

Abstract

This work focuses on Wystan Hugh Auden's (1907-1973) early poetry (1927–1938) and analyzes its engagement with places, landscapes and local cultures. The scope is limited to the interwar years, when Auden started to write poetry, entered the literary stage and formed his ethical stances, poetics and a personal voice within one of the most socially arduous and aesthetically innovative periods of recent history. This turns his 1920s and 1930s work into a fertile ground for research, which is evidenced by the large body of extant criticism scrutinizing the technical aspects of Auden's interwar poetry as well as its reflection of the poet's affinity with Marxism and the politically conscious intelligentsia of his generation.

While sharing the same historical focus, this dissertation diverges from existing scholarship and traces the character of Auden's imaginative dynamic, which renders an inscription of the physical world into art. Auden was highly emotionally and intellectually responsive to particular places, environmental types, human spatial experience and their embedment in arts. This work examines his engagement with Alston Moor in the Northern Pennines, Iceland and England. In his prose, the former two are constructed as sacred places and asylums for his imaginative and physical escapism. The latter two are presented as islands whose insularity forms a border and protects their specific local cultures. All three locations are fashioned as hierarchically superior places bestowed with a unique and distinctive landscape which attracts his topophilic sentiments. Together they form the major constituents of Auden's personal mythical geography. Using relevant secondary sources, this dissertation provides a detailed textual analysis of Auden's engagement with these locations in interwar poetry with the intention to determine the nature of his imagination and poetics of place as well as the impact on their character of the poet's responsiveness to the 1920s and 1930s social and aesthetic milieu. Hence, this dissertation seeks to enhance the ability to perceive one of the most accomplished authors of the last century in terms of his relation to contexts that are broader than merely political ones.

Such integral attributes of Auden's work are examined in light of knowledge offered by humanistic geography and recent theorizing about landscape. Conflating phenomenology and geography, its exponents (Yi-Fu Tuan, Edward Relph, D.W. Meinig, Anne Buttimer, etc.) concentrate on the forces informing the sense of place, patterns of human spatial awareness and experience, and their inscription in different art forms. Tuan and other humanist geographers provide a set concepts applied to the present reading of Auden's poetry, namely place-making, existential insidedness and outsidedness, topophilia, escapism and mythical geographies. This theoretical underpinning is complemented with observations on landscape and its representation in the visual arts and topographical poetry of recent literary critics, critics of culture and anthropologists of landscape such as Paul Shepard, David Lowenthal, John Wilson Foster, Raymond Williams, Jerome McGann, Dennis Cosgrove, Lothar Fietz, J. Hillis Miller, Eric Hirsch, Roland Barthes, W.J.T. Mitchell.

Keywords: Wystan Hugh Auden, English interwar poetry, poetics of place, literary topography, sacred place, landscape, Iceland, Alston Moor, England, topophilia, escapism.