

CONFLICT IN THE POEMS OF W.H. AUDEN

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Abstract

*W H Auden belonged to the post first world war generation with its curious mixture of despair and joy. In his poems Auden's foremost interest was understanding the working of the world and only tool to serve this interest was his ideologies he revised his writings to accommodate any shift in his faith in the words of Hanna Arndit," in the forties there were many who turned against their old beloved they simply changed trains, as it were: the train of socialism and communism had been wrong and they changed to the train of capitalism and Marxism Auden apparently changed trains frequently in his poems."*¹*The post war period of the late twenties and thirties, in which Auden grew, was a period of tension to which the young minds were bound to react strongly. In the writing of Auden and his friends," what one cannot forget is the time; and a very bad time it was"*²*Auden, like other left wing poets and writers of the thirties, was no doubt formed by the river and temper of his age, and he represented In his early poetry not only the crisis of his age but also his radical reaction to it. The present paper attempts to explore the cultural conflict in the poems of W H Auden.*

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In the earliest poems of Auden, the state of social and spiritual decay is suggested but the images of “the frozen buzzard/flipped down the weir and carried out to see”³ dismantled motion floor”⁴,” snatches of tram line running to wood”⁵ etc. It is obvious that in the Poems 1928 Auden’s Emphasis is more on the disintegration of life as a prelude to creation then on the call to action and change. The radical Auden emerges first in poems 1930 in which his tone becomes more threatening and assertive. The last line of the fifth stanza of 1929”till i was angry said i was pleased”⁶ clearly illustrates Auden's position as a radical humanist who although annoyed at the prevalent terrorism was happy at the prospect of resolution which was inherent in the war” Of proletariat against Police”⁷. The idea of a proletariat revolution is again suggested through rotten bridge that totters/over the abyss”⁸ the deserted castle/ready to explore”⁹and opening of ”the locked door”¹⁰.

Being one the bourgeoisie himself, he warned the members of his class to guard against impending doom which is sure to overtake them incase they fail to rise equal to the claims of the evolutionary principle. As life is essentially governed by an evolutionary process in which all orders are continually superseded by new ones, the doom of which the complacent bourgeoisie are unaware is inevitable and imminent the time has already approached when we must: Find the pen knife there and plunge it into false heart .With such a critical time it is of no avail to lecture on blowing” the cobwebs from the mirror”¹¹. It is the time when the leaders must migrate and “leave for cape wrath tonight”¹² because the doom is drawing close. Something must be done to end the diseased and decayed order as things have gone too far already and the time for inactivity and dullness is past now. At this stage Auden synthesises the evolutionary principle and Marxism into his own poetic idea of change which becomes the basis of the myth in several poems of the thirties.

There is undoubtedly a lack of uncertainty of tone in Auden's early poems. It is never clearly indicated whether the war, the struggle and The Skyline operations are communistic operation or something different from it. The war image as MK Spears puts it," is too generalised and too nebulous to fit Marxist terms....."¹³. Yet it is not due to the lack of allegiance to an Idea as much as due to a poet's conscious concern to save his poetry from the explicitness of propaganda that results in ambiguity and uncertainty. Moreover when this class war between the suggested forces of good and evil is taken for a clash between the forces of decaying capitalism and its opponents, Auden's stand becomes evident. His voice is unmistakably the voice of a Near-Marxist intellectual. A "pink old liberal"¹⁴ as he declared himself to be. He remains to the side of the heroes whose "bravery is now not in the dying breath"¹⁵ but in developing greater endurance and understanding of the true object of their struggle in "resisting the temptations/ To Skyline operations"¹⁶. Auden is unequivocally against the financier, the seeker after happiness and the holders of one position as much as he is against the false heroes and absurd heroism.

The influence of the culture can be easily seen in his poems. For example in 1929 it is remarkable that the particulars of the contemporary life are juxtaposed to the account of the universe and nature of human life both reinforcing the pathos of each other and leading finally to the intended conclusion of the "destruction of error "¹⁷and" death of the old gang."¹⁸ The 1930s were a "perpetual state of emergency for those aware that there was an emergency"¹⁹ the images such as "the clock's alarm/ in the strange Valley"²⁰ the sound behind our backs of glaciers Calving" and the bitter blue smoke rising in "days of luck and heat"²¹ that occur in The Bonfires form the integral parts of the objective picture of an impending catastrophe. As these images do not refer to actual events they embody the ideological struggle for social revolution. The following lines effectively suggest the intended warning as well as the threat of the necessary destruction of existing order of existence:

Bitter the blue smoke Rises
From Garden Bonfires lit

To wear burning sit:

Good, if it is thorough²²

The same note of menace and threat in 'Missing' can also be found in which the call for immediate action is still more emphatic as the Revolutionary leaders are warned against all sorts of temptations In Their Skyline operation and are admonished to²³ quench the Lamps and pass alive into the house."²⁴

September 1 1939 evidences more clearly the ideological turning point in Auden development. The poem begins with the announcement of the end of²⁵ a low dishonest decade as well as the poet's own²⁶ clever hopes ".The staring faces of imperialism and "international wrong"²⁶ have completely disillusioned the poet about his previous humanistic hopes of a bright future the sense of crisis in the present is deepened throughout the poem by set images as" waves of anger and fear"²⁷,"the unmentionable Odour of death"²⁸ and of lost" children afraid of the night who have never been happy or good"²⁹. The Sonnet sequence of 'In Time of War' in journey to a war also suggest the transitional phase in Auden s Poetic career in so far as it presents The Universal condition of man the problems and predicaments of his existence as well as the historical development of Civilization from a broadly philosophical angle instead of a purely psychological or political point of view. Although the influence of Marxist philosophy is traceable here as it is in On the Frontier the philosophical frame of reference in the Sonnet of in Time of war is a broader significance then the specific Marxist empiricism of On the Frontier. These sonnets dramatize the history of man since the beginning of creation to the present day a process of constant evolution beginning with man's fall from Eden.

What Auden proposes in his early poetry is the creation of a new order for which man has to bring about a change in him and around him and this necessarily involve the death of his old self .To Auden of the thirties the prevailing conditions were suicidal to the happiness and harmony in man's life, and therefore, he arouses in us an awareness of the necessity to choose between death and life. Those who choose to live urged to Revolt against the mortifying forces within themselves.

Auden accepted Christian ideas of sin Grace and redemption because:” He has been so utterly disillusioned with regard to men’s capacity for goodness...”³⁰ and he found that there was no way except the acceptance of man’s sinfulness which alone could make life acceptable. Making life acceptable is Auden’s Chief motive throughout his poetic career religious faith he finds can provide and an erring solution to man’s problems of the conflict between the good and the evil. Man’s acceptance of his sinful before God induces humility in him on the one hand and on the other saves him from pride in his relations with his fellow men .In fact ,Auden’s Passion for the Spiritual regeneration of man impulse him to shift his Emphasis from one ideology to the other or synthesise them into a new pattern. At every stage of his life, he adheres to one or the other kind of Faith either secular or religious and there are certain Cardinal principles and patterns such as ‘absolute devotion’³¹ and “the real right place”³² which passes through out in wedding perspectives moreover in some of his poems of the 30s we find him invoking some of his personal deities to come and redress It. it was it may be said that his mother’s influence which subsisted as a hidden religious impulse was realise fully in his acceptance of Christianity Auden analyses the symptoms of social decay with the same Vigour as he did in the depiction of psychic melodies. In this respect the greatest influence was obviously of Marx and Engels whose ideas of class struggle, alienation of labour from the fruits of production, government as the agency of those who own the instrument of production interaction of freedom and necessity in human existence, and the new philosophy of history appealed not only to Auden but to several young intellectuals of his generation who were all profoundly concerned about the evils of capitalism and menacing threat of facism.

He was essentially a liberal humanist whose radicalism owed much to Marxism as It owed in the early years of the thirties to psychology. In an untitled essay in Modern Canterbury Pilgrims Auden describes his position as a liberal humanist.

“What was one looking for at that time? Nothing is more difficult to recall then past assumptions, but I think the state of mind among most of my contemporaries was somewhat as follows. We assumed that there was only one outlook on life conceivable

civilized people, the liberal humanism in which all of us had been brought up whether we came from Christian or agnostic homes. To this the Theological question seemed irrelevant since when used as freedom of person, equal justice for all, respect for the right of others etc. were self evident truths. However the liberal humanism of the past has failed to produce the universal peace and prosperity it promised, failed even to prevent a world war. What had It overlooked? The subconscious, said Freud; the means of production, said Marx. Liberalism was not to be superseded; it was to be made effective instead of self defeating.”³³ Such events of European history in the thirties such as the threatening emergence of facism in the beginning and later the outbreak of the world war completely disillusioned him as to the capacity of man to bring about any kind of regeneration in him or in his society and put him in a state of confusion and self doubt for some time. Auden writes: confronted by such a phenomenon it was impossible any longer to believe that the values of liberal humanism work self-evident unless one was prepared to take relativistic Review that all values are a matter of personal taste one should hardly avoid asking the question as I am convinced the Nazis right what is it that validates our values and invalidate theirs’?

Lastly, it may be noted that these ideas enabled Auden to form his notion of a Christian democracy as well. The above discussed conflict in the culture of Auden s Era teaches us, “the best form of human society can only be the form through which at any given historical moment or in any given geographical location, love for one’s neighbour can express itself most freely....” ³⁴

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