

**The 1930s are notoriously marked by a high degree of politicisation of literary writing. Consider any poet working in the period and discuss the extent to which this observation is either useful or accurate as a means of reading their work. Can the 1930s be marked out as a special case in this way, and if so why?**

The 1930s was a decade that can be characterized by the economic depression<sup>1</sup> and the rise of authoritarian ideologies in Italy, Germany and Spain. These historical and political circumstances had a deep impact on the young writers and poets of Britain and Europe (Manteiga 1989:3). As Woolf (2004: 613) points out “in 1930 young men at college were forced to be aware of what was happening in Russia; in Germany; in Italy; in Spain. They could not go on discussing aesthetic emotions and personal relations”. Hence the poetry of this time is often seen as directly influenced by politics and as such “public, classical, and through association with Marx, left-wing” (Caesar 1991: 37). After the war, in the 1950s, this focus on politics within art had changed. Critics saw the 1950s and 1960s as a period where poets were “indifferent to the immediate problems of society” (Booth 2005:112). The Movement poets, for instance, were primarily concerned to uphold with their poetry conservative opinions and a sense of tradition (Draper 1999: 231).

In the first part of this essay I will examine the extent of the politicisation of the 1930s poetry of Auden, who is seen as “the clear Master of the Period” (Skeleton 2000: 33). In a detailed analysis of ‘Spain 1937’, a ‘Communist to Others’ and other examples of Auden’s poetry of the 1930’s I will assess the degree to which “the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act” (Auden 2004: 383). In the second part I will compare the committed writing of the pre-war period with the poetry of Philip

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<sup>1</sup> The great depression was a result of the collapse of the New York Stock Market in 1929.

Larkin. In examining 'MCMXIV', 'Church Going' and other examples of his writing of the 1950s, this essay will establish the notion that Larkin's poetry is not only driven by a sense of nostalgia but is also concerned with the social injustices of his time.

W.H. Auden, D. Lewis, St. Spender and L. MacNeice are the central figures of the Auden group (Skeleton 2000: 14). Their left wing political commitment is one of the major characteristics that had labelled them as 'Poets of the Thirties'. W.H. Auden is a representative of this period and this generation (Skeleton 2000: 35). Although he became interested in left-wing politics - which is evident in his use of Marx's ideas in his poetry - he was reserved in his political commitment (Lucas 2004: 152). Since he did not join the communist party of Great Britain, Draper (1999: 104) understands his political campaigning as limited and regards his poetry as not explicitly left-wing.

Nevertheless, Auden's 'A Communist to Others' can be seen as one of the "handful of overtly left-wing propaganda pieces that he wrote during the early thirties" (Firchow 2002: 120). On the one hand, the speaker of the poem idealises the manual worker as a "splendid person" with a "Grecian figure" (29-35) with whom he deeply sympathizes. This positive notion is also reflected in the triple rhyme (fug/drug/hug or brink/shrink/think) as well as the bouncing metre. Consequently the poem can be seen as supporting Marxist doctrine, which "speaks of a section of intelligentsia 'going over' to support a proletarian revolution" (Caesar 1991: 50-51).

On the other hand, the speaker distances himself from the working class in referring to them as passively directed by cops and sensations until they die (4-7). In doing so the speaker, who cannot straightforwardly be associated with Auden, appears to see himself as superior to the masses, which contradicts Marx's ideas. In this sense the poem explores the divisions of the classes and not their possible integration (Caesar 1991: 52). Hence it can be argued that Auden himself was not

“entirely clear in his own mind about what the future would be like in political terms” (Firchow 2002: 129). Although the reader of today is aware of the right and wrong sides during the 1930s, for the “men living through that decade the issues were not always clear, nor the right line of actions always evident” (Hynes 1971: 124).

This political and artistic confusion during the 1930s was brought into one perspective with the war in Spain<sup>2</sup>. “It was precisely the kind of black and white situation everyone was looking for” (Manteiga 1989: 7). According to Caesar (1991:14) four thousand volunteers reached Spain from Britain, among them Auden. Although he never fought in the event, he believed that only true experience and direct knowledge could qualify him to write the poetry he wanted to; “I shall probably be a bloody bad soldier, but how can I speak to / for them without becoming one” (Auden cited in Manteiga 1989: 9).

One of the most famous testimonies of Auden’s war experiences was his poem ‘Spain 1937’. Yet, ‘Spain 1937’ can hardly be regarded as a war poem in the traditional sense of the genre of the First World War. Manteiga (1989: 9) argues that the poem is more an “espousment of Auden’s Marxist ideology than it is a realistic presentation of the circumstances surrounding the Spanish war “ (Manteiga 1989: 9). On the one hand, it lacks the particularities such as battles, dead soldiers or screaming civilians (Hynes 1976: 254). As Caesar (1991: 60) points out “his treatment of the war is similarly romanticised and damagingly unfeeling”, which can be seen in the distanced but also very precise line about war casualties: “To-day the inevitable increase in the chances of death;” (77). On the other hand, the poem does not use a “personal voice that testifies the wars’ hideousness” but ends open and unresolved (Hynes 1976: 254).

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<sup>2</sup> In August 1936, Franco’s troops began a war against the democratically elected government of Spain (Lucas 2004:153).

This is mainly due to the sense that for Auden, similar as for many other poets of the thirties, the Spanish Civil War posed a problem of moral choice (Hynes 1976: 255). In 'Spain 1937', Auden highlights the essential choice of the 1930s between fascism and its counterpart to the reader by exploring its manifestation in Spain (Buell 1973: 152). Between Auden's representation of the past and his outlook of the future lies today. And today's choice is for the struggle in Spain; "I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain." (56).

It is important to emphasize that for Auden today's decision will determine tomorrow and consequently the path of mankind in history. This interconnection between the past, present and the future is reflected in the structure of the poem. Although fragmented and abstract which can be seen as a modernist characteristic, the poem follows a clear 'Yesterday', 'To-day' and 'Tomorrow' pattern. First Auden deals with the past, then the present and finally the future and after that returns to the present again. Auden's dense vision of the past is highly selective in its foregrounding of inventions and religious manifestations (Davison 1970: 45). Though it represents a pattern of evolution, it insists that history is the outcome of men's choices. His view of the future is positive and optimistic but there is no clear reference that it is socially oriented on Marx (Davison 1970: 51). Past and future are interlinked by today's world of murder (82), fever (68) and hurting (88) which might be resolved if mankind chooses right.

Although the poem has as its subject the moral decision to choose the "Just City" (53), it does not ask for political action or to take up arms. Rather the poem explores the necessity but also difficulty of this moral choice, and presents the reader with a situation that asks him to decide by himself according to his attitudes and actions (Davison 1970: 43). Neither the stars, nor the animals can help man to make his decision, which is essentially personal and individual; "the animals will not look:/

We are left alone with our day, and the time is short” (89-90). It can be argued that the poem implies that mankind might progress towards Auden’s Just City only in being conscious and aware of this essential possibility of choice (Buell 1973: 152).

Yet, the choices Auden offers are restricted; one can either choose the “just city” (53) or “the suicide pact, the romantic” (54). As a consequence, Auden emphasizes that in the struggle of Spain and the world respectively, one side is right and the other is wrong. Hence, ‘Spain 1937’, although not explicitly antifascist in theme, aims to win the reader for a specific cause and is as such highly political. In this sense it can be argued that the poem is to some extent propaganda.

In 1935, Eric Gill illustrates in his famous essay ‘All art is Propaganda’ that “whether the artist is conscious of it or not, there is nothing he can do but must have propaganda value, that is to say value for or against one cause or another” (529). Apart from Auden’s clear valuation of the right and wrong moral decision this can also be seen in his use of selected but significant details. The “flat ephemeral pamphlet” (84) refers to the Party member book and as such implies a specific ideology into the poem. In addition Auden explores the idea of community, which is reflected in his understanding of history as a collective experience; he wrote as Everyman for whom history matters (Lucas 2004: 159); “History to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help or pardon” (91-92).

However, in his poem ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’, Auden suddenly rejects these political references in his poetry. In this poem he asks the reader to enter the museum of Fine Arts where the old aesthetic masters seem to know more about human suffering than the new political ones, and “they were never wrong” (1) (Firchow 2002: 156). Caesar (1991: 61) suggests that with this poem Auden “places art outside the world of action and event” and as a consequence expresses doubts about commitment within art.

In 1938, the year in which Auden wrote this poem, the world was a dark place where prisons and concentration camps were filling up with innocents and human suffering became increasingly relevant. There was little doubt that the world would face another major war. The suffering mediated through the art of the old masters implies that suffering is a part of life. The poem, itself a piece of art about suffering, seems to deliberately ask could Icarus have been rescued? Despite the fact that the world is a dark and horrible place everyone seems to mind his own business; “how everything turns away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster” (14-15). The principal concern for the ploughman, for instance, is ploughing and sowing; he might “have heard the splash”(16) of Icarus’ fall but “for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone” (17). This is also reflected in the leisurely tone. There is no feeling of urgency and no rush despite the notion that time in this period is generally seen as rapidly running out (Rodway 1984: 82).

Yet, Auden does not abandon all his left-wing ideology. Firchow (2002: 156) suggests that the ship of the last few lines might carry capitalist goods. “If it had been less commercially minded, it could have turned about to rescue (or at least attempt to rescue) Icarus” (Firchow 2002: 156); but it “had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on” (Musée des Beaux Arts, l. 21). This poem can be seen as an example for a work of art that is able to transcend the historical and political moment in “proving that a poem can contain an effective political message without losing its aesthetic appeal” (Manteiga 1989: 12).

Having provided clear evidence that Auden’s poetry of the 1930s is political to a high extent, it is now of importance to put forward the notion that the 1930s is not a special case. The poetry of the Romantic Period, for instance, is often seen as a response to “a turbulent, distressing and exhilarating history” (O’Flinn 2001: 2). In addition, many critics argue that there is generally “no escape from history” (Bennett

a. Royle 2004: 117) and that a poet cannot ignore politics. In this sense most poetic writing is shaped by the tensions, hopes and fears of its specific period.

Yet, the poetry of the nine Movement poets of the 1950s is widely regarded as a-political. According to Bradley (1993: ix) the poetic of this time is very sceptical, “often modestly informal and conversational”, focused on everyday life in order to “rehabilitate the corrupted public taste of the 1940s”. K. Amis, D. Davie, E. Jennings and foremost P. Larkin are regarded as some of the representatives of this poetic style of the 1950s. The most significant characteristic of several of their poems is an explicit anti-modernist stance with an emphasis on the “dignity of ordinary things through a revitalized often predictable imagery” (Bradley 1993: 1).

Larkin’s ‘Church Going’ is widely regarded as *the* Movement poem (Booth 2005: 125). The poem is about a visit to an empty church, which causes the speaker in an ironic tone to meditate on the future of humankind “when churches fall completely out of use” (22). Larkin (cited in Bradley 1993: 19) insists that ‘Church Going’ is not religious at all but is simply a poem that is “about going to church, not religion”. In this sense, the narrator is not connected to God during his visit, and does not even show respect, but mounts the lectern and mimics the tone of a lesson-reader to pronounce “‘here endeth’” (15). His descriptions of the inside of the church indicate wryness, boredom as well as indifference that are also linked to limited knowledge about churches and religion respectively (Gardiner 1989: 67). Therefore the speaker can be seen as a representative of the “ordinary, faithless Englishman” in an increasing secular age (Gardiner 1989: 66). Hence it can be argued that Larkin captures the life as it is lived in contemporary England with great accuracy (Gardiner 1989: 62).

Thus Larkin’s work, despite having little references to ideologies or the Second World War, is full of political implications (Bradley 1993: 6). This can be seen in

Larkin's "reluctance towards change and an inherent suspicion of the naïve liberalism of the 1950s" as expressed in 'Homage to a Government' and 'MCMXIV' (Bradley 1993: 6). In 'Homage to Government' Larkin refers to the government's decision to close the military base in Aden (Booth 2005: 136). This decision, primarily a financial one, was for Larkin a sign that Britain became a "country where honour, duty and responsibility no longer matter" (Gardiner 1989: 68). Nevertheless, in a time with constant fears of a nuclear conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, the idea that Britain maintains an overseas base to keep order in the world might be regarded as rather naïve (Booth 2005: 136).

The reluctance towards change is implied in his poem 'MCMXIV'. The title itself, with its roman numbers, suggests an outlook to a very distant and historical past. In using an interesting, photographic technique Larkin evokes the lost world of the pre First World War period. All four stanzas consist of single sentences, which are lacking a main verb. As a consequence, the picture is frozen into complete stasis, which results in a detailed perception of the poem's imagery and reminds the reader of a photograph (Petch 1981: 80).

With this technique Larkin evokes and at the same time values the innocence of this period. Since the reader visualizes very strong nostalgic images, such as "tin advertisements/ For cocoa and twist, and the pubs/ Wide open all day;" (15-16), it introduces very positive and gentle feelings of the past. According to Petch (1981: 95) 'MCMXIV' is a poem "which evokes rather than states, and which lingers on the positive qualities of the past rather than on the dreadfulness of the present".

Yet, in the last stanza Larkin makes clear that this calm life of the past will never be achieved again; "Never such innocence again" (32). On the one hand Larkin suggests that "the men/ Leaving the gardens tidy" (29) will now have to encounter the horrible experiences of the trenches, from which one can not come



back to innocence at all. On the other hand, as Gardiner (1989: 68) points out, Larkin alludes to the social and industrial developments of the twentieth century that have changed life in Britain.

Yet, I would also like to emphasize Booth's (2005: 135-136) point of view that to "yield a political meaning" into any of Larkin's poetry is forced and relies on the "ingenious contortions of critics who believe all poetry to be politics in disguise". Larkin understood his writings as timeless and wanted as a poet to "transcend the limitations of period and nationality" (Booth 2005: 113). He wanted to focus on something more important than history, which he found in the common and the immediate. D. Davie expresses this notion in his 'Remembering the Thirties'. In this poem Davie refers to the problem of poets who seem to be lost and trapped in their committed poetry of a politicized age. The changing perceptions of a historical period result in difficulties of communication between the generations. In this sense, as Auden (2004: 382) notes, "the whole aim of a poet, or any kind of artist" should be "to produce something which is complete and will endure without change". This development within Auden's understanding of poetry might have been one of the reasons for Auden's decision to distance himself from his radical and political poetry of the 1930s (Cook 2004: 377).

In conclusion, the 1930s was a decade that "uniquely seemed to require writers to speak out" (Lucas 2004: 156). As shown on the example of 'Spain 1937' and 'A Communist to Others' Auden was conscious of the social sickness of his age and expressed this perceptions of contemporary disorders in his art. His writing, influenced by Marxist ideology, is a "type of literature which is fundamentally moral and political, and which espouses the ideas of justice and truth" (Spender cited in Manteiga 1989: 4). Thus many of Auden's poems of the 1930s can be read from a political perspective, which offers a useful starting point for a close reading. Yet, as

shown on 'Musée des Beaux Arts' Auden's poetry is not always expressing political beliefs but often explores a mood of anxiety or the pressure of events on the private lives (Hynes 1971: 124). Hence, Auden's writing of the 1930s cannot generally be seen as political or committed to a specific ideology.

In the same way the writing of the Movement poets cannot generally be regarded as a-political. Although Larkin understood himself as "resolutely ordinary and unpretentious poet" (Gibson 1099: 9), who did not "find lessons in history" (Booth 2005: 130) he addressed contemporary issues in some of his poetry. As shown in this essay, especially 'Homage to a Government' but also 'Church Going' can be mentioned as examples in this context. Even 'MCMXIV', which can be read as an homage to Britain's innocent past, implies the soldier's experience of the trenches and touches in doing so on political issues. Thus, the poetry of Larkin is not only shaped by an "a-political Fifties quietism" (Booth 2005: 119) but engages with political concerns. As a consequence, the poetry of the 1930s cannot be marked as a special case in terms of its politicisation because even poetry, which is widely regarded as a-political, such as Larkin's, shows political influences to some extent. Gill has stated in 1935, "few things are more uncertain than the relations between art and life". This statement was valuable for the political difficult period of the 1930s but also for the 1950s and for today.

Wordcount: 3263

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