

## **Rumination on War in Auden's Poetry**

**Karunakaran B Shaji**

*Associate Professor Regional Institute of Education  
Mysore- 570006*

---

**ABSTRACT:** Ravages of war never failed to provoke disruptive matrices in the Post- War generation poets. In Auden, it grew into the diaphanous allegory of the brutality the human mind is capable of. The horrendous details of war and its incipient dialectics write its amok tales of gory witchcraft in the hyphenated spaces of the poetic mystique. Set apart from the crowding associationist war imagery, Auden takes recourse to a reticent, resilient path and retains its stoic rectitude. The proponents and perpetrators of the war sardonically cast their derisive whimsical smile at Auden, even as the poet continues his relentless tirade against the new age avatars of Vikings and Mongolian warmongers. It offers a critique of the vivacity and audacity of Auden's anti-war rhetoric.

**KEY TERMS:** Sangfroid morality

- ✚ Aesthetics of violence
- ✚ War criminals
- ✚ Totalitarianism
- ✚ Masochist ethos of war

---

In the 1930's the Western world was caught in the grip of political and economic uncertainty. The democratic governments remained largely clueless as to the strategies to be evolved to confront the threat of Fascist totalitarian forces of the Hitler-Mussolini combine. Great Britain found itself in the vortex of an irresolvable political and economic imbroglio. There were definitive signs of the looming threats to the foundation of the edifice of the empire. Poets like Wyndham Lewis even supported the fascist ideal and went onto predict great futures for National Socialist movement of Germany. Aldous Huxley who had never ceased to be sceptical of the seamy side of Soviet Communism, hoped that the Soviet Union would come out with a more viable model of socialism setting the path for Britain to follow.

The World War (1914-18) and the Great Slump (1929-32) had ushered in a situation of unprecedented chaos and uncertainty in the social and economic spheres. Writers, intellectuals and dramatists began to explore alternate ways to come out of the ever worsening crisis that lacked prehistory and a name. For some of them the available path was to admire and ultimately subscribe to some other variety of totalitarianism. For Auden it lay in the ultimate humanitarian deal of communism, inspite the various pitfalls and drawbacks that the rival systems sought to project. The practical and visionary ideal of Communism held its sway over the poet, whereas for others it was the divisive strategies of totalitarian powers. The ground was abuzz with experiments of all sorts that passed off in the name of German National Socialism, the Young Turk Movement, Austrian Social Democracy, Kuomintang, King Alexander's 'experiment towards modern state' in Yugoslavia, Italian Fascism and Bolshevism. Many including Graham Greene observed that Auden's allegiance was difficult to be determined, as there was a perceptible tension between leftist sympathies and the father figure which was central to the fascist plot.

In the period between 1923 and 1940, both the Communist Party of Great Britain and the various fascist parties survived on the sidelines of British politics. The confrontational strategies of these opposing ideological streams acted against the core character of British politics which had been one of peaceful camaraderie till that time. The inter-war years chose to distance itself with the violence ingress politics of Victorian and Edwardian periods. After the war years politics gradually returned to its elite creed of civilised democratic themes. The major political outfit that subscribed to the Communist ideology was CPGB in 1920, which got affiliated to the Communist International in the 1920's in the aftermath of the revolution of 1917. In the times that followed, CPGB emerged as a major influence among the working class people of Britain. It brought the massive numbers who had leftist leanings under its sway. In 1932 the British towns witnessed massive unemployment demonstrations led by National Unemployed Workers' Movement culminating in the hunger march to Hyde Park that led to violent confrontation with baton wielding mounted police.

The party wielded support on the anti-fascist platform in 1930s. CPGB had stated allegiance to Soviet Union and the Five-Year Plan of Joseph Stalin appeared to provide a viable alternative capitalist systems of the time. Britain's political establishment found itself in an awkward and embarrassing relationship with British fascism. The British Fascistic sprang up in 1923 with the stated motif of countering repelling socialist forces, when the Communists never concealed their intention of revamping the parliamentary democracy and establish a state on the lines of Soviet Socialism through the proletarian revolution. Though the British Fascists remained a minority they never lacked the unstinted support of the landed gentry of all hues. They signed their loyalty with the Conservative Party while deriving covert inspiration from Mussolini's success in repressing the leftist movement of Italy. Gradually they could witness their support base increasing with fiercely racist groups like Imperial Fascist League and Mosley's foundation of the British Union of Fascists.

Auden's idea of history and poetry has to be examined in the light of his perception of the various political and ideological clashes that were witnessed in his time. There is a discernible interest in the problem of responsible historiography. He rejects Camus' idea of writerly engagement and examines in detail the legacy of Orwell in the Anglo-American intellectual community. Auden sought an idea of history that had no ideological trappings, while choosing to distance himself with the theories of Spengler and Toynbee, which had caused a great deal of academic discussion in the 1920's and 1950's. He felt he could go along with Cochrane, de Rougemont and Rosenstock-Huessy. Perhaps no other English poet of the time was confronted by the bewildering complexity of contemporary history like Auden. Auden published 'The History of an Historian' a review on Ernest Jones's biography of Freud. Interestingly Auden considers Freud as a historian caught in an intractable bind, who was to discover laws of history in the full awareness that they are not laws of orthodox historians, but laws that scientists discover.

Auden observes: 'In assessing the importance of his data, all historians are governed by the same general principle that the importance of an historical event is in proportion to its casual effect on subsequent historical events which include its influence on the later interpretation of the past. There exists a casual relationship between events in history. But the way these events are interpreted can themselves reach the status of an event. There coming into a continuum of influences between the earlier events and later events. Here the category of cause has to be detached from necessity. For the reason as stated above, Auden treats Freud as a historian. Freud's decision to disown his early speculations about brain mechanics necessitates that he has now to consider his data as irreducible to quantifiable occurrences. Auden makes an in-depth analysis of the situation where there began develop a never ending series of disputes between Freud and his erstwhile disciples. He identifies these disputes as paradigmatic cases of dispute among historians, in which a judgement of taste is inescapable. Religious as well as historical disputes have always remained irresolvable. In 'Interlude' Auden provides a caustic insight into this issue. He seems to believe that autobiography is as much a form of history as biography or military historiography.

A good historian has to be honest and tactful in the handling of the data and has to discover the laws by which they are governed. More than that he has to be conscious of the fact that interpretation itself is a possible datum, but at the same time laws he is devising are not the same as natural laws. There is always a conflict zone when it happens to be relation between 'motive' and 'cause'. Most of the historians hold onto the prevailing view that motives that they have identified propel the events under discussion, they tend to confuse them with causes. Auden identifies Marx as one of the major historians who ultimately yielded to this temptation. Auden frequently reveals the temptation to pair Marx with Freud as well as Kierkegaard. Auden was blind to the fact that Marxist historiography could be sometimes problematic, 'Marx seems to me to correct in his view that physical conditions and the forms of economic production have dictated the forms of communities'

Auden pays scant regard to academic historiography when it began to debase itself as the social science. But he holds *Christianity and Classical Culture* by Charles Cochrane in great esteem and finds there is an obvious parallelism between it and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Interestingly Gibbon identifies the fall the Roman empire with the rise in Christianity, whereas Cochrane finds in that decline the failure of the classical culture which never established 'any intelligible connection between natural affective bonds and the life of justice'

*Love in the Western World* is another poem that bears deep imprints of the Marxist leanings of the poet, in which he draws parallels with Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's *Out of the Revolution*. Both locate the source of the contemporary European crisis in an apparently minor innovation of the medieval period. Auden ponders on the vocation of the writer and depicts his theme with a certain rustic humour which is rather rare in the poet: 'The

most satisfactory answer I have discovered, satisfactory because it withers curiosity, is to say Medieval Historian'. He goes on to say that *Out of the Revolution* refers to 'Autobiography of the Western Man' In his sonnet sequence in *Journey to a War*, Auden includes in his verse commentary: 'This is the epoch of the Third Great Disappointment': the first is the collapse of the classical culture, the second is the demise of the Christianity in classical form, and the third is the crisis of modernity. This theme gets an elaborate treatment in

*Out of the Revolution*. The Great War had thrown up a symbolic barrier bent upon the inhuman division of children of the British middle class and upper middle classes born in the 1890s and 1900s from their forebears. It may look a little ironical that Auden's self-mortifying idea of New York can be read as an alibi for the emigrant who had ignobly left Britain to a chorus of disapproval. In truth, Auden arrived as an emigre; the harsh attacks on him during the war aware to transform him temporarily into an exile. Like many a European's first impressions of the city, his were soon to change under the terrible honesty of New York living. As a fatigued and ailing Albert Camus recorded in March 1946: 'At first glance, a hideous, inhuman city. But I know that one changes one's mind.' And he found New York was always too hospitable.

In Auden's poem *The Orators* published in 1932, the Old boy raises the question during a school prize day, 'What do you think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well?'. The question is ambiguous as the speaker and as the context in which it is asked. Subtitled An English Study, the book was written and set in a minor private school in the salubrious Scottish town of Helensburgh on the Clyde, where Auden taught for two years from 1930. Although the Old Boy expresses an abiding opinion of Auden's in 1930s, that individual and collective repressions, he is not simply a mouthpiece for the poet's views. On the contrary, he is a figure of fun, to a parodied and reviled as a spokesman of patriarchal authority, engaged in the manipulation of the boys into guilty submission. Yet his speeches end with apparent volte-face, inciting his youthful audience of 'initiates' to stage what is virtually a pogrom against all the 'rotters and slackers...proscribed persons' in the school hall, which he recalls from a bullying initiation rite of his own school days.

The poet had few doubts that his own native land could easily go the same way under the pressure of economic depression, mass unemployment, and the collapse of Ramsay MacDonald's short-lived Labour administration, beset by a banker's ramp, into conservative-dominated 'National government' Coalition which received a huge mandate in the general election of October 1931. Such easy shifting between Left and Right radicalism was widespread at the start of the 1930s, and the young Auden was not immune. His often leftist disciples readily wore black shorts of the British Union of Fascists into which they rapidly mutated. Auden's poetry is often inclusive which holds within its purview not only factory workers who are 'too old at the age of thirty' but the shareholders too whom 'fierceness of competition and the constant trade booms and depressions keep...in perpetual state of anxiety'. 'Half the machinery of the world is running to-day not to satisfy any real want', he argued, 'but to stop us from remembering that we are afraid'.

To conclude this kind of contradiction is rampant in his fascination for the communist ideal. On the one hand, reproducing a leftist trope, the vast majority of all classes are victims of the capitalist system now apparently in terminal decline. On the other hand, we're all alike guilty, by omission or commission, and deserve what we're going to get it. The sense of a diffuse collective guilt transforms an historical conjecture into a metaphysical condition, summed up in his adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon poem 'The Wanderer': 'Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle'.

#### REFERENCES:

1. What W. H. Auden Can Do for You: 5 (Writers on Writers)
2. by [Alexander McCall Smith](#)
3. Lectures on Shakespeare
4. by [W. H. Auden](#) and Arthur C. Kirsch
5. Selected Poems of W. H. Auden (Vintage International)
6. by [W. H. Auden](#) and [Edward Mendelson](#)
7. The Enchafed Flood: Three Critical Essays on the Romantic Spirit
8. by W H Auden and Dan Rattelle