

Wystan Hugh Auden and the committed writers



The literature of commitment

The deep sense of crisis World War I (1913-18) had created in English culture became even more intense with the worldwide economic crisis of the late 1920s and 1930s (1929-33). Not the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the prospect of another world conflict in Europe. Divisions of class and the burden of sexual repression became common themes in the fiction of the 1930s. However, the literature of the interwar period showed great variety, from modernist experimentation (1913-5) to a new documentary realism. As the world became less stable, writers looked for some more solid background than that provided by contemporary circumstances.

A group of poets joined together as undergraduates at Oxford and planned to devote themselves to left-wing propaganda. They were called the 'Oxford poets', and the four most famous names were W.H. Auden (1907-73), Stephen Spender (1909-95), Louis Macneice (1907-63) and Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-72). They concerned themselves with the social and political aspects of human life. This was partly because the brutal facts of the day, such as unemployment, Nazism and Fascism, were inescapable, and partly because they belonged to a generation which had been encouraged by its teachers to develop a social conscience. Though they admired T.S. Eliot (1911-72), they turned away from his complexity and allusiveness in order that they might communicate with their fellow men and encourage them to follow certain morally right courses of action. They also used slang and jazz rhythms and drew their images from the world of technology.

In the 1940s a group of young poets reacted against the intellectualism and commitment of Auden's poetry and his contemporaries, appealing to emotions and rediscovering individual themes such as love, birth, death and even sex. For this reason, they were labelled as the 'new Romantics'. Their greatest representative was the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas (1914-53), Text Bank 118-119).

1 READ the text on the literature of commitment and then discuss the following in pairs:

- the mood of the literature of the 1930s;
- its general features;
- the meaning of commitment for the Oxford poets;
- their stylistic choices;
- the reaction of the poets of the 1940s.

W.H. Auden's life

Wystan Hugh Auden was born in York in 1907, to middle-class High Church Anglican parents. He was a voracious reader; his early reading consisted of fairytales, myths and legends, but this reading seems to have been paralleled by that of books about psychology and technical works on mining engineering. While studying at Oxford, Auden became familiar with modernist poetry and he was the leader of the so-called 'Oxford poets', a group of young intellectuals who expressed a left-winged viewpoint, while continuing the artistic revolution started by T.S. Eliot, James Joyce (1882-1962) and Ezra Pound. As a young man, he was deeply committed to social and political issues. During the General Strike of 1926 he worked for the strikers. In 1928 he went to Berlin, where he witnessed the rise of Nazism. During the Spanish Civil

War he served as an ambulance driver. He showed his solidarity with the Jews persecuted by Hitler after 1933: in 1935 he married the German writer Thomas Mann's daughter, Erica, only to provide her with a British passport to enable her to escape from Nazi Germany.

Auden was also becoming increasingly concerned about his homosexuality. Homosexuality was condemned by the standards of his religious upbringing and was regarded as a criminal offence in England. In 1939 he moved to New York and settled in a house in Brooklyn which he ran as a sort of intellectual commune. In 1940 he began teaching in New York and published what is probably his best volume of the decade, *Another Time*. He was still to write much social poetry but his 'political' period was over; from then on his social poetry was to be anti-ideological, anti-political. It was at about this same time that he returned to the religion of his youth, Anglicanism.

He developed a growing concern with poetics. *New Year Letter* (1941), *For the Time Being: a Christian Oratorio* (1944), and the 1948 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Anxiety* (1948) are all characterised by extremely difficult verse forms. These works are also marked by his religious reaffirmation, even if this is expressed through questions concerning existence rather than by discussing his own spiritual struggles and achievements. In 1946 Auden became a citizen of the US, and in 1956 he was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford. He died of a heart attack after giving a poetry reading in Vienna in 1973.

Literary language

The main features of committed poetry are:

- the poet seldom intrudes as a speaker using the pronoun 'I';
- scepticism about contemporary society;
- openness to new ideas and a broad range of life experiences;
- a social commentary which is not limited to politics – for example, it explores Freudianism, the inadequacies of the British government, war;
- a variety of forms and techniques; a very colloquial tone, which complements the satirical subject matter;
- powerful imagery, the use of juxtaposition and contrast;
- a unique and inspiring perspective on the human condition.