

Nicholas Jenkins, "Auden and Spain"

an appendix-essay to "Eleven Letters from Auden to Stephen Spender", ed.
Jenkins, in Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins, eds., *W. H. Auden:
"The Map of All My Youth": Early Works, Friends and Influences*, Auden
Studies vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 88-93

© 1990 Nicholas Jenkins

Appendix

AUDEN AND SPAIN

AUDEN'S time in the Republican part of Spain from 13 January to around 2 March 1937 is the most intensively mythologized blank-spot of his career.¹ Of the three major journeys which he made between 1936 and 1938—to Iceland, Spain, and China—the Spanish experience seems to have had the heaviest impact on his thought, although, perhaps because he travelled alone, it is the most sparsely documented of the three visits. By the time that Auden or his friends were prepared to say anything, however brief, about what he had seen there, the facts of the trip had been modified by hindsight, demand for a good easy-to-follow story, and simple forgetfulness. There are three direct literary results of the journey: 'Spain',² which Auden presumably completed in March after he had returned to England, the journalistic sketch 'Impressions of Valencia',³ and a note (Letter 4 above), apparently the only surviving piece of correspondence from his stay there, which was probably left at Spender's hotel in Barcelona on 30 January, the day when Auden set off for the Aragon Front.⁴ In this Appendix, I try to establish for the record roughly where Auden went in Spain and when, approximately, he did so. However, it is important to bear in mind that any traveller's actual experience of the country during the Civil War was shaped as much by Spain's political situation and by the practical difficulties of moving around—the mandatory visas and passes, border-controls, petrol rationing, and territorial conflicts within the Republican armies—as by distances and terrain.

Auden was in London in early January, waiting to leave for Spain with a Medical Unit, one of the few officially approved ways of entering the country. At this stage, he seems to have intended to drive an ambulance in the heavy fighting around Madrid. The morning of 8 January was spent with Britten, drinking coffee in Tottenham Court Road, where he

¹ The details of Auden's journey will be easier to follow with a map of northern Spain to hand. The year 1937 should be assumed with any date, unless otherwise stated.

² *SP* 51–5.

³ Repr. in *EA* 360–1.

⁴ Carpenter, 214, suggests that this note was written sometime after 21 Feb. (i.e. 27 Feb., the next 'Saturday' after 21 Feb.) in Valencia. However, correlation of Auden's visit with the journeys to Spain made by Spender, who just missed him, and Cyril Connolly, who saw him twice, make this date and place improbable.

gave the composer two recently completed poems, 'Lullaby' and 'Danse Macabre'.⁵ Britten noted in his diary that Auden expected to leave the next day, but in the event, his departure was postponed until 11 January.⁶ Isherwood met him in Paris on the morning of 12 January and they spent the afternoon getting drunk with Brian Howard and the night in bed together. The next day, 13 January, after a 'solemn parting', Isherwood saw Auden off to Spain.⁷

From this point on, little went according to plan. Auden's mother, for instance, told enquirers that she expected him to be away until May.⁸ Actually, he was back in London by 4 March. Moreover, having told friends that he was going to Madrid to work as an ambulance driver, soon after he arrived in Spain he surfaced in Valencia, writing journalism and perhaps also broadcasting propaganda from the tiny socialist radio station there. Given this confusion, Auden's movements can only be reconstructed now from the accounts of people who either saw, or in Spender's case, just missed him as he spiralled around the country. Two widely canvassed—and obviously related—'sightings' must be discounted as, at best, hearsay. Robert Graves reports that Auden spent some time playing table tennis at Sitges (just below Barcelona), and Roy Campbell finds Auden guilty of the same thing, though this time at 'Tossa del [*sic*] Mar'. Both Graves and Campbell, although they were Nationalist sympathisers, had left Spain before Auden arrived.⁹ Still, Campbell is right to pick out the seaside village of Tossá de Mar. On what was probably the night of 14 January, Auden stayed at the Casa Johnstone hotel there, owned by Archie and Nancy Johnstone (Mrs Johnstone was a Faber author), when he was on his way down to Barcelona. According to Mrs Johnstone, he was still hoping to find medical work, though now as a stretcher-bearer.¹⁰

Soon after this, Auden was in Valencia, the main centre of Republican administration at the time. To get there, he must have passed through Barcelona, though it seems likely that he did not stop in the city for long.

⁵ *EA* 207 and 208–9.

⁶ Donald Mitchell, *Britten and Auden In the Thirties: The Year 1936* (London, 1981), 141.

⁷ *CHK* 263–4.

⁸ Carpenter, 215.

⁹ Graves's remark comes in 'These Be Your Gods, O Israel!' in *The Crowning Privilege* (Garden City, NY, 1956), 137. But see Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London, 1982), 278–80. For Campbell, see 'Epitaph on the Thirties' in *Nine*, 2. 4 (Nov. 1950), 345, and Peter Alexander, *Roy Campbell: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1982), 165, 172.

¹⁰ Nancy Johnstone, *Hotel In Flight* (London, 1939), 84–5.

Cyril Connolly, who was on a three-week trip to Spain with his wife, Jean, and Lord Antrim, had reached Valencia some time before 12 January and was planning to travel deeper into the country before turning for home towards the end of the month. The Connolly party, with a letter of introduction from Isherwood, first met Auden in Valencia.¹¹ Since they were only there for a few days in mid-January, Auden must have arrived in Valencia by 17 or, at the latest, 18 January. Many years afterwards, Connolly reported that, when they met, Auden was working for the government radio, but this may well be an instance of him converting something he had read into a piece of his own experience.¹² In any case, after the Connollys and Antrim had moved on, Auden stayed in Valencia until at least 25 January, when he took part in a doom-laden evening of drink at the Hotel Victoria with, amongst others, Arthur Koestler.¹³ (He must have written 'Impressions of Valencia' by now, because it appeared in *The New Statesman & Nation* on 30 January.¹⁴)

Some time during the next week, he seems to have travelled back to Barcelona on his way up to the Aragon Front. On 30 January, a 'Saturday', having seen the now homeward-bound Connollys again, this time in Barcelona,¹⁵ he left the note at the hotel where Spender was expected. Spender had been in Spain with T. C. Worsley since early in January under orders from the Communist Party, which he had recently joined. Their brief was to investigate the fate of the crew of the Soviet supply ship *Komsomol*, sunk in the Mediterranean by the Nationalists on 14 December 1936. On 5 January Spender wrote to Isherwood saying that he was going on 'rather an important job to the rebel part of Spain'.¹⁶ (Even if Spender had not told Auden directly, because Isherwood had seen him in Paris on 12 January, Auden would have known that Spender was also in the country. This is the point of the phrase 'I did so want to see you'.¹⁷) Spender and Worsley were in the southernmost part of Spain and in north Africa for almost the whole of their trip, but on their way home at the end of January both confirm, in separate accounts, that they stayed in Barcelona; for 'two or three nights' by Spender's reckoning.¹⁸

¹¹ Cyril Connolly, 'Some Memories' in *Tribute*, 69.

¹² *Ibid.* 69.

¹³ Arthur Koestler, *The Invisible Writing* (New York, 1954), 336-7.

¹⁴ *NS* 13. 310, 159.

¹⁵ Connolly in *Tribute*, 70.

¹⁷ See Letter 4.

¹⁸ *WWW* 197. For Worsley's account, see T. C. Worsley, *Behind the Battle* (London, 1939), 77-115.

They just missed Auden, who, as I have said, had doubled back to the city in order to reach the Aragon Front.

Both the line between the Republicans and Nationalists, and the lines of political demarcation within the fragmented Republican ranks, would have made a journey from Valencia directly to Sariñena (the little town which Auden told Spender he was aiming for) impossible. The main fighting was concentrated further west around Madrid, but the railway line from Valencia to Saragossa, the nearest big town to Sariñena, ran through territory already held by the Nationalists. Moreover, it was extremely difficult for journalists, especially those like (apparently) Auden who were without Communist Party accreditation, to travel freely. A state of profound tension, which a few months later erupted into armed struggle, existed between the Socialist-Communist Government in Valencia, backed by the USSR, and the anarchist and 'Trotskyite' POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista) militias who controlled Barcelona and who provided almost all the troops for the Aragon Front. The government was focussing its propaganda efforts on the defence of Madrid (a fact which is reflected in the declaration in 'Spain' that 'Madrid is the heart' over which Fascism and Democracy are fighting) and it was labouring to establish itself as the single authority on the Republican side. Part of this effort involved trying to corral the diverse militias into a single army, the Ejército Popular, or as Auden calls it in 'Spain', the 'people's army'.¹⁹ To this end, it was quietly depriving the still independent anarchists in Barcelona and at the Aragon Front of weapons and publicity. As a result, the Front was relatively peaceful during the period of Auden's visit. I have not, though, found a single report of anyone being able to travel by car or train to the Aragon Front without first passing through anarchist-run Barcelona.

Auden did manage to get there; twenty-six years later he told an interviewer that he had gone to the Front between Saragossa and Barbastro (an exact description of the location of Sariñena).²⁰ Some remarks by Claud Cockburn, who was then working in Valencia for the Communist Party, support the hypothesis that Auden reached Valencia, turned round and left for the Aragon Front, and then came back again to Valencia. Cockburn maintained that 'the bloody man went off and got a donkey, a mule really, and announced that he was going to walk through Spain with this creature. From Valencia to the Front. He got six miles from Valencia before the mule kicked him or something and only then

¹⁹ *SP* 54.

²⁰ Unpublished 1963 interview with T. G. Foote for *Time*.

did he return and get in the car and do his proper job.²¹ If we bleach out Cockburn's picaresque details, his basic story fits with the facts scraped together from other sources.

How long Auden was up in the mountains north-west of Barcelona is impossible even to guess at, but once more events did not work out as he had expected them to. Instead of staying at the Front for 'about 1 month', Auden appears to have been back in Valencia by 21 February, his thirtieth birthday, which Carpenter says (though he gives no source) was spent in the Republican capital.²² He may also have become involved—again or for the first time—with the radio station in the city. Whatever the case, by the time that Spender, making a second journey, reached Valencia around 23 February, the radio station had closed down. This further frustration, compounding Auden's distress at the brutalities he had witnessed, may have convinced him that it was time to leave. At some point after 21 February, then, he travelled back up the now bombarded railway line between Valencia and Barcelona, and from there, probably on 2 March, caught an express for Paris. On the evening of 4 March, he was sitting next to Isherwood in the Mercury Theatre, London, watching *The Ascent of F6*.

To retrace Auden's journey is also, incidentally, to taste again some of his poem's original flavour. The imperatives of 'Spain' are not just based on some loose notion of a Marxist analysis of history, or on a simple rallying call to the fight against Fascism, although both these factors are present. The poem also, unambiguously—and from the elder Auden's point of view disastrously—takes sides in a factional struggle within the Republican forces: the one between the Soviet-influenced Government and the independent revolutionary militias. Orwell, who was at the Aragon Front at the same time as Auden, described this struggle in *Homage to Catalonia* (London, 1938), and when Connolly got back to England—a month or so before Auden—he too discussed the Republican divisions, in the piece 'A Spanish Diary' which he published in the *New Statesman & Nation*.²³ Connolly sets out two opposing positions: 'The Communists and Socialists say "First win the war, then attend to the revolution"'. The poem's main assertion is, of course, a perfect encapsulation of this argument: 'To-morrow . . . / all the fun under / Liberty's masterful shadow . . . / To-morrow . . . / The eager election of chairmen / By the sudden forest of hands. But to-day the struggle.'²⁴

²¹ 'A Conversation with Claud Cockburn' in *The Review*, 11–12 (1964), 51.

²² Carpenter, 214.

²³ NS 13. 313 (20 Feb.), 278.

²⁴ SP 54.

And, Connolly continued, 'The younger Anarchists and the P.O.U.M. say, "The war and the revolution are indivisible and we must go on with both of them simultaneously."' Sure enough, 'Spain' pointedly counters this revolutionary impulse.

The sheer sense of will, the sense of great literary powers placed, decisively but without full conviction, in the service of a just cause, is essential to the effect of Auden's poem. But in the context of Spain in 1937, that cause is quite specifically and narrowly defined. Auden's most hortatory ode relies on a line of propaganda which was rapidly discredited. As the war dragged on, the language and structure of 'Spain' became increasingly compromised by their links to a Government which was more and more clearly the tool of a repressive Soviet foreign policy. In the end, having broken down so comprehensively the barriers between public imperatives and the private moral conscience, the poem had no defences against the tide of History, and it was swamped. It was against this wholesale debasement, not against a particular line or phrase, that Auden, later on, took such drastic measures.