

The
W. H. Auden Society
Newsletter

Number 22 • November 2001

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ISSN 0995-6095

The W. H. Auden Society Incorporated is a not-for-profit organization

“September 1, 1939” after September 11, 2001

“I sit in one of the dives | On Fifty-Second Street | Uncertain and afraid | As the clever hopes expire | Of a low dishonest decade.” The drumming cadences at the start of “September 1, 1939” mark one of the most famous openings to a modern lyric poem in English. It is familiar not only to fanatical specialists like me—I am finishing a book on the poetry of W. H. Auden, the author of these lines—but, as I was recently reminded, to many people who would not ordinarily think of themselves as poetry-readers at all.

Poems draw their energies not only from the historical contexts within which they were written but from the ever-changing circumstances within which they are currently read and with which they sometimes, suddenly and disturbingly, seem to fuse. A poem can light up the present. And the present can light up a poem. At the moment, then, it is hard to read the date “September 1” and not to reflect that the mere addition of an extra “1” would make the title read “September 11.” My day-to-day work hasn’t really been changed substantively (at least so far . . .) by the events of September 11, 2001, except in the ways, psychological, economic, ethical, imaginative, and cultural, that everyone’s work and life have been altered, if only ever so slightly and tangentially, by those events. However, I find that my thoughts about Auden’s poem have acquired another, unexpectedly contemporary dimension as a result of what happened a few months ago. It is, for me at least, no longer quite the same poem it was.

That is partly that so many of its lines and phrases articulate so starkly and evocatively the look and feel of New York now as well as then: the “blind skyscrapers,” for instance, who “use | Their full height to proclaim | The strength of Collective Man,” the skyscrapers that Auden returns to with an instinct for their symbolic significance near the end of the poem when he talks about “the lie of Authority | Whose buildings grope the sky.” The poem finds what is distinctive and representative about the city in its architectural emblems of modernity – precisely the same emblems that, because so distinctive and representative, made such direly meaningful targets for the terror attackers of 2001, intent on staging a symbolic assault on secularism, capitalism, and modern power. And after September 11, 2001 and all

those photographs of workers in boots and masks picking through hills of twisted steel and powdered concrete, who cannot now feel some strangely prophetic reverberations in lines such as those about the “unmentionable odour of death” that “Offends the September night”? Lines that in their original context had a purely figural meaning.

But it is not only that Auden's poem is acutely and resonantly aware of the outer landscape in which history then as now must be lived and in which tragedies must take place. (This is a subject that Auden had also tackled brilliantly a few months earlier in “Musée des Beaux Arts.”) It is also that “September 1, 1939” gives an unparalleled vivacity to the inner world of metropolitan emotions and thought patterns. And I believe it is mainly for these reasons, relating to a delineation of the internal landscape, that, in the wake of the catastrophes in NYC, DC, and Pennsylvania, “September 1, 1939” a poem that Auden composed in self-imposed exile in New York at the very start of the Second World War in far-off Europe, began to be discussed in the United States by people who normally wouldn't bother themselves with such things.

The upsurge of interest was widespread and spontaneous enough for me to take it as culturally significant as well as being revelatory of some essential part of the poem's meaning. Many citizens somehow needed to borrow words from somewhere to express their feelings of sudden dread, their sensation of staring the unforeseen directly in the face. And it was to Auden's writing that they often gravitated. In the days after September 11, 2001 “September 1, 1939” was read out on National Public Radio, it was earnestly analyzed in the online magazine *Slate*, it began to circulate widely in the discursive hinterland of the web, the newsgroups.

Here, by way of illustration of the kinds of unusual contexts in which the poem began to appear last fall, is part of what the MSNBC website said in introducing a portfolio of harrowing news photographs accompanied by the entire text of Auden's poem. “In the wake of September 11, 2001, many have turned to one poem in particular in search of understanding and insight. ‘September 1, 1939’ by the British-born poet W. H. Auden (1907-1973), was written in reaction to the Nazi invasion of Poland that occurred on that date . . . Two weeks ago, the work found new life as it was passed from one e-mail inbox to another.” (Given this sudden welling of mass media interest, it be-

comes a nice irony that in 1939 when Auden wrote the poem and submitted it to the *New Yorker*, the magazine turned it down.)

I wouldn't agree with MSNBC's superciliously expressed notion that the poem suddenly found "new life" in the wake of September 11. After all, it has never been "dead" or even just ignored. Auden's lyric is one of the most powerful (and ambivalent) public poems of the twentieth century. It has exercised an extraordinary influence on later poetry in English and on the memories of perhaps hundreds of thousands of poetry readers over the years. And its more sonorously affirmative moments have been opportunistically pillaged (without acknowledgment of course) by politicians as various as Lyndon Johnson, George Bush, and even Dan Quayle. As such, one might argue that it has already, in a fractional and unnoticed way, affected the lives and perceptions of millions of people. (What is more, for many years now the poem has acted as a kind of literary thrift store, its verbal shelves piled high with scores of possible book titles looking for new owners. Authors of volumes as different as a cheery social history of saloons—*Faces Along the Bar*—and a sombre, mildly paranoid tome on Soviet espionage—*The Haunted Wood*—have had reason to be grateful for the existence of Auden's poem.)

During the later stages of his career Auden reacted very strongly against "September 1, 1939," describing it vehemently as a "lie" and as "the most dishonest poem I have written." He singled out for particular condemnation the line "We must love one another or die." But what the events of September 11, 2001 have done is to draw my attention as a reader firmly away from "September 1, 1939"'s moments of uplift and affirmation (although doubtless these sections will continue to be beloved by speechwriters everywhere), those moments that Auden may have remembered as being a good encapsulation of his conscious thoughts when he was writing "September 1, 1939" and that he later felt ruined the poem.

Instead, some of what seems freshly significant in the poem is its often ignored note of trenchant social critique. First, disgust with the sky-high wave of political and media rhetoric which any significant historical event instantaneously triggers: "Exiled Thucydides knew | All that a speech can say | About Democracy, | And what dictators do, | The elderly rubbish they talk | To an apathetic grave." And second, perhaps more tellingly still, the sense of deep, involuntary complicity which well-fed, well-meaning citizens of western democracies often experience in relation to an awareness of other people's

suffering: “Out of the mirror they stare, | Imperialism’s face | And the international wrong.”

The infernal, 3000-degree fires of September 11, 2001 have also made another new, eerie but fascinating light flicker across the surface of Auden’s poem. That light illuminates what now seems the central, underlying subject of “September 1, 1939” – an exploration of the state of religiously unconsolated, self-conscious, nagging fear. A fear of things that are happening far away. A fear that history is both unavoidable and incomprehensible. The subtly fearful unease of watching oneself be afraid. “Defenseless under the night | Our world in stupor lies,” Auden wrote. It was this very modern, very dissociated sensation of fear that many people in various parts of the world experienced in the days after the suicide attacks ended and before the bombing began. And (I now see) 60 years ago it was Auden who, probably only semi-consciously, put that fear into words.

NICHOLAS JENKINS

This piece was originally written in response to a request from the Stanford Magazine to the university’s faculty, asking them to comment on the ways in which the events of September 11, 2001 had or had not changed their research and teaching.

A Warwickshire Lad

W. H. Auden, *Lectures on Shakespeare*, Reconstructed and Edited by Arthur Kirsch. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press; London: Faber & Faber, 2000 [for 2001]). xxiv + 398 pp.

About the time Auden was giving these lectures at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1946-47, Ernst Cassirer was reflecting in *The Myth of the State* on “whether the struggle of the Russians and the invading Germans in 1943 was not, at bottom, a conflict between the Left and Right wings of Hegel’s school.” He might have speculated further on how much of the misery of Europe in the twentieth century could have been avoided if the opacities of the great Idealist philosopher’s posthumously published *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* had found more able amanuenses than some not too bright students at the University of Berlin. Auden’s writings in

the 1930s, as he himself observed, may not have saved a single Jew from the concentration camps, but at least he started no wars with his lectures on Shakespeare, and he found in the person of Alan Ansen, who became his confidant and private secretary in the course of the lectures, a gifted scribe, as well as, in Howard Griffin, who succeeded Ansen as secretary, what Arthur Kirsch calls a "less reliable" though equally indispensable reporter. The notes of both men are now deposited in the Berg Collection of New York Public Library. Ansen's, according to Kirsch, apart from a few smudged pages, are easily readable and exceptionally detailed, sometimes quoting Auden's exact words, and are throughout faithful to Auden's language and thought. They also exhibit a better knowledge of Shakespeare than do Griffin's typed notes which, possibly composed long after the lectures, attempt a more continuous narrative than Ansen's by supplying transitions, but fail to make specific references to Shakespeare's texts, where Ansen's notes are full and detailed.

In Arthur Kirsch, a Shakespeare scholar and Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Virginia, Auden has found a scrupulous and resourceful interpreter. Kirsch supplements his reconstructed text with the partial notes of two other auditors, which prove to be of particular importance for Auden's lectures on *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet*, which Ansen missed, but are also informative elsewhere. Kirsch expands these collations with reference to Auden's markings in his personal copy of Kittredge's *Complete Works of Shakespeare* (all of which are listed in an appendix), and to subsequent discussions of Shakespeare in Auden's published essays. Another of Kirsch's appendices transcribes Ansen's "sporadic" and "sketchy" notes of Auden's Saturday discussion classes, while a third contains the text of his unusual Fall Term final examination paper, largely a compendium of Shakespeare passages which alone might have provided the schema for a whole monograph on Shakespeare. Kirsch's textual notes, which are thorough but not intrusive, record the sources and grounds for his various readings and expansions, elucidate passing references and allusions, provide apposite citations, clarify obscurities, whether textual or the result of lost references, and correct inaccuracies, not all of which can be laid at the door of the poet's scribes. The index is exemplary, listing themes and topics as well as plays and people.

Much of what Auden says here is familiar from other, more polished sources, and occasionally, shorn of Auden's elegantly ruminative prose, his aperçus seem more commonplaces than *bons mots*.

Auden's playing to the gallery, reasonable enough in a public performance, can sometimes become a little tiresome, particularly when, condescendingly, he wants to show himself *au fait* with American, or more specifically New York (and *New Yorker*) attitudes and idiom. The discussion of the Hubert and Arthur scene in *King John*, for example, skids whimsically from the bathos of the would-be demotic to typological erudition, and back again, in a couple of sentences: "Little kids on stage are impossible. They should be drowned. The ultimate origin of this scene is the episode of Abraham and Isaac in miracle plays - Isaac was the Shirley Temple of the day." Nevertheless there is much that is new and informative in these pages, and, often, the very rawness of Auden's formulations allow us to discern autobiographical dimensions that are more calculatedly concealed in Auden's more formal essays.

In 1946-47, when these lectures were given, Auden was still unsettled by his mother's death five years earlier. The period was also haunted for Auden by the *grand guignol* of his fraught on-off relationship with Chester Kallman - something reflected in his meditations in particular on the young man of the sonnets and on the Hal / Falstaff "eternal antitypes," a preoccupation which had already manifested itself in his Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard in 1946, "Under Which Lyre," and was to surface again when he revised some of the ideas tried out in these lectures in *Encounter* a decade later, and in *The Dyer's Hand* in 1963. At the time the lectures were delivered, Auden was going through the rites of passage of naturalisation as a US citizen, turning his back for good, it seemed, on all that both Shakespeare and, Auden's mother, the intensely English Constance Rosalie Auden, had stood for. During the same period, he had been engaged in a complicated and decidedly physical heterosexual affair with the striking New Yorker Rhoda Jaffe. This affair presumably lies behind Auden's gratuitous contrast, in discussing *The Taming of the Shrew*, between "colorless," insipid English women and their American sisters, who are "more interesting than the men... better educated, confident, and amusing to talk to," "holding such a dominating position" that "In fifty years most American men will be honourably employed as gigolos." (It is clear from all Auden wrote and said about her that his mother was an honorable exception to this rule.) When Auden observes that "in the war of the sexes, a woman today should represent a masculine protest," he, the sexually passive, has Jaffe in mind, and he identifies himself with the position he argues Petruchio

should assume: that of the “uniquely timid and . . . the least likely person to tame” Kate, who, he says, playing to the groundlings, “should have picked up a stool and hit him over the head.”

The inequities of power, in personal as in political relations, is a theme that runs through these lectures. Contrasting Proteus in *The Comedy of Errors* with the “tyrannical father” in *Two Gentleman of Verona*, for example, Auden notes, shrewdly, that “Proteus wants to get power; the Duke of Milan wants to keep power.” Auden’s own favourite plays are all about relinquishing power, or declining to lay claim to it. Of the great tragedies, he prefers *Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra* (seeing the last, with Dryden, as a case of “the world well lost”). He admits to finding *Macbeth* “pretty dull,” and is unimpressed by *Othello*. The tragedy of both figures, of course, lies in a loss of power enforced by circumstance, the deeds and manoeuvrings of others, as well as their own folly. Having only recently acquired power by fair means or foul, each tries to cling on to it, to keep the upper hand, until the end. Of another study in control freakery, *Coriolanus*, Auden affirms, in what feels like an act of rebellion against an admired intellectual father-figure, “I can’t follow Eliot in his exalted opinion of the play,” finding the character “the most boring of Shakespeare’s heroes.” (Interestingly, though, in his strange compounding of weakness and power, *Coriolanus* is most like Auden’s own projection, Ransom, in *The Ascent of F6*.) *The Tempest*, a favourite play, and one to which Auden was to devote much original attention in his later essays, is famously about the renunciation of power, while *The Winter’s Tale* (“I’m extremely fond of *The Winter’s Tale*”), like *Measure for Measure* (“Of the ripe plays . . . the least unpleasant”), also concerns itself with the insufficiency of mere mortals endowed with unconstrained authority, proposing instead the virtues of humility and a humbling self-knowledge.

Sonnet 95, “They that have pow’r to hurt and will do none,” quoted here as elsewhere in Auden’s work, seems to have had a peculiar valency for Auden, informing not only his reading of the sonnets as exemplifying “The weak self that desires to be strong,” but also his interpretation of the Hal/Falstaff and Angelo/Duke relationships. The hypocritical Angelo, like Hal and the “Lovely Boy” of the Sonnets, has more than a passing resemblance to Kallman, the “prig Prince Hal” of “Under Which Lyre,” revelling in the charismatic power which allows him endlessly to hurt and humiliate his dotting puppy-dog subject. “In the Sonnets we seem to be confronted with

the anxiety into which the behavior of another person can throw you," Auden says, and his reflections on the master-servant relationship as a paradigm of the love relation, adumbrated at length in *The Dyer's Hand*, are offered to his New York audience with all the endearing vulnerability of a lovesick troubadour from the pages of Denis de Rougemont, whose *Love in the Western World* is drawn on for moral authority. Sometimes even his shrewd aphorisms take on a plangency halfway between the cracker barrel and the Lonely Hearts advice column, hinting pointedly at personal suffering, as for example in his conclusion to the discussion of *Errors* and *Two Gents*, where, having cited Kierkegaard and St Augustine on "the earthly city of self-love," he ends: "Forgiveness is a relation between two people.... Many promising reconciliations have been wrecked because both sides were ready to forgive, but neither side was ready to be forgiven." He was fond enough of this apothegm to repeat it in a varied form at the end of his discussion of *Measure for Measure*.

The tones of covert confessional are strong in these lectures. Discussing *Love's Labour's Lost*, for example, he describes Armado as "a man without a function," who "suffers from glossolalia, a disease of people who cannot stop talking - because of their unhappiness. It is a more innocent, if more tiresome, refuge than drink." There is a personal pathos implied in this defensive self-knowledge of the loquacious intellectual: "We must learn not to monopolize conversation, and when we speak we must be funny." Sometimes the autobiographical reference is half disguised as mere topicality, as when, elucidating here "the scheme of four young men to found a kind of neo-Platonic academy," he remarks that "You might think of four men meeting in Greenwich Village in 1946." But it is in the recurrent discussion of "love" - that word known to all men that had trailed its coat through his writings of the 30s and 40s - that Auden teeters on the edge of a mawkishness which sounds more like apologia than analysis. As, thus, in his (middle-aged) response to Romeo and Juliet: "You find out who you are when you are in love. The experience is likely to appear at critical junctures - adolescence, middle age - when a stage of life is being outgrown"; or again, when Kierkegaard and Martin Buber on the I/Thou relation add resonance to his 1930s observations on the Truly Strong and the Truly Weak: "A weak self wants to be aggressive in love and to appropriate the Not-self, the lonely self wants to be related through protecting or being protected. In adolescent love, the two are brought together."

Personal confession is often subsumed, half buried, in generalisations about the human condition. The first person plural is much in evidence: "We are born grave and honest, and the first step is to learn frivolity and insincerity. The second step is to learn to be serious about other people." Puck's aphrodisiac herb reveals the delusory nature of our loves, self-obsessed even in our doting on the nominated other: "We like to believe that our love is due to the innate value of the object of it," when much of it lies clearly in the eye of the beholder, and his or her will to love. "Pretending is harped on" in the *Henry IV* plays, he observes, where "they are all not what they seem." Shakespeare's tragic characters, he says discussing Othello, "suffer from the Christian sin of pride: knowing you aren't God, but trying to become Him - a sin of which any of us is capable" - and Auden, perhaps, more than most, in the 1930s and thereafter. Of *Troilus and Cressida* he observes that "A man who hasn't questioned the value of his own existence or of any social effort is still a child. As Martin Buber explains, it is only at that point that man achieves individual history." In this play, he says, in words which recall the emblematic New York figures of *The Age of Anxiety*, "the characters are not driven by a fate from which they cannot escape. They know what they are doing and don't believe in it." Of the decidedly middle-aged lovers of *Antony and Cleopatra*, he suggests that their "flaw is general and common to all of us all of the time: worldliness - the love of pleasure, success, art, ourselves, and, conversely, the fear of boredom, failure, being ridiculous, being on the wrong side, dying."

Boredom is much in evidence in these lectures, that demon of noontide also encountered in Auden's poetry of these middle years. Secreted by a disenchantment with a self that can only ever play at being authentic, boredom lies at the heart of Hamlet's "inability to act, for he can only 'act,' i.e. play at possibilities. He is fundamentally bored and for that reason he acts theatrically." According to Kierkegaard, Auden says, "Boredom is the root of all evil." But if boredom is a pervasive theme, so, too, is failure, in personal as in social and political life, the sign under which Auden seems to be conducting these lectures as a kind of dialogue with himself and his own worst fears about his "devil of unauthenticity." Antony and Cleopatra in their expressions of love, he says, are "entirely conscious of their exaggeration." He could be reflecting on his own love poetry from the period, doubts about which were summed up with self-conscious embarrassment in "Dichtung und Wahrheit." "The words are used to

create feelings about which Antony and Cleopatra are in doubt," he proposes, "and the rhetoric is meant to prove their self-importance." Even if Auden's formulation draws surreptitiously on Eliot's description of Antony's Senecan stoicism as a form of "cheering oneself up," it is well perceived, as are his discriminations of the varieties of oratory in *Julius Caesar* and other, less obvious plays. In a similar vein, he hears the "mistress mine" song in *Twelfth Night* quavering with "the voice of aged lust, with a greed for possession that reflects the fear of its own death." Waxing Lawrentian over the Shakespearian figure (in several senses) with which he most identified in middle age, he contrasts a Falstaff "defeated by life" with the "generally seedy," "often malicious," "contemptible" characters of this "gamey" play: "Unlike Falstaff, these people emerge victorious and have their nasty little triumph over life." Possibly only an English ear can pick up the accumulated class and cultural disdain contained in that apparently innocuous locution, "these people." The defeat of life, and of its quondam Lawrentian apostle Mr W. H., seems to endow such observations with a peculiarly personal frisson.

So, too, does that quirkily irrelevant-seeming question, ostensibly à propos the psychology of Falstaff: "Why do people get fat?" Auden's first, playfully aphoristic but evasive response, "because they eat humble pie as their food and swallow their pride as their drink," leads on to a more serious one, to do with self-love and the wish for self-sufficiency—freedom from dependence on others—pre-figuring the picture of Narcissus as "a middle-aged man with a corporation" adumbrated in his later, published essays. A rather less self-flattering explanation lies in the consumerist analogy he draws at the start of his lecture on the Sonnets:

Why should so much poetry be written about sexual love and so little about eating – which is just as pleasurable and never lets you down . . . ? The weak self that desires to be strong is hungry. The lonely self desires to be attached. The spirit desires to be unattached, and not at the mercy of natural appetite.

Though he goes on to redeem himself with a witty anecdote and some hi-falutin ontology, Auden's Freudian slip is showing here. The conflation of sex and eating through the traditional trope of the "appetites" is deeply revealing about many of his more casual, not to say predatory attitudes to what in his early writings he deemed "love."

Auden can be caustic enough about the commodification of sex; in his lecture on *Measure for Measure* he writes:

Food and greed are the two great human drives. For the girls, sex is not love, but a form of work and a source of money. For the customers, it is not love, but food. The transaction is based on mutual consent and is equitable, because one want is exchanged for another.

But substitute “boys” for “girls,” and one can see that much of Auden’s cult of sexual freedom in the 1930s was simply a jaunty application to sexual matters of the morality subsequently proclaimed in the Brechtian catchphrase appropriated to *About the House*: “Grub First, Then Ethics.” It wasn’t, really, until he met Kallman that he grasped what it was like to be, not simply the well-heeled consumer with enough emotional capital in his pockets to pay for personal gratification, but, instead, the hapless victim of an insatiable hunger. Auden’s emotional underdevelopment accounts, perhaps, for the maudlin teenage nature of much of his writings about love, Kallman, and Wagner in these and subsequent years. It also, because of that insistent, narcissistic capacity for self-analysis, accounts for many of the fine insights in these lectures, whether on the immature affections of Romeo and Juliet or the world-weary pretensions of Antony and Cleopatra.

Another homosexual poet, arrested, according to Auden, in the fixations of adolescent desire, is an unexpectedly regular revenant in these lectures. A. E. Housman is first introduced as the possible source of a scholarly joke in a *Punch* cartoon of “two middle-aged English examiners taking a country stroll in spring”:

First E.E.: O cuckoo shall I call thee bird
 Or but a wandering voice?
Second E.E.: State the alternative preferred
 With reasons for your choice.

The flippancy here may have much to do with Auden’s contempt, spelt out at length in “Letter to Lord Byron,” for the upright (yes!) schoolmasterly solemnity of Wordsworth’s attitude towards nature, sex, the universe and everything. Housman next appears in a discussion about “the nature of falling in love” in the *Romeo and Juliet* lecture, providing, amidst much high talk about Buber’s I and Thou, an

ironic intertext, "Oh, when I was in love with you," with its conclusion that one is not "quite [one]self again" until the folly of love is foregone. Falling in love, Auden goes on, is not simply about "possession": "It is a gift, not a thing that you can make happen.... Falling in love does not demand the return of love. The Thou is not aesthetically or ethically defined, not a prettier or better person, but a unique person." It is, rather, one feels (responding to the confessional coat-trailing, in the cynical-loving terms which point unequivocally to Chester), about being possessed.

But Housman's significance in these lectures is not only or primarily as a figure of emotional incompetence. "The writer who surrenders to language - including even W. B. Yeats - is a minor poet," Auden reflects, in a passage which translates the relationship of poet and medium into the transactions between husband and wife brutally negotiated in *The Taming of the Shrew*. "In the period of courtship," he says, "the writer should fetch and carry and stand waiting in the rain. Once accepted, however, he must be the boss." Otherwise he will always remain a minor poet. It is here that the ghost of Housman appears in the shaving-mirror, making bristle the hairs of the chin:

Everyone must begin as a minor poet . . . beginning poets confine themselves to poetical feelings, either those of others or those that are their own particular discoveries. Housman is an instance of the latter. A major poet is always willing to risk failure, to look for a new rhetoric. . . . It is great luck that Shakespeare had no money and was forced into drama. . . . Shakespeare had to study action, which was a bore. So he had to find a rhetoric to make action interesting to him.

Housman is a minor poet, because he never risked failure; Shakespeare a major one, because he did. Elsewhere, in the *Troilus* lecture, Housman is linked with Campion, Debussy and, one whom Auden confesses he reads "with the utmost pleasure," the camp Ronald Firbank, as instances of "The minor artist, who can be idiosyncratic, keeps to one thing, does it well, and keeps on doing it":

There are minor writers who can mean more to us than any major writer, because their worlds are closest to ours. Great works of art can be hard to read - in a sense, boring to read. . . . The minor writer never risks failure. When he discovers his particular style and vision, his artistic history is over.

The major writer, on the other hand, is of two kinds. One is the kind who spends most of his life preparing to produce a masterpiece, like Dante or Proust. . . . The other kind of major artist is engaged in perpetual endeavors. The moment such an artist learns to do something, he stops and tries to do something else, something new - like Shakespeare, or Wagner, or Picasso. . . . Shakespeare is always prepared to risk failure. *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* don't quite come off, whereas almost every poem of Housman's does.

What's become of Wystan in all this strange exchange of major and minor? Reviled in the 1940s on both sides of the Atlantic for ceasing to do that which he could do with one hand in his sleep, Auden from *The Double Man* onwards, through *For the Time Being* and *The Age of Anxiety*, had sought to do something completely different, to confront not only new formal and linguistic challenges but new ways of thinking and feeling. In the figure of Shakespeare, then, he projects an image of aspiration which clearly corresponds to his own restless questing after new styles of architecture, a change of heart. But in Housman, that reproachful ghost in the shaving mirror, he sees figured all the possibilities of defeat and failure. Housman's poetry, he says, discussing *Julius Caesar*, offers "a good contemporary example of the morbid outcome of the ideal of detachment," citing in full, as Kirsch presents it, his "From far, from eve and morning..." and "On Wenlock Edge." "What are the modern forms of detachment?" he continues, rhetorically, before answering "Professionalism - keep at the job. And go to psychoanalysts for a perfect personality," before moving on to the character of Brutus, interpreted via Kierkegaard, and concluding, apparently inconsequentially, with the lament of Eliot's Coriolan,

Mother mother

Here is a row of family portraits, dingy busts, all looking
remarkably Roman,

Remarkably like each other . . .

I a tired head among these heads.

Espousing professionalism as the antidote to the murderous emotions he had discovered in his jealousy of Kallman, Auden was intensely aware of the criticisms of Jarrell and others that he had

turned into a kind of latter-day Tennysonian technician. The minor poet never fails as long as he accepts his minor status. But what if he foolishly aspires to be a major one, and is not up to the measure, simply another tired head among all the other dingy family busts? The anxiety about detachment, professionalism and psychoanalysis (Auden's great manipulative tool in the 1930s) is intimately bound up with a new and disturbing awareness of personal mortality, which finds him quoting that master of morbidity, Housman, at every turn. Why else should he cite, in discussing *Twelfth Night*, the "residues" of the courtly love tradition in Housman's "If truth in hearts that perish"? Coriolan's echoic appeal to the mother is perhaps a sign here of something else troubling Auden, as he symbolically cut himself adrift from both his motherland, that England which had been to him his own tongue, and from what he had done when he was young.

Which brings us back, I think, to Wenlock Edge. The Wenlock Edge of Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* is the nearest limestone landscape to Auden's native Birmingham. ("Wenlock" indeed is the name of a whole geological category, with outcrops throughout the world.) Auden introduces Housman's poem gratuitously into the *Julius Caesar* lecture as "another poem, which refers to Rome." Auden's own "In Praise of Limestone," written a couple of years after these lectures, is not just about an Italian landscape. Like Housman's poem, it links the Roman, public world with the maternal contours of a private English landscape. What the "English yeoman" of Housman's poem shares with the Roman soldier who, "before my time," also stared at that heaving hill troubled by the gale, is a kind of ontological as well as literal homesickness. Auden's late essay on Housman, in 1972, is entitled "A Worcestershire Lad," and draws heavily on the assumption that Housman, born in Kidderminster, just down the road from Auden's Birmingham, had never actually been to Shropshire when he turned its "blue remembered hills" into the very figure of nostalgic desire. "I am pretty sure that in his sexual tastes he was an anal passive," Auden remarks there, with a certain amount of fellow-feeling, noting that Rome and Greece were "both pederastic cultures in which the adult passive homosexual was regarded as comic and contemptible." But if the beloved minor poet Housman was a Worcestershire, not a Shropshire Lad, his imposture is something which strikes home to the homesick Auden who, just returned from his first trip to Europe, in the uniform of the U. S. Air Force, has now irrevocably sealed his Ovidian exile by becoming an American

citizen—like Coriolanus, a self-made man, author of himself, and knowing no other kin. Neither Auden nor Shakespeare could be considered representative Brummies, but one thing that the newly created American writer, with immortal longings, shares with this undoubtedly “major” poet is his standing as a Warwickshire Lad. Not for nothing, perhaps, was Auden’s first published poem, in the school magazine, incorrectly attributed to W. H. *Arden*.

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Auden and the New York School Poets

When one thinks of W. H. Auden’s influence on postwar poetry, certain names spring to mind – James Merrill, Richard Howard, Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Joseph Brodsky, Thom Gunn, Amy Clampitt, or J. D. McClatchy. Drawing on Auden’s blend of urbane wit, suave sophistication, and technical mastery of traditional forms, these poets for the most part drink from the well of the later, American Auden. As Lynn Keller has observed, for poets like Merrill, “Auden’s early poems” – those “compressed, elliptical, and obviously modernist” works – “were of minimal interest, while his less obscure American works using traditional poetic forms and a conversational, discursive manner were of tremendous importance” (*Re-Making It New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 185-56). With their elegance and craftsmanship, these poets constitute one important group of Auden’s descendants.

However, much less attention has been paid to the relationship between Auden and his other, more reckless progeny – John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, and James Schuyler, members of the circle of avant-garde poets who emerged in the 1950s and came to be known as the New York School of poets. Smitten with Auden’s strange, daring earlier work, left cold by much of his later poetry, the New York School poets viewed Auden as a major exemplar of inno-

vative poetry. Although Auden clearly played an instrumental role in the developing poetics and dynamics of the New York School of poetry, his impact on postwar experimental poetry has been somewhat obscured. This is perhaps because discussions of the “New American Poetry” – the avant-garde, bohemian poetry movement of the 1950s and 1960s comprised of the Beats, the Black Mountain poets, the New York poets, and other dissenters from the mainstream, who often sang the praises of the Pound/Williams tradition – have left us with the sense that Auden, like T. S. Eliot, was rejected and ignored by these poets and their descendants. But Auden’s presence was crucial, especially in the case of the New York School – not only as a poetic influence to be both mined and resisted, but as an arbiter of poetic talent, an important gay literary model, and a social acquaintance.

From the first, these poets revered the early, experimental Auden – the poet of “1929” and *The Orators* – as one of the leading, cutting-edge voices of their time. In one of his earliest poems, “Memorial Day 1950,” Frank O’Hara invokes a pantheon of innovative heroes and precursors in order to trace his own avant-garde genealogy. In the midst of venerating “the men who made us” in a wild litany which includes Pablo Picasso, Gertrude Stein, Max Ernst, the “Fathers of Dada,” Paul Klee, Boris Pasternak, and Guillaume Apollinaire, O’Hara also – perhaps surprisingly, from our vantage point today – includes Auden as an important father-figure to be celebrated: “And those of us who thought poetry | was crap were throttled by Auden or Rimbaud” (*The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, pp. 17-18).

Like O’Hara, Ashbery also discovered Auden at a young age; he has often noted that his initial exposure to modern poetry was through Auden, and thus considers him “the first big influence on my work” (Peter Stitt, “The Art of Poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery,” *Paris Review* 90, Winter 1983, p. 37). While still in high school, Ashbery felt that Auden’s poetry was a liberating, barrier-breaking force: “What immediately struck me,” Ashbery recalls, “was his use of colloquial speech – I didn’t think you were supposed to do that in poetry. That, and his startling way of making abstractions concrete and alive” (Stitt 38).

At Harvard in the late 1940s, when O’Hara, Ashbery, and Koch were all students in Cambridge, Auden cast an imposing shadow. For Ashbery, “he was the modern poet. Stevens was a curiosity, Pound probably a monstrosity, William Carlos Williams – who hadn’t yet

published his best poetry – an ‘imagist.’ Eliot and Yeats were too hallowed and anointed to count” (Stitt 38). Not only did Auden visit Harvard to read on campus in December 1947, but, as O’Hara’s biographer Brad Gooch claims, “among the young poets a civil war had developed between those who favored Yeats and those who favored Auden,” with the nascent New York School poets aligning with Auden and poets like Donald Hall and Robert Bly with Yeats (*City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara*, New York: Knopf, 1993, p. 127). The great poet was more than simply a figure in anthologies and term papers, but also a living icon: as David Lehman reports, “one evening Ashbery and Kenneth Koch were playing pinball at a Harvard cafe when Auden himself entered, had a cup of coffee, and left. Ashbery said he was miffed that the poet had not greeted them. ‘But we don’t even know him and we haven’t published anything,’ Koch said. ‘Well, you’d think he would know,’ Ashbery replied glumly” (*The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, New York: Doubleday, 1998, p. 137).

As a Harvard undergraduate, Ashbery wrote two incisive, sophisticated papers about Auden’s work. In 1949, at the end of his senior year, Ashbery submitted his thirty-page Honors Thesis, entitled “The Poetic Medium of W. H. Auden,” in which he observes that

No other poet at this time, I feel, has a comparable medium for expressing the ideas which are common to most modern poets. Eliot, it is true, did much of the ground work for Auden. But his poetry as a whole, though it introduced the idea that the everyday world is part of the province of poetry, remains allusive and refined, lacking in the immediacy and concreteness which Auden gives to all he touches. . . . Mr. Eliot, it is true, introduced the tired clerk and the gaswork to poetry, but in his hands they are general and symbolic; not corresponding to the reality we know. Auden, on the other hand, has particularized them for us by presenting them in a language that is neither stylized and over-literary nor a too-hearty imitation of everyday speech; and when he generalizes them he makes them personify certain immediately grasped and vital ideas. (31-32)

In his final estimation, Ashbery argues “If he is not a great poet, a decision which must be made by time, he has brought innumerable people closer to the world in which they have to live” (32). Ashbery’s

college work also provides us with some tantalizing signs of which Auden poems the emerging poet found particularly inspiring. In a 1948 essay (which received an uncharitable B) Ashbery was asked to explain what he would choose to include in a hypothetical anthology of Auden's work. In justifying his inclusion of *The Orators* and "Paid on Both Sides," Ashbery argues that "these early [works] are famously obscure, but their obscurity has never interfered with the tremendous mystery and excitement which Auden here transmits to the reader." It is notable that in celebrating Auden's balance of obscurity and mysterious suggestiveness, Ashbery highlights qualities in Auden that the best of his own poetry would later exhibit. Stressing early works that "show Auden at his freshest and most provocative," Ashbery mentions such poems as "As Well as Can Be Expected," "Year after Year," "As He Is," "Adolescence," "Eyes Look Into the Well," and "Prospero to Ariel," as well as the whole of *The Sea and the Mirror*, which he deems "one of the most amazing poems in English." Regarding "Musée des Beaux Arts," Ashbery writes "I believe it is Auden's finest short poem. In it we see presages of his final (to date) style: an easy, unaffected, and thoroughly successful approximation of the conversational idiom." Some of these works would be tremendously important for Ashbery's later poetry, not least "The Sea and the Mirror," since the poetic prose of "Caliban to the Audience" (which Ashbery declared in his thesis "probably the most brilliant writing Auden has ever done") served as an important model for the prose poetry of one of Ashbery's most highly regarded works, *Three Poems*. In his book-length study of Ashbery, John Shoptaw goes so far as to claim that Auden's *The Orators* - which he calls "Auden's boldest experiment in collaged verse and prose" - is "perhaps the single most productive poem behind Ashbery's own poetry" (*On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994, pp. 62, 76-77).

Fortunately, Frank O'Hara also left some clues about his own early favorites among Auden's poems - in the table of contents of a copy of *A New Anthology of Modern Poetry* (1938) edited by Selden Rodman, which resides in Columbia University's Rare Book Room. In the early 1950s, O'Hara gave the book as a birthday gift to a childhood friend, Burton Robie, and - noting that he "couldn't resist marking my favorites" - placed checks next to poems by many poets, like Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Auden. Of Auden's works, O'Hara singled out "Get There if You Can," "Sir, No Man's Enemy,"

"The Airman's Alphabet," "Chorus from *The Dog Beneath the Skin*," and "Prologue" ("O love, the interest itself in thoughtless Heaven,") beside which he wrote "terrific." In his own estimation of Auden, O'Hara seemed to have cherished qualities similar to those valued by Ashbery - the use of colloquial, conversational language, and the innovative inclusion of aspects of everyday, modern life overlooked by other poets. Quoting from O'Hara's own notes for a lecture he gave in 1952, Marjorie Perloff points out that "according to O'Hara, Auden is 'an American poet' in 'his use of the vernacular. . . . Auden extended our ideas of what poetry could be; his poems saw clearly into obscure areas of modern life and they provided us with obscure and complex insights into areas which had hitherto been banal.' O'Hara praises Auden's poetry for being 'intimately based on . . . experiences and expressions of what had been looked down upon by the pretentious estheticism and mysticism of the Eliot school'" (*Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, Austin: U of Texas P, 1977, 61).

While they had revered Auden from afar during their college years, due to a lucky coincidence Ashbery, O'Hara, and Koch would soon get to know Auden personally after they arrived in New York. The link was James Schuyler, also newly settled in Manhattan, who quickly became one of the core members of their literary coterie. During and after the war, Schuyler had become close friends with Auden's lover Chester Kallman, and through him, began a friendship with Auden. The young Schuyler lived in Auden's summer house on Ischia while the poet was in New York for the winter, and was the recipient of Auden's generosity in the form of sizeable check for an operation. In 1949, Schuyler even played Pound to Auden's Yeats, serving as the famous poet's secretary. While Schuyler typed up most of the poems that would appear in *Nones*, he seems to have felt some ambivalence about this apprenticeship - he later remembered that "I would type something of Wystan's and think, 'Well, if this is poetry, I'm certainly never going to write any myself'" (Lehman 259). In an elegy he wrote over twenty years later, Schuyler recalls this larger-than-life figure with a series of small, quirky human details, including that "on Ischia he claimed to take / St. Restituta seriously, and / sat at Maria's café in the cobbled / square saying 'Poets should / dress like businessmen,' while / he wore an incredible peach- / colored nylon shirt" (*Collected Poems*, New York: Farrar Straus, 1993, p. 243).

Given Schuyler's intimate connection to Kallman and Auden, it was only a matter of time until all of the young New York poets had

the opportunity to mingle with the master himself over dinner and at cocktail parties. Considering that Ashbery has recalled that “actually the one poet I really wanted to know when I was young was Auden,” it is not surprising that the whole group of fledgling avant-garde artists was somewhat star-struck – in a 1951 letter to Jean Garrigue, the painter Larry Rivers (a close friend of all the New York poets) relates with great excitement that he has just had dinner with John Ashbery, gallery owner John Bernard Myers, and Auden himself, who amazed them all with his humility and his good-humored gossip (Stitt 38; 5 October 1951). In a 1955 letter to a friend, O’Hara reports that he saw the “enchanting” Wystan at dinner at Schuyler’s before recounting the elder statesman’s witty bon mots. But meeting an idol in person is never easy, and, as Brad Gooch points out, the poets “all had been so inspired by [Auden’s] early work that any friendship with him was always a bit strained” (260). Ashbery recalls that “it was very hard to talk to him since he already knew everything. I once said to Kenneth Koch, ‘What are you supposed to say to Auden?’ And he said that about the only thing left to say was ‘I’m glad you’re alive’” (Stitt 38).

This personal connection between the New York poets and Auden was a factor in the well-known events surrounding Auden’s choice of a winner for the 1955 Yale Younger Poets award. Dissatisfied with the work of the finalists he had seen, Auden decided he was not going to award a prize at all that year. James Schuyler heard this news from Chester Kallman, and quickly informed his friend of two submissions the judge never saw. At Auden’s request, two more manuscripts were then rushed to him on Ischia – O’Hara’s, which had been rejected for arriving too late, and Ashbery’s, which had never made it past the initial screeners. After reviewing them, Auden decided to give the nod to Ashbery’s collection, which resulted in the publication of his first volume, *Some Trees*, and effectively launched Ashbery’s career. Reporting the outcome in a letter to O’Hara, Auden reflected on the delicacy of the situation: “I’m sorry to have to tell you that, after much heart searching, I chose John’s poems. It’s really very awkward when the only two possible candidates are both friends.”

At the same time, Auden warned O’Hara, as well as Ashbery, about their experimental excesses and their overly French use of disjunctive, illogical imagery:

I think you (and John too, for that matter) must watch what is always the great danger with any “surrealistic” style, namely

of confusing the authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue. (qtd. in Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, pp. 249-250)

O'Hara bridled at Auden's criticism of his Francophilia and off-kilter imagery, telling Koch "I don't care what Wystan says, I'd rather be dead than not have France around me like a rhinestone dog collar" (qtd. in Gooch 261). Auden apparently had reservations about both O'Hara's and Ashbery's poetry; Schuyler confided in Koch that Auden "didn't think either of them was very good, and he chose John's *faute de mieux*" (Lehman 89). (It is worth remembering that the other poets Auden selected for the Yale Younger Poets prize in the mid-1950s included James Wright, Adrienne Rich, and John Hollander, poets far less prone, especially at this point, to such avant-garde excesses). Auden's ambivalence about the surrealist tinge of the Ashbery/O'Hara mode is also evident in his notoriously lukewarm introduction to *Some Trees*, in which he worries about poets who indulge too much in "strange juxtapositions of imagery" and who are "tempted to manufacture calculated oddities" (Perloff, *Poetics* 249).

Perhaps it is not surprising that Auden would have reservations about the emerging poetics of the New York School, since the poets were themselves becoming increasingly dissatisfied with Auden's own work and influence by the mid-1950s. In Kenneth Koch's 1956 salvo against the orthodoxies of the poetry establishment, "Fresh Air," he asks "Who are the great poets of our time, and what are their names? / Yeats of the baleful influence, Auden of the baleful influence, Eliot of the baleful influence" (*On the Great Atlantic Rainway: Selected Poems, 1950-1988*, New York: Knopf, 1994, p. 71). For Koch, Auden's baleful influence could be seen in the ascendancy of restrained, elegant, formal poems written by his more conservative-minded peers, "the men with their eyes on the myth / and the Missus and the midterms" (73). Koch was not only wary of the troubling explosion of Auden-like stanzas filling the pages of the *Hudson* and *Partisan Reviews*, but also distressed by the poet's own recent work. Slated to review Auden's latest, *The Old Man's Road*, for *Poetry* magazine in 1957, Koch worried about how to do so without being too unkind or impolitic. Schuyler reassured Koch that he should pull no punches, telling him "I think you ought to lay the book out like a split cod." Schuyler complained about Auden's "conversion - or, rather,

reversion – to the Anglican church” and his disavowal of his previous interest in a psychoanalytic outlook: “he has become increasingly a lay-preacher (I mean real sermons in real churches), an apologist for Anglicanism and quite willing to attack psychoanalysis” (Lehman 257-58).

In the review, Koch pronounces Auden’s volume “disappointing” and critiques it at some length: the book is “too flat and abstract, and resembles the surface of his poetry minus his genius,” the poems are filled with ideas that “have been handled in the past, with greater skill, by Auden himself,” and “they are either developed too simply and one-dimensionally to have the resonance of poetry, or else they are too clouded with abstractions to be convincing” (“New Books by Marianne Moore and W. H Auden,” *Poetry*, April 1957, pp. 47-50). For Koch, Auden’s latest poems seem “like intellectual exercises which he is using his talents to decorate. We don’t feel the movement of his mind, we don’t feel the hesitations and desires that have made so many of his intellectual poems so satisfying.” One can sense Koch’s mixture of admiration and disappointment when he concludes: “Since Auden is one of the best poets alive, one can only hope that, wherever he has been, he will come back, and soon, into his poems” (52).

In later years, Ashbery too has made no bones about his preference for the earlier, pre-America Auden, whose work he views as being, oddly enough, more American in its rash experimentalism, in contrast to the more orderly and British-seeming poetry from his American years. In a 1983 interview, he admits that “I cannot agree though with the current view that his late work is equal to if not better than the early stuff. Except for ‘The Sea and the Mirror’ there is little that enchants me in the poetry he wrote after coming to America. There are felicities, of course, but on the whole it’s too chatty and self-congratulatory at not being ‘poetry with a capital P,’ as he once put it” (39).

Despite their sense of Auden’s increasing conservatism and the divergence between his aesthetic and their own penchant for playful, disjunctive experimentation, the New York School poets never relinquished their passionate devotion to Auden’s work. In a late interview (1965), O’Hara reflects on his deep and long-lasting admiration for Auden’s work:

we all got stuck on Auden and MacNeice in a way ... They really captured us, and, as a matter of fact – like last year, for

instance – I was giving a few readings. And finally I was so tired of reading my own work, I read all Auden’s things and some MacNiece and, let’s see, one poem of Wallace Stevens. But I found that when I read *The Orators*, which I read the whole of the book because it’s been out of print for some time and Auden has repudiated some of the poems and everything, and as a work, however, it goes streaming along like the most marvelous thing imaginable. And I think it was also the most satisfying reading I ever gave of anything. You know, much better than my own work. (*Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen; Bolinas, CA: Grey Fox, 1975, p. 24).

O’Hara goes on to stress the impact of *The Orators* in particular on contemporary American poetry: “even the structure of it, as a book, has had an enormous influence on American writing ... the sheer flippancy and sarcasm and accurate satire is very important.” Asked whether he is unhappy with Auden’s later work, O’Hara seems to hedge, and then responds “As a matter of fact, he’s such a great master that it’s very moving – even to have him in operation in the same time that you live is thrilling. And besides, of course, it depends on what you really love. Now, for instance, in ‘In Praise of Limestone,’ he’s going along and then he says, ‘Green places inviting you to sit.’ That’s worth a whole career to have a line like that.” What he admires most in Auden at this point is “a certain dashing, Byronic” quality, a sense that “you’re sort of galloping into the midst of a subject and just learning about you, you know. You’re not afraid to think about anything and you’re not afraid of being stupid and you’re not afraid of being sentimental. You just sort of gallop right in and deal with it” (*Standing Still* 25). The importance of Auden to O’Hara’s own poetry is evident in the proximity between this view of Auden’s aesthetic and O’Hara’s famous declaration in “Personism” that in poetry “you just go on your nerve.”

Auden, and his difficult, hybrid books like *The Orators* and *For the Time Being*, clearly had a greater impact on experimental poets of the 1950s and 1960s than is often recognized. Indeed, with his remarkably varied oeuvre, we should not be surprised that Auden’s legacy is large and contains multitudes. Among the many postwar writers indebted to Auden, the New York School poets should be recognized as some of the most significant of those who were nudged, if not hurt, into poetry by Auden’s work. O’Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Koch

found inspiration in Auden's earlier work for an experimental American poetry founded upon demotic language and ceaseless formal invention, a love of artifice, an attentiveness to the quotidian and mundane, a poetry of velocity and elision, ironic wit and lightly-worn learning. For O'Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler, the lionized elder poet served as a gay role model of sorts in a time of rampant, Cold War homophobia. And for all of them, he was, thrillingly enough, a living, breathing embodiment of modernist poetry, an actual person who might evaluate one's poems or with whom one could chat over drinks. In his elegy "Wystan Auden," James Schuyler struggled to memorialize this complicated man and poet who had been so important to himself and to his New York School companions:

So much
to remember, so little to
say: that he liked martinis
and was greedy about the wine?
I always thought he would live
to a great age. He did not.
Wystan, kind man and great poet,
goodbye.

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Polish Auden

Auden argued that "the only political duty [for a writer] . . . in all countries and at all times . . . is a duty to translate the fiction and poetry of other countries so as to make them available to readers."¹ Translation involves the introduction to a new type of sensibility, rhetoric, and style, but more importantly, as Auden insists, it enriches any language. Though the poet would no doubt sacrifice mistaken translations for availability, a brief comment on Auden's difficult

¹ Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden*, 406.

entry into the Polish culture may illustrate how very problematic an assimilation of foreign verse may prove.

To use Czesław Miłosz's helpful image, every translation is like a billiard ball. It collides with other balls. Numerous and timely collisions alter configurations and assure a satisfactory progression. Regular English renderings of Różewicz's poetry by two devoted translators: Czerniawski and Plebanek, for example, may show how excellent translations become a way of happening and being for "foreign" poetry. The problem with Auden's canon in Poland, however, is that it has not been represented in its entirety and that the always delayed translations have lacked the necessary orientation and consistency. Though interested, the Polish reader has not had, as yet, the opportunity to scrutinize so foreign a formation as that of the Audenesque.

In Poland, there are about a hundred poems by Auden prepared by thirty-five translators. The poems selected for translations come from Auden's "earlier" as well as "later" volumes. However, except for *For the Time Being*, no complete translations of Auden's long poems exist. While some poems appear only once and in some obscure magazines, others, most notably "September 1, 1939," "Lullaby," "You," "Dover, 1937," "Voltaire at Ferney," and "Paysage Moralisé," are reprinted up to seven times in at least three different renderings throughout general anthologies of foreign verse and various newspapers. Usually the poems are placed to illustrate a theme or to celebrate an occasion. No solid critical appraisal accompanies such accidental appearance of these poems.

Paweł Mayewski's anthology *Czas Niepokoju (The Age of Anxiety)*, published in 1958, formally introduced Auden to Poland. It contained seven of Auden's poems of the thirties (Miłosz commented on its "polite" and "academic" choices). We may note here a symptomatic gap of over twenty years between the dates of publication of the poems in Britain or the U.S. and their introduction in Poland. In the sixties, the publication of the poems of the thirties continued, and poems from the volume *Another Time* were also featured. "September 1, 1939" (appearing unflinchingly in its first version on the front pages of many September issues of various magazines and newspapers with reference to Auden's reaction upon seeing *Sieg in Polen*) and "Voltaire at Ferney" became two of the most popular pieces in Poland. In the eighties and nineties a wider selection of Auden's work began to be made available to Polish readers. In 1988 Jacek

Elektorowicz's anthology *W. H. Auden: Poezje* was published; it included sixty-four poems (in bilingual versions) from Auden's *Collected Poems*, *Collected Shorter Poems*, *Selected Poems*, *The Shield of Achilles*, *For the Time Being* (fragments of "Advent," "The Summons," "The Flight into Egypt," and "Prospero to Ariel"; the complete oratorio translated by Barańczak was featured in the 1992 Christmas edition of the theatre monthly *Dialog*), *About the House*, *The Age of Anxiety* (epilogue only), and *Epistle to a Godson*. Elektorowicz refers to Auden as an important literary phenomenon. (Auden is perceived as such by critics in their responses to news about new publications of Auden's texts abroad.) At the time of its publication, Elektorowicz's anthology was considered "representative" and "almost complete" by critics and reviewers. In 1993, Stanisław Barańczak, poet and Poland's most prolific translator of English poetry, published *W. H. Auden. 44 wiersze. (W. H. Auden. 44 Poems)*. The volume, largely unnoticed by reviewers, comprises the most often anthologized of Auden's poems and belongs to a series entitled *The Library of English Language Poets* (among other poets included in the series are Larkin, Hardy, Frost, Herrick).

The claim about the importance of Auden, the poet, is often established with vague reference to Eliot: Eliotic mastery of poetic form, Eliotic elitism (Eliot's and Yeats's standing in Poland is more secure in part because of masterful translations by Miłosz). Many Polish critics position Auden as a poet who, like Eliot, his "strong" predecessor, "expressed the fears and dangers of yet another pre-war decade."² Yet among the most frequent attributes describing the character of Auden's poetry, one will find Englishness. Understood as being dry, impersonal, intellectual, and obscure - but not difficult,³ Auden is placed outside of the immediately recognized climate of opinions. Auden's declaration that he wrote in praise of the English language has been used as an excuse for some translators and readers who feel intimidated by some of his more difficult and obscure uses of English. Polish, an inflected language relatively poor in monosyllables, could not accommodate those speech-rhythms and "peculiar words" that fascinated Auden so much. The critics do, nevertheless, mark the undying importance of Auden's perpetual questioning of

² K. Andrzejczak, "Poezja i Mądrość" in *Życie i myśl*, Oct. 1974: 84.

³ M. Niemojowska compares Auden's early poems to chatty talks of English chaps, talks which are chaotically philosophical but really never going beyond everyday wisdom.

the role of the poet and poetry, Auden's firm belief in the closeness of poetry to the truth, and his inquiry into *la condition humaine*. Surprisingly, especially when one considers that Auden's reviews appeared in Catholic papers such as *Tygodnik Powszechny*, the religious dimension of Auden's poetry is not of key interest.

The absence of translations of the long works, libretti, plays and texts such as *The Orators* makes it impossible for the Polish reader and critic to experience Auden's poetry as a continuum or to engage in an informed analysis. Nevertheless, among the few longer critical evaluations there are, one finds a division over the question of the unity and consistency of Auden's work. It is a division which reflects Anglo-American critical disagreement. Elektorowicz and Król find that Auden's poetry exhibits a gradual overcoming of obstacles on the way to a Christian existential perspective. According to them, even in the early poems devoted to shapeless fears, anxieties, and loneliness the religious dimension is always present. Other critics, like Niemojowska, find that Auden's later poetry loses some of its intensity and clarity. "The American phase" of Auden's writing is presented by Niemojowska as trivial and even not worth reading.

On the other hand, the prominent position of Auden's essays among the works translated is a sign of more substantial interest in Auden as a critic. The Polish version of *The Dyer's Hand* as *Ręka farbiarza i inne eseje* was published in 1988, although independent translations of selections from both *The Dyer's Hand* and from *Forewords and Afterwords* (thirty essays from the former and eighteen from the latter translated by nine translators) had been making sporadic appearances in various Polish magazines and newspapers since the late sixties. The volume was very favourably reviewed. Leociak found in the essays the same drama of language, time, and history as in Auden's poetry. The critic referred to Auden's essays as "living pictures of life and death"⁴ The volume, however, remains incomplete, and the order of essays Auden insisted upon was not followed.

The barriers to the assimilation of W. H. Auden have both literary and non-literary roots such as the ever-changing socio-political situation of pre-war and post-war Poland, the character of the poet and his work, and the resulting translation problems. Unquestionably, W. H. Auden fell victim to the unfavourable political milieu in Poland. Auden's work did not reach Poland in the thirties, when his poetry

⁴ In *Nowe książki* 11 (1989): 38.

could have had the most appeal to his generation. Even more damaging, during the forties and after, disorganized publication and translation policies hindered access to Auden's works. Additionally, an analysis of the Polish biographical notes on Auden reveals that, sadly, Auden did not fit easily into some preconceived image of a poet. In a country with very strong political-historical consciousness, a country where for decades a poet was not just an artist but a vocal thinker and "moral" leader, Auden's changing attitudes and contradictions could not earn him a warm welcome. Auden's homosexuality, for instance, up till the early nineties was hidden under the illusion that the poet was happily married to the politically engaged Erika Mann. On the other hand, Auden's "leadership" of "the gang" of fellow poets was represented in terms of ideology - perhaps a sign of critics' strong desire to read Auden as a socially engaged poet. Auden, the poet, emerges from critical considerations as an eccentric (a pejorative term in Polish) but also as an intellect who defies any easy comparisons with any parallel Polish tendencies.

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The Case of Auden Studies in Egypt: A Review Article

Precisely how a particular image of an author becomes the dominant one will always, I suspect, be somewhat mysterious. Why, for example, has Auden's poetry acquired a reputation for difficulty and ambiguity among Egyptian scholars and students? While Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Yeats's "The Second Coming" and the twin Byzantium poems have been, since the 1960s, the central texts in most Egyptian universities syllabi, the works of Auden and his generation remain immune even from the consideration of postgraduate students. In Egypt, it is generally assumed that though the works of Eliot and Yeats seem difficult to understand, they have things to tell us about real evils in the world, and about how those evils should be dealt with, while the works of Auden and his generation seem to be following the motto of ambiguity for ambiguity's sake. The common and the relatively justified association of the English Auden with the dilemmas of the 1930s has invariably led Egyptian scholars to give much more attention to his early writings than to his later, American poetry. Two of the only three dissertations on Auden's poetry by Egyptians have focused on his early poetry, and present an image of Auden as a poet whose main task was to denounce all beliefs and customs in poems that instead concentrate on the poet's personal problems and the problems of his generation.

The first Egyptian study on Auden was a Ph.D. dissertation which examined the influence Eliot exerted on the young Auden. In his thesis (entitled "The influence of T. S. Eliot on W. H. Auden," submitted to Cairo University in 1982), Maher Shafik Farid is careful not to assume that Auden is a person who is easy to be pinned down, or that there is a simple ground from which we can understand his poetry. Rather, he turns to the works of Eliot and Auden in order to examine the common ground between them - the implication here is that Auden inherited some of his obscurity from Eliot. It is hardly a surprising argument that Eliot exerted a crucial influence on the young Auden. It is obvious that their poetry shares certain similarities which Farid defines as (1) allusiveness, (2) the use of myth to reveal unconscious feelings of conflict and the use of myth as a literary allusion to evoke a contrast between past and present, (3) urban landscape, (4) colloquialism and slang, and (5) the ability to capture and reflect the spirit of the age. But Farid reads further than this: he reads Eliot's continuing influence as if it was met with a counter in-

fluence from Auden: "Auden exercised some influence on Eliot's dramatic works in the 1930s. Three of his plays - *The Dance of Death*, *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, and above all *The Ascent of F6* - left some traces on Eliot's *The Rock*, and *The Family Reunion*." But though this thesis is carefully written and supplemented with an annotated bibliography of Auden's studies in Arabic, it seems as if it was not sufficient to prompt in young Egyptian researchers the desire to break down established ideas about Auden and his poetry.

In 1990s, the wide gap in the literature of Auden studies in Egypt was partly filled with two M.A. theses, each of which deals with 1930s politics as the central point from which to understand Auden's early poetry. The first thesis is entitled "The Conflict of W. H. Auden as Reflected in his Poetry of the Thirties" by Shereen Saad Abou-El-Naga, submitted to Cairo University - a thesis which insistently, but mistakenly, represents Auden's early poetry as fragments of inconsistent thinking. The author makes claims throughout, such as that "Auden was not a political poet . . . [he] was just utilizing Marxism as an instrument to cure himself and his community" and that although Auden "was politically active," he "never committed himself to any political party." A reading of Justine Replogle's "Auden's Marxism," of John Willett's *Brecht in Context: A Comparative Study*, and of Auden's friend Naomi Mitchison's "Young Auden," however, would be more than sufficient to illustrate that the issue of Auden's political commitment is still far from being clear.

The second M.A. thesis is "A Study of the Translations of W. H. Auden with Reference to his English Image in the Thirties," by Mohamed Sa'ed Ali, submitted to the University of South Valley in 1995. This thesis is of particular interest since it suggests an answer to the question of why Auden's poetry does not appeal to the Arab reader. The thesis deals primarily with one question: "Do the Arabic translations of Auden's poetry succeed in conveying Auden's English image to the Arab reader?" After long discussions of the centrality of the English image in Auden's early poetry and a comparison between the quantity and the quality of Auden's English image in the thirties and the quantity and the quality of its translation comes the answer: "comparing the English image of Auden to that of the Arabic image resulting from the Arabic translations of his poetry reveals that the Arabic image is far removed and completely different from the English one." Though the reality of the situation is clearly and rightly stated, the reasons behind this failure are not mentioned, nor are

Auden's own theories of translating poetry ever discussed or even referenced. Perhaps further penetrations into these issues could have been reached had Mohamed had the opportunity to read at least the first two chapters of Nirmal Dass's seminal book *Rebuilding Babel: The Translations of W. H. Auden* (1993) - a book which, I suggest, is indispensable for any discussion of Auden and translation, but unfortunately is not included in Mohamed's Bibliography.

Auden, however, is known to the Egyptian reader not through these academic studies, but through the attention Egyptian critics and translators have given to his poetry. Perhaps the first Arabic article which introduced Auden to the Egyptian reader was one by Ali Shalsh, entitled "W. H. Auden: An Introductory Essay with Translations from his poetry," published in *Poetry* (Cairo: June, 1965). A review article of Auden's *Thank You, Fog!* by Adel Salama was published in *El-Katib* (Cairo: Feb., 1975). A third article by Yusseri Abdullah, entitled "Poet of the Age of Anxiety: W. H. Auden," was published in *El-Jaddid* (Cairo: March, 1982). Selective translations from Auden's poetry by Maher Shafik Farid were published in his book *Modern English Poetry* (Egyptian Organization for Writing and Publishing, 1971). In attempting to introduce Auden to the Egyptian reader, all these critics have certainly done us a wonderful favor, especially during times when the interest of Egyptian professors and critics in Eliot and Yeats was at its peak.

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A Note on Auden's "Nursery Library"

Auden twice catalogued the collection of books that he referred to as his "nursery library," the books that shaped his life when he read and reread them in childhood. In his introduction to John Betjeman's *Slick but Not Streamlined* (1947) he listed these titles:

Icelandic Legends, Machinery for Metalliferous Mines, Eric or Little by Little, Lead and Zinc Ores of Northumberland and Alston Moor (Stanley Smith, M.A., D.Sc. H.M. Stationery Office, 3s6d net), *Strewwelpeter*, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (the 1869 edition), *The Edinburgh School of Surgery*, *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (with tunes), and *Dangers to Health*, a Victorian treatise on plumbing with colored plates, which incidentally, I lent to Mr. Betjeman twelve years ago and he has not yet returned.

In his “commonplace book,” *A Certain World* (1970), he offered a slightly different list divided into three categories. Under “Nonfictional Prose” he named:

T. Sopwith	<i>A Visit to Alston Moor</i>
?	<i>Underground Life</i>
?	<i>Machinery for Metalliferous Mines</i>
His Majesty’s Stationery Office	<i>Lead and Zinc Ores of North- umberland and Alston Moor</i>
?	<i>The Edinburgh School of Surgery</i>
?	<i>Dangers to Health</i> (a Victorian treatise, illus- trated, on plumbing, good and bad)

His “Fiction” category included a list of familiar classics by Beatrix Potter, Hans Christian Andersen, Lewis Carroll, George Macdonald, Jules Verne, H. Rider Haggard, Dean Farrar, R. M. Ballantyne (listed as the author of *The Cruise of the Cachalot* [for *Cachalot*], in fact written by Frank T. Bullen), and Arthur Conan Doyle. Under “Poetry” he listed Heinrich Hoffman’s *Struwwelpeter*, Hilaire Belloc’s *Cautionary Tales*, and Harry Graham’s *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Children*.

With the exception of Jon Arnason’s *Icelandic Legends* (1864), a book which may once have been part of Auden’s father’s nursery library, the fiction and poetry on these lists could have been found on Any middle-class child’s bookshelf in the Edwardian era, but the non-fiction list could only have been devised by Auden. Some further details may be of interest.

Machinery for Metalliferous Mines: A Practical Treatise for Mining Engineers, Metallurgists and Managers of Mines, by E. Henry Davies, F.G.S. (1894; 2nd edn. 1902) is an extensive description, with copious line drawings, of what Auden called in “The Prophets” “those earliest messengers who walked | Into my life from books where they were straying, | Those beautiful machines that never talked | But let the small boy worship them and learn | All their long names whose hardness made him proud.” The hard names include the Ingersoll-Sergeant Auxiliary Valve Drill, the Cwmystwith Air Compressing Plant, and the Hand-Power Diamond Prospecting Drill. Auden’s copy of the book, inscribed “W. H. Auden, Christmas 1918,” is now in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

Stanley Smith's *Lead and Zinc Ores of Northumberland and Alston Moor* is of special interest because this hundred-page volume in the series, "Memoirs of the Geological Survey: Special Reports on the Mineral Resources of Great Britain," was published in 1923, when Auden was sixteen and had presumably outgrown the nursery. Its presence on both lists confirms that Auden retained his deep interest in lead mines for at least a year after he discovered his vocation for poetry in March 1922. (Auden's accounts of this discovery seem to imply a sudden overthrow of earlier interests.) One source of his poem "The Old Man's Road" may be a paragraph in the book that refers to "the risk of encountering the 'old man,' a term commonly employed to denote any workings of which no records exist" (p. 11).

The Edinburgh School of Medicine (not Surgery), by William Nisbet (1802), is an introduction to anatomy and other medical sciences. *Dangers to Health: A Pictorial Guide to Domestic Sanitary Defects*, by T. Pridgin Teale (1878), matches Auden's description.

One of the titles that Auden added to the second version of his list was *A Visit to Alston Moor*, by T. (for Thomas) Sopwith. The actual title was *An Account of the Mining Districts of Alston Moor, Weardale, and Teesdale, in Cumberland and Durham; comprising descriptive sketches of the scenery, antiquities, geology, and mining operations in the Upper Dales of the Rivers Tyne, Wear, and Tees* (1833). Auden's recollections of this book are traced in John Fuller's *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*.

The other non-fiction title added to the second list was *Underground Life; or, Mines and Miners*, by L. Simonin, translated, adapted to the present state of British mining, and edited by H. W. Bristow, F.R.S. (1869). This massive volume, mostly devoted to coal mining, with only brief references to lead, includes, besides its full descriptions of the methods and geology of mining, lurid illustrations of mining disasters and thrilling accounts of brave rescues, all of which may remain fascinating to any readers who have not suppressed the child in themselves.

EDWARD MENDELSON

Recent and Forthcoming Events

Michael Yates

We deeply regret to report that Michael Yates died on 28 November 2001 at the age of 82. Michael Yates was one of the Bryanston School pupils who accompanied Auden to Iceland in 1936, and, together with his wife Marny, he remained one of Auden's most valued friends for the rest of Auden's life. He attended the Yale School of Drama in the late 1930s, was a prisoner of war in Germany during World War II, and worked as a theatrical designer, notably for Granada Television, before his retirement in the 1970s. He is survived by his wife and by his wife's two sons by a previous marriage. Auden dedicated his last book, *Thank You, Fog!*, to Michael and Marny Yates with this epigraph:

*None of us as young
as we were. So what?
Friendship never ages.*

New books and reprints

A Company of Readers: Uncollected Writings of W. H. Auden, Jacques Barzun, and Lionel Trilling from the Readers' Subscription and Mid-Century Book Clubs, edited with an introduction by Arthur Krystal (New York: The Free Press, 2001) reprints for the first time fifteen of the essay-reviews that Auden wrote for the monthly bulletin of the two book clubs. A foreword by Jacques Barzun briefly describes the history of the clubs.

Look, Stranger! (1936), Auden's second published collection of poems (published in the United States as *On this Island*) was reissued by its original publisher, Faber & Faber, in April 2001. The *Newsletter* reported previously that Auden's first published book, *Poems* (1930), would be reissued, but Faber changed its plans after the initial announcement.

The translation by Auden and Chester Kallman of a libretto by Carlo Goldoni, *Arcifanfano, King of Fools, or, It's Always Too Late to Learn*, has

been published in full for the first time in a special issue of the little magazine *Unmuzzled Ox*, with an introduction by the magazine's editor, Michael Andre. The translation, made in 1962, was commissioned by the conductor Newell Jenkins for the Clarion Concerts series, and was first performed at Town Hall, New York, on 11 November 1965. The magazine is available from the publishers, Unmuzzled Ox, 105 Hudson Street, New York NY 10013, and may be ordered from booksellers.

Donald Mitchell's *Britten and Auden in the Thirties: The Year 1936*, first published in 1981, was reissued in paperback by the Boydell Press in 2000. Members of the W. H. Auden Society may buy the book at 25% off the \$19.95 or £12.99 list price by writing to Boydell & Brewer, P.O. Box 41026, Rochester NY 14604 (1-716-275-0419, fax 1-716-271-8778), e-mail to 104572.1422@compuserve.com.

Richard C. Bozorth. *Auden's Games of Knowledge: Poetry and the Meanings of Homosexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

James Fenton. *The Strength Of Poetry*. London: Oxford University Press; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001. Includes three lectures on Auden, first printed in slightly different form in *The New York Review of Books*.

Paola Marchetti. *Landscapes of Meaning: From Auden to Hughes*. Milano: I. S. U. Università Cattolica, 2001.

Other news

A six-page manuscript of "Case-Histories," an early group of short poems by Auden, was sold at auction by Phillips in London on 15 June 2001. Auden submitted the twenty-three poems in the manuscript to *The Adelphi* magazine in 1931, but only four were printed. Some poems in the group appeared in later publications, and others survive in a manuscript notebook in the British Library and in a typescript also titled "Case-Histories" that Auden sent to Christopher Isherwood. The exact text of the poem that Auden submitted to *The Adelphi* was previously unknown. The manuscript was bought by an anonymous American collector for £14,950, and has again disappeared from view, but the full text can be reconstructed from other surviving manuscripts and will be published in the future.

The newly-formed Christopher Isherwood Foundation wishes to award grants to fiction writers and to scholars who wish to work with the Huntington Library's collection of Isherwood manuscripts (which includes large holdings of Auden's early work). For information, write to the foundation's Executive Director, J. White, P.O. Box 650, Montrose AL 36559 (www.isherwoodfoundation.org).

Editor's Notes

The cost of producing the *Newsletter* has increased considerably, and the Society has been lax in asking for subscription renewals. We would be deeply grateful for renewals from members who have not sent payments in more than a year.

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