



Reading  
The Thirties

BERNARD BERGONZI

# READING THE THIRTIES

Texts and Contexts

Bernard Bergonzi



© Bernard Bergonzi 1978

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
without permission

*First edition 1978*

*Reprinted 1979*

*Published by*

THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

*London and Basingstoke*

*Associated companies in Delhi*

*Dublin Hong Kong Johannesburg Lagos*

*Melbourne New York Singapore Tokyo*

*Printed in Great Britain by offset lithography by  
Billing & Sons Ltd, Guildford, London and Worcester*

---

British Library Cataloguing in Publication

---

Bergonzi, Bernard

Reading the thirties

1. English literature 20th century - History  
and criticism

1. Title

820'.9'00912

PR471

ISBN 0-333-23562-2

---

*This book is sold subject  
to the standard conditions  
of the Net Book Agreement*

1937

For me it was a time of bandages  
and so it was in Spain.  
I heard there was a war in Spain:  
I knew where Spain was on a map.

A further piece of surgery impended,  
but in the end was not performed.  
A further war impended too; I did not know.

And I knew nothing  
of the bright-eyed poets in open shirts,  
of the last mile to Huesca  
and the Attlee Battalion;  
of clean untrammelled function in life and art;  
Ben Nicholson's squares and circles,  
the Health Centre at Peckham;  
Stalin's Five-Year Plan.

I had not sensed  
the perilous freedom in the air beyond the pylons  
eluding the ferrety pale cyclists.  
I had not seen, O machine's-miracle-marvel,  
a Bristol Bulldog loop the loop  
high over Salisbury Plain.

But I devoured *Modern Wonder*  
and several comics, weekly.  
My bandages grew smaller,  
Franco's troops moved north and east,  
the Junkers pummelled free Madrid.

I was a child and sickly in those years.  
But I have read the histories,  
have learnt the things I was too young to know.  
I feel my memories  
crystallizing into myth.

# Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to my wife and Bridgit O'Toole, who read parts of this book in manuscript; to Audrey Cooper, of the University of Warwick Library; to the editors of *Encounter*, where earlier versions of chapters 2 and 6 first appeared; and to the participants in an undergraduate seminar on the literature of the 1930s that I taught in 1975-76 and 1976-77.

The author and publishers wish to thank the following who have kindly given permission for the use of copyright material:

Professor Miriam Allott, for an extract from 'Signs', by Kenneth Allott, from *New Verse*.

Curtis Brown Limited, on behalf of Christopher Isherwood, for an extract from 'Lions and Shadows'.

Faber and Faber Limited, for extracts from 'A, a, a, Domine Deus', from *Sleeping Lord* by David Jones.

Faber and Faber Limited and Random House Inc., for extracts from 'Pylons' and 'The Express', from *Collected Poems* by Stephen Spender.

A. M. Heath & Company Limited, on behalf of Mrs Sonia Brownell Orwell, for an extract from 'On a Ruined Farm Near His Master's Voice Gramophone Factory', by George Orwell, published by Martin Secker & Warburg.

William Heinemann Limited, for a passage by Edward Upward, quoted in *Lions and Shadows* by Christopher Isherwood.

A. D. Peters Limited, on behalf of Mrs Day Lewis, for an extract from 'The Road These Times Must Take', by C. Day Lewis, from *Left Review*—1934.

Lawrence Pollinger Limited and The Viking Press Inc., for extracts from Graham Greene's novels, published by William Heinemann and The Bodley Head.

Random House Inc., for an extract from 'Essay on Rime' by Karl Shapiro.

# Contents

<i>Poem: 1937</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Introduction</i>	i
1 Men Among Boys, Boys Among Men	10
2 Auden and the Audenesque	38
3 Auden/Greene	60
4 Transformations of the Frontier	66
5 The Last Days of Futurism	90
6 Supplying the Lyrics	111
7 Icon or Commodity?	124
8 Conclusion	134
<i>Notes</i>	147
<i>Index</i>	152

# Introduction

This book is not about all of the literature written in England between 1930 and 1940. In the title, and throughout the book, I use the term 'the thirties' in the same deliberately selective fashion that made it possible for Edward Upward to give the all-embracing title, *In the Thirties*, to a retrospective novel about the progress of a young poet and schoolmaster from bourgeois individualism to the Communist Party which restricted itself to a dozen or so characters. Despite this narrowness of range, Stephen Spender could still call Upward's novel 'the most truthful picture of life in that decade'. In the present book I do not intend 'the thirties' to mean just a period, but also to refer generically to a group of writers and the work they produced, mostly in that decade, occasionally later. Indeed, 'the thirties' in this sense largely corresponds to what Samuel Hynes, in his recent admirable study of literature and politics at that time, calls 'the Auden generation'. The thirties generation mythologised themselves as they lived and wrote, and I have long been fascinated by the mythology, as the preceding poem will indicate. It was written in 1963 and first published in 1967, in a slightly longer version, in the little magazine *Tracks*. I reprint it here, not out of any strong conviction of its literary merit, but because it briefly tries to capture, in imagery and language, characteristics that I discuss at greater length in this book. There is the foregrounding of lists and isolated typological images, with a stylistic tendency to strings of nominal phrases and an abundant use of definite articles. There is also a touch



of the Hopkinsese that young poets tried out in the early thirties. (Some allusions may, with the passing of time, need annotating: 'the last mile to Huesca' is from John Cornford's poem 'Heart of the Heartless World'; the Attlee Battalion was the British formation in the International Brigades; and the Peckham Health Centre was a much-admired example of a neighbourhood welfare unit.) This poem represents the remote genesis of the present book, and shows that my interest in the thirties long antedates the attention that began to be directed at the period from about 1975 onwards. This new interest was evident in the 'Young Writers of the Thirties' exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery, London, in the summer of 1976, and in such books as A. T. Tolley's *The Poetry of the Thirties*, Samuel Hynes's *The Auden Generation*, the new edition of Julian Symons's *The Thirties: A Dream Revolved*, and Christopher Isherwood's autobiographical *Christopher and His Kind*. Parts of the present work were written, or drafted, before these books appeared; in other parts I am indebted to them, though my approach to the literary history of the thirties is rather different from theirs.

My interest is less in extendedly discussing individual authors, or individual texts, than in trying to read the thirties as a collective subject, even a collective text. The approach involves certain departures from the familiar methods and assumptions of English criticism, and not all of this book can be called literary criticism, though all of it stays close to literary texts. Where it is not criticism it moves towards cultural history and the sociology of literature, though I should like to think that all three approaches can be kept in a coherent and mutually supportive relation. The first chapter discusses the writers I am interested in as a generational group, who shared important formative experiences: being sons of the English or Anglo-Irish professional or administrative class, very conscious of the First World War but too young to fight in it; educated at boarding schools and, in nearly all cases, at Oxford or Cambridge. This common experience seems to me more important if less noticeable than the left-wing political views attributed to the 'Auden Group'; it also characterised writers

who were apolitical or right-wing, like Graham Greene, Anthony Powell and Evelyn Waugh. This chapter draws on biographical material, but not quite in the way of conventional literary biography; I am more concerned with seeing how the text we call a writer's 'life' interacts with the other text we call his 'work', and with typical rather than individual elements. In subsequent chapters the emphasis is on common elements of style and structure, verbal and cultural. If texts are placed in their contexts, it is also suggested that the contexts, or other texts, can become important constituents of the texts themselves.

This book had, in fact, two points of departure. One of them was the interest in the typology and mythology of the thirties just referred to. The other, of a more theoretical kind, was interest in the nature of a literary period, and how far it can be described or even defined in terms of regular and recurring structural constituents. There are some relevant and suggestive remarks in Graham Hough's book *Style and Stylistics*:

I am often haunted by the suspicion that the art historians, with their schools and styles and periods, have a command of their material and of its developments that literary historians seem to lack. And to many Continental students our unwillingness to deal in such ideas would seem but another example of our well-known incapacity for going beyond the barest empiricism.<sup>1</sup>

Since Hough wrote, English literary culture has become increasingly open to Continental ideas, so that a bare empiricism seems less wholly adequate than it once did, and words like 'generalisation', 'abstraction' and 'theory' seem less self-evidently condemnatory. I have tried to follow up the implications of Hough's words; in doing so I have been helped by some ideas, however imperfectly apprehended, of the late Lucien Goldmann. He emphasised 'group consciousness' and the way in which writers will express this consciousness, however much they think they are writing for themselves alone. Beyond a certain point I cannot follow Goldmann: in his Marxism (or, as some would have it,

his left-Hegelianism); his insistence that significant social groups are social classes; and his belief that what makes writers great is their expression of the 'world vision' of an emergent social class. But, in appropriating ideas from their ideological context, I have found Goldmann a useful corrective to the familiar individualism and empiricism of English literary discourse. Goldmann directs attention to the 'trans-individual' mental structures involved in writing, and I have tried to do something similar in this book. I believe, though, that the individual talent is more important than Goldmann would allow; indeed, it is interesting to see how such very individual, even idiosyncratic modes of expression as those of W. H. Auden or Graham Greene still fit into and reproduce the mental and imaginative structures of the group. There is a further paradox, which I elaborate later, in the diffusion of Auden's style to such an extent that it became part of the cultural environment rather than the mark of a particular personality. Goldmann's ideas have some affinities with those of Raymond Williams, who has argued that a particular collective 'structure of feeling' can shape the literary expressions of a period; Williams too I have found useful. (He has set on record his own interest in Goldmann's theories about the 'collective subject', and the structures of the genesis of consciousness.<sup>2</sup>)

Accounts of the literature of the 1930s often stress the closeness of that literature to social questions, under such headings as 'Literature and Society', or 'Literature and the social and/or political background'. I believe that it is right to examine the closeness of literary and social interests at that time, and I have done so in this book, but I have also tried to find a new way of relating them. In particular, I think we need to phase out the inert concept of 'background', however useful or even indispensable it is to planners of academic courses or writers of textbooks. The problem is that if the background appears important or interesting in the discussion of a text, then inevitably it comes to be part of the foreground. The most desirable change is in our model of the literary text. We are all familiar with the idea of the text as a smooth, solid, self-enclosed, free-standing object, the Well-Wrought Urn or Ver-

bal Icon of New Critical theory, placed some way in front of its social, intellectual and historical 'background' so that there seems to be no evident way of relating them. I propose instead a more kinetic model, which makes the text less tangible though no less specific; that is to say, the text as a field of force, or configuration of energy, or a vortex, to return to one of the dominant images of high modernist poetics, as described by Hugh Kenner in *The Pound Era*. I am influenced in this suggestion by Roland Barthes's model of the text, in *S/Z*, as a system of interlocking codes, of almost indefinite possible extension, though I do not want to take over Barthes's scholastic terminology, nor his attempted fusion of classical rhetoric and psychoanalysis. But Barthes does help one to a more open model of the text. If the text is a field of force then its whirling constituents come from many possible sources as well as the author's creative brain and imagination.

The Anglo-American critical tradition assumes that a literary text is solely dependent upon its author; it exists, simply, because a particular person has written it. Recent Continental critics, by contrast, give the individual author a very modest place among all the other determinants of the text: the state of the language, the genre, the contemporary literary situation, the ideology of the author's social group or class, the nature of productive relations in society at large, the desires and expectations of the audience. In our tradition, most of these elements would be relegated to the background, to be looked into or ignored, according to the reader's inclinations. But, in the model I propose, all these elements—personal, intellectual, literary, linguistic, social—would be there *in* the text, as constituent elements, or part of the network of codes that make up the totality. The uniquely personal element that we look for in a literary work would consist in the form, the configuration or particular vortex, that informs all these constituents. In the case of major talents it will be original and arresting; with minor ones it will be conventional or imitative; and very minor work can seem to have no author at all, to be merely an emanation of the spirit of the age, so formulaic

is it. There are some instances of such writing in this book, and despite their aesthetic nullity they are useful in exemplifying in a simple state the collective style of the times, the *langue* from which the *parole* of unique artistic utterance is formed.

Here are some specific examples of how contexts enter texts, which I discuss more fully later. In the literature of the thirties there are frequent references to a possible war and the threat of bombing; and to the rituals of cinema-going and the cult of film-stars. They form prominent subtexts in novels or poems. One can never be certain, simply by inspecting a literary text, that things referred to in it are direct reflections of contemporary society or events; they may well have their origin in literary convention or a prevalent ideology. Yet, if references are scattered over a variety of texts, one gets the sense of a system building up, referring to, say, bombers, or film-stars. At that point one may move from literature to historical evidence and find that there was indeed a widespread fear of bombing or a cult of film-stars in the 1930s. The movement will involve an interaction between the texts of literature and the texts of history on particular topics, a more dynamic process than merely 'filling in the background'. And, since fields of force may interpenetrate, it is not surprising that literary texts may move in and out of each other, literature always drawing, in part, on other literature as well as on the larger world outside it.

Literary texts remain unique entities, but they inevitably enter into relations with other texts, either by the same author, in a context of personal development; or by other, contemporary authors, in a group context of shared attitudes and influences. So, too, in astronomy do single stars form constellations, and constellations form galaxies, even though, in the end, everything consists of single stars. In the present book I have tried to trace connections and interrelations to the extent that one can, ultimately and by a process of deliberate abstraction (which means no more than 'drawing out of'), speak of 'the thirties' as a collective text, the trans-individual product of a generation, possessing, like the *oeuvre* of an individual author, a number of regular

and recurring features. I am still, however, sufficient of an Anglo-Saxon empiricist to remain sceptical of single, ultimately reductive explanations of diverse phenomena, whether in terms of a transcendent *Zeitgeist*, or the 'economic base' to which, 'in the last analysis', all cultural manifestations must be referred, however many 'mediations' have to be slotted in between text and base. I have looked for larger coherences than ordinary empirical readings can provide, but not final explanations.

I think it likely that survivors of the thirties generation, if they chance to read this book, will complain that everything they knew is distorted, that it was not like that at all. I remain unabashed: single stars may well believe that the universe consists of single stars and that talk of constellations and galaxies is so much nonsense. C. Day Lewis, for instance, remarked in his autobiography, *The Buried Day*, that, though throughout the thirties he and Auden and Spender were always regarded as a tight little group of poets, they did not all three meet in one room until 1947. One takes the point, whilst insisting that a group need not necessarily imply a circle of writers sitting round a café table composing a joint manifesto. A group can still be recognisable as such, even if the separate members rarely meet or do not know each other personally at all. My concern is not only with what was happening forty and more years ago, in all its diversity and detail; that has been fully and richly set down in biographies and memoirs. I have attempted, rather, to find categories and models to make sense of all that activity. For that matter, survivors, because of their particular allegiances, may make distorted judgements. There is a good example in the '1930s Special Number' of *Renaissance and Modern Studies* (1976). Arnold Rattenbury was too young to be very active in the thirties, but in the early forties he was friendly with several older Communist writers who had been. He writes in an essay called 'Total Attainder and the Helots',

Perhaps I put things poorly, being unaccustomed to memoir and polemic both; but orthodoxy lies and someone, if only a boy at the time, must say so. That

the Thirties were made of Auden and friends and such influences as reached them is as unlikely a notion as daft.<sup>3</sup>

To that unlikelihood and daftness I unrepentantly admit. Although I make limiting judgements on Auden in the following pages, his centrality in the literary life of the thirties seems to me unmistakable. Unlike other hostile critics of 'orthodoxy', Mr Rattenbury does give a hostage to fortune by proposing an alternative. This proves to be Randall Swingler, a minor Communist poet, a Wykehamist and sometime editor of *Left Review* (whom I can remember as a man of immense charm when I used to attend his extra-mural lectures at Goldsmiths' College in the early fifties): 'It's hard for me to say other than that he wrote from a centre of his times, while Auden wrote roundabout.' One can check Mr Rattenbury's judgement at once, because that same issue of *Renaissance and Modern Studies* contains a substantial selection of Swingler's poems. Whatever their merits, Auden's centrality is unaffected.

I have not presented a single developing argument in this book. It is, in form, a set of essays which consider different aspects, or different cross-sections, of the literature of the thirties, and which do not attempt to be exhaustive. But certain themes emerge which I try to draw together in the Conclusion. And, to repeat a remark made in the opening sentence of this introduction, there are important texts written between 1930 and 1940 that I say nothing about. I reiterate this for the benefit of reviewers, who when faced with a selective study of a subject are liable to complain that it is not a comprehensive study, and then list all the missing names. To save them trouble I shall set down some names here and now. There is, for instance, nothing about the later writings of the major modernists, published during the decade: Eliot's 'Burnt Norton', Yeats's *Last Poems*, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, Wyndham Lewis's *The Revenge for Love*. Nor about remarkable new work by younger writers in the modernist tradition, such as David Jones's *In Parenthesis* or Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*. And there are only fleeting

references to slightly younger writers who began in the thirties and did not attend public schools, such as Dylan Thomas, George Barker and David Gascoyne. And nothing about the fine work of a Scottish Marxist who had some political affinities with the writers I do discuss, but little else in common: Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*. Some of these novels and poems I love and admire, at least as much as the texts I have chosen to discuss. But they belong on different maps, are to be sought on different expeditions.



# 1 Men Among Boys, Boys Among Men

The question, 'Where were you (or, Where was he) at school?' is not always, in an English context, a simple request for information. It often implies that the person addressed was at a public school, or might have been, and the answer will enable him to be fitted into the pattern of fine gradations that extends over upper-middle class and upper-class society. As has been often remarked, the crucial social division in England is not between middle and working class, but between the upper and lower middle class; between those who were educated at a grammar school, or no school in particular, and a public school, however minor. And the public school, in this scheme, is usually preceded by a preparatory school and followed by Oxford or Cambridge. This has been the traditional pattern for the professional and administrative classes in England, and for much of the aristocracy. It has never been general for men of letters, however: their social basis tends to be wider, stretching well down into the lower middle class and even, exceptionally, to the working class. We can consider the writers who were active in England in 1915, or at least bringing their work out from London publishers. It is a convenient year, since Henry James was still alive and writing then, and T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf published their first work. Some basic names include those of Joseph Conrad, Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, W. B. Yeats, Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, E. M. Forster, Ford Madox Ford, D. H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, James Joyce and Ezra