W.H. Auden: Poems of the 1930s

by Ian Parks

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Scope of Topic
The purpose of this Bookmark is to introduce readers to the poetry published by W.H. Auden (1907-73) during the 1930s. Although he continued to write poetry after his emigration to the United States in 1939, Auden’s output in the decade leading up to his departure forms a distinct and self-contained body of work for which, arguably, he is best remembered. This Bookmark seeks to relate the poems to the social and political context in which they were written, to examine some of the issues they raise, and to offer a few approaches to discussion.

BOOKS TO READ
W.H. Auden: Collected Poems (Faber)

NOTES
W.H. Auden was the first English poet to accept into his work the whole range of twentieth-century experience in the West – its warfare, its political complexity, and the growing alienation of the individual in the face of industrialisation and the growing power of the state. Such an acceptance was all the more remarkable to his contemporaries who recognised in Auden’s work an immediacy not often found in the English tradition. While earlier poets such as Hardy and Edward Thomas had looked back to the relative stability of the Victorian Age, reflecting its major concerns in their vocabulary and subject-matter, Auden was unique in his startling use of images and idioms drawn from such diverse and modern sources as psycho-analytical terminology, political jargon, and the lyrics of popular song. True, the modernist poets Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot (whose The Waste Land of 1922 remained a profound influence on Auden) had registered in their work the shock of coming to terms with the new century; but their response was essentially one of recovery – of attempting to find some meaning in an economically and spiritually crippled West still reeling from the effects of the 1914-18 War. The significance of Auden to both his contemporaries and to us as students of English Literature is his willingness to accept the fact of the twentieth-century in all its diversity and to articulate this diversity in his poems. And it is to the poems he wrote during that turbulent decade, the 1930’s, that we must turn if we want to see this acceptance at work.

In order to appreciate the sort of impact Auden’s early poems made (his first collection was published, significantly, right at the beginning of the decade in 1930) it is essential to grasp something of the social and political context in which they came to be written; and seeing that a sense of audience is so important to Auden’s work at this stage it is equally useful for us to know the sort of audience he had in mind and the group of individuals he felt he was addressing. As we have seen, the effects of the 1914-18 War were widespread. The whole of Europe had sunk into a malaise from which recovery seemed impossible; so much so, that after the failure of conventional politics to bring about positive change during the 1920’s a new wave of nationalism swept across the continent, usually centred around some prominent leader or figurehead. Fascism, as it came to be known, found its first and perhaps fullest expression in Italy where the dictator Benito Mussolini had risen to power at the end of the decade. By the middle of the next, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party had seized political control in Germany, while in the United Kingdom itself Sir Oswald Mosley and the British Union of
Fascists constituted an ever-present reminder to the populace that political extremism was not to be construed merely in terms of something that ‘didn’t happen over here’. The ideological opposite of Fascism, Communism, had been established in Russia following the Revolution of 1917 and a violent clash between the two seemed inevitable. When it finally came, in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-38, a group of British intellectuals including Auden volunteered to fight on the side of the left-wing Republicans. Although it falls outside the scope of this discussion, Auden’s poem *Spain* (1937) is interesting as it illuminates the sort of attitudes expressed by those participating in the struggle. Auden, then, was writing at a time of great political change and instability during which the future of Europe was uncertain and the threat of another, even more devastating war was looming. How he succeeded in relating these social tensions to his own and others’ experience of life in the 1930’s will be the main preoccupation of this essay.

Rather than engage in a general discussion of Auden’s work during this period, my intention here is to offer a fairly detailed examination of just three poems which represent something of the poet’s range, style and thematic content. The first of these, *The Secret Agent*, was written as early as 1928 and immediately establishes Auden’s tone and his distinctive vocabulary of the frontier, the border, and the spy. The second, *Lay Your Sleeping Head, my Love* – ostensibly a love poem but shot through with Auden’s acute awareness of the social dimensions implicit in all relationships – dates from 1937. The last, and probably Auden’s most well-known poem, *September 1, 1939*, was written from exile in America at the end of the decade and on the eve of the Second World War. Any selection from the work of a great poet has to be, to some extent, arbitrary. However, these three poems, spanning as they do the whole of Auden’s range during the decade provide us with a good starting point from which to approach the rest of his output.

The very title of *The Secret Agent* (added by Auden at a later date) is significant, as it draws our attention immediately to the central place occupied by the individual in an alien landscape where ‘The bridges were unbuilt and trouble coming’. The speaker is presented as a stranger and, although the exact reason for his presence in the ‘new district’ is never made clear, it is obvious that ‘He, the trained spy’ is engaged in some sort of political espionage which has placed his life in danger. Auden’s refusal to give more information about the situation in which the speaker finds himself serves only to strengthen the sense of menace and secrecy which pervades the whole of the poem and most of Auden’s work at this point. At the same time as he makes us aware of the political context of the poem, Auden also draws our attention to the personal nature of the protagonist’s mission by allowing the reader to interpret some of his statements in the light of individual experience, hinting at a thwarted sexual relationship at the very end of the poem

> They would shoot of course,
> Parting easily who were never joined.

This violent image of an abrupt divorce is characteristic of Auden in the 1930’s, as is the interaction between landscape and individual, politics and private life.

Approaching Auden’s early poetry for the first time, the reader is often confronted with the slightly unsettling sense that each poem appears to be a disconnected fragment from a larger, more coherent scheme or narrative to which the poet alone holds the key to a fuller interpretation. Yet this tendency (as baffling to Auden’s first audience as to later readers) is part of an overall effect; so much so that his style – at once colloquial and didactic – was to exert a profound influence on a whole generation of poets who sought, with varying degrees of success, to emulate it. At worst they were content to merely reproduce his techniques and mannerisms, giving rise for the first time to the term ‘Audenesque’. However, three poets – Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis and, most notably, Louis MacNeice – succeeded in *adapting* Auden’s manner while shedding his idiosyncrasies. Between them they went on to produce some of the most moving and socially-aware poetry of the twentieth-century.
In *August for the People* (1935), a birthday poem addressed to his friend, the novelist Christopher Isherwood, Auden stated that the function of the modern poet was to ‘Make action urgent and its nature clear’. In *Lay Your Sleeping Head, my Love* he goes on to set the fragility of a love relationship against the wider context of social responsibility. Beginning in understatement

Lay your sleeping head, my love  
Human on my faithless arm

and in a language of precision and great beauty, the poem develops into the painful recognition that even in this most private setting public concerns intrude:

And fashionable madmen raise  
Their pedantic boring cry.

We are instantly reminded of the political oratory of Hitler, Mussolini and Mosley – the ‘fashionable madmen’ of their time, and of the fundamental differences which exist between the language of autocracy and the language of love.

The tensions implicit in the public/private dichotomy as explored by Auden during the 1930’s culminates in *September 1, 1939* where, from the perspective of exile in the United States Auden looks back with a caustic eye on that ‘low dishonest decade’ and finds it wanting. Having set the context in a specific place and time through the title and the opening lines

I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-Second Street

Auden quickly expands his own feelings of uncertainty and fear to include all ‘the darkened lands of the earth’. For Auden, as for many of his contemporaries, the United States had come to embody the values of neutrality and democracy in a world which appeared to be succumbing rapidly to the political extremism of Fascism or Communism. His reference in the third stanza to ‘A psychopathic god’ is clearly meant to be understood as Hitler, and we are reminded once again of the ‘fashionable madmen’ of the earlier *Lay Your Sleeping Head, my Love*. By the end of the poem Auden appears to have reached a position where he can reject the world-saving ideologies of his younger self (he had been a member of the Communist Party during the 1930’s) and to rely only on the interaction of a handful of trusted individuals, in whom he had faith, to transform the world. At the same time he comes to recognise his function as a poet

All I have is a voice  
To undo the folded lie

as being a sort of mediator between these individuals:

Defenceless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages;  
May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.
Although this poem was revised drastically by Auden on several occasions during his life, finally being rejected by the poet from his collected editions, the original version remains his most well-known, powerful, and enduring poem of the 1930’s.

Auden travelled widely during the decade, most notably to Spain, China and Iceland, and these first-hand led him to formulate an almost journalistic approach to what he saw. More than any other poet, Auden was in a position to communicate something of the spirit of the times, although, as some critics have pointed out, he may well have been hindered by the fact that he was divorced through reasons of birth and upbringing from the very class of working men and women he was seeking to address. Yet, throughout the 1930’s Auden never seems, as a poet at any rate, to have wavered in his ultimate faith in the restorative power of love; and this was to provide him with his major themes as he matured into the rest of his career. As early as 1934 in *Easily, my dear, you move* Auden had realised the central place *Love* occupied in human activity and recognised that

> . . .through our private stuff must work
> His public spirit.

**FURTHER READING**


Cecil Day Lewis: *Collected Poems* (Faber, 1977)

Louis MacNeice: *Collected Poems* (Faber, 1979)

Stephen Spender: *Collected Poems* (Faber, 1985)

**CRITICISM**


Edward Mendelson: *Early Auden* (Faber, 1981)