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Auden's Call to Arms: 'Spain' and Psychoanalysis

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W. H. AUDEN OCCUPIED A CENTRAL PLACE in the consciousness of the British left in the 1930s not because he was a political poet in any ordinary sense but because he was a persuasive diagnostician of a diseased civilisation. There was also, of course, a touch of the prophet in the early Auden, hinting at hidden, unconscious forces beneath the surface of events. These forces could be either menacing or potentially liberating, and part of the appeal of Auden's early poetry was the process of self-exploration and self-diagnosis taking place in contact with larger, deeper energies and powers – the unconscious of an expanded territory. With the Spanish crisis of 1937, however, Auden's stance altered in an important way. He was no longer satisfied with waiting for a 'change of heart'; it was time to assume responsibility and take personal action. But this decision could only be a first step. To manage such a transition as a poet, Auden would have to discover new resources of poetic form, take up a different stance towards his audience, and find the proper grounds of intellectual appeal for the new kind of argument he wished to make. And, since psychoanalysis had provided much of the intellectual underpinning, or we might even say the logic, of Auden's poetry, Auden would now have to adapt what was explicitly an anti-political mode of thought to political uses. His partial success is testimony to the poet's enormous ingenuity and talent, and to his intellectual seriousness, but also to the inherent moral and political limitations of psychoanalytic thinking.

Auden's decision to go to Spain in 1937 was motivated in part by his belief that 'The poet must have direct knowledge of the major political events', as he wrote to E. R. Dodds, adding that 'I shall probably be a bloody bad soldier but how can I speak to/for them without being

one?’¹ Auden was to spend the greater part of the next two years travelling in search of first-hand experience and someone to ‘speak to/for’, but his trip to Spain was a failure. The reasons why he could not fulfil his plan to become an ambulance driver on the Republican side remain unclear, but Auden returned to England after only a few weeks out of the country and afterwards had little to say about this period of his life. Like George Orwell, who was there at the same time, he experienced an inevitable disappointment with the Republican government and came away from his experience viewing the Spanish conflict now as primarily a fight against fascism rather than a fight for revolution.² Eventually Auden’s Spanish experience was to have a profound impact on his political and religious outlook, yet in ‘Spain’, written shortly after his return, he was still trying to find the basis of commitment to political action on his habitual intellectual grounds and in spite of his personal failure.

It has not been easy for critics to establish the general character and meaning of ‘Spain’. For Samuel Hynes, it is an ‘extraordinary war-poem’ with a peculiar approach: ‘diagnostic, abstract, detached, lacking all the particularities and feelings that defined the genre in the First World War . . . It is a pitiless poem: the poetry is in the pitilessness.’ Hynes sees ‘Spain’ as ultimately psychological in tenor, not political, an observation that echoes leftist reactions to the poem at the time it was published.³ Among those who have taken its political character seriously, the reaction to ‘Spain’ has been more negative, starting with Orwell, who saw in it a casual attitude towards violence, particularly when Auden writes, near the end of the poem, of ‘the conscious acceptance of the necessary murder’.⁴ For Orwell this typified the unserious thinking of an ‘utterly irresponsible intelligentsia’ that neither risked nor understood the real consequences of war.⁵ Perhaps in response to Orwell’s comments, Auden softened the offending line in subsequent printings. Later, after his Christian conversion, he withdrew ‘Spain’ from the body of his work altogether, allowing it

¹ Letter to E. R. Dodds, 8 Dec. 1936, quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston 1981) p. 207.

² On Auden’s time in Spain see Carpenter, *W. H. Auden*, pp. 206–16, and Nicholas Jenkins, ‘Auden in Spain’, in Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (eds.), *W. H. Auden: A Map of All My Youth*, *Auden Studies* 1 (Oxford 1990) pp. 88–93.

³ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (New York 1976) pp. 254, 253, 255.

⁴ W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, new edn. (New York 1979). Quotations from ‘Spain’ are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

⁵ ‘Political Reflections on the Crisis’, *The Adelphi* (Dec. 1938) p. 100, in George Orwell, *Essays*, ed. John Carey (New York 2002).

to be anthologised only with the disclaimer that the author considered it 'trash'.⁶ This has naturally enhanced the authority of Orwell's complaint. Auden's executor, Edward Mendelson, endorses the notion that the poem was not only mistaken but mendacious, giving expression to political ideas that Auden really knew he no longer held. For Mendelson, Auden was incapable of lying effectively in poetry, so that the failure of the poem's rhetoric provides an index of the author's divided feelings.⁷ Thus, in the eyes of Auden's most influential critic, 'Spain' comes off as self-contradictory propaganda for a delusory utopia that the poet no longer believed in but had not yet quite managed to give up.

In order to understand 'Spain' we must first be clear about just what Auden was attempting to accomplish in writing it. First of all, it is not predominantly a war poem, as Hynes would have it, so the comparison with the witness poetry of Owen's generation does not help very much. One section of the poem attempts to suggest the moral implications of war and what political action entails, but this does not make it in any serious sense a poem about the experience of war. Nor is 'Spain' an apology for political assassination or 'murder', as Orwell took it to be, or even a defence of communism as an ideology. When Auden writes of the 'necessary murder', he is thinking not of political terrorism but of the need to repel fascist military intervention. It is strange to call this 'murder', but that seems to be the view Auden held. Stan Smith takes the poem to be a call for intervention on the part of the Western democracies in support of Spain, and this would make excellent sense given the political situation and Auden's views at the time, but there is no mention of such an action in the poem.⁸ The 'nations' Auden refers to seem to be simply the people of western Europe. The poem contains, in fact, no explicit politics. What we have, rather, is a call for others to do what Auden himself had tried to do, put his life at the disposal of the Spanish cause.

'Spain' is neither a witness poem of war nor an attempt at political provocation but a call to arms, a call to fight fascist fire with fire, written by a person who had already tried and failed to make a contribution to that war. The problem it attempts to confront is how to provide motivation for individuals to surrender their private interests and risk their lives for the common good. Its first task is to evoke the urgency of the moment and set it in a broad context – to rise, in other words, to the historic and heroic note. Taking the long view was indeed something Auden was perfectly suited to do. His mind was habitually drawn to grand schemes and narratives. He

⁶ Robin Skelton (ed.), *Poetry of the Thirties* (London 1964) p. 41.

⁷ Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (Boston 1981) p. 200.

⁸ Stan Smith, 'Missing Dates: From *Spain* 1937 to September 1, 1939', *Literature and History*, 13/2 (Fall 1987) p. 172.

could only think in the largest possible context, and his poetry contains many recountings of human and natural history. Yet, except in 'Spain', these recountings are not given a heroic turn. They have a naturalistic character and are adumbrated somewhat elliptically, left to the reader to puzzle out. Nor was the heroic pitch of rhetoric ever part of Auden's repertoire except in pastiche. Up to this time his style depended upon casual, ostentatiously unpretentious and unpoetic diction, the deft mixing of high and low registers, and metrical effects that are either so close to prose that they do not impose themselves strongly upon the reader's experience (as in 'Spain' itself) or so ostentatious as to be ironic (as, for instance, in 'Autumn Song'). Auden had written about heroes too, of course, and questers in various guises, but never in a language of celebration. Typically, his heroes are figures of mystery or parable. Their motives remain obscure and compulsive, allegories of a primal struggle that cannot be brought to the surface. Such heroes pose basic riddles of the self but they do not typically find answers to them unless, occasionally, in the moment of their destruction (notably at the end of *The Ascent of F-6*). It is also worth noting that Auden frequently resorts to the prayer as a hortatory form, and this form also plays a role in 'Spain', but it is hardly suited for a call to arms. Clearly, it was necessary for him to innovate stylistically to produce the high rhetorical note of 'Spain'.

The ingenuity of Auden's solution, his ability to discover a grand register without abandoning his elliptical style, has not been sufficiently appreciated. The *Yesterday—Today—Tomorrow* scheme of 'Spain' allows Auden a bold pattern of repetitions and antitheses without departing from his telegraphic manner. With this truncating of syntax, the poet at once evades flat explicitness and achieves a certain elevation of tone, exploiting one of the oldest epic devices, the list.

Yesterday all the past. The language of size
 Spreading to China along the trade-routes; the diffusion
 Of the counting-frame and the cromlech;
 Yesterday the shadow-reckoning in the sunny climates.

Yesterday the assessment of insurance by cards,
 The divination of water; yesterday the invention
 Of cartwheels and clocks, the taming of
 Horses. Yesterday the bustling world of the navigators.

Yesterday the abolition of fairies and giants,
 The fortress like a motionless eagle eyeing the valley,
 The chapel built in the forest;
 Yesterday the carving of angels and alarming gargoyles;

The trial of heretics among the columns of stone;
 Yesterday the theological feuds in the taverns
 And the miraculous cure at the fountain;
 Yesterday the Sabbath of witches; but to-day the struggle.

Yesterday the installation of dynamos and turbines,
 The construction of railways in the colonial desert;
 Yesterday the classic lecture
 On the origin of Mankind. But to-day the struggle.

Yesterday the belief in the absolute value of Greek,
 The fall of the curtain upon the death of a hero;
 Yesterday the prayers to the sunset
 And the adoration of madmen. But to-day the struggle.

'Yesterday all the past' – this provocative tautology at once brings all of the past close to us, compresses it into the near-simultaneity of a single day, and separates it decisively from us. In what follows there will be no subjects or predicates, but our relation to these events has already been framed. What Auden presents, then, is a brilliant selection of the diversity of historical phenomena detached from their local contexts and chronological relations. Rather than selecting the high points, he stresses what happens over and over again. It is the kind of list that might have been framed by an *Annales* historian, emphasising everyday material culture and *mentalités* rather than famous battles or treaties. With Auden's left identification in mind, we might have expected him to offer a history of progress and gradual enlightenment, and that is what some readers have found in the poem.⁹ Auden's list of yesterdays does not deliberately exclude a generally progressive direction, but the selected episodes are strangely off kilter and out of order. 'Yesterday' includes things that history would keep and things it would discard or preserve only for their imaginative curiosity – 'the carving of angels and alarming gargoyles'. There are ironic touches also. To speak, for

⁹ Behind the progressive moment of 'Yesterday', for example, John Fuller detects the influence of W. J. Perry's *The Growth of Civilization*, and he is right to see Auden's sense of intercultural diffusion as being in tune with Perry's. John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (Princeton 1998) pp. 283–4. Perry, however, does not see history in particularly progressive terms. For him, the high point of culture was ancient Egypt, the source of all great innovations. According to Perry's 'principle of cultural degradation', the value of each innovation declines with every episode of transmission, so the Mycenaean were inferior to the Minoans who came before them. W. J. Perry, *The Growth of Civilization* (London 1924) pp. 55–6.

instance, of the 'diffusion' of the cromlech, or to juxtapose 'the assessment of insurance by cards' with 'the divination of water', is to maintain an eccentric and surprising neutrality towards these quaint objects and practices. But the irony operates in relations among the details, not in the evocation of the details themselves, thus drawing attention to the somewhat whimsical imaginative process that brings them together. In stanza 4 we find the theological trials and 'feuds in the taverns', viewed from a sociological distance, juxtaposed with 'the miraculous cure at the fountain', which Auden adds with a perfectly straight face. What we seem to be leaving behind in the transition from 'Yesterday' to 'To-day' is not a history of human progress, now put in jeopardy, but access to human creativity itself, that creativity which invents the dynamos and the gargoyles, addresses its prayers to the sunset, and delivers 'classic lectures'. It looks back upon its own history with a non-partisan sense of pleasure. 'Yesterday' is a realm of freedom, an indefinite background, unencumbered by linear logic or reality testing, against which significant acts of imagination stand out. While in the younger Auden's poetry the hidden context was a world of Mortmerian fantasy, significant symptoms isolated against a background of social and sexual fear and longing, here we have history as human productivity itself set against the renunciation of imagination demanded by politics and war – 'the struggle'. Some of the elements of 'Yesterday' suggest tension – the fortress, the trial, the feuds – but among these spectacles as a whole there is an absence of dialectic or struggle, in contrast with 'To-day', which represents the struggle as one simple concentrated element standing against all the vividness of historical possibility.

* * *

It is fair to say, then, that Auden succeeded in achieving an epic scale of narrative on which to base his appeal and a grand rhetoric to go with it, but at the same time it is impossible to overlook the fact that this epic reality is viewed from a great historical and aesthetic distance. It is the pastness and separateness of this 'Yesterday' that protect its force and charm. 'Yesterday' does not impinge upon the present. We are not connected with it directly; no collective agency, no single moral community or national life carries on from the past to the present moment of crisis. Auden's portrayal of history as imagination includes those whom he is calling to arms, but it is not particularly *their* story. The story belongs to the enemy as much as to the protagonists, and when we come to the moment of 'the struggle' it might be 'their' moment as much as it is 'ours'. In fact, the distinction between Us and Them is simply not made. Rather, we are still gazing downward with the difference-annihilating

'hawk's vision' Auden found so comforting in Thomas Hardy, 'looking at life from a very great height'.¹⁰

It is part of the effectiveness of Auden's angelic survey of human history to be non-nationalist. We can think of it, for instance, in contrast with the closing of Churchill's Battle of Britain speech, with its evocation of the English imperial past – 'all that we have known and cared for' – set against the coming of a 'new Dark Age'.¹¹ Auden's refusal of partisanship contrasts just as strongly with the vision of history given by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, with its sharply defined periods and forces, classes as agents of history, clear winners and losers, whereas Auden's 'Yesterday' is a single long, various, exciting and confusing day. Marx wants to escape the past, is essentially contemptuous of it, while Auden is not only forgiving towards it but inclined to see in it the foundations of human value. Auden sees history 'To-day' at the crossroads, but it is not clear what it is about that history, with its heretic trials and 'alarming gargoyles', that lends hope or energy to the present struggles. The phenomena of the past are aesthetically fascinating but not necessarily encouraging from a political point of view. Auden does not take sides against the past in an ideologically motivating way. His portrayal of the past may be inspiring, but it is not *politically* inspiring. For Auden, the turn to politics is not an attempt to escape from the nightmare of history. Rather it is a self-sacrificial attempt to renounce the pleasure of its imaginative contemplation. In the Freudian terms with which Auden was so familiar, the logic, or alogic, of history belongs more to the pleasure principle than to the principle of reality, and the transition between them can only be made by renunciation.

In spite of the poem's non-partisan evocation of history, Auden's left political affiliations make it natural to assimilate his narrative to Marx's and to take Auden's call to arms as the beginning of a call to revolution. In the most challenging and original reading of 'Spain' to date, Stan Smith takes the 'Yesterday' section to depict the beginning of a kind of Hegelian progress of consciousness, so that the poem provides us not with the simple appeal to a moral community but with an account of how a moral and political community is formed, starting, in the section I have quoted, with its material bases. In 'Yesterday', he writes, 'the process precedes and constitutes its subjects, navigation finally offering us "the navigators" as a human group, who are nevertheless dependent on, secondary to, a "bustling world"'. In the same way, Smith goes on to say, 'the trade-routes generate

¹⁰ 'A Literary Transference', in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton 2002) ii. 46.

¹¹ *Winston Spencer Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963*, ed. Robert Rhodes James (New York 1974) vi. 6238.

the traders, and the inventions their inventors. Human subjectivity is still to come into full existence, secondary to the material world upon which it is working.¹²

This, of course, is something that Auden could have meant, but it is Smith who is supplying all the connections. Moreover, to read the passage in this way is to abandon the contemplative vantage point that gives the 'Yesterday' sections their imaginative power. Auden is asking us to survey 'Yesterday', to take account of and admire it, but, once we have done so, to renounce this detached perspective temporarily in favour of something much simpler and less gratifying – 'the struggle'. And it is impossible to miss the sense of rupture between 'Yesterday' and 'To-day' – 'Yesterday the Sabbath of witches; but to-day the struggle'. We go, unhappily, from being spectators to being agents. To take up 'the struggle' is not to complete history but, at least temporarily, to renounce it as an intellectual and imaginative activity.

* * *

It seems, then, that if Auden originally began his journey to Spain with the hope of getting in touch both with history and the audience he could speak to and for he was only partially successful, for there remains in his thinking a great divide between the movement of history and the present in which political action occurs. So it is natural that Auden should now turn to the problem of the audience itself. In the next seven stanzas we see him attempting explicitly to portray the consciousness of those whose conscience he is attempting to rouse. They take us into a territory, therefore, that is completely absent from conventional political rhetoric like Churchill's, where the unity of the group and its common need are simply not in question. In the face of a direct threat to his own country, Churchill could make a clearly motivated appeal to personal heroism and historical memory. In Auden's poem, however, attempting to evoke a more complicated ideological and moral emergency, before the moment of crisis and the crossroads are evoked a space of discussion opens in which various collective fantasies are voiced, and the wishes and cries of various characters converge. In this search for the sources of hope, we see the poet 'by the leaning Tower' calling for 'the luck of the sailor', a phrase that resonates with earlier Auden moments of hopefulness.¹³ Luck here is a merely

¹² Smith, 'Missing Dates', p. 168.

¹³ I am thinking here of 'Lucky with day approaching, with leaning dawn', the last line of 'Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle', in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927–1939* (New York 1977). Except for 'Spain' or as otherwise noted, further quotations from Auden's poetry are from this edition.

personal, secular grace, and the sailor brings to mind the 'truly strong man', a superseded image of the Auden hero.¹⁴ The scientist, by contrast, never was a source of hope, being preoccupied with 'inhuman provinces', while the poor call rather naively for help from a capitalised History: 'Our day is our loss, O show us | History the operator, the | Organiser, Time the refreshing river'. They are mistakenly appealing to 'History' as an inevitable material process, operating regardless of human designs, whereas Auden has shown us history as the collective result of human invention. It seems as if the poet with his vision, the scientist with his inhuman research, and the poor with their deterministic passiveness are all evading responsibility for making the future. Finally, 'the nations', by which Auden seems to mean not governments but populations, having ignored Spain, speak as the crescendo of these evasive voices.

And the nations combine each cry, invoking the life
 That shapes the individual belly and orders
 The private nocturnal terror:
 'Did you not found the city state of the sponge,

 'Raise the vast military empires of the shark
 And the Tiger, establish the robin's plucky canton?
 Intervene. O descend as a dove or
 A furious papa or mild engineer, but descend.'

The 'nations' portray history as a sequence of founders and empire-builders inspired by an abstract force, life, establishing forms of human life that are as different as animal species. The mistake dramatised here is to think that the individual, or even nations full of individuals, can call upon some provident force to descend from above. There is, in Auden's view, no dove or Holy Spirit, no furious Oedipal papa or mild social engineer, and even though the speaker of the poem renders the 'invoking of the life | That shapes the individual belly and orders | The private nocturnal terror' as if it were something real, this too may be an illusion, for life, 'if it answers at all' immediately disclaims its own powers.

'O no, I am not a mover;
 Not to-day; not to you. To you, I'm the

¹⁴ Auden refers to 'Absence of fear in Gerhart Meyer | From the sea, the truly strong man' in 'It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens'.

‘Yes-man, the bar-companion, the easily-duped;
 I am whatever you do. I am your vow to be
 Good, your humorous story.
 I am your business voice. I am your marriage.

‘What’s your proposal? To build the just city? I will.
 I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic
 Death? Very well, I except, for
 I am your choice, your decision. Yes, I am Spain.’

This remarkable speech makes a denial of all heteronomy: there is no *other* who chooses on your behalf or mitigates your responsibility. All is up to you. Consequently, ‘life’ here is actually rejecting collective in favour of individual responsibility. Once again, as with ‘Yesterday’, there is a certain ethical surprise, an imaginary power evoked in these lines in the unsuspected connection between ordinary choices and grand political consequences. ‘I am your vow to be/ Good, your humorous story. | I am your business voice. I am your marriage’. The future of Spain, which is the fate of Europe, will arise by uncanny logic from a grand body of everyday behaviour, which can be as casual as a humorous story, as tenuous and artful as a ‘business voice’, or as profoundly human and unique as a marriage. None of our actions is too little or insignificant to play its part in the greatest of events. The lesson, though, is neither Marx’s, nor Tolstoy’s, nor Freud’s. We cannot look to history, and neither psychology, science, nor the nations themselves will be able to recognise the struggle until they see their own responsibility. ‘Yes, I am Spain’: this is what Spain tells them to tell themselves. Spain speaks here as a collective wish from the depths of a communal unconscious, but in confronting it the petitioners of life should recognise not an alien force but only their true selves figured in the mass. Thus the effect of this communal fantasy is to dissolve itself. It is the individual who acts. Prayer can only be misplaced when we must act on our own. We might glimpse a Hegelian aspect here, but it is deflationary, a negation of the collective in favour of individuals each recognising their own responsibility.

In the next two stanzas, the speaker portrays the response that should arise from Spain’s plea. Of the many that answered the call to Spain we are told that ‘All presented their lives’. The choice of ‘presented’ gives the action of answering the call a somewhat theatrical ring but also emphasises its character as a moral test. These lives seem to be ‘presented’ for examination before they can be given to the cause. The action is supremely self-conscious, self-justifying, and individual. In the 1940 version of the poem, Auden changed this phrase to ‘All *came to present* their lives’, as if

to suggest that Spain might not accept everyone, that some people might not measure up, as the poet might have felt was true in his own case.¹⁵

At this point in the poem, when the moment of sacrifice has been envisioned, we might expect 'Spain' to move on to a consideration of the future. Instead, Auden now presents a kind of collective vision of the conflict, which seems to take place within the very fantasy logic that 'life' has taught us was a displacement of our own responsibility. Rather than the solitary sacrifice, we see Spain from a strange imaginative height and distance.

On that arid square, that fragment nipped off from hot
Africa, soldered so crudely to inventive Europe;
On that tableland scored by rivers,
Our thoughts have bodies; the menacing shapes of our fever
Are precise and alive. For the fears which made us respond
To the medicine ad. and the brochure of winter cruises
Have become invading battalions;
And our faces, the institute-face, the chain-store, the ruin
Are projecting their greed as the firing squad and the bomb.
Madrid is the heart. Our moments of tenderness blossom
As the ambulance and the sandbag;
Our hours of friendship into a people's army.

Suddenly the temperature has risen, as Spain is born out of geological forces. Auden was often preoccupied with the mapping of landscape to temperament, and here we see Spain as symbolically engaging with passions normally foreign to intellectually oriented, 'inventive' Europe except on that subterranean level where the fevers of bourgeois society burn. The speaker goes out of his way to emphasise the inhuman dimensions of the 'tableland scored by rivers' upon which 'our thoughts have bodies'. The process of transformation between emotion and action is 'precise', too precise, in fact, to be anticipated except by some occult logic. Fears that were once assuaged by advertisements and brochures become 'live invading battalions', the greed that motivates the 'institute-face' becomes 'the firing squad and the bomb' while tenderness and friendship 'blossom' into the ambulance and the 'people's army'. It is significant that the feelings to which Auden appeals here are responsible for both sides of the conflict of Spain. By standing apart, we do not merely let it happen. Our bourgeois neuroses fuel the engines of destruction, while our

¹⁵ W. H. Auden, *Another Time* (London 1940); emphasis added.

better impulses are the only hope of resisting them. The sentence 'Madrid is the heart' stands out in the middle of these feats of translation. Madrid was, of course, the centre of the fighting between Franco and the Republican forces. Beyond that, though, Auden seems to be suggesting that his contemporary audience could find the nature of their own hearts in what was going on in Madrid, that Madrid is, in fact, the human heart itself. What is going on in Madrid is an image of western European consciousness.

In Smith's account, Auden's ability to connect the public and private realms has a profound political significance. 'For Auden in the thirties, it was precisely the inability to link the particular personal, apparently private life to larger moments of history in the body politic that has bred both fascism and the moral inertia of the Western democracies that failed to resist it in time.'¹⁶ 'Spain', with its scheme of *Yesterday—Today—Tomorrow*, enacts the overcoming of the personal/political division, the emergence of political self-awareness in the poem's evocation of a 'people's army', for Smith 'a new collective subject'.¹⁷ What Auden is doing here, according to this view, is dramatising a moment of collective responsibility, not in a merely theoretical way but as a call to action at a particular juncture of history; we can now recognise this juncture as a lost opportunity when fascism could have been defeated and the Second World War rendered unnecessary.

Smith is right that to see Auden's approach to Spain as entirely private and psychological is to miss the character of his concern. It was typical of Auden, in psychoanalytic style, to think of public behaviour as collective neurosis and private fantasy as political or social symptom. Symbolic displacement and symptomatic mapping from private to public were constant resources of his art and his way of understanding the world. It is also with justice that Smith points two years forward to 'September 1939', in which Auden identifies the separation between the private and public realms as fateful lies, the 'romantic lie in the brain | Of the sensual man in the street' and the 'lie of Authority, whose skyscrapers grope the sky'. Auden denies both the state and the individual as discrete entities: 'We must love one another or die.' Still, to interpret 'Spain' as portraying the emergence of a new collective consciousness raises a number of problems in addition to the one I have already mentioned – that, for Auden, responsibility in the poem seems to remain explicitly personal. First, it seems clear that in general Auden indeed tended to think in terms of a strong division and tension between public and private spheres, and not

¹⁶ Smith, 'Missing Dates', p. 165.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

long after he wrote 'September 1939' we can see him deliberately renouncing the political sphere and the role of the political poet in favour of the personal life. In *The Prolific and the Devourer* he writes of 'the struggle between the public life and the private life', asserting that 'to be forced to be political is to be forced to lead a dual life'.¹⁸ In the call to political action Auden hears a special danger for the poet, the 'voice of the Tempter' saying 'unless you take part in the class struggle, you cannot be a major writer'.¹⁹

The connection Auden draws between Madrid and the heart reveals a hidden collective logic but, against revolutionary hopes, it does not promise a new collective life, only the preservation of what already exists. Thus the familiar character of the future offered 'perhaps' by the poet's vision of Tomorrow. If we act now, Tomorrow will be a continuation of Yesterday, only with a greater investment in leisure, things that are done for their own sake, a state of beautiful banality when only poets explode 'like bombs'. Tomorrow even has a courtly aspect, with the 'pageantmaster and the musician' presiding, and its wholesome politics amounts to nothing more inspiring than 'the eager election of chairmen | By the sudden forest of hands'. The future will not need heroes. One might be tempted to look for utopian shadings in 'the beautiful roar of the chorus under the dome', but the image seems to lead us not to a revolutionary future but to a world of peace and culture in which Auden can gratify his traditional musical tastes.

This is not to say, of course, that Smith is wrong to claim that in 'Spain' Auden does portray a peculiar kind of connection between public and private consciousness. But it is the nature of this connection that is most perplexing. Smith expresses Auden's logic this way: 'our conscious and unconscious life is itself the product and projection of social and political forces. And that politics in turn is the projection and product of our primal traumas.'²⁰ The psychoanalytic logic is indeed, as Smith says, 'precise'. The trouble is that in order for us to overcome the situation we would have to overcome our 'primal traumas' and their political and social projections, and even if that were possible it would not likely be in time to make a difference in Spain in 1937. Auden portrays a moment of decisive action, a grand cultural turning point, but the intellectual understanding he offers of the context of this action suggests little hope. And that is perhaps why the logic of the connection between public and

¹⁸ W. H. Auden, *The Prolific and the Devourer*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Hopewell, NJ 1976) p. 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁰ 'Missing Dates', p. 166.

private has seemed to so many readers to be merely a psychological one. In fact, it would be more accurate to describe it as magical – the projection of mental properties onto the real world – or we might call it, with a full sense of the ironies involved, merely poetic. A psychoanalytic perspective that emphasises the way public reality ‘shapes the individual belly | And orders the private nocturnal terror’ is bound to fall short as the instigator for political action, not only because it sees ‘primal traumas’ as the fundamental shaping forces of individual and collective mind, leaving small space for human decision-making, but also because the relation between individual and collective realities is bound to remain occult and symbolic, leaving politics as an art of external manipulation. Both Auden and Smith are struggling to find the potential for political action inside a model of psychology that was partly designed to frustrate political action and undermine its innocence.²¹

It is important to remember in this regard that Freud himself, in the original context in which he developed psychoanalysis, had good reason to be suspicious of political action and, in fact, of the realm of politics in general. We miss the significance of psychoanalysis if we forget that, for a Jew living and working in imperial Catholic Vienna, it was political action of a quite momentous kind to recast the entire political sphere in terms of psychologically and historically atavistic personal fantasy.²² The political power of Freud’s model lies not merely in the reduction of the political to the personal but also in the recasting of the personal dimension itself as compulsive, structurally self-delusive, and fantastic in its symbolic substitutions. Freud’s attitude towards politics, as towards most human endeavour, was essentially satiric.²³ From the psychoanalytic point of view, the higher and more sublime the aim of human behaviour, the more abjectly it is rooted in our basest and crudest motives. As Auden himself dryly put it, Freud ‘revised hero-worship’.²⁴ As a result, those who attempt to recast their own politics in Freudian terms will always run the risk of inadvertent irony and self-subversion. I suspect that most of the time the tendency of psychoanalysis to ironise political behaviour was part of its appeal for Auden, as his elegy for Freud would suggest.

²¹ It was not long before Auden reconsidered his lines about the psychological sources of bombs, ‘invading battalions’, and the ‘people’s army’. Those line were dropped from the version of the poem published in *Another Time* in 1940.

²² For a fine statement of this view see Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York 1981) ch. 4.

²³ See John Farrell, *Freud’s Paranoid Quest: Psychoanalysis and Modern Suspicion* (New York 1996), ch. 5: ‘Freudian Satire’.

²⁴ W. H. Auden, ‘Psychology and Art To-day’ (1935), in *The English Auden*, p. 341.

It is also important to note in this regard that, in order to avoid the ironic aspect of psychoanalytic thinking and make it politically serviceable, Auden had to give it a sentimental cast in which positive private feelings become positive public deeds and negative private feelings become failures of responsibility. Freud's logic, of course, with its reliance on defence mechanisms and inversions, is far more paradoxical and suspicious. This is not to forget that Auden had his own canon of analysts – Lane, Layard, Lawrence, Groddeck, and Jung, with Blake in the background. The version of analysis he derived from them is far more wholesome than Freud's, without managing to escape the occult and anti-political aspect of Freud's thought. Freud would have thought Auden's call for an increase in the sense of personal responsibility the very thing that feeds unconscious violence.

* * *

Having evoked the imaginative energies of the historical past, attempted to establish the moral and psychological complicity and responsibility of his audience, and held out the promise of a Tomorrow free from tension and fear, Auden finally comes, in the two penultimate stanzas of 'Spain', to the depiction of 'To-day', the moment of great decision, where we find the magical vision of tenderness and friendship blossoming into a people's army yielding to a rather grim portrayal of realities.

To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death,
 The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;
 Today the expending of powers
 On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting.

To-day the makeshift consolations: the shared cigarette,
 The cards in the candlelit barn, and the scraping concert,
 The masculine jokes; to-day the
 Fumbled and unsatisfactory embrace before hurting.

Orwell puts his finger on the first crux of this passage when he bids the reader to 'notice the phrase "necessary murder"'. It could only have been written by a person to whom murder is at most a *word*. Personally', he goes on to say, 'I would not speak so lightly of murder. It so happens that I have seen the bodies of numbers of men murdered – I don't mean killed in battle, I mean murdered'.²⁵ Auden later defended himself by saying that he was '*not* excusing totalitarian crimes but only trying to say

²⁵ *Inside the Whale*, in *Essays*, p. 237.

what, surely, every decent person thinks if he finds himself unable to adopt the absolute pacifist position'. The poet goes on to provide a syllogism for his argument:

- (1) To kill another human being is always murder and should never be called anything else. (2) In a war, the members of two rival groups try to murder their opponents. (3) *If* there is such a thing as a just war, then murder can be necessary for the sake of justice.²⁶

It is true that some generally clear-thinking people who were not entirely pacifists – Bertrand Russell, for instance – have been willing to say that killing in war is murder even though it is necessary.²⁷ But Orwell certainly has the better of the argument here, for it is hard to understand how something called 'murder' can ever be justified. Auden's position would make even killing in self-defence murder ('To kill another human being is always murder'), surely an untenable position and hardly one that can be attributed to 'every decent person' who is not a pacifist. There is one other logical option for Auden, to deny the condition specified in number 3 – '*If* there is such a thing as a just war' – but that is scarcely open to him when issuing a call to arms.

We are left, then, with the strange conclusion that, at the crescendo of his call to arms, Auden is on the brink of undermining the moral basis for war itself, and while this may not have been his intention, he clearly did intend to emphasise the moral hazards of war at what seems like a supremely inopportune moment. In fact, Auden obviously thinks that assuming the guilt implicit in war is part of the warrior's task. Moral risk accompanies physical risk, and it is the moral risk that he finds himself most crucially urging. The fact that the enemy has embarked on a project of evil does not absolve one of one's own guilt for contributing to the situation in the first place, nor does it remove the evil of killing him. At the climactic moment, as he calls upon all to present their lives, Auden still refuses to adopt a partisan point of view or a publicly inspiring stance. He instinctively prefers the heroism of self-deflation. As the poet appeals to the public, he is still thinking *for* himself and *as* himself.

It was undoubtedly in an attempt to be honest that Auden went so far in deglamorising the cause he espoused, for that is the effect of these

²⁶ Letter to Monroe K. Spears, 11 May 1963, in Spears, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island* (Oxford 1963) p. 157. The italics are Auden's.

²⁷ 'It is obvious that there are cases where lying and stealing are justifiable, and the same must be said of murder by those who hold that some wars are righteous.' Bertrand Russell, *Justice in War Time*, 2nd edn. (Chicago 1917) p. 39.

stanzas. Even the meaning of risking one's life is depersonalised here – 'the deliberate increase in the chances of death' – making it sound like an actuarial calculation. Politics and war are for Auden the very opposite of poetry, even the poetry of History, the celebration of Man the Maker. The struggle is boring and flat, it offers a few moments of Hemingwayesque camaraderie under grim conditions ('the shared cigarette'), but it too is morally complicit. The epic, Churchillian, or even Marxian note of justified opposition to evil cannot sound. It is tempting to remember at this point that Auden himself didn't manage to present his life to the cause as he set out to do and to see the same ambivalence surfacing here, where even the warrior for good retains his guilt.

It is indeed a guilty warrior that Auden summons to Spain, while believing, of course, that one would be even more guilty to stay at home.

The stars are dead. The animals will not look.
 We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and
 History to the defeated
 May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon.

The opening line of this stanza is brilliantly dramatic. There are no witnesses to our action, no higher powers to enlist, no lower powers to aid us on our quest. We are alone in a Nature that bears no relation to us. History looks on, but it is History with a capital H, inhuman, not the moral community evoked by Churchill nor even the meaningful dialectic of classes envisioned by Marx. And where Churchill calls up the spectre of a 'new Dark Age', Auden does not mention the objective consequences of defeat. Instead, the pending evil is the *experience* of defeat itself. Nor is the enemy evoked, for we are ourselves the enemy. It is our fears, our greed, our moral impostures that fuel the powers against us. History does not offer to remember our finest hour, only to look back upon our failure. The poem ends not with an offer of glory but a threat of further guilt. For Auden, 'the conscious acceptance of guilt' remains inescapable, and it would not be long before he would begin insisting that we are all very much like Hitler, since Hitler was teaching us what human nature really is.

There is no denying that 'Spain' is a brilliant accomplishment. It points in the most timely way to the danger of passivity in the face of evil, of what happens when 'the best lack all conviction'. Its evocation of imagination in history remains a haunting one, and it poses one of the central questions for democracy in a mass culture – how to achieve an effective cohesion of public and private motives without falling either into nationalistic self-glorification or Hegelian determinism. It urges the reader not only to action but to a serious sense of responsibility. With its ultimately

magical logic, however, and its insistence on the guilt even of those who resist fascism, it shows the inherent limits of a left rhetoric of responsibility built on psychoanalytic foundations. The problem goes beyond mere political or even personal ambivalence and points towards a deeper intellectual impasse. It was not that Auden no longer believed in what he was saying but that the intellectual framework within which he was working did not allow him to formulate what he believed, or at least not in a way that effectively supported the course of action he wanted to recommend. Auden simply does not have a working model of political agency. The result is that he cannot express even the clearest political imperatives in an unambiguously committed way. In issuing a call to arms he is in danger of substituting moral for physical risk. Given the moral solitude and reflexive guilt in evidence here, it is not surprising that at this point in his life Auden was already in the process of turning towards Christianity. In retrospect, 'Spain' seems less like a step towards victory than the diagnosis of a failure. In being so, it is faithful both to Auden's own experience and to the original purpose the vocabulary of psychoanalysis was designed to accomplish.