Auden and Co.

'A LOW DISHONEST DECADE'

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-Second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade.

These are the lines which begin W. H. Auden's 'September 1, 1939' (a poem which its author virtually disowned in later life). The 'decade' in question is that of the 1930s; and the comments made on it, including its 'clever hopes' and its 'low dishonest' nature, suggest the character it acquired for a group of poets who themselves take their place in literary history, rightly or wrongly, from the work they did in the 1930s. Chief among them are Auden, Louis MacNeice, C. Day Lewis and Stephen Spender – mockingly clustered together by Roy Campbell as 'MacSpaunday', and by Auden himself as 'Daylewisaudenmacneicespender'.

The four did not share either a tight-knit philosophy or set of political opinions, though it is their generally left-wing outlook and opposition to fascism (particularly to the rise of Franco in Spain) which has stamped them as 'poets of the Thirties'. Day Lewis and Spender were the only ones to have affiliated themselves with communism, and that only for a while. Moreover, they diverged very sharply from each other after the 1930s, Auden, for example, becoming an American citizen and a Kierkegaardian Christian, MacNeice a classics lecturer, Day Lewis the British Poet Laureate (in 1968), and Spender co-editor of the anti-communist journal, Encounter. What connected them more lastingly was their social compassion and their interest in a witty, 'clever' and determinedly contemporary poetry of the twentieth-century urban-industrial environment. And in the cases of MacNeice, Day Lewis and Spender their enthusiasm for the extraordinary precocity of Auden, whom
they first encountered as students at Oxford in the 1920s. Auden speaks for the Thirties character of their work when he writes, in ‘Letter to Lord Byron’ (1936):

Tramlines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery,
That was, and still is, my ideal scenery.

But as poets each of them had their own individual careers which embraced much wider material and more diverse styles.

W. H. AUDEN (1907–73)

Auden began in his ‘teens as an admirer of Wordsworth, Hardy and Edward Thomas, but soon after going up to Oxford in 1925 he started to read T. S. Eliot. In the words of Edward Mendelson, ‘Eliot served as a great liberator. Poetry, Auden learned, could be comic and grotesque. ... Using Eliot’s exotic vocabulary as his model, Auden brought into his poems the science and psychology he learned in his father’s library, while discarding the traditional poetic diction and poetic subjects favored by his mother.’ However, much as he admired The Waste Land, and much as his early poetry in particular suffered from the characteristic obscurity of modernist poetry, Auden remained in the English main stream of rational discourse and syntactical coherence. This continued to be so even when he left England for America in 1938; and his later work, written in the USA and subsequently in Italy and Austria, accentuates, if anything, his commitment to the discursive tradition.

It could be argued that the rediscovery of the Metaphysicals by Eliot influenced Auden more than it did Eliot himself. Auden’s obscurity is not that of Symbolist music, Imagist discontinuity or self-consciously modernist allusion, but of concentration and ellipsis. Another important influence here is Gerard Manley Hopkins; the ‘telegraphese’ (omission of articles and merely connective words) in many of Auden’s early poems is an attempt to achieve a powerfully compact language from which all superfluous elements have been ruthlessly pruned. The line of argument may thus be made more difficult to follow, but it is deliberately pursued. The reader must focus on the reasoning process which forms the structure, and to which all evocative or associative elements are strictly subordinated.