



SAMUEL HYNES

THE AUDEN GENERATION

Literature
and Politics
in England
in the
1930s

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in the 1930s*



THE VIKING PRESS NEW YORK

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Published in 1977 by The Viking Press
625 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Hynes, Samuel Lynn.

The Auden generation.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. English literature—20th century—History
and criticism. 2. Politics and literature.

I. Title.

PR479.P6H9 820'.9'12 76-23104

ISBN 0-670-14044-9

Printed in the United States of America
Set in Monotype Baskerville

A portion of Chapter X was first published
in *Modern Irish Literature: Essays in Honor of*
William York Tindall (New York: Iona College Press, 1972).

Page 429 constitutes an extension
of this copyright page.

For Mandy and Jo

You cannot tell people what to do,
you can only tell them parables;
and that is what art really is, particular stories
of particular people and experience, from which
each according to his own immediate and peculiar needs
may draw his own conclusions.

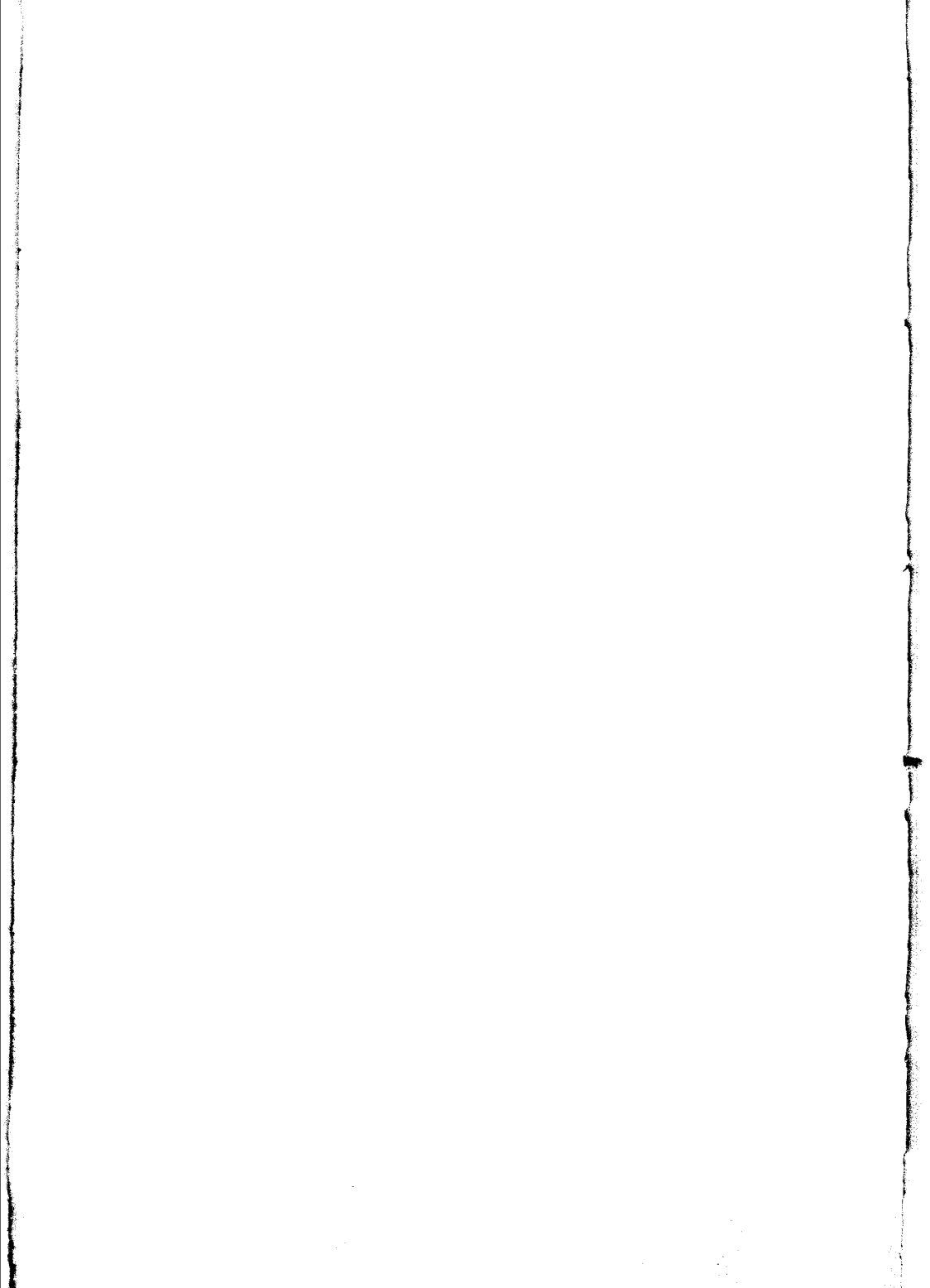
AUDEN

Psychology and Art To-day (1935)

. . . if one conceives that the subject of writing is
the moral life of one's time, in the same way as
the subject of Greek Tragedy is moral, and *Everyman* is
a morality, and the subject of *Tao Te Ching* is the art
of ruling and being ruled; then to-day one is in
a very difficult situation. The precise difficulty is
to write about this moral life in a way that is significant:
to find the real moral subject.

SPENDER

Writers and Manifestos (1935)



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PREFACE

This book is about the making of a literary generation—the young English writers of the 1930s. Several things should be said about the nature and the limits of the subject. First, I am concerned with one generation of writers, the men and women born in England between 1900 and the First World War, who came of age in the 'twenties and lived through their early maturity during the Depression. They are above all the generation *entre deux guerres*, and their relation to both wars is an important part of this book. I am interested in how the development of this generation of writers was affected by the circumstances of their times, how the war behind them and the war ahead entered into their work, and how the forms of imagination were altered by crises. I do not take the generation beyond the beginning of the Second World War; the decade of the 'forties has a different history. Nor do I consider, except tangentially, important works written during the 'thirties by older writers. Of course those other works are part of the circumstances of the time: one could not be a young poet in the 'thirties and be unaffected by *Ash Wednesday* and *The Winding Stair*, or be a young novelist and unaware of *Work in Progress*. But these are relevant to this study only insofar as they influenced younger writers.

I must also stress the point that I am dealing with a *literary* generation, and that this is a literary study. I assume that a close relation exists between literature and history, and I think that this relation is particularly close in times of crisis, when public and private lives, the world of action and the world of imagination, interpenetrate. I do not believe that literary history can be separated from social and political and economic history, and the reader will find that the context of literary events in this book is history in that larger sense. Nevertheless, the subject is literature, and specifically the growth of literary forms.

I have organized the book in a straightforward year-by-year chronology. I am aware that certain simplifications enter with such a method: it seems to assume that all imaginations work at the same rapid pace, and does not allow for a varying lag-factor between the stimulus and the work; and it seems also to assume that in all cases the stimulus is in immediate history. But the works I am concerned with here were not, in most cases, long in the making; all of the principal writers of the 'thirties generation were rapid and prolific writers. Most of them wrote for a living; some of them had propagandist motives that encouraged immediate publication. And the pace of the time itself, and the sense of time passing and an end approaching, gave a special quality to the 'thirties that made the relation between a work and its historical context unusually close. Not every work was topical in an obvious way (though there is a good deal of topical material in most 'thirties writing), but almost every work of importance is demonstrably related to its historical moment in mood and tone.

The 'moment', strictly speaking, is the time of composition, but that is not always easy to determine, and I have used instead the date of publication. In most cases the difference was not great; for example, Auden's 'Spain' was written between January 1937 (when he went to Spain) and April (when copy went to the printer), and was published in May, and Rex Warner's *The Professor* was written between the Austrian and Czechoslovakian crises (that is, between March and September 1938), and was published in November of that year. But there is also a theoretical justification for using publication dates. To the degree that literature *creates* as well as *records* consciousness, it begins to exist when it enters history—when publication makes it a public reality. *New Country* and Spender's *Poems* are both historical facts of 1933, with historical causes and historical consequences.

To write about the *literary* existence of a generation is to accept a necessary restriction of subject: you will be writing almost entirely about the middle-class members of the generation. English literature has been middle-class as long as there has been an English middle class, and the generation of the 'thirties was not different in this respect from its predecessors; most of the writers I deal with

here came from professional families, and were educated at public schools and at Oxford or Cambridge. Virtually no writing of literary importance came out of the working class during the decade. The poor did find symbolic ways of expressing their needs and feelings—in Hunger Marches, in protests, in the East End resistance to Mosley's invasion—but these were not literary ways. This is scarcely surprising if one considers the conditions of working-class life during those years, the unemployment, the Dole, the diet of bread and margarine, and all the rest of it; it is simply one of the facts of the time. So when one generalizes about the generation, it must always be with the implicit qualification that there was a large majority whose lives did not find expression in language. This is of course true of any generation; what is different about the 'thirties is that, as political and social awareness grew among educated, middle-class young people, their sense of the need to speak to and for the poor and the workers grew too, and this becomes, for the critic-historian, another literary problem.

A further point to be made is simply a gloss on my phrase, 'the making of a generation'. I assume that a generation grows in definition by the interaction of consciousness and circumstance. One might say that a generation does not really exist until it has been made conscious of its identity, and that for such consciousness it must depend on the special awareness of its artists, and on their ability to create the forms appropriate to their own particular circumstances. Surely most of the members of any chronological group, even the most articulate ones, are neither spontaneously aware that they *are* a group, nor capable of defining their special existence. It took Gertrude Stein to explain to the post-war expatriates that they were a Lost Generation, and it took Hemingway to show them what she had meant. Evelyn Waugh's contemporaries didn't know that they were Bright Young People until Waugh told them they were; then they looked back to Oxford and the Hypocrites' Club and saw that they were significant. So it was with the 'thirties: the generation grew into consciousness as its artists devised the forms in which they could express contemporary history, and that new consciousness evolved and changed as events, and the expressions of events, occurred. There is not, then, a Thirties Generation that exists through the decade, with a fixed

and definable set of characteristics; rather there is a consciousness that develops and changes as circumstances change.

It is only when a period has passed that it solidifies and becomes history, and we begin to think of it as a set pattern of events, forces, and consequences. At the time, history feels fluid and uncertain, the forces that time will eventually confirm don't yet know that they *are* the significant ones; in studying the past, we must try by an act of imagination to recover that sense of fluidity. In the Myth of the Thirties, for example, the Left plays a powerful role, but in the actual period the role of the Left was not clear, nor its principles and practices established. The Communist Party of Great Britain had been in existence for less than ten years when the decade began—like disillusionment, it was a post-war phenomenon. The *Daily Worker* began publication in 1930, and the *Left Review*, which was the nearest thing to an official organ that the intellectuals of the Left had, did not appear until 1934. The whole question of what a British Communist would be—how he would behave, what he would think about art and literature, and what kind he would himself produce if he were an artist—all these questions were unanswered, even unasked, in 1930. The 'thirties was not a time of political orthodoxy, but a time when orthodoxy was being worked out, and this includes orthodoxy in literature.

In a study of a literary generation, the process of 'growing into consciousness' will necessarily involve questions of the functions and forms of art. The decade of the 'thirties was a time of crises, and the most important writing of the period is best seen as a series of efforts to respond to crisis. Auden posed the problem very acutely in the mid-'thirties when he wrote, in a birthday poem to Isherwood:

So in this hour of crisis and dismay,
What better than your strict and adult pen
Can warn us from the colours and the consolations,
The showy arid works, reveal
The squalid shadow of academy and garden,
Make action urgent and its nature clear?
Who give us nearer insight to resist
The expanding fear, the savaging disaster?¹

In these questions there is a new and different conception of the literary act, adapted to a sense of the critical nature of the time. The writer must be *strict* and *adult*, adjectives that impose moral commitment and discipline upon the act of writing. By his pen—in his role as a writer, and not simply as a citizen—he will make men aware of the need for action, and of what action means. His insight will give men strength to resist their enemies, without and within. This is more than simply a moral theory of literature, it asserts a direct relation between literature and action in the public world; writing becomes a mode of action.

There is no precise name for the kind of writing that Auden was approving in that poem. It is not simply didactic—the focus on action makes it more insistent, less abstract than that. Nor can it be described as propaganda—*strict* and *adult* ask for more than a party line. Auden was urging a kind of writing that would be affective, immediate, and concerned with ideas, moral not aesthetic in its central intention, and organized by that intention rather than by its correspondence to the observed world. The problem that he posed was not simply a formal one—finding an alternative way of writing a Georgian lyric or a realistic novel—but something more difficult: he was asking for alternative *worlds*, worlds of the imagination which would consist in new, significant forms, and through which literature could play a moral role in a time of crisis. This idea of a new kind of literature raises questions of fundamental importance—of the nature of language, of history, of the meaning of action, of heroism. These are not all strictly literary questions, but they are all questions that the writers of the 'thirties concerned themselves with; their works, the major writings of the generation, can all be understood as efforts to solve the crucial problem that Auden posed.

If we consider some major examples, we will see how difficult it is to give a generic name to them: what term will cover *Paid on Both Sides*, *A Gun for Sale*, *Vienna*, *The Wild Goose Chase*, *Goodbye to Berlin*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *Autumn Journal*? All of these, in their different ways, might be taken as efforts to make action urgent and its nature clear. All deal, to some degree, with problems of politics and action. All are departures—in some cases quite extreme departures—from the formal traditions of pre-war writing;

all take their forms to some extent from their conceptual content, rather than from tradition or from observed reality; all embody a sense of crisis.

It is clear that the young writers of these books, and 'thirties writers generally, were very conscious of the special formal properties that their generation's best work had. In criticism and reviews they commonly used terms that identify this element of conceptual form: terms like *fable*, *myth*, and *allegory*. These terms have different literary ancestries, of course, but in the 'thirties they were used more or less as synonyms; it is one more evidence of the generation's separation from the past that they should use such traditional terms without reference to traditional examples: an allegory is an allegory *now*, not a work that resembles Bunyan's. I don't think terminology is an important issue here: any of these terms will do if one uses it consistently, and with an awareness that it covers a wide range of formal variations. What is important is to see the process by which these young writers groped toward forms for a new set of problems, and what factors affected their decisions.

I have adopted Auden's term—*parable-art*—because he provided contemporary definitions of what he meant by it. In his essay, 'Psychology and Art To-day' (1935), Auden wrote:

There must always be two kinds of art, escape-art, for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep, and parable-art, that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love . . .²

And in the introduction to *The Poet's Tongue* (also 1935):

. . . poetry, the parabolic approach, is the only adequate medium for psychology. The propagandist, whether moral or political, complains that the writer should use his powers over words to persuade people to a particular course of action, instead of fiddling while Rome burns. But Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.³

The distinction between parable and propaganda seems to me a

useful one, and so does the echo of Auden's poem to Isherwood. It all comes together: poetry is parable-art, parables teach (but love, not ideology), and that is what a strict and adult pen must do in a time of expanding fear and savaging disaster. Art remains Art, but it performs a social role.

The definition that emerges is something like this: a parable is functional—that is message-bearing, clarifying, instructive—but it is not didactic. Rather it is an *escape* from didacticism; like a myth, it renders the feeling of human issues, not an interpretation of them. It is non-realistic, because it takes its form from its content, and not from an idea of fidelity to the observed world. It is moral, not aesthetic, in its primary intention; it offers models of the problem of action. The working out of the meaning of parable, in theory and in a parabolic practice, is a process that continued through the 'thirties, and gave a kind of formal continuity to the diversity of 'thirties writing. And all that time history continued to offer new fears and new disasters, the public world pressed in more and more urgently upon the private world. Out of all that—the works, the crises, and their interactions—a generation discovered itself, and found its own expression. That is what this book is about.

My study of a decade has taken half a decade to research and write, and during that time I have been generously helped by the American Council of Learned Societies and by the National Endowment for the Humanities; I am glad to express my appreciation for their assistance here. Northwestern University was also liberal with funds and with released time from teaching and administrative duties, for which I am also grateful. I would also like to thank the following for their advice and assistance: the Librarian of Exeter College, Oxford; the staff of the University of Sussex Library; the staff of the Cambridge University Library; the directors of Mass-Observation Ltd; the staff of the Northwestern University Library; Quentin Bell, Barry Bloomfield, Mrs John Carleton, Sam Carmack, Arthur Crook, Mrs Valerie Eliot, William Empson, Brother George Every s.s.m., P. N. Furbank, Barbara Hardy, Laurence Lafore, Edward Mendelson, Sir Denis Proctor, Kathleen Raine, Leonard Skevington, Stephen Spender, T. Stanhope Sprigg, Rex Warner, Antonia White, Ian Willison, Charles Wintour, Alex Zwerdling.

