again illustrated in "The Dog Beneath the Skin," or "Where is Francis?" (1935) written in collaboration with Isherwood, and which illustrates best how Auden's plays, with their terse social comments, are an epitome of his social concerns in the 'Thirties. Justin Replogle has been fairly unjust to Auden in thinking that, "From the play's beginning the authors never seem totally interested in issuing their grave messages about a decadent world," and that "the play's social satire is hopelessly undermined by its vaudeville treatment of cultural ills." Auden's observation of a degraded society and a diseased culture is wonderfully perfect and his comment on the upper-class hypocrites and places of corruption is unfailingly correct. It is no doubt true that there are many funny places in the play which provide much amusement, but they are deliberately written with a view to lessen the intensity of tension and save the play from being a too didactic and sombre social address. But the dramatists never miss their target of satire against those who make our world unacceptable for us! When a whole-hearted laughter is finished, we are compelled to think and share the cultural and social considerations of the writers! However, the play did not receive the kind of appreciation it deserved. Replogle's scathing review is much recent. In 1935 itself, immediately after its publication, it became the target of much wigging in the literary journals. J.M. Parsons' remark which appeared in 'Spectator' calling it "the groariest, the flattest and
the stalest that has managed to get into print for some time" represents the general feeling of critics towards it. But, a more balanced criticism would certainly regard it as a lively fantasy with much serious social satire. Compared chiefly to its predecessor ("The Dance of Death"), it is certainly a much more impressive work.

"The Dog", it will be illuminating, perhaps, to know was the third final version of a fantasy-cum-morality play Auden had written in 1932 with the title "The Enemies of a Bishop" in which the Bishop represented "the natural law" and had been sketched after Homer Lane, for whose psychological theories Auden had great respect in the 'Thirties. He represented all the healthy forces of love and freedom whose enemies were considered malice, hate and their agents who distort and repress life.

In 1934, Auden reproduced another version of this play entitled "The Chase." Though it straightforwardly took much of the handy material of "The Enemies of a Bishop", its theme is totally different from the first version. It is about class-struggle—a clash between the Capitalists and workers. It was highly topical depicting the general mood of the early 'Thirties which was a messy period of hunger and strikes.

In November 1934, Auden sent 'The Chase' to Isherwood for comment, who suggested many alterations and introduction of some new scenes, and gradually the play became their
joint effort — a collaboration between them. Isherwood was in Copenhagen at this time and Auden visited him there in January 1935, where together they worked on "The Chase" afresh, and changed it into "Where is Francis?" which was again transformed into "The Dog Beneath the Skin" by Rupert Doone whose Group Theatre produced it in 1936. In 1935, Faber & Faber published it as a play "by W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood", though Isherwood himself insisted that most of the play was written by Auden alone.

It is very strange and surprising that while criticizing the Auden-Isherwood collaborations critics simply denied Isherwood's association with them. After a cursory mention of his name at the beginning of their reviews, they assumed that the work solely belonged to Auden. Even the publishers had the same attitude. Charles Osborne has offered the piece of information:

"At first, Auden's publishers were reluctant to add Isherwood's name to the title page, but Auden was insistent — — "16

However, the fact remains, that quite a considerable portion of "The Dog" belongs to Isherwood. Auden himself writes in a letter to Stephen Spender in June 1935 that himself he has written all the verse speeches for the Chorus, and that Isherwood has written Act I, scene ii, except for the song; Act II, scene i, except for the leader's speech; Act II, scene ii, except for the song; the dialogue between the
left and right feet in Act II, scene v; the Destructive Desmond episode in Act III, scene ii; the whole of Act III, scene iii and scene iv, from Francis' discovery on, and Act III, scene v, apart from the Vicar's sermon. The outline of Ostria Palace and Paradise Park scenes and several suggestions throughout the play have been provided by Isherwood. Hence, it is necessary to break the general trend of favouritism and to make Isherwood share the censure or the praise allotted to works he wrote in collaboration with Auden.

What is "The Dog" about—can be described thus. It describes the journey of two sensitive, exceptional souls through the realms of social and moral degeneration, which disillusion them perfectly! The story has the fascinating appeal of a folk-tale. The heir to the village, Pressan Ambo, Sir Francis Crewe, is missing. Seven young men, so far, have set out on the mission to search and bring him back, but themselves never returned. Finally, it is Alan Norman—a man with some exceptional qualities of head and heart, who is selected by the villagers to go in search of Francis Crewe. Accompanied by his dog 'Francis', Alan volunteers for the task, while the Chorus showers blessings on him and invokes love to guide him!

Quite a considerable part of the play forms Alan's travels through the abhorrent places of a corrupt society. He is an idealist whose sentimental vision is corrected by
a more quiet vision of Francis who, with his dog's eye view of society, has experienced the corruption of the village.

The places of Alan's visit, it is remarkable, are, mostly, European capitals, which makes it certain that the play is about post-war European degeneracy. In the very opening chorus, we're informed:

"The Summer holds: upon its glittering lake
Lie Europe and the islands—"

After each significant travel or event, the choruses pass a commentary related to it, full of direct social comments which sound like a dramatic version of Auden's poetic themes of the 'Thirties. Alan's first meeting is with two cynical journalists. Together they reach Ostria—a typical bourgeois country under dictatorship—and witness one of the regular mass political executions. Then Alan goes to a brothel in search of Francis and the poverty and deprivation he observes there touch the very core of his heart. Alan's visits to different places and his observation of society in many phases, though full of direct statements and open preaching, are moving in effect and form a profound reading. His search, next, leads him to Westland where the complete decadence of a society under fascist dictatorship is witnessed by him. His visit to Westland's lunatic asylum, from which he is rescued by the journalists, goes to make a very readable part of the play which is an obvious satire on German nationalism, the Nazis being portrayed as lunatics and their fascist state
as an asylum. Though the elements of humour and parody have been abundantly mixed with satire (which is, at places, rather too direct), yet Auden's heart-felt abhorrence of facism and its power-mad exponents is genuine and profound. It is ironical enough that a person like Francis' calibre who renounced all power and authority and who had the guts to break with social hypocrisy should be searched in a lunatic asylum — a fascist country — by Alan.

Still more ironical is Alan's visit to Paradise Park in search of Francis — a place to which he is directed by Grabstein — a financier. This place is full of 'sick' people and the whole scene is stuffed with those psychological eloquences Auden so earnestly desired to versify in these years! Paradise Park is a society of the neurotics, the sick and the frustrated who are afraid of something or the other and seek refuge from these fears in flight — which has many kinds. It is a world of the fugitives seeking escape in art, in sexual love, in hypochondria, in one's feats, in devotion to such ideals as God, Beauty etc., and Auden seizes a fruitful opportunity to expose the hollowness of their meaningless existence.

The following episode — Alan's visit to Nineveh Hotel — again contains a biting satire. With its three hundred bath rooms, five hundred bed-rooms, three hundred and seventy-five w.c.'s etc., this place best represents all that is highly cheap and nonsensical in a permissive society. Auden's observation of the base life of the elite-class and
the real places of corruption is unquestionably acute. With
the cabaret and seduction scene, the vulgarity of a
megapolitan culture becomes complete. How capturing and
tempting this panorama may be even for a morally strong and
socially aware person, is clear from Alan's falling in love
with the cabaret dancer. However, he is rescued from this
affair by him constant companion, the dog, who is no one
else than Sir Francis Crewe himself, disguised. Until Alan
set out to search for him, Francis had never left the village.
Disguised, he used to wander among the places of social
treachery and was its keen observer. Now in his unique
journey with Alan, that vision is widened and he has become
aware that with all its degradation, Pressan Ambo was just
a microcosm of entire Europe.

Together, Alan and Francis come to their village as
changed and illumined persons with their broad and clear
social vision - finding themselves as strangers among their
own people. It was shocking enough for them to see how they
treated those whom they considered their inferiors but on
whom they were dependent for their pleasures. The action to
build up a society, 

"Where grace may grow outward, and be
given praise
Beauty and virtue be vivid there,"

thus becomes imperative. Denouncing the leaders of the
village establishment - the Vicar, the General and his wife,
(the 'old gang') they, together with some sensitive youths of
the village, accept a self-imposed exile and leave the village.
The search of the missing heir theme thus becomes identified
with the search for a better society, which continues even
after he is found out. Thus, it is not the person which
matters, it is the search which is all important! As they
leave (to join "the army of the other side" — defined by
Spender as "the workers' side") all the fascists in the
village are transformed into wild animals — which, in spite
of their human appearances — they really are!

With this sort of a story, Auden got ample scope for
social, political and moral criticism and he fully availed
himself of the opportunity. The obvious risk with it is of
the work turning into a propaganda-piece. But "The Dog"
stands nowhere in direct preaching and propaganda if compared
to "The Dance of Death" in which open tributes are paid to
Marx and Communism. "The Dog" does not speak on behalf of
any doctrine or 'ism'. In fact, it has often been criticised
for merely presenting a bleak situation and stressing the
need for action. The nature of the action has not been
made clear, neither has any way-out been suggested. The only
reference to any group or community of thought is in the end
when Alan, Francis and their followers leave Pressan to join
'the army of the other side' — which, as has been pointed
out, Spender explains as the side of the proletariat. But,
as is obvious, this hint is slight and Auden and Isherwood
themselves have never made it clear what they exactly mean
by 'the army of the other side'.

In fact, in "The Dog" the social considerations of the writers precede everything else. Disillusioned as they were with the existing social, political and cultural values, they tried to give complete outlet to the ideas foremost in their minds in these matters in this collaboration. Their only serious intention, in a play offering much fun and genuine entertainment, seems to be their contempt for the growing forces of Capitalism, Nazism, dictatorship and disgust at moral bankruptcy of the existing culture. And, for these illuminations only, the play should be read. It is useless to take Francis as a symbol of any social or political doctrine, for, the quest does not end with his finding. On the contrary, himself he continues it welcoming anybody who joins him in it. He may, in fact, safely be brought in the line of Auden's Truly Strong Men, one of those heroes of Auden who can judge and think individually and act accordingly!

"The Ascent of F6" (1936), marks a further development from "The Dog Beneath the Skin" and is rightly regarded as Auden and Isherwood's mutual 'achievement'. Though, the varied interpretations conferred upon the symbolic significance of the mountain (F6) and the climb have turned it into a much ambiguous work. As is with 'The Dog', here too, Auden's contribution amounts to a considerable extent. Isherwood has noted in his diary that most of their
play was written by either one or the other co-author, and
that the real collaboration was on the final scene. Auden's
contribution, according to Isherwood, was Act I, scene i; the
dialogue between Ransom and the Abbot in Act II, scene i;
Ransom's monologue in Act II, scene ii; the whole of Act II,
scene iv; all the songs and choruses, the speeches by Mr and
Mrs A, and the other speeches between the scenes. 22

Conveying some of Auden's favourite psychological
themes of the 'Thirties (the discovery and limitations of the
Self, the destruction of a sensitive individual by the false
values of a degraded society, the impurity of human will and
man's inevitable surrender to it, the temptation to power and
authority which ultimately corrupt, the ghastly consequences
of mother-fixation etc.), "The Ascent of F6", has a
fascinating story to tell, and presents a full-length
character study of Michael Ransom, who is a great mountaineer-
the 'unusual mixture' of a scholar and a man of action — and
is expected by his people to climb F6 — a haunted mountain
of British Sudoland and Oestnian Sudoland which stands on the frontier line between England and Oestnia.
It has been believed by the natives of the region that the
man who first reaches the summit of F6, would rule over both
the Sudolands (i.e. British and Oestnian), with his
descendants, for a thousand years. The request of his
brother, James, to lead the expedition on F6 is ruthlessly
refused by Ransom, for, he considers James as one who has
always usurped his things — right from the childhood —
playthings to their mother's love which has always been an obsession with Ransom. At her request only he surrenders and with his small troop goes on the mission. He is again provided with a choice in the middle of his journey by an Abbot who asks him to enter the monastery. By the time he conquers the summit, he has lost his companions one by one. There, in a hallucinatory scene, he faces the mysterious Demon in a visionary moment - who is revealed as his mother, as a young lady, singing a lullaby for him - and dies!

Remembering Auden's psychological preoccupations of this time, it is possible to define this sort of symbolic framework in a thousand ways. It is indeed an interesting and illuminating job to go through the wide world of varied symbolic interpretations of the play! Richard Hoggart, for example, sees in Ransom much in common with Auden himself and regards the climb and its significance for him as the dilemma of an exceptional man, for whom, ordinary men are mere "objects of pity and concern," who, "putting up with things," lead dreary lives. Ransom's problem, he thinks, is a spiritual one, whose inadequate solution is presented by the Abbot - Since all power corrupts, he should cleanse his will and renounce power! A monastery, signifying spiritual isolation, may be a fit place for him. But even an abbot is a man of power, so for an exceptional man, destruction is inevitable!

E.M. Forster makes a suggestion to read it on four different levels of parable: the heroic, the politico-
economic, the character-test, and the Freudian. Samuel Hynes views it as a significant fable of an introspective young man who, by the compelling powers of a domineering mother, is forced toward a life of action—a fable conveying a familiar Auden theme, "the necessary journey over the border into the unknown." While Francois Duchene relates it to Auden's early myth of the man of action and considers his ascent of the mountain as "the solitary journey of the man of free will." Francis Scarfe regards it as an undertaking of an ill-equipped man for a significant task, which he is fully aware would "lead him only to failure and death." Thus "The Ascent" is, as he thinks, a great work in which individual psychology and social satire mingle, presenting the tragedy of a sensitive but fearful person driven to a heroic mission by the false values of an ambitions mother and a corrupt bourgeois society.

However, the most subtle and convincing interpretations are those provided by Barbara Everett and Dennis Davison. Everett senses in it Auden's desire "to exhibit his generation as a collection of infants longing for the consolations of the nursery" always relying on others for emotional support and unable to act and think individually. Thinking on this very line, Davison observes:

"The suggestion is that England is suffering from an Oedipus complex and that the noble hero, Ransom, is seeking the consolations of the
nursery rather than spiritual truth. "29

In fact, the clue to the meaning of the play is provided in an intensely moving and wonderfully dramatic scene in which Ransom, who has earlier rejected his brother's constant pleas to lead the expedition, is requested by his mother, Mrs. Ransom, not to shatter his people's hopes and faith in him and to save England's fair name by conquering the summit. In its sheer force and vitality of arguments, it is comparable to that grand court-room scene in "The Merchant of Venice" where a prudent Portia pleads with an adamant Shylock to show mercy towards Antonio. Here is a son - sensitive, alone and dissatisfied - yearning for the love of his mother which, in abundance, is received by his elder brother-James. And here is a woman - deliberately denying that love to his favourite son in order to bring him up as an independent individual about whose infinite strength she is fully certain:

"I know my son the greatest climber in the world;
I know F6 the greatest mountain in the world."30

All of Ransom's tensions related to a note of preference in her voice for James and James' stealing of his share of her love, are subdued by her in a long speech written in a lofty, preacher-like style Auden could adopt so easily in his verse. James was like his father - the Really Weak Man - completely dependent on others to exist, unable to think and act individually - 'He cannot live an hour without applause.' But Ransom, for whom she deliberately stealed her love and hid it, was saved from all such elements which
weaken, for, he was to be the truly strong:

"You were to be unlike your father and your brother

You were to have the power to stand alone." 31

She passed through the ordeal of crucifying the mother in her to save him from weakness and is naturally sad now that when the time to prove his strength and "to choose the greatest action" of his life came, he withdrew -- just for displaying his hatred for a brother who shared in his mother's love!

It is torturing, pathetic and yet sound. Ransom gives in -- but not because he had strength enough to conquer the summit, but because he wanted to reassure a dejected mother that her sacrifices were not wasted. Ransom was not an exceptional man as her mother wanted and thought him to be. Far from being a Truly Strong Man, he grew up into a Truly Weak One, craving for a woman's love and care. He is, in fact, another John Nower compelled to obey a domineering mother and bring destruction upon himself. His tragedy is an outcome of his being misunderstood by others and himself. Outwardly, he appears to be a hero -- a powerful man of free will who can achieve miracles -- but inwardly, he is all broken, lonely and feeble. His ascent thus becomes his flight from a dull and dark world (whose sombre picture is presented in the speeches of Mr and Mrs A) into a world of 'Action and Glory' where as a leader of his men he has all power and authority.
The flaw in Ransom's nature - the destructive force in his personality - is well understood by one who believes in renunciation (though this is another example of how spiritual authority and power impure and corrupt!) and is spiritually enlightened - the Abbot. He explains his dilemma psychologically. 'The Demon is real' he informs Ransom in whose case its forms are very subtle. It has a source in his will which is evil. He is a scholar, a great mountaineer and an ascetic, yet he is a 'sick' person - the one who is tempted by power and adoration. He wants to get loved and cared. The weakening forces in his case are his secret, haunting desires.

The Abbot's choice offered to Ransom has its own limitations as he can himself see it clearly. He can, as the Abbot suggests, abandon the mountain and remain in the monastery. Obviously, this can't be Ranson's way - for even an Abbot is a man of (spiritual!) power, who wants to dominate others. Besides, the sensual world is not an easy temptation to renounce. The Abbot himself confesses about the visitations of his Demon to him in the forms of the dreams of "the world of the common people." For a man like Ransom who knows his powers and intelligence, the course of spiritual isolation is not adequate. He is the one who would always want people, less intelligent than himself, to obey him just like the ones who have followed him in his climb. So, for him, there remains only one way-out - to continue with the ascent, see its significance for him and to face the
Demon.

The end of "The Ascent" has not been acceptable for many. It is considered a part of a typical Auden-habit - to give weak endings to great works. Richard Hoggart regards it as a theatrically startling close and Samuel Hynes is of the opinion that "... the authors had trouble ending the play satisfactorily." Even a recent criticism declares:

"We are, however, left at the end with the impression that Auden has yet to seek the way the demon can be conquered."  

The fact, however, is not so. It is not an abrupt or hectic ending imposed on an otherwise carefully-conceived drama. On the contrary, it was the one selected out of many different conclusions thought by the writers to this Tragedy. The Demon which appears on the summit is Ransom's own mother, strengthening the point that his problem is rooted in the mother-fixation phenomenon in his nature. His climb - the remarkable achievement of a lifetime, ending in his falling in the arms of a young mother lulling him to slumber - thus proves to be his endeavour to gain his mother's adoration which has always been denied to him. The journey is an attempt to satisfy the demon - the longing for maternal affection - in him. The refusal of something intended to make him strong and free thus became the very source of his weakness, getting in the way of his 'standing alone.' This inner flaw in his nature and the real limitation of his self is revealed to Ransom only in the end:
"F6 has shown me what I am. I'm a coward and a prig." 36

All the ideals of Action and Glory prove unreal. Only the Demon - his self-created evil - was real to meet whom he was surmounting the heights of F6. Far from being the saviour of his people - the one who, as they believe, would not preach at them but do for them what they can't - he proved to be the one who could not even save himself! The play thus becomes a tragedy not of a hero - a man of action and an individual of free will - but of a neurotic. It is far less a social satire or something else than a psychological study of the frustration of such a weak hero!

In their last collaboration "On the Frontier" (1938), Auden and Isherwood aim at unmasking the degeneracy and futility of fascism and dictatorship, replacing them with that only political system which seemed just and reliable at that time to them - i.e. Communism. The "frontier," which divides people and places, will be gone, those who love truly will be united, the dignity of man will be brought to its full flower and the people will be free to choose their own road when the dawn of a new day (heralding the arrival of a classless, communist society) would appear. The social comment is obvious and the pure political propaganda makes it a work of highly topical nature, although the facile way in which the subject is treated gives it an impression of being a play which belongs less to Auden and more to Isherwood. 37
The contents of "On the Frontier" (specifically subtitled as "a melodrama in three acts" by its authors) are very simple and stand in sharp contrast to its predecessor—"The Ascent of P6." From the thematic story of rivalry going on between Westland—a state of fascist dictatorship—and Ostria—which represents a decadent monarchy—spring two parables of equal significance, one of the challenge from the proletariat to the head of the Westland Steel Trust, Valerian, and the leader of Westland, both of whom are mercilessly killed by one of their victims, and the other of the tender love of Eric and Anna living on either side of the dividing frontier. They are all easily interrelated to construct a moving narrative of the suffering of the workers, their consequent revolt against their oppressors, the downfall of capitalism and dictatorship in their respective provinces, the break-out of an inevitable war, the pathetic end of those who cherish the life-giving, healthy sentiments of love and peace and the final heralding, through their lips, of a "guarded future" in which others like them "shall meet—and find the real world happy." Eric and Anna's pathetic yearning is perhaps suggestive of the notion that mere love with its dreamland of personal desires is helpless to change people's destinies and cure hatred. That Utopia cannot be brought about unless the environment given to people is changed. It is out of this environment that men must make their destiny. The inadequacy of his former belief that "our love is stronger than their hate" is later on felt by Eric...
himself as he says:

"But I was wrong. We cannot choose our world,
Our time, our class."

The action to cure a society should not take place within an individual— but outside him—in the environment. And, in a changed environment only the act of loving can flourish. In Eric and Anna's case, there remains only one way of curing the society—the capitalist fascism should be destroyed. This is the message of the play.

The speeches delivered by Eric and Anna, scattered throughout the play, constitute the really beautiful part of the play. The art of using the medium of verse at the required places, giving vent to ideas supreme in the writer's mind, which Auden had started in "Paid on Both Sides", gets its culmination in "On the Frontier." Eric and Anna are, at first, shown as characters belonging to a different world than the one in which they live—talking of "Good neighbours and good parents and good children," of a beautiful and likeable and happy life. They are, thus, the romantic fools and the misfits. The way they are presented on the stage, each occupying a place divided by a line, a frontier, persons who have never met or seen each other, too is remarkable. Their relation to their world of imagination, thus, is still more strengthened. It is, in fact, to their ideal of a companion, that each one is addressing, representing persons who possess the nobility of loving in an environment stinking of hatred and brutality and all life-crushing forces. The
way they yearn for each other (mentally, of course!) is too
delicate and heart-capturing. Remembering the days of happy
companionship, Anna says:

"--- Often you sat
Beside me in the park and told me stories
Of couples in the panting unfair city
Who loved each other all their lives.
O. when I went to dances, all my partners
Were you, were you. "39

And Eric too responds in the same passionate but matured
tone:

"I've seen your face reflected in the river
As I sat fishing; and when I read a book
Your face would come between me and the print
Like an ambition," 40

It is through their sublime eloquence that the
playwrights vividly portray their celebrated vision of "the
good place," the happy society. These speeches may be
attributed to Auden's pen, for, throughout the 'Thirties, we
find him talking constantly and dreaming hopefully of
bringing about the existence of this Mortmere. In one of
Eric's memorable utterances, he explains his concept of the
good city which is defined as a place:

"Where the air is not filled with screams of
hatred
Nor words of great and good men twisted
To flatter conceit and justify murder. "41
It is only after they are disillusioned with their romantic ideologies, that these lovers come to realize the reality of patriotism, war and peace. Hatred always precedes love. In fact, love and freedom are begotten out of the darkness of hatred and violence. And it is only when the latter is destroyed that the following generation enjoys the bliss of peace. "Our hatred is the price of the world's freedom" - Eric says in his final speech, when he is on the verge of dying.

"On the Frontier" is, in fact, a play of startling ideas. On the subjects of heroism, nationalism and patriotism too, it has much to say. Nationalism is no cause of war which is, in any way, a great treachery. Our sympathies are directed, in the play, not either towards Westland or Osnia or towards any of their leaders. They are created for the masses - the common people on either side who suffer due to the mania for power and fame of their leaders. Nationalism, thus, does not remain a desirable virtue, but becomes a heinous feeling which produces war and inhuman destruction. In the broad consideration of mankind's ruin, the terms 'country,' 'nation,' and 'frontier' lose their meaning. This theme is boldly expressed in one of Dr Thorvald's speeches:

"--- I was brought up to think that a man's greatest privilege was to fight for his country; and it's hard to change one's ideas. Perhaps we were all wrong. War
seems so beastly when it actually happens!
Perhaps 'country' and 'frontier' are old-fashioned words that don't mean anything now. What are we really fighting for?
I feel so muddled! 42

Another very striking idea "On the Frontier" presents, is the leadership-phenomenon and its painful reality. Outwardly a leader appears to be a powerful, valiant person - a hero. But inwardly he is a broken, lonely creature - yet another number in Auden's list of the Truly Weak Men. "You think I am strong? No, I am weak, weak -- " the leader in the play himself unmasks his existence. In his urge for power, he becomes a working instrument in the hands of the industrialists who exploit him for selfish ends. He knows it, and he also knows that his people's respect for him is not real. At heart they despise him. The very nature of his responsibility - to make the final choice regarding Peace or War - is killing and he thus becomes a pitiable hero - who, far from being torturing, is himself tortured. Leadership had, in fact, been forced upon him by friends "who thought only of their own ambition." He was actually "a poor out-of-work bank-clerk," who had the power to speak and mobilize the masses. In order to climb higher, he had to depart from his noble, human self and be cunning. He had to intrigue and murder and do horrible things. But when power came and with it the great disillusionment, he wanted to be alone and "humble and free" and "go back to his parents!"
cottage." In his terrible hysterias, he could be temporarily
controlled and consold by music, proving that inwardly he
feels himself lonely and unprotected and like an ordinary
human being wants love, but again goes back into the world of
hysterical fury.

In 1936, when "On the Frontier" was first produced,
many were of the opinion that it is an open satire on Nazi
Germany and its dictators with Scandinavian names being
substituted for German ones, and that the play's Leader was a
caricature of Hitler. The latter supposition should never be
paid serious attention, for, the points of difference between
the Fascist dictator and Auden's Weak Hero are more than the
points of similarity among them. One should only remember T.S.
Eliot's celebrated remark in this regard which he passed the
very next day after the night when it was first performed by
the Group Theatre at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge in November,
1936:

"I am afraid that Hitler is not the
simpleton that the authors made him
out to be."43

Auden's plays, and particularly, "On the Frontier",
have been considered as "topical" pieces, (probably due to the
constant references in them to war, dictatorship, violence,
fascism, class-struggle, a ruined society etc.) fascination for
whom has paled with the passing away of time. This charge
should strictly be refuted. Topicality proves a writer's
genuine interest and attachment to the life of his time. It
shows his deep awareness of the various problems of his age. Some of the masterpieces ("The Waste-Land" for example) in literature are, to a remarkable degree, topical or rooted in their times, and their significance is unquestionable. In fact, the entire poetry of Auden is, in a sense, topical. Yet, even today, it remains vigorous and has a unique appeal. So, it is highly improper to reject his plays as works meant only for the study of the 'Thirties' audience.

It is, however, right that his plays cannot be considered as his most invaluable contribution to the dramatic writing of the times. They owe a great deal to the Experimental Drama of Germany where Auden had been before 1930, and was, particularly, impressed by the German Epic Drama. Their merit is that, in them, the writers aim at expressing, with great zest and a sense of urgency, their psychological, political and leftist leanings. Above all, they directly convey their social and human preoccupations. Their great fault is, perhaps, that within a few pages, their creators tried to achieve a lot — speaking on a number of subjects and covering a vast area of thought with a single stroke. Consequently, they produced works of much confusion and obscurity. Auden's bidding farewell to the art of writing drama as early as 1938, makes it certain that he had himself felt that the form did not suit much his kind of talent and that its infinite possibilities of communicating to a much wider audience had not been fully explored by him. Nevertheless, their importance — as being honest endeavours of a sensitive
mind much moved by the social and moral chaos of the Age - remains and compels us to regard them at least as "minor achievements" of one whose wit and intelligence have always been unquestionable!