Nicholas Jenkins, “Auden and Spain”


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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. 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’, which Auden presumably completed in March after he had returned to England, the journalistic sketch ‘Impressions of Valencia’, 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. 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
gave the composer two recently completed poems, ‘Lullaby’ and ‘Danse Macabre’. Britten noted in his diary that Auden expected to leave the next day, but in the event, his departure was postponed until 11 January. At the last minute, he sent in his notice of arrival at 10h30 on the morning of 12 January and they spent the afternoon getting drunk with Brian Inwood and the night in bed together. The next day, 13 January, after a ‘solemn parting’, Inwood saw Auden off to Spain.

From this point on, little went according to plan. Auden’s mother, for instance, told enquirers that she expected him to return by May. 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 poems 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 ‘l’ossa del [sic] Mar’. Both Graves and Campbell, although they were Nationalist sympathisers, had left Spain before Auden arrived. Still, Campbell is right to pick out the seaside village of Tossa de Mar. On what was probably the night of 14 January, Auden stayed at the Casa Johnston hotel there, owned by Archie and Nancy Johnston (Mrs Johnston was a Faber author), when he was on his way down to Barcelona. According to Mrs Johnston, he was still hoping to find medical work, though now as a stretcher-bearer.

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.

1 Ed. 207 and 208.9.
3 29K 263-8.
4 Carpenter, 215.
6 Nancy Johnston, Heart In Flight (London, 1959), 84-5.
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 Sarriena (the little town in 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 Sarriena, 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 Unificacion 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’. 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 Sarriena). Some remarks by Clared 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

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did he return and get in the car and do his proper job.\textsuperscript{21} If we bleach out Cockburn’s picturesque 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 thirteenth birthday, which Carpenter says (though he gives no source) was spent in the Republican capital.\textsuperscript{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*.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{21} *A Conversation with Cloud Cockburn* in *The Revue*, 11–12 (1946), 51.
\textsuperscript{22} Carpenter, 214.
\textsuperscript{23} *ibid.*, 313 (20 Feb.), 278.
\textsuperscript{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 impetus.

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 this can be specifically and narrowly defined. Auden’s most horatian ode relies on a line of propaganda which was rapidly discarded.

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.