



W. H. Auden’s anti-Japanese war: “Sonnets from China” and its historical context

Jian Zhang¹

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Abstract

Auden’s “Sonnets from China” are often understood as abstract thinking on war and peace or as account of the author’s personal spiritual progress, but as descriptions of his “journey to a war,” the “Sonnets from China” are better understood as sonnets about China. Auden’s other writings of this period, including the “Travel-diary” of *Journey to a war* and journal publications, help to show many of the historical references behind the sonnets. Chinese news reports at the time also reveal the sonnets’ specific contexts and the extent to which Auden’s sonnets can be understood as descriptions of the war in China. Although Auden at the time had tendencies to transcend politics, his attitude to the war in China and his view on art-politics relation in general was more complex than critics have so far allowed. This essay is not just an enquiry into the historical meaning of the sonnets, but also an investigation into the larger meaning of art’s role in the society.

Keywords History · Politics · Context · Intertextuality · Orientalism

Historicizing the text

Between February and June 1938, under the auspices of Faber and Faber and Random House, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood visited China, a country torn apart by the Sino-Japanese war. The book which they jointly published on return, entitled *Journey to a war* (1939), contained poems by Auden on the voyage from “London to Hong Kong,” a “Travel-diary” kept by Isherwood, a “Picture

✉ Jian Zhang
jzhang@bfsu.edu.cn

¹ School of English and International Studies, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing 100089, China

commentary” by Auden, and a sonnet sequence entitled “In time of war” which Auden wrote both in China and after return to Europe. These poems, photographs and diaries recorded what they saw in China, especially on the eastern front.¹

Critics tend to read the sonnet sequence as Auden’s general meditation on war and evil, or as a record of a western intellectual’s eastern adventures and spiritual progress. Edward Mendelson (1981, pp. 349–350) in his influential biography of *Early Auden* calls the sequence a “historical survey,” starting from the Creation and the Fall and extending to the rise of modern science and Industrial Revolution. He sees the sequence as Auden’s general thinking on war and peace, on the origin of evil and man’s wrong choices, and regards the Sino-Japanese war only as part of a larger meditation on human history. Samuel Hynes in *The Auden generation* argues that the “Sonnets from China” “says nothing specific about the war in China, or about any war. The moral condition of man that it describes underlies all aggressions of men against men, not any one in particular” (1982, p. 345).

A more recent development is to emphasize the Orientalist nature of the sonnets and the un-authentic “China” they represent. Douglas Kerr describes the authors of *Journey to a war* as travelers in search of the “real” Orient, but finds “a crisis of representation” in their writing, especially in Isherwood’s account, which is unable to “bring the east within the protocols and genres of western understanding” (2002, p. 292).² Stuart Christie (2002, p. 132; 2005, p.1577) also underlines the divide between the East and the West, and the inevitable inability of a Western subject to understand an Eastern country despite Auden’s initial attempt to embrace this “occult signifier” as a strategy to fight the western canon’s marginalization of his homosexual subject. Hugh Haughton sees *Journey to a war* as the fulfillment of an “Orientalist blank cheque,” which is marked by considerable “gap between the ‘dream’ of the ‘mysterious’ Orient and the journey recorded in the text” (2007, p. 159). He regards Auden’s sonnets as “gnomic verse” cast in “abstract allegorical idiom,” “which ultimately locates neither ‘History’ nor ‘China’” (2007, p. 159).

While the abstraction argument reduces China to an unimportant example in a large meditation, the Orientalist argument mystifies China into an elusive existence outside the reach of Western mind. The effect of both is to consign the country to a sphere outside the focus of Auden’s work. However, I feel that the “Sonnets from China” by virtue of its name should first and foremost be sonnets about China and about the particular events which took place in China. The author of the sequence may have had western preconceptions and prejudices, but what he saw in China did inspire the sonnets and inform his understanding, even if this is hampered by puzzles and half-understandings. If we could restore the sonnets to their historical context and read them together with Auden’s other writings of this period, as well as

¹ *Journey to a war* (1939) contains a group of 27 sonnets entitled “In time of war,” 21 of which were later revised and published as “Sonnets from China” in *Collected shorter poems* (1966). In the revised edition of *Journey to a war* (1973), Auden retained the 21 “Sonnets from China,” deleted the “Picture commentary” and reorganized the “London to Hong Kong” poems.

² The main idea of this essay is reprinted in Douglas Kerr’s book *Eastern figures: Orient and empire in British writing* (pp. 159–77), Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008.

the "Travel-diary" and "Picture commentary," then we shall probably see a different picture. The seemingly abstract generalizations will take on new and added meaning and the abstract phrases will reveal the specific situations and particular events which form their actual historical basis.

The Chinese scholars, who are more willing to see the sonnets as reflections of the anti-Japanese war, have not delved deep enough into the documents of Auden's visit, resulting in superficial narrations of friendship and support from two British gentlemen in China's most difficult time. Though the sonnets were translated into Chinese right after their publication in 1939 by Bian Zhilin (1983, pp. 150–175) and Zha Liangzheng (1985, pp. 107–145), a fact showing the sonnets' great political and poetical importance to China at that time, only recently do we find critics writing on the subject in a scholarly fashion. Zhao Wenshu (1999), Huang Ying (2006), Wang Pu (2011) and Zhang Qiang (2016) have all in their different ways attempted to locate the sonnets back into their time, highlighting historical episodes like "the Japanese air force's massive bombing on Wuhan, the Chinese army's stalwart defense of Zhabei, and the notorious Rape of Nanjing by the Japanese army" (Zhao 1999, pp. 165–166). However, among the twenty-one "Sonnets from China," only Sonnets 12 ("Nankin, Dachau") and 13 ("A Chinese soldier") are discussed in some details; others are passed over and mentioned in the passing.

This paper believes that a close reading of the relevant parts in "Sonnets from China" (11–20) and in the original sequence "In time of war" (14–15, 20, 23) is important for a good understanding of Auden's representation of the Sino-Japanese War, and of his view of the poetry's place in the world. The details of the sonnets will help us understand meanings which are otherwise buried among abstract meditations. The Chinese newspapers of the time are also crucial aid for such undertaking, because they help us see the particular situation in which these sonnets were composed, pointing to the particular incidents and events which they probably refer to.

The horrors of war: "Sonnets from China"

Auden said before he left for China, "We shall have a war of our own" (Isherwood 1976, p. 289). Looking back from today's perspective, the "war" of his own consists of rough travels in the war zones of China, emergency evacuations during Japanese air raids, harassments in the Japanese-occupied areas, and struggles to report the war back to people in the West who were still mostly unaware of what was happening in China. A transition takes place slowly but consistently, showing a definite change in Auden's sympathy and attitude, from regarding it a war of theirs to regarding it "a war of our own." He starts his China visit as war correspondent and neutral "observer" in Hankou, the war-time capital of China after the fall of Nanjing in December 1937.

According to their "Travel-diary," Auden and Isherwood arrive in Hankou from Hong Kong on 8 March 1938 and find it a place "we would rather be in at this moment than anywhere else on earth." Here live all kinds of interesting people: "Chiang Kai-shek, Agnes Smedley, Chou En-lai; generals, ambassadors,

journalists, foreign naval officers, soldiers of fortune, airmen, missionaries, spies” (1939, pp. 49–50). They meet the British consul-general, Chinese Nationalist government’s political advisor George Donald and military advisor General von Falkenhausen, reporters from all over the world and, above all, Chinese politicians and dignitaries from both sides of the political divide. Their aim is to report war, but at this stage only the headquarters where commanders are planning military campaigns is within their reach.

In the headquarters, which Auden visited, he sees telephones on the desks and maps on the walls, showing the position of the troops and the progress of the campaign. Auden’s sonnets, which recorded the experience of his visit, often offer satirical and ironical comments on the safety of the headquarters in contrast to the danger of the battlefields. In the headquarters, Auden says, “War is harmless like a monument”: fresh milk is delivered every day as in normal life (Auden 1966, p. 133). But the soldiers in the trenches do not get milk when they feel thirst: they are fighting “in terror of their lives.” Auden’s sonnets highlight the gap between the high and the low, expressing sympathy for those who, he says, are shepherded into war by a “lie.”

In another scene, two generals, in a beautiful back garden in a guarded place, are engaged in a conversation discussing a major offensive. The place again is far from the frontline: the flower-bed and lawn are cultivated by gardeners. The generals wear expensive shoes and chauffeurs drive their cars. The point is again focused on the gap between the peaceful atmosphere of the headquarters and the cruel realities of the battlefields: the generals’ conversation is likely to have a devastating effect on the lives of the soldiers. Their “highly trained” army at the front is waiting for an order with “well-made implements for causing pain” (Auden 1966, p. 135).

Haughton (2007, p. 157) identifies this scene with “the [British] Ambassador’s official garden party” held in in the International Settlement in Shanghai, recorded in the “Travel-diary” (Auden and Isherwood 1939, pp. 239–240). If this is indeed so, the conversation could be between western diplomats, military advisors, high officials of all kinds who are present at the party. The “verbal error” could be an error of international negotiation, and the “highly trained” army with fatal weapons could be Japanese troops. In November 1937, the Japanese have already forced the Chinese “Doomed Battalion,” the brave defenders of Zhabei, into the French Concession and are probably waiting for orders for further action. At the moment of the sonnet’s composition, Zhabei which is only a short distance away is already “a land laid waste with all its young men slain/Its women weeping, and its towns in terror” (Auden 1966, p. 135).

To Auden, “respect for life” is a great good and the opposite is a great evil. It disturbs him immensely to hear a Chinese high official talk about the horrors of war with an inexplicable ease of mind: “Japan velly foolish... China agricultural country. Japanese dlop bomb—woo-er, boom! Only break up earth, make easier for Chinese plough land! Much people is killed of course. Velly cruel! But we have lots more, yes? Ha, ha, ha, ha!” (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 35). Auden obviously does not appreciate such jokes. He knows about the huge massacre which just took place in Nanjing on 13 December 1937 and compares it with the Nazi concentration camps in Dachau: both are “places/Where life is evil now” (Auden 1966, p. 133).

In their travels to the eastern frontline, recorded in Part 3–4 of the "Travel Diary," Auden and Isherwood are horrified to see the sufferings which the war has inflicted upon the ordinary people. In Zhengzhou, Shangqiu and Suzhou, between March and April of 1938, they have visited war hospitals and Chinese army stations. Although their objective is to see the conflict, which they expect to resemble those of World War I, what they actually see is not trench fighting, but only silent confrontation between Japanese troops who hide in their fortresses and their Chinese troops who try to avoid direct fighting with their better-armed enemy. In Suzhou, the primitiveness of the Chinese army's weapons will make any European troops mutinize, and the Chinese troops' expressed determination to fight reminds them of a soldier's bragging (Auden and Isherwood 1939, pp. 116–117).

Yet massive Japanese bombardments are taking place along the Yellow River. In Zhengzhou and Shangqiu, casualties, both military and civilian, are rushed to hospitals as a result of the Japanese air raids and the shelling from Japanese guns. "A Chinese soldier," probably the most famous sonnet in the sequence, reflects what happens and the soldier's death is so movingly represented that Auden reads it aloud at a reception held in his honour on 20 April, 1938 at Hankou's Terminus Hotel. This unknown soldier is sent to fight in a distant place, far away from the center of civilization. His death is not known or not cared: he closes his eyes under a padded quilt, "abandoned by his general and by his lice" (Auden 1966, p. 134). This detail of a nameless dead soldier, abandoned by his general, is felt to be sensitive because it could be interpreted as criticism of the Chinese authorities.³ Auden very probably has such intention in his mind: If the Chinese Anti-Japanese War has left any impression on him, it is the immense harm which the war has done to the ordinary people.

"A Chinese soldier," however, is not wholly a satire, although Auden find the "disrespect for life" rather shocking. The poem is an elegy, suggesting that something good shall come from the soldier's sacrifice. Haughton (2007, p. 156) relates the soldier with the Unknown Soldier in the "Picture commentary" (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 257), thus restoring some human qualities to his otherwise total anonymity. At the end, the sonnet says, the soldier did not die in vain because his death, like that of many Chinese troops, will win a future when the daughters of the land will "keep their upright carriage" and "where are waters,/Mountains and houses, may also be men." The reference to the daughters of the land, "not again be shamed before the dogs," implies Auden's knowledge of the violent rapes which are taking place. Actually he is going to interrogate the Japanese on this point very soon (Auden 2010, I, pp. 445–449).

In Zhengzhou and Shangqiu, Auden and Isherwood have visited two field hospitals (1939, pp. 78–93). In the one run by an American mission, they see civilian victims of Japanese bombing and soldiers de-capacitated out of war. In the other, a Chinese military hospital or just "a square of miserable, windowless huts," they see

³ When the poem was translated into Chinese by Hong Shen for the *Dagong* newspaper (22 April 1938), the "abandoned by his general and his lice" is changed into "The rich and the poor are combining to fight" (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 161; Bian 1983, pp. 161–162).

“the wounded lay in uniforms on straw—three men usually beneath a single blanket.” There are hardly any dressings or antiseptics, and no X-ray or proper surgical instruments. “In one hut the sweet stench of gas-gangrene from a rotting leg was so violent that I [Isherwood] had to step outside to avoid vomiting” (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 93).

Auden’s sonnets, too, describe the seriously wounded soldiers in the field hospitals, who are lying on the operating table and enduring immense pain: “They are and suffer,” Auden describes, “...a bandage hides the place where each is living.” Instead of receiving treatment, these invalids are struggling on the verge of death, so totally overwhelmed in their pains that although Auden is standing beside their beds, they seem very aloof, “as remote as plants.” Their “knowledge of the world is restricted to/A treatment the metal instruments are giving” (Auden 1966, p. 134).

These soldiers, like the Unknown Soldier of the previous sonnet, are also anonymous. While history applauds heroes and generals, the ordinary soldiers are usually forgotten: “Who needs their names?” (Auden 1966, p. 137) The irony is that it is exactly these ordinary soldiers, not the commanders or generals, that Auden’s sonnets intend to glorify. Though “dictatorial avenues and squares,/Gigantic terraces, imposing stairs” are built in the name of the “great” men, it is the nameless soldiers that Auden writes his sonnets for. These may have “desired no statues,” but they will dwell “incognito” in people’s memory and live continuously in the hearts of the future generations: “While they breathed, the air/All breathe took on a virtue; in our blood/If we allow them, they can breathe again” (Auden 1966, p. 137).

For foreigners, China of 1938 is already not a strange place: for them it is an “adventurers’ paradise.” Britain has ruled the colony of Hong Kong since 1898 and has transformed it into a conglomerate of different cultures, an outpost of European civilization. Auden tells us in the sonnets, the British Empire’s “global story is not yet completed” and “crime, daring, commerce and chatter will go on” (1966, p. 135), but signs of crisis are already visible. The Empire builders believe they have brought “love” for this far forbidden country, but often they encounter angry stares from the natives. It is ultimately “a world they never understood.” Thus, a sense of “Loss” dogs them like a “shadow-wife” and a sense of “Anxiety” receives them like a “grand hotel” (Auden 1966, p. 135).

As to the Sino-Japanese war, the western folks living in China at the time, whatever interests and purposes they may represent, are almost united entertaining a none-of-our-business attitude, regarding it as “a quarrel between two indigenous groups.” They may have a view on the war, and they could even denounce Japanese aggression, but there is little will or readiness to intervene.⁴ When the Governor of Guangdong Province suggests that Britain could stop the war if she wants, Auden

⁴ Having said this, I should qualify by saying that some western individuals were literally fighting on the Chinese side of the war or at least offering moral support. The “Travel diary” mentions Agnes Smedley who was trying to alert the western world about what was happening in China and an American missionary who was looking for chances to join the Chinese side of the fight. The well-known Canadian doctor, Norman Berthune, was serving in the Eighth Route Army in the frontline. But on the whole, the Western governments were just looking on at the time, not taking any actions.

and Isherwood are not sure. "Yes, she could stop it. But would she? Ah... There was a moment's embarrassed silence" (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 42).

China is indeed experiencing the worst of its crisis in history. Yet in a dancing hall, somewhere in the country, a music with strong rhythmic beats is rumbling, arousing desire of the flesh, and speaking "to our muscles of a need for joy" (Auden 1966, p. 136). In a year "when Austria died, when China was forsaken,/Shanghai in flames," this false picture of peace and joy narcotizes the body and numbs the mind to the great sufferings of the real world. In the metallic beats of the music, however, Auden does not hear the carnal "need for joy": for him, the music's variation and the change in the rhythm reflect the attitude of the West. They "mirror every change in our position" and are the "very echoes of our lost condition" (Auden 1966, p. 136).

Indeed, Auden can see no reason for such cheerfulness and can never understand what makes these dancers so happy. The "Doomed Battalion" of the Chinese resistance is still hiding in the French Concession, and is besieged by the Japanese who are seeking their arrest and execution. Their bravery and refusal to surrender have fueled the Japanese anger and determination to revenge. Auden's "Picture commentary" (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 256) incorporates photos from a Chinese government film about the Doomed Battalion, "The fight to the last," showing Zhabei's devastation and desolation after the Japanese attack. It should be clear that none of these events is likely to give pleasure.

While the dancers indulge in their drunken joys, the western powers are also indulging in their dream of world peace. Auden's sonnets satirically represent their self-indulgence and their refusal to see what is happening on this side of the globe. The French are saying to the world: "Partout il y a de la joie." The Americans are preaching their Gospel of love: "Do you love me as I love you?" (Auden 1966, p. 136) The British Chamberlain government has a similar policy of appeasement and non-intervention towards the Japanese which, according to the sonnet, leads to the tragedy of China being forsaken and Japan slaughtering its way into the country.

Bombings and refugees: "In time of war"⁵

The Chinese War "isn't like wars in history books," Auden tells his British audience in 1939. "War is bombing an already disused arsenal, missing it and killing a few old women. War is lying in a stable with gangrenous leg. War is drinking hot water in a barn and worrying about one's wife. War is a handful of lost and terrified men in the mountains, shooting at something moving in undergrowth. War is waiting for days with nothing to do, shouting down a dead telephone, going without sleep and sex and a wash. War is untidy, inefficient, obscene, and largely a matter of chance" (2010 I, p. 490). This effectively summarizes, in an understated and ironic manner,

⁵ The sonnets considered in this part are either revised or excluded from the later "Sonnets from China" for reasons which need to be examined more carefully. Popular belief is that Auden wanted to erase the historical particulars, but the more probable reason is to make the sequence more compact. They are excluded for reasons of expediency, not for reasons of their inappropriateness.

almost all of what Auden and Isherwood saw in China. It probably also shows that they did not see what they went there to see, but that does not mean what they expect to see has not happened.

They have their first experience of bombing just after they enter the country from Hong Kong and are staying in the British consulate in Guangzhou. “The whine of the power-diving bombers, the distant thump of explosions” wakes them up as from dream and gives them a sense of arrival in this war-torn country, with shocking recognition that a real war is taking place (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 32). Then in Hankou, they witness even more massive Japanese air strikes: “the air-raid siren began to scream” and “the streets lay empty and dead.” After a while, they hear “the hollow, approaching roar of the bombers, boring their way through the dark” and “the dull, punching thud of bombs falling” and you see “the dull red shrapnel-bursts and vicious swarms of sparks, as Japanese planes spat.” Isherwood condemns it as a “cosmic offence, an insult to the whole of Nature and the entire earth” (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 71).

Auden describes this same air strike in “In time of war”: “The sky/Throbs like a feverish forehead” and “the groping searchlights suddenly reveal” Japanese bombers spreading in the evening sky like bacteria (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 272). This comparison of Japanese invasion to bacteria harming the Chinese health is also used in the “Travel-diary”: “Suddenly there they were, six of them, flying together and high up. It was as if a microscope had brought dramatically into focus the bacilli of a fatal disease. They passed, bright, tiny and deadly, infecting the night” (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 71). Auden’s own account elsewhere is similar: “At night I would go up on to the roof to watch the searchlight beams plotting the sky like dividers, till suddenly they intersected and there the Jap planes would be, isolated in light like the bacilli of some fatal disease” (2010, I, p. 490).

This metaphor of disease attacking the health of China is first used by Auden and Isherwood to describe a Japanese gunboat which they passed on their journey up the Pearl River into Guangzhou: “There she lay, murderously quiet, anchored right across our path. We passed very close. You could see the faces of her crew, as they moved about the deck, or polished the sights of a gun. Their utter isolation, on their deadly little steel island, was almost pathetic. Self-quarantined in hatred, like sufferers from a fatally infectious disease, they lay outcast and apart, disowned by the calm healthy river and the pure sanity of the sky” (1939, p. 29). William Empson (1955, p. 70), who was living in China at this time, compared Japan’s invasion to a fluke attacking the liver of China.

To the ordinary Chinese, bombing is probably the most painful perception of Japanese invasion: Japan uses almost indiscriminate bombing as a weapon to break the Chinese will to fight back. The book cover of the first edition of *Journey to a war* (1939) used a cartoon from the Chinese painter C. C. Yeh, entitled “Born for Hatred,” which shows a Chinese family running for air-raid shelter: the terrified baby on the mother’s back is crying loudly and the mother’s wide-open eyes stare angrily toward the sky, where four Japanese war-planes are dumping bombs upon the city, their blood-thirsting deadliness having dyed the sky into red colour.

From the Japanese point view, air superiority is probably the most effective means of terrorizing the Chinese population into surrender. Statistics show that, between

August 1937 and March 1938, Japan launched altogether 29 air strikes on Hubei Province, 14 of them on Hankou, the temporary capital. They dropped over 1290 bombs and killed 643 people, among them 112 women and children, as reported in *Dagong* newspaper (Hankou) on 14 April, 1938. The massive bombing launched on Hankou on 29 April was intended to mark the birthday of Japan's Emperor Hirohito.

Auden in his sonnets imagines a Japanese pilot flying a bombing mission over a Chinese city. "Engines bear them through the sky...they can only see/The breathing city as a target" (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 273). The pilot, who is obviously used as a pawn of war, feels no guilt at all because he does not see the bloody consequence of his action: five innocent civilian victims all "terribly mutilated and very dirty, for the force of the explosion had tattooed their flesh with gravel and sand." "All the dead bodies looked very small, very poor and very dead." Isherwood's final comment is: "Such were the Emperor's birthday presents" (Auden and Isherwood 1939, pp. 174–175).

Auden and Isherwood have witnessed many scenes like this during their adventure-like train journeys across China, first from Hankou through Zhengzhou to Suzhou to see the eastern frontline; then from Suzhou through Chengzhou to Xi'an to see the other frontline in the Northwest; and finally from Xi'an through Zhengzhou back to Hankou. From their VIP seats or berths, they see desperate refugees cling to the top of trains, dying to escape the war zone. "The carriage roofs, as usual, are black with passengers. On every journey, we are told, two or three of them fall off and are killed. At the last moment, dozens of people tried to clamber on to the train, and were beaten off with sticks" (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 95).

During their journey to Xi'an, they are forced to leave train and hide in the dug-out of a railway station. Auden in his sonnets records the terrified refugee passengers: "They carry terror with them like a purse...And all the rivers and the railways run/Away from the Neighborhood as from a curse./They cling and huddle in the new disaster... For Space has rules they cannot hope to learn./Time speaks a language they will never master" (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 278). The *Dagong* newspaper (22 May, 1937) reports on thousands of refugees swarming into Hankou and causing overcrowding in the refugee camps. "Most recently, another eight thousand arrived in Wuhan. As the battle on all fronts enters a fiercer stage, we expect more of them to gather into this city." Wuhan has already hosted thirty thousand refugees.

The bombing, the bloodshed and the deaths which the war caused to ordinary people, were gradually changing Auden's perspective. "When all the apparatus of report/Confirms the triumph of our enemies;/Our bastion pierced, our army in retreat,/Violence successful like a new disease.../Let us remember all who seemed deserted" (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 281). It is important to notice that Auden in this sonnet uses "our army" to refer to the Chinese army and the "our enemies" to refer to the Japanese. This he would repeat very soon in a more direct manner. The suffering which Auden witnesses in China gradually changes his perception of his role as "neutral observer." He is soon to assume the new role of an out-spoken freedom fighter.

Thus, contrary to the belief of many critics, Auden seems more committed to support for the Chinese struggle. As "amateur war correspondent," he warns the western powers that "the invader is deadly" and is indiscriminate in its attack: the safety

of the so-called international quarter is a “sham,” the invaders will give exception to no one and everyone’s life is “profoundly implicated” (Auden and Isherwood 1939, pp. 291–292). The lines of his poetry and prose tell us that, while he lashes out against Japanese aggression, against Chinese authorities’ indifference to soldiers’ sacrifice,⁶ and against Western countries’ non-intervention policy, he stands firmly on the side of the war victims and the suffering individuals: the dying soldiers, civilian refugees and the bombing victims who are the true heroes of his poems.

In *Letters from Iceland* (1937), published only 2 years before *Journey to a war*, Auden tells a revealing story about human cruelty. He sees a group of Icelandic people killing a huge whale, which he thinks is the most beautiful animal in the world. While they are about to carve up the animal, the bell rings for lunch and everybody sticks his spade into the whale’s body and goes away to lunch, leaving the poor animal steaming under the sun. Auden considers this an “extraordinary picture of human cruelty” (Auden 2010, I, p. 288). In China, we can probably say, Auden and Isherwood have witnessed another “extraordinary picture of human cruelty.” The Japanese invasion has turned the country into something of a giant martyr, almost a Saint Sebastian, “stuck full of swords and pestered by a tiny Jap aeroplane which buzzes around his head like a wasp” (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 142). As Auden says in the “Verse commentary,” the war “has made Hongkew/A terror and a silence, and Chapei a howling desert” (Auden and Isherwood 1939, p. 291).

Auden-Byron parallel: “A war of our own”

Auden’s visit to China and the reception at Terminus Hotel is sensational news, widely reported in Chinese newspapers. The poem he reads at the reception, “A Chinese soldier,” is published in *Dagong* newspaper on 22 April, together with a poem written by the Chinese writer Tian Han comparing him to Lord Bryon who a century earlier crossed oceans to help liberate Greece from Turkey’s occupation:

Really, the ends of world are neighbours,
 Blood-tide, flower-petals, Hankow spring.
 Shoulder to shoulder for civilization fight,
 Across the sea, long journeys, how many Byrons? (*Dagong*, 22 April 1938)

Auden’s visit is perceived in China as an act of heroism, a tremendous support to China at its most difficult time. The *Dagong* newspaper (22 April 1938) says: “Not only did this reception enable Chinese and British writers to have a good exchange of views, but it also highlighted Japanese army’s inhumane and savage acts of crime which they [Auden and Isherwood] shall certainly report back to the British people.”

⁶ Auden was in fact very critical of the Chiang Kai-shek government in China, which he believed to be corrupt and ineffectual. “The future of China lay with Mao and the Communists, not with Chiang Kai-shek and the Kuomintang,” he wrote in “Second thoughts” in the revised edition of *Journey to a war* (1973), which he later qualified as his previous naïve belief in the Chinese communism.

Western critics are usually reluctant to read Auden's visit as an act of political radicalism. Douglas Kerr (2002, p. 292) likens the Terminus Hotel reception to the Bridge Party in E. M. Foster's *Passage to India*: a lot of good will on both sides but not really a dialogue. Edward Callan, who would not go along with the Auden-Byron parallel, points out, "However Byronic their setting out from London as war correspondents, their book on China is remarkably un-Byronic" (Callan 1983, p. 80),⁷ believing that Auden is unlikely to get himself involved in the politics of a region which he does not understand well, especially in 1938 when he is moving away from his earlier radical politics.

It is true that Auden has been moving away from radical politics after the Spanish Civil War. His "Spain 1937" is severely criticized by George Orwell (1960, pp. 36–37) for inaccurate understanding of real deaths and war atrocities. For a period of time, he refuses to reprint the poem in collections or anthologies. He is indeed considering withdrawal from politics and moving towards a poetics of transcendental art which he is soon to summarize in 1939 in that famous line from "In memory of W. B. Yeats": "Poetry makes nothing happen" (Auden 1966, p. 142). Yet in 1938, the withdrawal is far from complete and we see him wavering between what can be called an interventionist and a non-interventionist poetics. Even in 1939, at the end of the poem on Yeats, Auden is to say that, with World War II coming, poetry can start "a healing fountain" in "the deserts of the heart" and "teach the free man how to praise." He was emphasizing the social function of poetry in time of crisis.

Critics so far have presented an Auden who in 1938 was trying to distance himself from politics and history, but Auden himself tells a different story. In an article entitled "China," he narrates two memorable incidents during his visit to the eastern frontline: "I arrived late one night at a ruined village which the inhabitants are expecting to evacuate...I found a number of them standing out in the rain holding up a banner with the English word 'Welcome' written on it." And on his journey back from the frontline, a Chinese soldier from the opposite train leaned out of the window, laid two fingers side by side and shouted "England and China together" (Auden 2010, I, p. 489). He is obviously moved by such acts of friendship and feels a sense of solidarity.

In an article entitled "Meeting the Japanese" published in August 1938, Auden and Isherwood assert that "it becomes difficult to remember that you are supposed to be impartial and neutral, whose country maintains 'friendly diplomatic relations' with each of the two belligerent governments. For us, in Canton, in Hankow, along the Yellow River, the Japanese were the 'enemy', the Chinese anti-aircraft were 'our' guns, the Chinese planes 'our' planes, the Chinese army 'we'. Most of the foreigners in China feel that way nowadays, even the officials." (Auden 2010, I, p. 448) It is important to remember this is before the "Fall of Singapore" (1940), a time when Britain begins to fight directly with the Japanese.

⁷ Auden in the essay entitled "George Gordon Byron" wrote of Byron in the following terms: "he fashioned a style of poetry which for speed, wit and moral seriousness combined with lack of pulpit pomposity is unique, and a lesson to all young would-be writers who are conscious of similar temptations and defects" (2010, I, p. 489).

In the same article, Auden and Isherwood narrate their encounter with four Japanese in the occupied city of Shanghai, including a consular official, a businessman, a banker, and a railway director, who tried to justify Japanese bombing of Guangzhou: “it is better than if we ran our tanks into the city.” These words of threat immediately remind one of the Rape of Nanjing which took place less than a year earlier. “Our demands are really reasonable,” the four Japanese went on, the Chinese do not “understand the art of compromise;” “We love the Chinese;” “There is no bitterness;” “Japan was really fighting on China’s side,” “to protect her from the Soviets.” Words like these aroused indignation in Auden and Isherwood who could not tolerate such hypocrisy from Japanese power politics. Thus “Meeting the Japanese” has become their “Standing up to the Japanese”: “Had they ever had their towns burnt or their women raped?” they retort with some heat. “Had they ever been bombed? Our four gentlemen had no ready answer.” (Auden 2010, I, p. 449).⁸

It is true that Auden in his pursuit of art is leaving politics behind, but in 1939 the process is far from completed. Amid his assertions of “poetry makes nothing happen,” there is also a recognition, as Lim Lee Ching (2012, p.107) has noted, of the social responsibilities of art, including its humanitarian and spiritual functions. In April 1939, Auden and Isherwood issued a warm-hearted “Message to the Chinese people,” a message which Ma Er has wished for in his report in *Dagong* newspaper (Jan 6, 1939), assuring them that they have the support of many people in England, Europe and America. “The struggle in which you are so heroically engaged is essentially part of the struggle for Freedom and Justice which is going on in every country in the world. We realize that you are fighting not only for China, but for us, and that the issue of the Sino-Japanese conflict cannot but have the most profound effect on the peoples of America and Europe. We pledge ourselves to do all that lies in our power, little though we confess with shame that may be, to assist China and try to persuade those more influential and powerful than us to do the same” (Auden 2010, I, p. 458).

Conclusion

So in 1939 there is a divide in Auden between “the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (Eliot 1920, p. 54). He seems trapped between what he calls “approaches to life which are eternally hostile, but both necessary,” approaches which are represented by Whitman and Arnold, namely “the way of the particularizing senses as against the way of generalizing intellect” (Auden 2010, II, p. 12). His revision of the sonnet sequence is indeed a process of abstraction, but his “generalizing intellect” never goes so far as to make the Sino-Japanese war “an opposition between the two sides of human psyche” (Mendelson 1981, p. 355). He also indeed

⁸ It is shocking to see Haughton (2007, p. 154) describe this incident as “Isherwood farce” and “political propaganda.” For one thing, the article was signed by both authors, not just Isherwood. For another, it is certainly not a “farce,” but anger justly expressed. Anyone who had witnessed what the Japanese did in China would not accept such nonsense.

attempts to erase some traces of history, but his "gnomic verse" never "casts the war into an abstract allegorical idiom with almost no geographical, historical or personal indicators" (Haughton 2007, p. 150). There is no compromise of artistic principle on Auden's part, although he seems a far more committed fighter against the fascists.

Admittedly there is an abstract and philosophical dimension to the sonnet sequence, but their full import may not be grasped without an awareness of the particular historical references behind them. Auden is not writing about abstract evils, not a dog biting the air. His experience in China had furnished him with a sense of evil taking place in this world and among the ordinary people. The particular events give force and shape and urgency to his abstract meditations, which make much more sense when closely connected with his real world experiences.

Orientalism assumes a concept of alterity concerning the Eastern culture which it believes the Western mind is unable to fully understand. This epistemological concern is legitimate, but not applicable to the issue in hand, which concerns not the opaqueness of Eastern mind, but world politics. The Sino-Japanese War is not wholly a Chinese issue, not even just an Eastern issue, it is an issue of international politics, an open conflict between two countries which is about to become part of a larger global conflict. It is in this sense that understanding the Chinese way of thinking is not prerequisite to understanding war and international politics.

As a record of war, "Sonnets from China" is probably like many other similar works, including those which Auden did not mention in the sonnets, e.g. the works of World War I poets and Walt Whitman. The latter's "Drum-taps," for example, records American Civil War from the perspective of an ex-journalist who takes upon himself the responsibility to report the war back to the American public, focusing particularly on the suffering of soldiers who die undignified deaths on the battlefields or whose wound receive no decent medical treatment. Whitman understands his own country, of course, and WWI poets understand Europe, but most important of all they understand the evil of war.

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