

The  
**W. H. Auden Society**  
**Newsletter**

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## 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.



## Auden's Influence

Aesthetics evolve as much by subtraction as addition, as much by forgetfulness and denial as by invention and revival. Reputations wax and wane, and a glance at some late 20th century anthologies would reveal, for instance, that E.E. Cummings and Lawrence Ferlinghetti are in critical decline; Anne Sexton is almost gone, Robert Lowell has been downsized and Frank O'Hara elevated. Pound is less read than ever; Stein's relevance has increased.

Even W.H. Auden, who gave poetic language its "modernist" flavor as much as Eliot did, and who was in many ways the quintessential English poet of the twentieth century, is subject to the flux of taste. And Auden's poems are not much favored as a model with young poets right now.

This disfavor is somewhat puzzling, because so many aspects of Auden's sensibility and talent would seem to suit contemporary taste so well: his bantering wit, his lexical wordplay and clashing of Latinate and Saxon dictions; his interest in elaborate poetic forms, his intensely figured surfaces; his sensitivity to the economic and social dimensions of human identity; they all make sense in the current climate of sensibility. Today's poetry zeitgeist is a veritable zoo of highly mannered styles, epigrammatic wit, verbal and intellectual sophistication—all dimensions of Auden's extraordinary palette.

It's easy enough to detect an Audenesque presence in the work of young, hyper-verbal poets like Matthea Harvey or Joshua Clover. Auden's ingenious affection for the plasticity of language, his love of the declarative, the rubbing together of public and private, secular and sacred dictions, are widespread contemporary stylistic features. To illustrate the resemblance, here is an excerpt from Section VII of Auden's poem "The Quest":

Fresh addenda are published every day  
To the encyclopedia of the Way.

Linguistic notes and scientific explanations,  
And texts for schools with modernised spelling and illustrations.

Now everyone knows the hero must choose the old horse,  
Abstain from liquor and sexual intercourse

And look for a stranded fish to be kind to:  
Now everyone thinks he could find, if he had a mind to,

The way through the waste to the chapel in the rock  
For a vision of the Triple Rainbow or the Astral Clock.

Here's a contrasting passage from Mathea Harvey's poem "Minarets and Pinnacles":

Ties to God had proven fickle – first the prayer mats  
were put in the pantry in case the maid happened to upset  
the olive oil & then the gold podiums seemed perfect  
for those lengthy articles about real estate & roof repairs...

At night, tucked into their towers, they dreamt of falling,  
like most people do, but though they'd been told the tale  
of Babel, their situation was admittedly different:  
this was each man and his minaret.

The declarative discursive tone, the sonic wit, the crisp, self-conscious use of public and private vocabularies which describe social life, the typifying (rather than individualizing) intelligence, the comedy of manners – all of these features seem Audenesque to me. Why then isn't Auden on more college reading lists, or commonly acknowledged as a contemporary mentor?

In fact, it is not Auden's sophistication or humor that is suspect to the contemporary eye: it's Auden's rationality, his utter clarity, and his worn-on-the-sleeve humanism that puts him outside the zone of contemporary hipness. Auden simply cares too much about, and makes too much, sense; he is too crisp a speaker to appeal to the current cadre of avant-garde sensibility. Digresser he is, but not errant enough to be hip. The contemporary general disbelief in knowability itself, our corollary preoccupation with the instability of language and the unreliability of ideas, all make Auden problematical; or even more damnably, "obvious."

Auden's sin, in the church of the new, is believing that the big forces which drive nature and us, which manipulate us, our culture and laws, can be made conscious and recognizable. That an individual consciousness, however much of a pawn it might be, can fumble its way to recognition, and thereby aspire to choice. If the world, and

even human nature are Sick (one of his most recurrent motifs), Auden believed that our physicians were available and competent – Marx, Darwin, Christ, Freud. In his brilliant elegy for Sigmund Freud, he describes,

For every day they die  
among us, those who were doing us some good,  
who knew it was never enough but  
hoped to improve a little by living.

Even more brilliant in that poem is his description of psychoanalytic method:

All he did all he did was to remember  
like the old and be honest like children.

He wasn't clever at all: he merely told  
the unhappy Present to recite the Past  
like a poetry lesson till sooner  
or later it faltered at the line where

long ago the accusations had begun.

Not surprisingly it is through the work of John Ashbery that Auden is being, by proxy, transmitted. Ashbery's unresolved, mysterious enigma-texts, his absurdist non-sequitur, his insistence that poetry exists in the hurdy-gurdy disconnect, the ground fog of mingled tones and collaged rhetorics, rather than the certainty of assertions – these are the convictions have been adopted and adapted by our young poets.

Fortunately the wise are always self-inoculated by canny expectations, and no one understood the vanities and errata of history and fame better than Auden, how "the words of the dead are modified in the guts of the living." As he said of Freud, Auden is now "a whole climate of opinion" and his work will be rediscovered again and again:

Time will say nothing but I told you so.  
Perhaps the roses really want to grow,

The vision seriously intends to stay;  
If I could tell you I would let you know.

TONY HOAGLAND

*Tony Hoagland won the 2005 Mark Twain Award from the Poetry Foundation, for humor in American poetry. His books of poems include What Narcissism Means to Me, Donkey Gospel and Hard Rain. Real Sofistika-shun, a collection of essays on poetry and craft, was published in 2006. He's been the recipient of grants from the NEA, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Folger Shakespeare Library. He teaches at the University of Houston.*

## **“Everyone in England is waiting for the war to start”: Rediscovering *The Way to the Sea***

### *Introduction*

On leave from his job as a GPO scriptwriter and staying at his parents' house, Auden wrote to his brother John on 24 February 1936:

I don't think, somehow, I shall go back to the film unit. There's not the faintest chance of making the kind of film I should like, there's no time to do anything else, and the atmosphere is exactly like a public school. I shall try and get evening adult classes, preferably in the Midlands.<sup>1</sup>

Despite his disenchantment Auden would resume working in the documentary film industry later that year, though not for the GPO, and the result was *The Way to the Sea*, an extraordinary and neglected work, and the subject of this article.

A highlight of the Auden/Britten collaborations of the mid-1930s, *The Way to the Sea*, has remained virtually unknown to Auden scholars and cultural historians alike, so its recent release in DVD format by the British Film Institute is cause for celebration.<sup>2</sup> Following two

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<sup>1</sup> RSL: *The Royal Society of Literature Review*, 2008 (p17).

<sup>2</sup> The British Film Institute's DVD of *Night Mail* (BFIVD522) is available from [www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk) (ISBN/EAN 5035673005224). A fine digital restoration of the title film. *The Way to the Sea* is included as an unheralded extra.



public screenings at London's National Film Theatre to enthusiastic audiences last year, now is a good time to take a closer look at this "lost" documentary, commissioned by the Southern Railway from Paul Rotha's production company, Strand.

*A note on the text*

Hitherto only Auden's credited End Commentary has been published,<sup>3</sup> but as will become clear there is much of interest in the first section. Below, for the first time in print, is the commentary in full.

The layout of the first section is my own, based on the original soundtrack. I have attempted to indicate the relation of commentary to image by setting the text out as a sort of blank verse. The second section is transcribed, appropriately, as conventional prose.

The third section, Auden's poetic commentary, is as set out in Mitchell and Mendelson, with some minor amendments to spelling and punctuation, as well as a key change to one word ("tidy" is corrected to "tiny" in the closing lines). The lines in square brackets do not appear on the final soundtrack but can be found in Britten's own transcription.

*The Way to the Sea*

Strand Films for Southern Railway

Producer: Paul Rotha A.R.F.P.

Director: J. B. Holmes A.R.F.P.

Music: Benjamin Britten

End commentary: W. H. Auden

Photography: George Noble, John Taylor A.R.F.P.

Commentators: Geoffrey Tandy, Norman Wooland

A Strand Film, produced by the STRAND FILM company limited.

Recorded at IMPERIAL SOUND STUDIOS

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<sup>3</sup> The two existing transcriptions of the End Commentary appear in Mitchell, Donald: *Britten & Auden in the Thirties* (Faber & Faber 1981; new edn, Boydell Press 2000; pp 88-93) and *Complete Plays and other dramatic writings* (ed. Edward Mendelson, Princeton University Press 1988).

Rome sends her legions into the furthest corners of the discovered world, and her ships are crowding English waters. (*Caption: A.D. 286*)

Some of them are pushing up into a lonely creek, on the south coast of Britain, in Hampshire.

In this natural harbour a fort is built.

But the power of Rome fades. Her ships sail away. The fort is deserted.

The Danes!

Foes they are, fierce beyond other foes. The sea is their school of war, and the storm their friend.

Alfred the Great! (*Caption: A.D. 857*)

He gave orders for building long ships, swifter and steadier than those of the Danes. These met the enemy off the Isle of Wight. A great battle was fought and the Danes were defeated, all their ships being either taken or sunk.

This is the beginning of the British Navy.

Alfred the Great has laid the foundation upon which others shall build.

Through the coming centuries the Navy will be forged into a great weapon and, as it grows, there will grow with it, and for it, the town of Portsmouth! (*Caption: 1545*)

There is, at this point of the haven, Portsmouth town, and a great round tower, whence runs, for the length of a furlong, a mud wall armed with timber.

King Henry the Eighth has come to see his new fortress at Southsea.

Inland, along the seventy-odd miles between London and Portsmouth, runs the old road—the way to the sea! A royal road, down which for seven hundred years, the kings and queens of England have passed. Along which, huge lumbering wagons carry men to the ships.

The Eighteenth century! (*Caption: The 18th century*)

A glorious age in the history of the Navy, whereon, under the good providence of God, the wealth, safety and strength of the kingdom chiefly depends. An age in which the men of Portsmouth can call their town “the glory and bulwark of our kingdoms”.

A royal dockyard. A great harbour. An anchorage for the fleet.

Along the way to the sea new and better roads are made, and Portsmouth is brought into closer touch with London by the stage coach. In 1784 His Majesty’s mails are first carried by coach to Portsmouth.

(*Caption: A.D. 1805*)

At two o’clock in the afternoon, on Saturday September the fourteenth, 1805, Lord Nelson, wishing to avoid the crowds who awaited him, embarked from Southsea beach rather than from the Sally port and set sail on his last voyage which ended at Trafalgar.

Nelson has gone. But there are still fine ships sailing in and out of Portsmouth harbour. And still the mail comes down by coach.

But a new age is dawning. An age of steam. Of industry. Of railways.

As the years pass, travel becomes ever faster. More and more trains are put into service, and the time between London and Portsmouth is cut down to ninety minutes! (*Caption: 1935*)

One hundred and sixty-nine steam trains a week!

Forty-four thousand passengers on one Saturday and three million passengers in a year—along the steam and steel road to Portsmouth!

And the crowds get larger every year.

To meet this problem one thing only can be done – electrify!

So the trains can travel faster than at present, and run more regularly.

2

*The work of electrifying a main line is a long and difficult job. First, where is the power coming from? From the great power network known as the National Grid. The Grid has two substations close to the line, but they must be enlarged to cope with new demands. New switchgear; another transformer; new control gear.*

*To convert the high power of the Grid to a form in which it can be used for the railway, eighteen special sub-stations must be built at regular intervals all the way along the line. The sub-stations are automatic. No staff is needed to run them. To control them, two central control rooms must be built. Each sub-station has its own panel, which tells the control rooms how it is working, and enables it to be shut down if necessary.*

*The trains pick up this power from a conductor rail. Two hundred and forty miles of this rail must be laid, on 150,000 insulators. Each length of rail is electrically connected – or “bonded” as it’s called – by a copper connection. The rails which carry the train are also bonded, so that the whole line will form one continuous electrical circuit.*

*So, after two years’ work, the way to the sea is electrified.*

3

*(Caption: 1937)*

The line waits,

The trains wait.

The drivers are waiting:

Waiting for power.

On the terminus now every kind of person is converging, each with  
his own idea of freedom.

People who work,

People who read adventure stories or understand algebra,  
People who would like to be rich or brilliant at tennis,  
People like you and me, liable to catch cold and fond of their food,  
Are brought all together here by a common wish:  
A desire for the sea!

They gather,  
They fight for the corner seat facing the engine.  
Red changes to green.  
They're off!

A signal box.  
A power station.

We pass the areas of greatest congestion; the homes of those who  
have the least power of choice.  
We approach the first trees, the lawns and the fresh paint, district of  
the by-pass and the season ticket.

Power which helps us to escape is also helping those who cannot get  
away just now,  
Helping them to keep respectable,  
Helping them to impress the critical eye of a neighbour,  
Helping them to entertain their friends,  
Helping them to feed their husbands, swept safely home each eve-  
ning as the human tide recedes from London.

But we, more fortunate, pass on.  
We seek the sea!

White factories stand rigid in the smokeless air.  
The pylon drives through the sootless field with power to create and  
to refashion,  
Power to perform on materials the most delicate and the most drastic  
operations.

Looking forward, out into the country, passing the wild and the dis-  
ciplined lives,  
The sun has not lost its importance:

The growth of the living is, as ever, incalculable.  
But for all the new power can do to cleanse and to illuminate,  
To lessen fatigue and to move deep cutters, milkers or separators,  
It is already available.

Up Haslemere Bank—a trial of strength in the years of steam, but  
today of small account.  
Over the hoop of the hill, and down,  
Fifty, sixty, seventy miles an hour!  
To the last straight run to the rolling plain of ships and the path of the  
gull.  
We seek the sea!

[Nor is power absent from the shore—  
It is here in the lamp on the sea front,  
In the cables above the streets,  
In private homes and places of public amusement and business.]

Here is a harbour, a dockyard, equipment for the construction of  
fleets,  
A scene of pilgrimage to the student of history and the curious  
stranger.  
[A place of salutes to kings and their counsellors,  
Both the dead and the living.]  
We seek an island!

All kinds of people:  
The married who have begun to get on each other's nerves,  
The lonely, daring to look for an amazing romance,  
The consciously beautiful, certain of easy conquests,  
The careworn, the unrewarded, the childlike:  
They embark for the pleasant island, each with his special hope:  
To build sand-castles and dream-castles,  
To eat out of doors,  
To hold hands in the shadow of a fort,  
To exchange confidences with strangers,  
To read, to relax,  
Or just to be and not to think at all.

Here are all the varieties of pleasure, permission and condolence:  
For the body a favourable weather, the caress of sunlight and the  
gradual doze;  
For the athletic and beautiful the fullest opportunities to be active and  
to be admired;  
For the sedentary the leisure for reminiscence and reverie;  
For the children the happiness of the immediate present, the romping  
hours;  
For all the pleasures of the air, the waters and the places.  
Do what you will:  
Be extravagant,  
Be lucky,  
Be clairvoyant,  
Be amazing,  
Be a sport or an angel,  
Imagine yourself as a courtier, or as a queen.  
Accept your freedom.

We seek a spectacle!  
We are all invited to inspect the defences of our dreams, to review the  
taciturn aggressive devices.  
Let the day commemorate the successful accomplishment of our past,  
Let it praise the skill of designers and the anonymous devotion of  
mechanics;  
Let it celebrate the artless charm of the far-travelled sailor.

Let the fun be furious,  
Let the intricate ferocious machinery be only amusing.  
Let the nature of glory be a matter for friendly debate among all these  
people,  
Both the just and the unjust,  
People like you and me – wanting to live.

Night.  
The spectacle fades.  
The tiny lives depart with their human loves.  
Only the stars, the oceans and machines remain:  
The dark and the involuntary powers.

### *Some preliminary thoughts*

This short film is in three parts, with three different narrative modes employing two commentators.

Parts 1 and 3 are linked by Britten's score and by certain thematic continuities.

Part 3, the End Commentary with which Auden is explicitly credited, amounts to some of his most substantial work in documentary. I am going to suggest, however, that Auden's contribution extends beyond the End Commentary, and that the work as a whole deserves consideration as the type of film he wanted to make.

The Southern Railway, sponsors of the film, were pioneers in corporate branding. Auden would recall, in *The Cave of Making*, that he and MacNeice "came to consciousness" around the time (in 1921) the railway's locomotives were named "after knights in Malory", an example of the company's success in communicating romantic notions of travel to its mostly suburban customers, in this case by giving its engines names like *King Uther*, *Excalibur*, *Melisande*, *Sir Mador de la Porte* and (a favourite with schoolboy train spotters) *Joyous Gard*.

In the previous year the Southern Railway had commissioned two promotional films from Strand (*Beside the Seaside* and *Southern Sunshine*, both directed by Marion Grierson), but with *The Way to the Sea* the company got more than it had bargained for. This was certainly no *Night Mail*, celebrating the efficiency and modernity of a public service. Nor did it resemble the artless and workmanlike films directed by Grierson. Rather, this was a troubling meditation on power, individualism, responsibility and freedom. It was also complex, whimsical and ironic—a deconstruction of the documentary process and a commentary on itself.

Despite extensive coverage of Auden's brief time in the documentary movement, very little has been written about this film over the years and one forms the impression that those who have engaged with it are familiar with the partial transcription and not the film as a whole. This is unsurprising given the relative unavailability of the film, but any viewing will confirm that the text works with (and sometimes against) the image and score to produce its surprising and subversive effects. Read in isolation Auden's commentary may seem aloof or "Weimar-like" (in Humphrey Carpenter's phrase) but in its proper setting, accompanied by image and score, the effect is subtler and more ambiguous.



In the letter to his brother John already quoted Auden wrote: "Everyone in England is waiting for the war to start." This pre-Munich perspective of 1936 may be less evident to us now – but this superficially sunny film is overshadowed with sombre notions of conflict and destruction (especially the final frames at sea), and it is reasonable to accept Mitchell's view that the film is in part a thinly-disguised call for rearmament. Of particular interest is the way this film consistently avoids the established documentary approach – it doesn't engage with the economic and natural forces that condition an abstract humanity but attempts (albeit with only partial success) to articulate the feelings, fears, doubts and assurances of "people like you and me". In the last reel, the accumulating images of uniformed yet individualised men against a backdrop of colossal ships and guns are references to conflicts past and future, to destruction and loss, to martial mythologies.

As the film unfolded the 1936 audience may well have grown increasingly uneasy. Were they having their legs pulled? Wasn't the tone just a little *too* bombastic, a little *too* high-flown and rhetorical? Rotha would later confirm to Donald Mitchell that the intention throughout the film was ironic and subversive, although the modern viewer may find it hard to judge how and when these aims are achieved. We tend to colonise films from this period with our own ironic privileged perspectives and thus risk missing the *intended* ironies of the original.

What I suggest is this: we witness, in this film an attempt by Auden and his collaborators both to create and impose a structure on some inherently inert material (i.e. the ostensible subject of main line electrification). We also see an attempt (led, I propose, by Auden), to re-direct the documentary movement's agenda and to create something more in line with the type of film Auden wanted to make. The results may be patchy and the intention sometimes obscures – but there are nevertheless many fine moments.

Take a close look, for instance, at the single shot accompanying the lines, "The consciously beautiful, certain of easy conquests,/The careworn, the unrewarded, the child-like". This is a frame – one of many – when the image and the spoken commentary work perfectly in unison as figures boarding the Solent ferry simply step into shot, right on cue, overseen by "the consciously beautiful" crewman: the careworn (an elderly couple), the unrewarded (a very nondescript pair) and finally some children. It's elegant, subtle and effective. It

also rhymes nicely with an earlier shot of passengers shuffling towards their train at Waterloo, which in turn is later mirrored in the movement of bottles through some apparatus. It is impossible and indeed unproductive to say with any degree of certainty, which came first—the image or the text. It's enough to say that such results—and there are plenty of other instances—foreground the collaborative dynamic of the documentary movement.

I'd like to suggest two unacknowledged sources exploited by Auden—one visual and the other structural.

Firstly, there are visual sequences clearly owing something to the French director Jean Vigo's influential debut *A propos de Nice* (1930), which similarly contrasted the manic frivolity of promenading tourists with the looming presence of warships moored offshore. The montage sequence in *The Way to the Sea* beginning with the line "Do what you will..." is revealing in this respect, and it's tempting to suppose that Auden would have seen and admired Vigo's work at a Film Society screening.

Secondly, Auden's decision in his End Commentary "to push the rail some stations nearer" beyond Portsmouth, crossing the Solent to the Isle of Wight, may well have been prompted by his reading of, and interest in, the island's resident laureate Tennyson's epic poem *The Voyage of Maeldune* (which Auden would include in his 1944 anthology of the poet's work).

Auden repeatedly uses nine-fold patterns in his commentary (a pattern he would later claim to have sourced in *Maeldune*). I'd invite the curious reader to note that the word "power" occurs nine times in the complete End Commentary and the name "Portsmouth" nine times in the prose section. Such a striking structural symmetry may be the residue of an early decision by Auden when getting to grips with his scriptwriting brief. There are other nine-fold anaphoric progressions in the verse section: the list of people who converge at the terminus; the types of activity available to those who arrive at the "pleasant island"; the injunctions that follow "Do what you will..." and so on.

Without more evidence based on further research it's impossible to do more than suggest that the first part of *The Way to the Sea's* commentary should be at least in part ascribed to Auden. Here in summary are my reasons:

- (a) The distinctive quality of the prose. There are adroit pastiches of Anglo-Saxon and 18th century English, enhanced by Brit-

ten's witty score. I can think of no other documentary from this period with such a distinctive and literary prose commentary. Certainly there's nothing like it in the other work of director Jack Holmes.<sup>4</sup>

- (b) The lack of any other credit for the script. Mendelson confirms (*Plays and Other Dramatic Writings*, Princeton University Press, 1988 p. 670) that Auden scrupulously insisted on sharing any credit equally wherever a co-author was involved. This (circumstantial) evidence may apply here.
- (c) The historical dates which loom up in the prose section, echoing Tennyson's *Maeldune* subtitle "Founded on an Irish Legend A.D. 700" and giving the enterprise its subversive historicity.
- (d) The structural symmetry (the aforementioned matching nine-fold iterations of Portsmouth/power; the Isle of Wight references in parts 1 and 3), and the poetic reformulation of prose elements e.g.
  - And the crowds get larger every year (part 1)
  - The growth of the living is, as ever, incalculable (part 3)
  - A royal dockyard. A great harbour. An anchorage for the fleet (part 1)
  - Here is a harbour, a dockyard, equipment for the construction of fleets (part 3)
- (e) The use of visual superimposition in both sections; in part 1 to valorise the Battle of Trafalgar and in part 3 to portray ironically the daily battle "to keep respectable" through the use of electrical appliances—a vacuum cleaner, a kettle, an oven etc. This ironic contrast of past martial glory and present domestic calm is summed up in the bathetic line 'They fight for the corner seat facing the engine'.
- (f) The sheer oddness of the film (regardless of any ironic intent), which departs from established documentary convention but, it could be argued, reflects Auden's view that the "story of a documentary film takes place essentially where

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<sup>4</sup> Generous selections of work by Jack Holmes, Paul Rotha and many others can be found on a new 4-DVD collection from the BFI entitled *Land of Promise* (ISBN/EAN: 5035673007563).

the public and the private spheres intersect". As Auden says in his review of Rotha's book *Documentary Film* "the private life and the emotions are facts like any others".

Questions of attribution are resistant to resolution in the context of 1930s documentary film because the credits seldom tell the full story, and as Nicholas Jenkins has astutely noted, Auden was "adept at integrating the flow of public commissions into the private, inner dynamic of his evolving ideas".<sup>5</sup> When looking at attribution we should therefore consider links to other Auden poems of the period, which reflect or carry forward preoccupations at the centre of the two commentaries.

For instance, the unused verse commentary for Strand's *Beside the Seaside*, published as *On This Island*, which describes ships engaged in "voluntary" errands, implying, as Fuller notes, the potential for future coercion.<sup>6</sup> We might compare the foreboding "involuntary powers" associated with darkness and conflict at the end of *The Way to the Sea*. Auden would thriftily recycle this phrase in the lyric *Lullaby*—"Noons of dryness find you fed/By the involuntary powers", this later example glossed by Fuller as "powers not of the human will, i.e. providence". In much of his writing of the period, Auden is concerned with the fragility of individual personal happiness in the shadow of some unspecified but imminent external threat; a dread which underlies the End Commentary but which also, subtly, informs the first section.

The most hauntingly memorable part of *The Way to the Sea* is the final section (from "We seek a spectacle!" onwards). The commentator's tone shifts from the bright and engaged to the solemn and impersonal while images of tremendous military hardware contrast starkly with sunlit shots of women and children. The day-trippers—"people like you and me"—gradually form into crowds marching to Britten's incongruously merry tune and milling around Nelson's flagship which signals the famous call to arms that "England expects..." There's a sudden cut to naval manoeuvres at sea, with gunfire, billowing smoke and exploding depth charges accompanied by the sepulchral invocation of those involuntary powers. It's an extraordinary sequence—unnerving, unexpected and compelling. Needless to say

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<sup>5</sup> W.H. Auden Society Newsletter, 10-11, September 1993 p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> John Fuller, *W.H. Auden: a Commentary* (Faber & Faber 2007 p.152).

we have long since forgotten anything to do with mere railway electrification.

Whatever Auden's degree of involvement in the script, this bizarre, engaging, ambitious and absorbing film represents a substantial part of his achievement in cinema, and should be regarded – alongside *Coal Face* and *Night Mail* – as a key, if uncharacteristic, work of the documentary movement.

DAVID COLLARD

*David Collard works for an educational charity in London and is currently working on a book about Auden's link to the documentary film movement. For their help in the development of this piece he thanks Elizabeth Barrett, Susie Bayford, Dr Tim Boon, Katherine Bucknell, Farnoosh Fathi, Robert Forsythe, Professor Edward Mendelson, Ailsa and Ralph Montagu, Jez Stewart (BFI). Particular thanks to Professor Annie Janowitz.*

### **Auden at the University of North Carolina, 1939: A Reminiscence by Junius Irving Scales**

*On April 4, 1939, a little more than two months after his arrival in the United States, Auden addressed the Human Relations Institute at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill on the political crisis in Europe.*

*The following account of that occasion is from a memoir by Junius Irving Scales, written with Richard Nickson: Cause at Heart: A Former Communist Remembers, foreword by Telford Taylor (University of Georgia Press, 1987). In 1939 a nineteen-year-old student at the University, Scales joined the Communist Party and by 1956 when he left the Party disillusioned by Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes, he had been for several years the chairman of the North and South Carolinas district of the Party. A victim of McCarthyism and the anti-Communist hysteria of the 1950s, Scales was convicted in 1955 of being a Communist Party member and sentenced to six years in a federal prison. He eventually served fifteen months before his sentence was commuted by President Kennedy in 1962. Scales died in 2002. – Note by ROBERT RUSHMORE*

Another visitor [to Chapel Hill in 1939] was W. H. Auden, the British poet, who had been invited to speak at the Human Relations Institute and had been pitted against one Lawrence Dennis (who billed himself

as “America’s number one intellectual Fascist”) [a New York banker and economist, according to a *New York Times* report of the event. 5 April 1939]. Auden made an ass of his opponent by a skillful combination of wit, reason, humanism, and a remarkably ingratiating way with the audience. His costume of shapeless tweed trousers and a baggy, unmatching tweed jacket looked as though it had been pilfered from a scarecrow after a season in sun and rain. Standing quite properly, he began his talk at a lectern before about twenty-five hundred people. As he warmed up, he hugged the top of the lectern with both arms and pushed his head forward, his unruly reddish thatch making him look like an aggressive rooster. Gradually he wound a leg around the middle of the lectern; then he uncoiled that one and tried the other. It was warm, so he unbuttoned his collar, slid his tie down, and removed his jacket. He abandoned the lectern altogether, advanced to a flight of stairs leading into the audience, and sat down on the top step. He concluded his remarks with his long legs crossed and drifting down one side of the stairs while he supported himself on his arm, leaving his right hand free for an occasional gesture. He received probably the greatest ovation given at the three-day institute.

I had met him that morning at Ab’s bookstore [Milton Abernethy’s Intimate Bookshop, a Chapel Hill landmark from the 1930s to the 1960s] when, having arrived by bus, he’d dropped in to ask directions to Memorial Hall [a large auditorium at the University]. Recognizing him from his picture, I’d greeted him in some awe: he was my favorite living poet after Eliot and the one closest to my own political outlook. I’d escorted him across campus to the hall, having left word for Lee [and Irwin and Danny (see below):leftist student friends of Scales] and some of my other cronies to join me there.

After Auden’s triumph, I introduced him to my friends and we all piled into Danny’s car to give the poet a guided tour of Chapel Hill, sandwiching him between Danny and me in the front seat. Just as the tour ended and we parked in front of the bookshop, I felt a tremendous pinch on the behind which could only have come from Auden. After my first amazement, I suddenly realized that Auden was homosexual, and blushed fiery; red. When he saw that I was embarrassed, he passed the whole thing off as if it had never happened, and we all went to lunch in a nearby cafe. There we spent the afternoon (with me discreetly seated on the opposite side of the ta-

ble), listening to Auden's engaging talk about poets, poetry, and politics.

Although he had made no anti-Communist remarks in his speech, in private conversation he made no secret of his acute disillusionment with Communism, even though, he said, he still liked some Communists. That delighted Lee and Irwin and disappointed most of the rest. After seeing him off on the bus in the early evening, I regretted that I hadn't been able to get Auden to elaborate on the reasons for his disgust of Communism.

JUNIUS IRVING SCALES

*Note: For a summary of Auden's lecture at North Carolina, see Edward Mendelson, Later Auden (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999), p. 41.*

## Book Review

**Rachel Wetzsteon, *Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden's Sources*. New York: Routledge, 2007.**

Readers of Rachel Wetzsteon's prize-winning poems will already know of both her admiration for Auden and the fruitful influence of his work on her own. Her elegy, "In Memory of W.H. Auden," from her 1998 volume *Home and Away*, resonantly reflected, in alcaics borrowed from Auden's own elegy for Freud, the whole climate of Auden-influenced poetic opinion under which younger poets like Wetzsteon herself have found their own distinctive voices: "You have taught us / not how to follow in your footsteps, but / how to carve out paths for ourselves." Now readers of Wetzsteon's first critical book can see how wonderfully deep her knowledge and astute appreciation of that influence truly is, as she extends the poetic conversation backward in time, showing how the poet she credits with helping to form her voice in turn discovered his with the help of his own gallery of "influential ghosts." Wetzsteon's book joins an encouraging trend in recent Auden scholarship, adding an important contribution to the increasing number of recent and forthcoming books—including Susannah Gottlieb's *Regions of Sorrow* (2003), Arthur Kirsch's *Auden and Christianity* (2005), Sherrill Tippins's *February House* (2005), Stephen Burt's edition of *Randall Jarrell on W.H.*

Auden (2005), Peter Gwiazda's *W.H. Auden and James Merrill* (2007), and Nicholas Jenkins's *The Island* (2008), to name just a few – which place Auden in context and conversation with a perspective-altering array of other writers, thinkers, and artists, and which inquire in new ways after the complex process of poetic influence itself.

The book traces, with impressive clarity, sympathy, and insight, Auden's own engagement with his sources in support of the book's central argument that "Auden's most crucial precursors were those with whom he argued most intricately." The first and most important of those poetic influences, as readers of Auden's essay "A Literary Transference" know, is Thomas Hardy, and Wetzsteon offers a sustained and compelling reading of Auden's assimilation of, and constructive arguments with, Hardy's poetic example. Noting in particular Auden's adoption of what he called Hardy's "hawk's vision" – with its lofty, analytical perspective on the malaise-filled world below – in poem after poem in his early career, including most notably "Consider this and in our time" (with its famous second line, "As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman"), Wetzsteon shows in an illuminating series of readings of Hardy-derived Auden poems the complex calculus through which a poet's functional involvement with the work of a predecessor can yield an authentic, distinct, and new poetic voice. Wetzsteon demonstrates how, throughout his career, Auden used Hardy instrumentally for his own poetic ends, including, as she describes it later-career "anti-hawk" poems like "In Praise of Limestone," to critique, correct, or revise his own earlier poetic perspective. Auden's career-long arguments with Hardy, Wetzsteon convincingly shows, are arguments with himself. Rather than being a case of one poet struggling to overcome the overpowering influence of another, we see how Auden finds Hardy *useful* for what he needs to say, either in his early career as a hawk-visions big-picture diagnostician, or later on when he finds himself rejecting that Olympian view, grounding himself in late-career firmly in the earthly, bodily, and domestic. And it's in this context that the broader significance of Wetzsteon's analysis of Auden's relation to Hardy becomes clear, and *Influential Ghosts* opens up important questions not only about how we think about Auden's construction of his own poetic identity, but about poetic influence more generally. Taking on the Bloomian model of agonistic influence in which the individual talent finds his or her place in the tradition by overthrowing the smothering influence of a precursor, Wetzsteon finds in Auden a powerful counterexample:



“Auden’s ongoing dialogue with Hardy was hardly a battle, and ... their relationship therefore serves as a healthy corrective to critics who tell the story of poetic influence as one of bitter rivalry and helpless, involuntary servitude.” Suggestively framing their relations less as a Freudian struggle than as an “on-again, off-again love affair,” she persuasively contends that poetic influence can be seen as “a far more benign, and – above all – conscious process than it is often taken to be.”

The rest of the book explores this provocative premise across a range of related but distinct aspects of Auden’s poetic practice, including his “affairs” with other poets besides Hardy, from Horace to Sidney to Rossetti to Arnold to Winthrop Mackworth Praed, demonstrating Auden’s ecumenical approach to the poetic past and how his strategic use of one influence for one purpose didn’t preclude the considered deployment of another for a different poetic task, even in the same poem: “In Auden’s poetic pantheon, there was always room for people to meet and mingle.” In the second chapter, Wetzsteon connects this idea to Auden’s engagement with the history of poetic form, articulating Auden’s use of what she helpfully terms “structural allusion” by which he “often alludes to entire poems in order to revise them on their own terms,” as in the example of “Get There if You Can,” in which Auden uses the structure and thematics of “Locksley Hall” to critique the argument of Tennyson’s poem. The third chapter similarly addresses Auden’s famous revisions of the conventions of the elegy, offering valuable new readings of familiar touchstones like “In Memory of Sigmund Freud,” “At the Grave of Henry James,” and, most notably, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats.” Wetzsteon insightfully connects Auden’s revision of elegiac tradition with his own habit of revising himself, as in his elimination of the apostrophic “O” (an elegiac commonplace from “Lycidas” and “Adonais”) in later editions of the Yeats elegy, which further asserted his uncowed relation to both Yeats and elegiac convention itself, and finding in the post-publication addition of the second section of the Yeats elegy – with its valleys, executives, and ranches of isolation – evidence of Auden’s desire to newly emphasize the *Americanness* of the poem’s perspective: “He seems to want to suggest that his new ideas about the connection between art and life, as well as his move to America, are just as important to the poem as Yeats’s death.” The fourth and final chapter of the book brings these analytical questions to bear on the philosophical content of Auden’s work, tracing the

poetic history of Auden's enthusiasm for, and eventual estrangement from, Kierkegaardian existentialism. Tracing the early appearance of Kierkegaardian thought in poems like "Like a Vocation" and "Leap Before You Look," and continuing through his sustained engagement with Christian existentialism in *New Year Letter*, *For the Time Being*, and *The Sea and the Mirror*, and into his later rejection of Kierkegaard's denial of bodily wisdom in very late poems like "No, Plato, No" and his 1968 essay "A Knight of Doleful Countenance," Wetzsteon shows how Auden uses philosophical ideas in the same way he uses past poets, poetic forms, and poetic genres: He takes them in, tries them on, discovers the parts of himself they help illuminate or express, and internalizes them in his ongoing process of self-articulation and critique. The words of the dead get modified in his own poetic gut, and those he admires become a part of him, if only to continue to provoke him or reveal retrospectively the incompleteness of their, and his, vision. For Auden, poetic identity is the ever-evolving project and product of an ongoing imaginative, intellectual, and moral conversation and debate with the voices of his moment and our collective past. Readers of *Influential Ghosts* will be delightedly grateful to Wetzsteon, whose keen poetic ear allows us to listen in on that remarkable conversation.

AIDAN WASLEY

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## Two Non-Events and Two Encounters

There are no fireworks and certainly no revelations here. I want only to recall a few random points of connection with Mr. Auden—together with two missed opportunities. These are trivia and meant to be. Auden, were he here, would recall only bits of Segment (4).

(1) I did *not* really meet Auden at Ann Arbor, as my graduate work at the University of Michigan was accomplished a good deal later than when he was teaching there in the early forties. But there was a little party in later years at a U. of M. art department function at which I first shook his hand. That must have been in the early

fifties. An acquaintance, Strowan Robertson, was there at the gathering and asked me then—or was it later (I have only slight recollection)—to visit him in New York. Strowan, a Canadian student at Ann Arbor and later active in film, television, and theater in Canada, had continued to be close to Auden who, I read somewhere, would visit him now and again in Ottawa. As an undergraduate, a decade earlier, Strowan had lived in the same house with Auden and Chester Kallman in Ann Arbor but in the early fifties was living in the city and working at the Modern doing this and that. Charles Miller's book on Auden at Michigan (and in later years) quotes letters to himself from Strowan which elucidate all that. In any case, I spent a couple of days with Strowan and we had a lunch with Auden somewhere near Sixth and 53<sup>rd</sup> Street (not at "one of the dives" nearby on 52<sup>nd</sup> of many years earlier), a place with a breakfast-and-lunch counter and a few small tables. It was pronounced "cozy," and the company surely was.

(2) I did also *not* really meet him on Fire Island. A friend with a clever cottage there in the late 1940s (I was still an undergraduate at Dartmouth; his name was Bill Miller and he had designed and built the remarkable self-encapsulating structure himself) had some MoMA people out there for a carouse; I doubtless shrank in a corner like a dazed violet. Present were some vivid names that I could make a stab at recalling. I won't try—artists and patrons mostly. It is quite possible, in fact, that Auden was there, but I claim no exact recollection.

Later, at the very end of the seventies, I bought a cottage out there myself on "Pleasure Island" and kept it for a decade. It was on Sea Walk. I had got it from Janet and Arthur Vitoch. Janet's mother had been the first owner; it was one of the few cottages built well enough to stand up to the fierce blow of 1938 and survive. She, Janet's mother, had rented it for a number of summers to the artist Paul Cadmus and he and Auden of course knew each other, but I suspect at arm's length. I am sure, however, that they sat by that fireplace and on the tiny deck, both later mine—and whose now? The pathetic little tar-paper shack that Auden and the Sternses had was close by on a parallel walk. (In the eighties I happened to buy a second-hand copy of *Nones* at a shop in Port Jefferson L.I., and stuck into it was a picture postcard showing the shack; it was from a woman, whose signature is indecipherable, to a librarian at the NYPL saying that she was renting Auden's cottage but was insensible to any spiritual effluvia inside from either "WHA or Tania and James.")

Cadmus, a much closer friend to E. M. Forster (who was a fan of his, actually), says in a taped interview that he did not wish to paint Auden, as Auden was not sufficiently pretty, and certainly not in the buff – though he would be wonderful to draw. (We might recall the Cherry Grove photo of that remarkable head and face pasted as in a montage onto the soft white body.) Cadmus did, though, render Forster – himself surely no Antinous. (It’s all, shall we say, in the eye of the beholder.)

(3) At the end of my twenties I was hired by Wesleyan University as instructor. That was September 1955. On the 26th of the following February, a Sunday, Auden, invited by the literary group at the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity, came and read poetry, both early work and a couple of more recent pieces, few of which I can recall for certain. I had been invited also for drinks and supper. Those were still the days when the boys didn’t much fret about legal age. Their charmed and charming guest had a drink (a martini, at a safe guess) and gave a fine reading to students and faculty and some wives. He was clear, precise, cool. He read for well over an hour. Then came questions and comments. One student (as Brother George Willauer, now professor emeritus at Connecticut College, reminds me) spun out a question that went on and on. To which in reply Auden said simply: “No.”

Then there was Nikos Stangos, a fly-by-night freshman, soon to be off to Harvard and later to become in London head of Penguin modern poetry, then head of Thames and Hudson art books. (The curious could consult his impressive obituary in *The Independent*, 23 April 2004.) Nikos wondered why Mr. Auden’s poetry for the past good number of years had become so frivolous, so empty of the great former promise. Stangos’s lamentation was not so short as Davenport-Hines’s account in his biography might suggest. The attack was met by the audience with embarrassment, smirks, shock, and murmured disagreement in the fraternity drawing room. Auden could hardly have been more wearily polite to Nikos but did clearly say that he couldn’t possibly care less what the young man thought of his work, or of him for that matter. Most of us thought Mr. Auden sang excellently well for the good fraternity supper, which finally ensued after a few more questions and comments and more drinks. For my part, I was very happy to sit with him at table and listen.

George Willauer drove him to the New York train at Meriden and gave him the honorarium, “possibly two hundred dollars.” The boys on Monday or shortly thereafter read what George remembers as a

story in the *New York Times* “or somewhere” about Auden’s having encountered upon his return home a weeping woman on the sidewalk at St. Mark’s Place, evicted or something of the sort, and giving her what they fervently hoped was the check or its equivalent. George is vague on details. (Does this strike a chord anywhere? I set someone at our library on the trail but nothing turned up.)

(4) Sometime around 1967 Heinrich Schwarz, the eminent Viennese émigré art historian and museum curator, for some years the head of the Davison Art Center and its remarkable print collection at Wesleyan, suggested to the head of its university press that they look into publishing an illustrated edition of one of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg’s *Ausführliche Erklärungen der Hogarthischen Kupferstiche*. The “Marriage à la Mode” was chosen and a colleague, William Coley, and I were asked to produce. The result by 1970 was a lavish production of our commentary and translations with full-size reproductions of the prints in the Hogarth series and the Riepenhausen replications and all sorts of other matter.

I had earlier learned, I cannot remember how, of Auden’s enthusiasm for Lichtenberg and during my work on the book I got in touch with him. We wrote (I to both New York and Kirchstetten) and telephoned several times over a couple of years. He alerted me to a possible competition (Peter Salus) of which nothing came, was wonderfully generous with advice and warnings of pitfalls, and offered apt suggestions. His German was impressive. He eventually asked me down to 77 St. Mark’s for a drink and a bit of *Plauderei*. Yes, I was quite prompt; yes, the carpet slippers, the disarray, the overflowing ashtrays. Yes, the singular presence. Would I run around the corner for olives for me (he took onions, did he not?). Of course I would. There were crackers and something else. He was expected for supper somewhere, but phoned to say he would be half an hour late. That, I later learned, was an exceptional honor.

The Press sent him the book, as he wanted to have it to review. The book did nicely with the critics, but the one-column unsigned piece Auden did for *The New Yorker*—he said in the review itself that it had to be short and why—meant the most to me. I wish I had kept or could find more than the five brief letters from him that I stuck in my copy of that book. God knows where the others are. (But then I am honor bound to destroy them all anyhow, am I not?) There was another letter, now undiscoverable but clearly the treasure, in which he wrote at some length about Lichtenberg and said it would be plea-

sant to talk more about him. Two points in it I particularly recall. (1) If, as I had earlier proposed, I translated a selection of other pieces from Lichtenberg, would he, etc. . . . ? Yes of course he'd be delighted to help out a bit with a selection and write an introduction. "But first get a publisher." And (2) would I please visit him in Austria—a country and its capital I knew fairly well from study and travel, though I had never been in *Niederösterreich*—and we could talk about it? This was probably in 1971.

I never did either the one or the other. And presently he was gone.

ARTHUR S. WENSINGER

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## Notes and Queries

Arthur S. Wensinger edits the correspondence of Norman Douglas (1868-1952). He asks if any reader "knows anything at all of a not unlikely, even if tenuous, connection between the Auden and Douglas during Auden's summers on Ischia while Douglas lived on Capri after his return there in 1946 and where he stayed until his death six years later? They ought to have had a good deal to talk about. Can there be only that one brief reference of Auden's to Douglas in the Auden/MacNeice "Last Will and Testament" in *Letters from Iceland*?"

## Recent and Forthcoming Books and Events

The Royal Society of Literature's magazine, *RSL*, contains, in its new issue, a six-page article on some newly discovered Auden letters, about which the editor, Anthony Gardner, writes, "Last summer, while going through some family papers, W. H. Auden's nieces Anita Money and Rita Auden came across more than 30 forgotten letters from their uncle, together with copies of replies by their father John. Twelve of Wystan Auden's letters—the earliest dating from 1928, and the latest from 1952—have now been published with an introduction

and commentary by Edward Mendelson in *RSL*. The subjects include the coming of the Second World War, Catholicism, Auden's work with Christopher Isherwood on *The Ascent of F6*, and his championing of Ezra Pound's poetry in 1946. The magazine can be bought from bookshops including Borders and selected branches of Waterstone's, or directly from the Royal Society of Literature, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 1LA. The price is £5, plus £1 p&p."

Recently, the *Guardian* newspaper has been distributing, together with the newspaper, booklets of "Great 20th Century Poets," including one volume dedicated to Auden. The introduction to the booklet of Auden's poems was written by Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is also a poet and translator.

*James Merrill and W. H. Auden: Homosexuality and Poetic Influence*, by Piotr K. Gwiazda, has been published by Palgrave Macmillan. The includes, among much other material, some brief unpublished accounts of Auden in letters that Merrill wrote to friends.

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