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The W. H. Auden Society is registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales as Charity No. 1104496.

The Newsletter is edited by Farnoosh Fathi. Submissions may be made by post to: The W. H. Auden Society, 78 Clarendon Road, London W11 2HW; or by e-mail to: thenewsletter@audensociety.org

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Please see the Appeal to Members that appears on the Contents page of this number.

The W. H. Auden Society Newsletter

Number 28 • June 2007

Recent and Forthcoming Books and Events

W. H. Auden, Collected Poems, edited by Edward Mendelson, has been published by the Modern Library and by Faber & Faber. This reset, hardcover edition includes a new introductory note and some minor textual corrections.

An expanded edition of Auden's *Selected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson, has been published by Vintage Books. The new edition adds twenty poems to the hundred that comprised the edition published in 1979, has a rewritten introduction, and adds brief explanatory notes on obscure names and allusions.

The Spoken Word: W. H. Auden, from the British Library, is a set of two CDs containing Auden's readings of forty-nine poems, all from BBC broadcasts dating from 1936 through 1972. Available from the Library's online shop <http://shop.bl.uk>, and from other CD dealers.

Auden's *Prose Volume III, 1949-1955*, the latest volume in the Complete Works of W. H. Auden, will appear in the autumn of 2007. The book has been edited by Edward Mendelson and includes much previously unpublished material.

Britten on Film, a CD of Britten's film music, includes a brief, newly-discovered lyric "Telegrams", almost certainly written by Auden. The CD is available on the NMC label, catalogue number NMC D112.

Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden's Sources, by Rachel Wetzsteon, has been published by Routledge. It discusses Thomas Hardy, Søren Kierkegaard, allusion, and the elegiac tradition as intellectual and philosophical sources for Auden's poetry.

W. H. Auden, by Tony Sharpe, a title in the Routledge Guides to Literature Series, has been announced for publication in August 2007.

Arthur Kirsch's *Auden and Christianity* has received the Book of the Year Award from the Conference on Christianity & Literature.

15 May 2007, London: The Highgate Film Society commemorates Auden with a recital and film showing.

22 May 2007, Edinburgh: Alexander McCall Smith discusses his favourite Auden poems at the Scottish Poetry Library; a further discussion with Robyn Marsack takes place on 6 June.

16 June 2007, Kirchstetten, Austria: Following a greeting lunch in nearby St. Pölten, a reading and presentation in Auden's house in Kirchstetten.

23-24 June 2007, Oxford: At Christ Church, Oxford, a weekend-long centenary celebration includes readings, lectures, and musical performances.

3 July 2007, London: At the Queen Elizabeth Hall on the South Bank, a celebration of Auden includes musical and other performances.

6 July 2007, Ledbury: An address by Katherine Bucknell at the Ledbury Poetry Festival. The festival also sponsors an Auden walk on 8 July.

13-16 September 2007, Holt, Norfolk: Gresham's School will present a festival "In Praise of Auden."

21 September 2007, London: Settings of Auden's poems, sung by Eleanor Meynell, at the National Portrait Gallery.

29 September 2007, Ilkley: At the Ilkley Festival, readings from Auden's poems and discussions of the 1973 Ilkley Festival which Auden attended.

31 October 2007, London: Poet in the City celebrates Auden at Christie's, 8 King Street, St James, SW1, at 6:30 p.m. RSVP to Poet in the City c/o Penningtons Solicitors LLP, Bucklersbury House, 83 Cannon Street, London EC4N 8PE, or send an e-mail to info@poetintheCity.co.uk, or leave a message on 07908 367488.

As an organic result of the centenary, reflections on Auden's legacy in contemporary arts & culture will be included in the next number of the *Newsletter*.

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The final section of Dana Cook's "Meeting Auden: First Encounters and Initial Impressions," will appear in the next number.

An Appeal to Members

The Society operates on a proverbial shoestring (almost on a literal one), and membership fees do not quite cover the cost of printing and mailing the *Newsletter*. Because the costs of sending a reminder letter are prohibitive, we rely on members to send their annual renewals voluntarily. If you have not sent a renewal in the past year, could you kindly do so now? Payment can conveniently be made by any of the methods described on the last page of this number.

ISSN 0995-6095

24 February 2007, York: The University of York holds a centenary conference with lectures and readings.

25 February 2007, CBC: The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation broadcasts a discussion of Auden in the program "Writers and Company".

26 February 2007, Charlottesville, Virginia: The National Endowment for the Arts presents a tribute to Auden at St Paul's Church, 1700 University Avenue.

27 February 2007, Washington: The National Endowment for the Arts presents a tribute to Auden at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

27 February 2007, Chapel Hill: At the University of North Carolina, the Institute for the Arts and Humanities presents a tribute to Auden.

5 March 2007, New York: The 92nd Street Y Unterberg Poetry Center presents a tribute to Auden.

14 March 2007, Cambridge, Mass.: The Poetry Society of America sponsors an event at the First Parish Church, 3 Church Street, Cambridge.

20 March 2007, Oxford: Oxford Literary Festival and the Bodleian Library: an evening of Auden-themed discussions and readings.

3 April 2007: BBC Radio 4 presents "The Accidental Beauties of Silly Songs," a broadcast on Auden and music; the programme remains available for one week after the broadcast on the BBC's web site.

9 May 2007, Los Angeles: The Poetry Society of America sponsors an event at the Billy Wilder Auditorium, UCLA.

10 May 2007, London: "Poetry in the House", a celebration of Auden and MacNeice at Lauderdale House.

15 May 2007, London: At St Pancras Church, the London Festival of Contemporary Church Music performs settings of Auden's poems, including a new setting by Francis Pott.

The Auden Centenary (Continued)

The centenary of Auden's birth occurred on 21 February 2007. Following is a list of a few of the commemorative events that have occurred or are scheduled. The *Newsletter* will welcome additions and corrections to this list.

18 February 2007, ITV (UK): The South Bank Show presents a profile of Auden.

18 February 2007, BBC Radio 3: "England: Six Unexpected Days", a broadcast inspired by Auden's 1954 article in *American Vogue* about the Pennines.

20 February 2007, London: Westminster Abbey presents an evening of readings, starting at 18:15.

21 February 2007, Durham: A conference on Reading Genesis After Darwin opens with a reading of excerpts from "New Year Letter".

21 February 2007, London: The British Library presents a reading at the Shaw Theatre.

21 February 2007, New Haven: At Yale University, the Whitney Humanities Center presents a tribute to Auden.

21 February 2007, New York: At Cooper Union, a free reading by poets and writers.

21 February 2007, York: Martinis are served at Auden's birthplace; an event follows, later the same evening, at Bootham School Hall.

21 February-24 March 2007, Oxford: "The English Auden": an exhibition in the Bodleian Library.

22 February 2007, BBC 4: Two television documentaries: "The Addictions of Sin: W. H. Auden in His Own Words" (the title of which seems not to be Auden's own words, however) and a rebroadcast of an earlier BBC documentary "Tell Me the Truth about Love".

Alan Ansen 1922-2006

The first poem Alan Ansen and I read together was Dante's *Divine Comedy*. We got quite far into the *Purgatorio* before something interrupted our sessions. This was February 1970; and I remember drawing a picture of an allegorical procession as a kind of study aid, and then of painting a mapped and labeled heart and giving it to Alan as a Valentine. He framed it, and for the next few decades it hung over his bed.

The last or next-to-last time I saw Alan, in the summer of 2002, he read (or was it recited? His eyesight was fading) Auden's poem "Herman Melville," whose beautifully valedictory tone ("Towards the end he sailed into an extraordinary mildness") brought tears into his eyes – tears that in turn brought tears into my own.

Any of Alan's many friends and students (categories which overlapped to the point of becoming synonymous) could surely tell a similar story of poems bracketing or punctuating their conversations or capturing the mood of the moment. Alicia Stallings, for example, told me of Alan's wistfully reciting Alcman's beautiful lyric about the losses of old age:

No Longer, O honeytongued, holyvoiced maidens,
can my limbs carry me. How I wish I were a kingfisher
who flies above the blossoming foam with halcyons,
fearless-hearted, a holy sea-purple bird.

(translation by Diane Rayor)

Since Alan's limbs had indeed ceased to carry him, the poem was very apposite. But then poems often are – and among Alan's greatest and most enduring gifts was his joy in demonstrating this fact.

Yet, despite reiterated breathless expressions of amazement at his erudition from acquaintances like Jack Kerouac and others in the 1950s and friends in Athens at the end of his life, Alan was not a monologuing bore or a freakish savant. Awe at the range of his knowledge and depth of his memory shouldn't obscure delight in the particular: that kingfisher, or that extraordinary mildness. A literary tradition is not only an epic but an individual exquisite trope: not only a grand opera but the individual aria. Alan's human qualities – his tremendous sympathy, loyalty, and generosity to his friends –

took lyrical rather than massive expression, not only in the poems he wrote but in his human responses. Unfailingly hospitable and kind, he often used the language of poetry to express his sympathy – what better way was there? When in 2000 I wrote to him that my marriage was in trouble, he phoned me from Athens, and boomed over the phone: *Ailínon ailínon eípe, to d'eu níkato* – the refrain from the opening chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, which can be rendered "Sing sorrow, sorrow, but still may the good prevail."

If not a pedant, however, Alan was most certainly a pedagogue. In his long autobiographical poem "Epistle to Chester Kallman," he cites as "proof of the beneficence of providence"

My debut as a teacher on the isle
Of Aegina filling the fresh-faced young
With musing memories of a bibliophile
And metric glories of our mother tongue.

I used to regret that Alan's modest income combined with his idiosyncrasies to prevent him from needing or seeking a full-time job. But what business was it of mine? Being himself was, I now think, a full-time job, if often a lonely one. Besides, Alan taught irrepressibly, not only when the occasion afforded him a classroom, but any time he found himself in congenial company. When John Psaropoulos was conducting a series of interviews with Alan for National Public Radio (interviews one hopes will eventually be aired), Alan always referred to these conversations as "lectures." An eloquent email from Fred Ahl, an American classicist, speaks, I suspect, for many, of this side of Alan:

I had so wanted to show him my Aeneid translation...and to have him read some lines aloud for me. He was in so many ways a final link with the last GREAT poets of the English language, whose love of the melody of words matched with the fire of their imaginations and vast learning, whose knowledge reached across ages and cultures with a speed dazzling the mind and delighting the ears. When I was with him I was with them too somehow. And now he's gone.

Of course he is not wholly gone: there are his remarkable poems, and the pieces of knowledge and memory he passed on. "He had an

Library, are the basis of *The Table Talk of W. H. Auden*, by Alan Ansen, edited by Nicholas Jenkins (1990), and of much of Arthur Kirsch's edition of Auden's *Lectures on Shakespeare* (2000).

"Lest he / Die like an Old Believer / For some spurious reading"

In "Winds," written in 1953, the opening poem of Auden's sequence "Bucolics," Auden, praying to the "Goddess of winds and wisdom", asks for an enlightening wind to shake the poplars as a warning to "Your clerk" when he is tempted by "moon-faced Nonsense," and risks the fate of dying "like an Old Believer / For some spurious reading."

The explanation of these lines may be found in a book that Auden read in the late 1940s or early 1950s, Dean A. P. Stanley's *Lectures on the History of the Eastern Church*, first published in 1861, and reprinted in the Everyman's Library in 1907. Auden perhaps came to read this book through his friendship with émigré members of the Russian Orthodox Church whom he met in New York, among them Vasily Yanovsky and Helena Iswolsky.

Stanley describes the sect of Starovers, or Old Believers, who broke away from the Russian Orthodox Church after the reforms made by Peter the Great. The Starovers hold wildly reactionary beliefs, among them that passports are the marks of the Beast and that it a mortal sin to give the benediction with three fingers instead of two. Because of a mistaken word in their version of the Nicene Creed, they believe in "one baptism *by fire* for the remission of sins." Stanley reports: "In defence of this corruption of the text whole villages of these 'Fire-Baptists have been known to commit themselves to the flames. It is probably . . . the most signal instance of martyrdom in the cause, not even of a corrupt practice or a corrupt doctrine, but of a corrupt reading" (p. 367 in the Everyman's Library edition).

Auden's copy of the Everyman's Library edition is now in the Raymond Danowski Poetry Collection at Emory University Library; he has written on the rear endpaper, "to die for a spurious reading."

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New York was scarcely the attempt at evasion that recent news reports suggest: his address was listed in the Manhattan telephone directory, where it presumably could have been found by the FBI (which, as MI5 noted, wanted to interview him).

In August 1951, while MI5's agents were exchanging urgent messages about Auden's left-wing political sympathies, the first newspaper reviews of Richard Hoggart's *Auden: An Introductory Essay* were publicizing Auden's rejection of his Marxist views of the 1930s and his return to Christianity around 1940. At this time MI5 was also hard at work trying to identify Auden's "younger brother," a mythical figure who was reported to have left a telephone message for Burgess at the Reform Club in 1946. Auden in fact had no younger brother, but MI5's summary of its findings identifies him as one Arthur G. Auden, a name otherwise unknown to history, whom an alert agent had uncovered in the London telephone directory. The whole story was told twenty-five years ago in Humphrey Carpenter's *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, but the reporters who rushed into print with "new revelations" from the MI5 file understandably refrained from mentioning this fact.

In 1953 MI5, having concluded at last that Auden had nothing to do with Burgess's disappearance or anything else worth their attention, cancelled its order to track his arrivals in the UK. Clouseau had evidently been transferred to the Sûreté.

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Notes and Queries

Alan Ansen

Alan Ansen was born on 23 January 1922 and died on 12 November 2006. An obituary by Rachel Hadas appears in this issue. He was the dedicatee of Auden's *The Age of Anxiety* and worked for some years as Auden's secretary and assistant. The chronological tables in *The Portable Greek Reader* and in *Poets of the English Language* are mostly his work. The second American impression of *The Age of Anxiety* includes some minor metrical changes that Auden made in order to correct errors in scansion that Ansen noted. Ansen's typescript and manuscript journals, now in the Berg Collection of the New York Public

inherited income, and he had to make it last. He never spent a penny unwisely," writes Steven Moore in his Introduction to the invaluable 1989 *Contact Highs*, Alan's Selected Poems 1957-1987. But a larger and as it were a more generous form of husbandry was always at work in Alan's work and life: the art of eking out, of making do with what was left.

Elsewhere in "Epistle to Chester Kallman" he muses:

Perhaps
We hope the act of compositions unsays
Unfitness for the journey without maps
We're ultimately doomed to undertake.

Without maps—and perhaps more important, without companions? I would like to let Alan's own voice speak to his loneliness, his economy, his dignity, and his affection, particularly in the distilled form they took in the poems of his later years. "Cats" is included in *Contact Highs*; "Constantine Cavafy: A Minimalist Exercise" was commissioned by the Princeton University periodical *Paralos*, where it was published in 1996.

Cats

As the boys fade out the cats fade in
Jumping down from the tree, creeping under the partition,
delicately walking the balcony railing
Waiting for food, licking themselves, sleeping, spying,
enjoying their state,
Modeling the being of God's creatures for a less satisfied one.

No rough and ready dog may invade the balcony's felinity,
Though an obnoxious bark may alert it.

Here one learns courtesy, patience, self-abnegation
Resigning a favorite chair to a cat in possession
Rather than attempting to justify the logic of proprietorship to
a sentience determined not to understand.
But one is tempted wrath when a mother pushes her way in to
the interior to stash her newly born kittens;
I didn't make you screech for those kittens;

Clouseau Investigates Auden

(The following note was prompted by the many press reports on the release of the files from the MI5 archive about Auden's possible connection with the flight of the Soviet spies Burgess and Maclean in 1951. Most of the reports took MI5's suspicions seriously.)

None of the documents in the MI5 file on W. H. Auden, released to the public in March 2007, is signed by Inspector Clouseau, but his handiwork is visible everywhere—both in the file itself and in the headlines that announced, “Auden evaded MI5 quiz”, “How Auden may have helped Burgess flee Britain”, and “Auden fled to avoid Cambridge spy interrogation”. The headline-writers are less at fault than the MI5 operatives who decided that Auden had gone underground, precisely when he was more in the public eye than he had ever been before.

If MI5 had switched on the radio while searching for Auden, they might have heard him being interviewed at the premiere of Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*, for which he and Chester Kallman had written the libretto. If they had opened a newspaper, they might have seen pictures of him bowing from the footlights in Venice. MI5, in its desperation to locate the elusive Auden and interrogate him about the flight of Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, never noticed that the Italian press had been reporting for weeks on the rehearsals for *The Rake* in Milan, where Auden was coaching the La Scala chorus in English pronunciation. Inspector Clouseau's notes report only the highly suspicious circumstance that during these weeks Auden had decamped for a “prolonged absence in the North of Italy.”

Much of Auden's MI5 file concerns a telephone message that Burgess left for Auden at Stephen Spender's house, where Auden had been staying in May 1951, a few days before the two diplomats fled to the Soviet Union. Auden never returned Burgess's phone call, and Burgess later told Tom Driberg that he had phoned—before he realized that he would need to flee together with Maclean—in order to arrange a holiday visit to Auden's summer home in Ischia, a visit proposed by Burgess when he had spoken with Auden in New York a few months before.

Burgess and Maclean left England on 25 May 1951. MI5's contacts in Italy reported that Auden, having left London, arrived in Ischia on 28 May 1951. This raised suspicions that Auden had gone to Italy in

“should win [Ansen] that audience so airily foregone, but from the beginning so utterly deserved.” Optimistic, perhaps? But then I think of Alan's master Auden's reminder—also perhaps optimistic?—that

Time that is intolerant
Of the brave and innocent,
And indifferent in a week
To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives

And thinking of Auden and time and poetry, let me offer a final memory. When, in the early months of 1970, Alan gave me a copy of John Fuller's *Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden*, knowing I knew far too little of the great poet's work, he inscribed it with characteristic charm, wit, and generosity, “A cart before a heavenly horse.”

RACHEL HADAS

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Auden and Horace: A Possible Source for “The Letter”

From the very first coming down
Into a new valley with a frown
Because of the sun and a lost way,
You certainly remain: to-day
I, crouching behind a sheep-pen, heard
Travel across a sudden bird,
Cry out against the storm, and found
The year's arc a completed round
And love's worn circuit re-begun,
Endless with no dissenting turn.
Shall see, shall pass, as we have seen
The swallow on the tile, spring's green
Preliminary shiver, passed

A solitary truck, the last
 Of shunting in the Autumn. But now
 To interrupt the homely brow,
 Thought warmed to evening through and through
 Your letter comes, speaking as you,
 Speaking of much but not to come.

Nor speech is close nor fingers numb,
 If love not seldom has received
 An unjust answer, was deceived.
 I, decent with the seasons, move
 Different or with a different love,
 Nor question overmuch the nod,
 The stone smile of this country god
 That never was more reticent,
 Always afraid to say more than it meant.

Auden placed "The Letter" (written in 1927, when he was 20) at the beginning of his final *Collected Poems*, as well as his *Selected Poems*. A poem of initiation, concerned with (as the first line tells us) "the very first coming down," it forms an invitation to his work. Like Yeats' "Song of the Happy Shepherd" or Milton's Nativity Ode, "The Letter" introduces both poet and reader to the beginning of a career. The poem opens the way to the early Auden canon.

In the course of this essay, I will juxtapose "The Letter" with Horace's Sestius Ode (1.4), examining the affinities and differences between them. Placing these two poems side by side casts light on Auden's self-definition at the beginning of his career, whether or not Auden had Horace's ode in mind. (Horace was one of Auden's chosen precursors, most notably in "The Horatians" and in "Thanksgiving for a Habitat," in which, he told James Michie, he had attempted "what I think Horace might write, were he alive today and were English his mother-tongue" [Mendelson (1999) 454].) I will begin by offering a close analysis of "The Letter," in order to prepare for the consideration of Horace's ode as a possible source.

"The Letter" is characteristic of early Auden in that its atmosphere of ominous, furtive suggestion, of tense significance, blends with a brave agility. Auden's early poems often make it hard to tell the difference between being heroic and bowing to necessity: between the thrilled adventurism of youth and an adulthood requiring ad-

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DAVID GALEF

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solemn, Auden almost never. Auden never ceased from going in many directions, either.

But eclecticism is also viewed with suspicion by purists. It is a testament to Auden's in-between-ness that he remains open to almost anything, from ottava rima to sestinas, from Old Masters to limestone. Auden was always an appropriator, and not just of children's verses. Katherine Bucknell remarks in her preface to Auden's *Juvenilia*: "Other people's poetry was there for him to use. . ." (xx). As other critics such as Fuller have noted, "Twelve Songs" contains echoes of other poets, as well: "Song of the Beggars," with its refrain "Cried the cripples to the silent statue, / The six beggared cripples" is Yeatsian. "[O lurcher-loving collier, black as night]" ends "Be marble to his soot, and to his black be white," reminiscent of Blake's "Chimney Sweep," just as "What hidden worm of guilt" evokes Blake's "The Sick Rose," with its invisible worm. As Donald Barthelme once observed, collage is the art of the twentieth century, in which case the age of appropriation changed the rules so that a work of art may display the sum of others' parts greater than the original wholes.

In the end, the resentment against professional practitioners like Auden and Milne isn't just a quarrel with so-called lack of seriousness but also includes a suspicion about versatility and its perceived lack of rigor. Unfortunately, versatility and eclecticism are not traits held in much favor in an age of increasing specialization and one-note artists. Milne, who also faced this problem, talked of a variously-aged persona named Hoo in his introduction to *When We Were Very Young*: "I don't know if you have ever met Hoo, but he is one of those curious children who look four on Monday, and eight on Tuesday, and are really twenty-eight on Saturday. . ." (x). For his part, Auden recalls of his college days: "And through the quads dogmatic words rang clear, / 'Good poetry is classic and austere,'" adding in the next stanza, "So much for Art" (CP 98). That the lines are addressed to that perpetual youth Byron is telling, but not at all damning. Youth and all its richness deserve more than a fling.

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justment to hard limits, to an inexorable "hidden law." Here, as in other early Auden, the world seems both hard to get and gathered under an inevitable rule, colored by doom yet liable--maybe--to reward someone who is canny enough, good enough at concealment.

"The Letter" is itself expert at concealment. Both portentous and delicate, its ideal is stated in its final line, about the "country god": "Always afraid to say more than it meant." In its style and in its argument, Auden's poem embodies both a riskiness and a due caution.

Personal in tone, "The Letter" yet withholds more than it gives. (Auden was interested in this feature of Shakespeare's sonnets: the speaker seems to be painfully reminding himself of events that we the readers remain excluded from.) In curt and puzzling fashion, "The Letter" presents shorthand descriptions of an experience that will never be unveiled clearly or fully. It is intimate without any hint of frankness.

We can discern the rough outlines of a story here: a love affair that began with a "frown" and a "lost way," with a journey into an unfamiliar place (a "new valley"). (According to John Fuller, the affair may have never, in fact, taken place: the poem, Fuller argues, is addressed to a heterosexual Oxford friend, William McElwee, who rejected Auden's advances [Fuller 13].) The lost way echoes the *via smarrita* at the beginning of Dante's *Inferno*, another poem of initiation into a new, frightening realm. Auden's speaker must pass through this underworld of eros as Dante's pilgrim passes through hell, coming out at the end for an interview with a new god.

As readers trying to understand this poem, we replicate the speaker's position: that is, we are embattled, resourceful interpreters of signs. "Love's worn circuit rebegun, / Endless with no dissenting turn" suggests that the speaker is telling himself, in attempted reassurance, that the frustration of erotic impulse is simply the way of things. The seasonal course of love allows for no human dissent. Reading through the first half of the poem, we get the impression that love's disappointment is in the past, or at least at sufficient distance to avoid overturning the speaker's resolve. All has been accomplished: this is a thought intended to deprive desirous stirrings of their threat. "Shall see, shall pass," is the speaker's watchword. The Stevens-like phrase "spring's green/ Preliminary shiver" is not allowed to shoot out further and disturb with desire. Instead young impulse is passed over by the poem's need for tightly accepting what always happens. "Thought warmed to evening through and through" suggests some-

thing like a hearth-like seclusion against the disruption threatened by memories and wishes. Halfway through the poem, the arrival of the letter breaks the resigned strength the speaker has created for himself, the home he has made in his thoughts ("the homely brow"). Now the past intrudes on the present. "Your letter comes, speaking as you,/ Speaking of much but not to come." The sudden presence of the letter, it turns out, is the storm presaged by the bird of line six, reminding the speaker that the past can return as the present. The letter is, in effect, the beloved himself: speaking "as you," and breaking the speaker's hard-earned calm, by reminding him of the wished-for future he is not going to get (the "much...not to come"). Leaping, in the middle of a couplet, into a new verse paragraph, Auden's poem strikes shielded, bitter anger, discernable behind the lines "Nor speech is close nor fingers numb,/ If love not seldom has received/ An unjust answer, was deceived." ("Nor speech is close" was originally "nor teeth are clenched," showing a harder fury [Fuller 13].)

The speaker, as the "deceived" victim of "unjust" words, seems about to rise to, or lapse into, the posture of righteous sufferer. But he fends off this possibility by beginning to ally himself to the country god invoked at the poem's end. "I, decent with the seasons, move/ different or with a different love." The difference obliquely referred to here, in this very oblique poem, is in one aspect Auden's homosexuality: his "different love," a kind of secret identity. But more important than the reference to homosexuality is the sense of the speaker inventing a word for himself, as he moves away from the wounded outrage that he expressed in the sentence ending "was deceived." The word he finds is "different." "I move....different" means that he is in accord with the way of things, now not merely resigned to the seasons of life (as in the first verse paragraph, with its "shall see, shall pass"). Rather, he moves *with* things, and in the way that they move: in their difference, their uncanny force. These lines represent a gaining of power from the hermetic and hard to figure, an identification of the poetic self with the deity that it honors: the god of reticence that sways us.

Auden, as he wrote "The Letter," may well have had in mind Horace's Ode 1.4 (the Sestius ode). My point is not to present an argument for direct influence, but instead to suggest both a similarity and a contrast between Auden and Horace as they address eros, one of the reigning powers of our lives. Specifically, Auden's Latinate word "decent" ("decent with the seasons") calls to mind Horace's poem.

Being solemn is easy. Being serious is hard. You probably have to be born serious, or at least go through a very interesting childhood. Children almost always begin by being serious, which is what makes them so entertaining when compared to adults as a class.

Adults, on the whole, are solemn. The transition from seriousness to solemnity occurs in adolescence, a period in which Nature, for reasons of her own, plunges people into foolish frivolity. During this period the organism struggles to regain dignity by recovering childhood's genius for seriousness. It is usually a hopeless cause.

As a result, you have to settle for solemnity. Being solemn has almost nothing to do with being serious, but on the other hand, you can't go on being adolescent forever, unless you are in the performing arts, and anyhow most people can't tell the difference. In fact, though Americans talk a great deal about the virtue of being serious, they generally prefer people who are solemn over people who are serious. (17)

What is true for Americans seems equally apt for the conservative element in literary criticism—and to some extent in poetry, as well. In an essay postscript called "The Frivolous & the Earnest," Auden writes: "A frivolity which is innocent, because unaware that anything serious exists, can be charming, and a frivolity which, precisely because it is aware of what is serious, refuses to take seriously that which is not serious, can be profound" (*Dyer's* 429). The ability to laugh at oneself is not necessarily the measure of poetic greatness, but it is an essential attribute for anyone who would write self-reflective verse. (Yeats never wrote a funny poem, with the possible exception of "The Scholars.") Auden's definition of poetry as speech at its most personal makes Eliot's theory of impersonality seem disingenuous: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality." People always forget its rider: "But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (43).

An emphasis on the childlike can be quite serious, one reason that Wordsworth's "The Child is father of the Man" has achieved such resonance. In his drive against romanticism, T. S. Eliot is at times

Compare the cadence and plangency with that of Milne's "Market Square":

For I went to the stall where they sold sweet lavender
("Only a penny for a bunch of lavender!")
"Have you got a rabbit, 'cos I don't want lavender?"
But they hadn't got a rabbit, not anywhere there. (*Young* 21)

Note the rhythm of petition and denial, originally a religious pattern. In Auden's lines, the endearment that seems to be an address from a parent to a child, with its simple refrain, grows insistent as the trek grows increasingly dire, ending with soldiers "Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me." The sense of displacement that a child feels is translated to Displaced People. Milne enacts this feeling in "The Wrong House":

I went into a house, and it wasn't a house,
It has big steps and a great big hall;
But it hasn't got a garden,
A garden,
A garden,
It isn't like a house at all. (*Young* 63)

Are these lines silly, too? Auden famously reclaimed the word *silly* from the Old English *saelig* or "blessed." And herein perhaps lies the crux of the quarrel with Auden and his so-called inappropriateness: it's felt to be sacrilegious or improper. It's not, in a word, serious.

Milne, who had to contend with this accusation all the time, concocted this defense in his *Autobiography*: "*When We Were Very Young* is not the work of a poet becoming playful, nor of a lover of children expressing his love, nor of a prose-writer knocking together a few jingles for the little ones, it is the work of a light-verse writer taking his job seriously even though he is taking it into the nursery" (*Autobiography* 282).

Milne's use of the term *seriously* is worth expanding on, especially since it is so often misconstrued. The idea of what has gravity is perhaps best expressed in Russell Baker's famous column on *solemn* and *serious*:

Ode 1.4 features what is perhaps the most prominent use of the word *decens* in Horace.¹ (The Latin *decens* means *proper, fitting, or seemly*; and by extension, at times, *beautiful or noble*.) Here are the relevant stanzas from Horace Ode 1.4:

Iam Cytherea chorus ducit Venus imminente luna,
Iunctaeque Nymphis Gratiae decentes
Alterno terram quatunt pede, dum gravis Cycloppum
Volcanus ardens visit officinas.

Nunc decet aut viridi nitidum caput impedire myrto
Aut flore, terrae quem ferunt solutae,
Nunc et in umbrosis Fauno decet immolare lucis,
Seu poscat agna sive malit haedo.

Now Cytherean Venus leads forth her dancers beneath the overhanging moon, and the lovely ("*decentes*") Graces, hand in hand with the Nymphs, strike the earth with rhythmic steps, while glowing Vulcan goes to tend the great forges of the Cyclops. Now it is fitting ("*decet*") to bind our gleaming hair with green myrtle, or with the flowers which the loosening earth bears; now it is fitting ("*decet*") in shady groves to sacrifice to Faunus, whether he demand a lamb or prefer a kid. (Translation by Steele Commager [267].)

In the Horace Ode, the word "*decens*" is repeatedly associated with the amorous awakening brought by spring (its "green preliminary shiver," as Auden puts it). Horace follows the passage I have quoted with an abrupt reminder of death, "*pallida Mors*," who knocks at the door of paupers and kings alike.² Auden, by contrast,

¹ Auden may also have had in mind Horace's thirteenth Epode, which, like "The Letter," features a storm, and which suggests, via the word *decet*, that youth is the right time for love ("*dumque virent genua/ Et decet, obducta solvatur fronte senectus*" [Ep. 13.4-5])

² Suddenly it is not the graces and nymphs who beat the ground (*alterno terram quatunt pede*), but pale, cool-minded death who knocks with his foot, wanting entrance (*pallida Mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas/ regumque turris*: as Commager translates it, "Pale Death with impartial step knocks at the huts of the poor and at the palace of kings"). The Ode had been

remains with eros, in loyalty to the country god (Horace's Faunus). Defining his "different love," he retains the oracular god presiding over desire, rather than banishing this deity, as Horace does, to make way for the brutal shock of human mortality. But he expands the role of the god, who now presides over, not just spring's new, hopeful desires, but the entire round of erotic experience, from excitement to disappointment to the tight-lipped, wary resolve that, in Auden's version, follows disappointment.

Faunus, the country god invoked by Horace, is often identified with Pan, who represents love's wildness; he is associated in Roman tradition with the mysterious sounds that emanate from the forest. He can also be oracular: as in the *Aeneid's* Bk. 7, when Faunus announces to his son Latinus that he must make way for a foreign lover, a stranger coming from distant lands. (Latinus' daughter Lavinia will be sought by the Trojan Aeneas.) In the conclusion of "The Letter," Auden's speaker joins himself to such a spirit: readying himself for the unexpected currents of time, even as he takes on some of the god's oracular power and his affinity with mysteries. He is "decent with the seasons," just as Horace's speaker moves decently with spring. The sympathetic alliance between the speaker and the god also implies the strength that comes from drawing on hidden, half-conscious thought: the strength of divination. In this respect, the conclusion of "The Letter" might remind a reader of certain poems of John Ashbery. Consider an Ashbery line like "At the back of the mind, where we live now" (the last line of "Saying it to Keep it from Happening," from *Houseboat Days*). Ashbery invokes not the unconscious, not a space that controls life from below or outside it, but the back of the mind, thoughts kept under control. Peripheral but crucial, these thoughts disturb us, but we like to keep them around; they are also what we rely on. This god is thought of "sometimes and always, with mixed feelings," which is how he thinks of us too (in Ashbery's "At North Farm"). The end of "The Letter" leads to a mood in Ashbery that emphasizes keeping to oneself, and that makes assurance

partial in its festive celebration of love, even ushering the betrayed spouse Vulcan off-stage so as to make way for the sacrifice to the rural, Pan-like deity Faunus. But death cannot be appeased by sacrifices. The thought of death is a momentary knock, sharp and blunt at once; it impinges, but it is nothing one could ally oneself to.

I often wish I were a King,
And then I could do anything

If only I were King of Spain,
I'd take my hat off in the rain.

If only I were King of France,
I wouldn't brush my hair for aunts. (*Young* 98)

Is this silly? As Edward Mendelson notes in *Early Auden*, the point is that love is serious, to the point where the last two lines from "Calypso" break the mandates of rhyming couplets to proclaim, "For love's more important and powerful than / Even a priest or a politician" (CP 211). In a similar move, Milne breaks ranks and font size in "Politeness":

I always answer,
I always tell them,
If they ask me
Politely. . . .
BUT SOMETIMES

I wish

That they wouldn't. (*Young* 41)

How short is the distance from love to resistance? In some ways the poster boy of happy domestic life, Milne led a life increasingly separate from his wife, Daphne. Auden moved from man to man, finally finding some measure of happiness in Chester Kallman. Yet "Ten Songs" isn't all about the Discovery of Love; it's more about control and the disempowered, just as Milne's writing took on a political dimension in the 1930's. (Milne's political activism, though mostly confined to writing letters and books like *Peace with Honor*, was inclined toward pacifism in the years leading up to World War II.) Auden "Ten Songs" starts with another song for Hedli Anderson, a poem known also as "Refugee Blues":

Say this city has ten million souls,
Some are living in mansions, some are living in holes:
Yet there's no place for you and me, dear, yet there's no place for
us. (CP 210)

nily suggests, may also show that Auden provided lines for his pupils. In any event, Auden makes the verse more elegiac with a follow-up reminiscent of Housman: “Nurses to their graves are gone, / But the prams go rolling on” (CP 118).

Like most youth, however, Auden is generally more preoccupied with love and its torments than with death. “[O the valley in the summer where I and my John]” depicts the sorrows of unrequited affection: “And I leaned on his shoulder; ‘O Johnny, let’s play’: / But he frowned like thunder and he went away” (CP 120). The ballad reenacts other scenes, from the Charity Matinee Ball to the Grand Opera, but in each instance the rebuff is clear: “and he went away,” exactly how a child would put it. The phrasing follows the lilt of a ballad, and some of these lyrics, under the heading “Four Cabaret Songs for Miss Hedli Anderson,” were set to music by Benjamin Britten. It’s worthwhile noting that a song usually depends on easy cadences and vocabulary, not the occasion for an exhibition of Auden’s at-times recondite diction, as in *blouts*, *pirries*, *stolchy*, *glunch*, *sloomy*, *snudge*, *snoachy*, *scaddle*, and *drumbles*—though in fact some of these words from other Auden poems sound a good deal like onomatopoeic nursery talk. As Stan Smith observes in “Auden’s Light and Serio-Comic Verse”: “The polyglot impurity of Auden’s diction, his manipulation of pastiche, parody, periphrasis, euphemism, jargon, the long-winded and whimsical circumlocutions and the verbal promiscuity which juxtaposes incongruous words from very diverse registers, alert us to the unreliability of all communication” (100)—though Auden is rarely unreliable in this regard, and Smith’s observation is more apt than his conclusion.

Auden went on several years later to “Ten Songs,” which includes “Domesday” and [“Warm are the still and lucky miles”]. These too exhibit the inequalities of love: in Milne the adoration of a child for an object or a pet, in Auden the anxious wait for a lover who may not appear, as in “Calypso”:

If he’s nót there to méet me when Í get to tówn,
 I’ll stánd on the síde-walk with téars rolling dówn.

 If Í were the Héad of the Chúrch or the Státe,
 I’d pówder my nóse and just téll them to wáit. (CP 211)

Compare these lines with some from Milne’s “If I Were King”:

out of fear, through a quiet mental flexing. Ashbery sometimes adds a camp note. “How brave!” Ashbery’s speaker tells himself: the poet mocks a little, and at the same time gives a solemn nod.

The phrase “I, decent” in the second stanza of “The Letter” rhymes with, and answers, “I, crouching” in the first stanza, just as the beloved’s frown in line one is answered by the country god’s smile at the end of the poem. The speaker can move with the god, no longer embattled and furtive as he was when he remained under the shadow of the beloved. He can enter into an alliance with this new force, rather than merely being swayed by another. The reticence of the god is also the reticence of Auden’s poem. “The Letter” comes to rest in portentous slightness. The god’s barely discerned nod and “stone smile” seem to convey a grim, ironic knowledge of love’s vicissitudes, as well as the fear that attends love. The smile is careful not to say more than it means. Which is to say that it means more than it says.³

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³ I have benefited from the discussions of “The Letter” in Hecht, Mendelson (1981) and Ellmann.

Ten Reasons Why Auden is Number One in My Book

1. Because he so wonderfully deflates stereotypes about how poets think and behave. We're all familiar with his claim that poetry "makes nothing happen." But consider too the following facts: when, in the late 1920s, young would-be writers around the world were flocking to Paris, Auden bucked the trend by heading with his friend Christopher Isherwood to grittier Berlin (and within weeks was writing sonnets in near-perfect German). With his customary mix of modesty and sternness, he countered Yeats's claim that "The intellect of man is forced to choose/ Perfection of the life, or of the work" by remarking that "Perfection is possible in neither." Despite his legendarily poor personal grooming, he was a model of efficiency in his work habits, heading for bed at an hour when most people were just getting going, and also proving himself richly capable—as Sherrill Tippins reports in her delightful book *February House*—of managing a household with an iron fist. And he provides a bracing corrective to Shelley-esque claims about the supremacy of poets through his utmost respect for other disciplines: he wrote moving sonnets in praise of novelists and composers, and declared that "When I find myself in the company of scientists, I feel like a shabby curate who has strayed by mistake into a drawing room full of dukes." He also offers a happy alternative to the romantic but, let's face it, terribly sad cliché of the poet as loner: I can't think of another writer to whom friendship meant more, or for whom friends were more cherished as both valued collaborators on, and crucial inspirations for, poem after poem after poem.

2. Because—along similar lines—where other poets had suggested extreme, harrowing or dangerous routes to literary greatness (Baudelaire's "get drunk!", Rimbaud's systematic derangement of the senses), Auden proposed an altogether more down-to-earth "day-dream College for Bards," whose curriculum I quote, hoping you'll forgive this list within a list, in full:

(1) In addition to English, at least one ancient language, probably Greek or Hebrew, and two modern languages would be required.

(2) Thousands of lines of poetry in these languages would be learned by heart.

Of course, Auden isn't writing for the love-struck young: note the sexual references to maidenhead, Brighton (where people went for seedy affairs), two-lips, "chicken," and bed—not to mention the man next-door who looks all too knowing.

Yet compare these lines with those in Milne's "Market Square" and "Halfway Down":

I had a penny,
A bright new penny,
I took my penny
 to the market square.
I wanted a rabbit,
A little brown rabbit,
And I looked for a rabbit
 'Most everywhere.

It isn't in the nursery,
It isn't in the town,
And all sorts of funny thoughts
Run round my head:
"It isn't really
Anywhere!
It's somewhere else
Instead!" (*Young* 21, 81)

Without over-equating, one can make a case for a similar animating impulse: the pursuit of a special object or place, whether the location of love or perfect spot for resting. The standpoint that Milne adopts to imitate the world-view of a child is akin to Auden's pose of naïveté. *In puero veritas* is as old as putting wisdom in the mouths of fools and with the same purpose: to ask plain questions that need to be aired.

One ever-present prospect of the juvenile perspective is an authority beyond one's control. In Milne, this figure is sometimes stern but kind, the nurse or nanny, whom one can also see in Auden's "Autumn Song": "Now the leaves are falling fast, / Nurse's flowers will not last" (*CP* 118). Auden remarks that he copied these lines from a ten-year-old pupil, though the lines from the school publication *The Badger* in the spring of 1933—"Now the snow is falling fast, / Nurse's flowers will not last"—as the commentator John Fuller (157-58) can-

Some say love's a little boy,
 And some say it's a bird,
Some say it makes the world go around,
 Some say that's absurd,
And when I asked the man next-door,
 Who looked as if he knew,
His wife got very cross indeed,
 And said it wouldn't do.

Does it look like a pair of pyjamas,
Or the ham in a temperance hotel?
Does its odour remind one of llamas,
Or has it a comforting smell?
Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is,
Or soft as eiderdown fluff?
Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?
O tell me the truth about love. (CP 121)

The poem takes the form of a quest through its refrain, "O tell me the truth about love," but the disparate images—the ham in a temperance hotel, the odor of llamas—substitute a sense of the absurd for T. S. Eliot's "tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace" (162). On the other hand, Auden does not succumb to what Eliot termed a dissociation of sensibility, that historic split between logic and emotion, but rather links love with images that include hungry Alsatians and picking one's nose.

Auden accomplishes these links in part by maintaining the stance of a naïf, forced to follow the strange logic of the adult world and its authority figures. The quest itself is probing but artless and unsystematic:

I looked inside the summer-house;
 It wasn't ever there:
I tried the Thames at Maidenhead,
 And Brighton's bracing air,
I don't know what the blackbird sang,
 Or what the tulip said;
But it wasn't in the chicken-run,
 Or underneath the bed. (CP 122)

(3) The library would contain no books of literary criticism, and the only critical exercise required of students would be the writing of parodies.

(4) Courses in prosody, rhetoric and comparative philology would be required of all students, and every student would have to select three courses out of courses in mathematics, natural history, geology, meteorology, archaeology, mythology, liturgics, cooking.

(5) Every student would be required to look after a domestic animal and cultivate a garden plot.

3. Because it was thanks to his loving, lifelong, relentless champion-ship of writers and artists who mattered to him that I too became an ardent admirer of their works: the achingly beautiful operas of Bellini; the fascinatingly terse novels of Henry Green; the soulful aphorisms of Dag Hammarskjöld; the profoundly nonsensical poems of Winthrop Mackworth Praed; the luminous meditations of Simone Weil; and so many others.

4. Because, no carefree spirit never blotting a line, he was his own harshest critic all his life, revising poems like "Spain" and "September 1, 1939" that he came to find dishonest, but also subtly but surely tempering early attitudes and enthusiasms in later works. Auden's fervid borrowing of Thomas Hardy's panoramic "hawk's vision," for example, used so stirringly as a means of social critique in the 1930 poem "Consider," gave way to the later poem "Homage to Clio" in which, concluding that hawks are marvelously far-sighted but also hopelessly distant from real people, he praised instead the "muse of the concrete historical fact." And similarly, his infatuation with Søren Kierkegaard in poems of the late 1930s and 1940s—his rapt reliance on the Danish philosopher's writings on marriage, crowds, the "leap of faith"—eventually gave way to a criticism of both Kierkegaard and himself for forgetting "that, whatever sorrows and sufferings a man may have to endure, it is nonetheless a miraculous blessing to be alive." Kierkegaard may have understood our minds through and through, but he didn't seem to find our bodies worth mentioning—didn't even seem to acknowledge that we have them. Consequently, in the 1973 poem "No, Plato, No," written just months before his death, Auden declared in a thoroughly un-Kierkegaardian manner that

I can't imagine anything
that I would like less to be
than a disincarnate Spirit,
unable to chew or sip
or make contact with surfaces
or breathe the scents of summer
or comprehend speech and music

Bodies may grow old and everyone must die, but here Auden, having come a long way from his former adulation of Kierkegaard, finds great relief in the fact that "the sublunar world is such fun, / where Man is male or female / and gives Proper Names to all things."

5. Because, when Christopher Isherwood wrote to Auden on the eve of the Second World War, suggesting that he might marry his friend Erika Mann in order to help get her out of Germany, Auden immediately wired back a one-word telegram: "DELIGHTED."

6. Because he showed that certain traits of human character or literary style that we might have simply supposed to be mutually exclusive are in fact, thank goodness, intimately aligned. I tried to express my gratitude for this revelation in a very belated elegy I wrote for Auden in the mid-1990s, noting how he

surprised us with obvious but
unexpected pairings – you knew that knowledge
does not shun the lover's embraces,
you knew that passion without precision

is like some awful parody of a book
on how to succeed: be one thing and be it
exclusively, the book says, and fly.
But if you fly like this, you will plummet.

In other words, for all his erudition, Auden never forgot the importance of what he called "a reverent frivolity." And despite his towering intellect, he still found room to praise the needs and skills of our humble mortal bodies, as in the wittily serious – or seriously witty? – poem "Precious Five," an encomium to the fingers of the human hand.

risson's mother / Hasn't been heard of since" (*Young* 33). In "Rice Pudding," all the adults are oblivious to what the young girl Mary Jane detests and keep serving it to her.

Auden was also adept at combining childlike elements with dark shadows, as in his twenty-part poem "The Quest," which features "Her Majesty in a bad temper or / A red-nosed Fool who makes a fool of fools" (*CP* 224). What he absorbed from practitioners like Milne shows up early in his juvenilia:

I know a very lonely lane
And a red brick wall
With a hole in it that's round and
Very very small.

When we were children we would go
Jonathan and I
With stones in hand to fill the hole
As we passed it by. (*Juvenilia* 29)

The simple nouns and verbs, the puerile transference in the hyppallage "lonely lane," and the simple urge to fill holes (in adulthood, the same desire is displaced to the body or a field of knowledge), all create an air of innocence, though the speaker has long moved on to more mature pursuits. As he remarks, "It's ever so long ago now / Since we passed that wall" (29).

The present reflects the past, even if through denial. But then, what Auden took from history was always inflected by the lessons of youth. As he wrote famously in "September 1, 1939," chronicling the incidents leading up to the German invasion of Poland: "I and the public know / What all schoolchildren learn, / Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return" (*SP* 86). No one more than a child has such an unsullied sense of fairness coupled with a consciousness of seemingly small but injurious acts.

As for the so-called childish nature of some of Auden's lyrics, this note was not a later divergence from his earlier style but rather a frequent aspect of his work, as a close look at the lyrics from Auden's "Twelve Songs" (1935-36) and "Ten Songs" (1939-47) reveals. The last of Auden's "Twelve Songs," opening "Some say that love's a little boy," has the cadence and logic of nursery rhymes, the questioning mode not of catechism but of children:

Light verse, poor girl, is under a sad weather;
 Except by Milne and persons of that kind
 She's treated as *démodé* altogether,
 It's strange and very unjust to my mind. (CP 80)

A precocious versatility with literary forms is an asset in the realm of light, though one risks being damned as “clever,” that all-too-mixed epithet the British accord their annoying wunderkind, implying “too clever by half.” As Christopher Isherwood noted of Auden: “You could say to him, ‘Please write me a double ballade on the virtues of a certain brand of toothpaste, which also contains at least ten anagrams on the names of well-known politicians, and of which the refrain is as follows. . . .’ Within twenty-four hours, your ballade would be ready – and it would be good” (*Tribute* 75).

Milne, though best known for Winnie the Pooh, was a prodigal contributor to *Granta* when at Cambridge, sold his first piece, a Sherlock Holmes parody, to *Vanity Fair* when he was twenty, and became an assistant editor of *Punch* when just twenty-four. As Ann Thwaite notes in *A. A. Milne: The Man Behind Winnie the Pooh*, Milne early on demonstrated a facile command of verse, just like Auden. While a university student, Milne chose to concentrate on mathematics; Auden focused for a while on biology. That Milne eventually received a Third Class degree, as did Auden in English language and literature, is also suggestive: both writers were busy in several other directions by the time they were graduated. As for Milne, he penned everything from light verse to mysteries, and in 1922, the *annus mirabilis* of High Modernism, he had five plays running in England and the United States.

Milne's two books of children's verse, *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We Are Six*, are still in print some eighty years after their first printing. The light whimsicality in such poems as “Buckingham Palace” (“Do you think the King knows all about *me*?” / “Sure to, dear, but it's time for tea” [*Young* 3]) sealed Milne's reputation with that half-dreaded commodity, a modern classic, while verses like “Disobedience” and “Rice Pudding” manage to conceal darker messages beneath the syntax of light verse: the opposed fears of abandonment and adult coercion. In “Disobedience,” James James Morrison Weatherby George Dupree's mother goes on a quick errand “to the end of town,” never to return, and though the tone is lighthearted, the import of the lines is ominous: “James James / Mor-

7. Because I've derived endless inspiration from a 1960 Richard Avedon photograph of Auden in which, trudging through a wintry street in lower Manhattan in tattered overcoat and filthy sneakers, his face half-veiled by snowflakes and wearing a slightly weary but determinedly alert expression, he stares straight ahead, ready for whatever new challenge might come his way. When we think of other poets engaged in similar strolls, very different pictures come to mind: Gerard de Nerval out walking his pet lobster; Pound sweeping through the streets with velvet cape and spiky shock of red hair; Stevens looking at dachshunds and imagining deer. Wonderfully vivid images all, but none of them matches, for me anyway, the humble wonder of this one.

8. Because I believe he presents contemporary poets with a model of poetic influence in which, as the Auden scholar Aidan Wasley writes, “the poet's belatedness is seen as a source of power rather than anxiety, enabling the poet to achieve originality, not through the agnostic sublimation and overthrow of influences, but through the conscious and professional acknowledgment, deployment, and utilization of them.”

9. Because Auden is one of the few artists of any genre who I seriously feel has made me not just a better poet, but a better, saner and wiser person. When I'm pondering a difficult decision, succumbing to self-pity, or pouting when something hasn't gone quite as I'd hoped – in other words just about every day of my life – I find great comfort in paging through my inner commonplace book of Auden's wise and generous Rules to Live By: “And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands.” “The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from, / Having nothing to hide.” “Find our mortal world enough.” “It is silly / To refuse the tasks of time / And, overlooking our lives, / Cry – ‘Miserable wicked me, / How interesting I am.’” “Love, or truth in any serious sense, / Like orthodoxy, is a reticence.” And of course the lines chosen for his plaque here in the Poet's Corner: “If equal affection cannot be / Let the more loving one be me.”

10. Because I agree utterly with the following lines from a lighthearted but astute poem by Chester Kallman:

Wystan is like the fire
That licks along the wood
Wystan is the desire
Of mankind for the good
Wystan is the poet
That makes the trees to grow
The trees don't know it
But Wystan thinks so.

I'd venture to guess that we all think so too.

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Auden and Milne

The poetry of W. H. Auden exhibits such a range that it can also arouse animus in those who dislike this poetic mode or that political stance. In fact, Auden has often been damned by association: his supposed fascist affiliations in "Spain," for instance, or his reliance on less-than-scientific psychologists. Orwell's denunciation, "Mr. Auden's brand of amorality is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled," has become famous, though too many critics gloss over what precedes the comment: "incidentally this poem is one of the few decent things that have been written about the Spanish war" (238). Auden's connections to shaman-like figures such as Homer Lane may have rendered his psychology suspect but aided his poetry. As Yeats once noted: "Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon. . . . I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi. They have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice" (25).

Others have faulted the postwar Auden for not writing quite like the prewar Auden. In another direction, Auden's lyrics have occasionally come under attack for their debt to nursery rhymes and children's literature—the overly familiar plaint, mockingly echoed by

Auden himself, "It's such a pity Wystan never grows up" (EA 190). Along these lines, here is the critic Roger Kimball clucking his tongue:

Taste is the lodestar of art, the inner principle that accounts for the decorum of the appropriately said. Increasingly, Auden's faculty of taste functioned accurately only in a risible or mocking mode. Given the right subject and the right form, he could be very funny. . . . But he had difficulty purging his poetry of that superciliousness. As Professor Ricks points out, this shows itself with lamentable consequences in his habit of irregular capitalization: "A Major Prophet taken Short," "a Perfect social Number," etc. The effect is unsettling, and ultimately unserious. Exactly how, Professor Ricks asks, does it differ from A.A. Milne's procedure with Winnie the Pooh: "A Good Hum, such as is Hummed Hopefully to Others"? (17)

What Kimball's asperity reveals is the all-too-common prejudice that links humor with triviality, not to mention the presence of academic snobbery: note the appeal to decorum and the unequal weight accorded to "Auden" versus "Professor Ricks." Clearly, Kimball means to damn Auden by association with Milne, or rather, by quoting another critic who decades earlier found this resemblance distasteful, though a closer look at Ricks' review from *The New Statesman* shows a follow-up to his rhetorical question: "Mainly in that Auden knows that we suspect it of being elephantine, and dares us—go on—into accusing him of not suspecting it too" (Haffenden 435).

The problem with such associations is that they confuse method with matter. A light subject must be paired with a light form, runs the argument. Yet Auden's appropriation of Milne's style in both sensibility and prosodic measure is precisely what makes certain of his poems so arresting, and all the more poignant when dealing with weighty subjects. Nowhere is this technique more evident than in modernism, with its high-low approach, where Joyce mixes flatulence and afflatus, or T. S. Eliot combines a ribald snatch of ballad with a swatch of Dante. In postmodernism, the game is played similarly, but with a ludic or self-parodying emphasis. Auden rests, if that's the right verb, somewhere between the two -isms in tenor while his approach is the opposite of earnest. As he proclaims in "Letter to Lord Byron":