

The
W. H. Auden Society
Newsletter

Number 35 • September 2012

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Auden's First Letter to an Editor

Digitized versions of printed magazines inevitably bring to light lost works by major authors. The digitized BBC weekly *The Listener*, for example, reveals Auden's earliest known letter to an editor. In it he responds to a remark in V. Sackville-West's review of Edmund Blunden's *Poems* (*Listener*, 10 December 1930). She had written: "He [Blunden] proves, indeed, that a straining after originality very often defeats its own ends, for by his own calm and traditional methods he manages to be quite as impressive—I put it mildly—as the latest young disciple of Mr. Eliot from Oxford or Cambridge." By "the latest young disciple," she meant Auden himself; recent reviews of Auden's *Poems* (e.g. anonymously in the *Listener*, 29 October 1930) had noted their untraditional originality and indebtedness to Eliot.

Auden's letter, under the heading "Modern Poetry," appeared in the issue dated 24 December 1930:

No review in this lovely age seems to be complete without a sneer. As one of "the latest disciples of Mr. Eliot from Oxford or Cambridge" in Miss Sackville-West's review of Mr. Blunden's poems (*Listener*, December 10), I protest—to put it mildly—against being taught bad manners by my elders.

Mr. Blunden is a fine poet and is very properly recognised as such. But whoever said he wasn't? Not we. Miss Sackville-West's own poem, "The Land," was good (I don't know how it sold but I hope well), yet she talks as if we had collared all the sales. Of course, our work isn't so impressive nor so good: we are ten years younger. We hope to do better next time.

We can't help feeling that Miss Sackville-West knows that the great audience she speaks to wants to be reassured about "modern" poetry. ("Miss West's a clever woman. She's read a great deal. She told me there's nothing in it.")

Helensburgh

W. H. AUDEN

Sackville-West's *The Land* appeared in 1927. Auden's letter will appear as an addendum in a forthcoming volume of Auden's *Prose*.

EDWARD MENDELSON

Tea With W. H.

Turn left from the High Street when you are walking towards the station and head down towards the bridge. Pass the public library on the left and cross the road before you reach Christ Church. There are a couple of shops, one sells good fudge, and behind them slightly mysterious Roman Catholic stuff. But the other shop is the target, a cafe.

I used to stop there for a cup of tea and, probably, something to eat after a day in the libraries. It was a bit touristy, a bit tea-and-cakes with genteel conversation. It had smallish tables, not the long tables of the greasy spoon sort of cafe that I prefer. You could not get a bacon sandwich there.

I don't remember what I ate, but tastes don't much change much so it's likely it would have been bread pudding, fruit cake, or toast. I wasn't desperate to get home even at that stage, and I was keeping office hours of a civilized sort. This routine was one of the few things that I had to hang on to in stretching and difficult times. So it would have been four-ish in the afternoon.

There was this older man in the cafe most days and we got to talking. I suppose it was after a period of visiting the cafe and we both must have been consigned to the same table because we were alone. It must have been him who started the chatting. I don't do that sort of thing, except on trains and planes where there is little risk that you will be saddled with a continuing relationship. His face was very lined.

We chatted every day. I was pretty stressed and abstracted. I was thirty years old and had not done any academic work since getting a couple of "A" Levels at night school in a year ten years before. And that was not very academic since I did not write an essay and everyone, teachers included, was tired out after a day's work. I was being financed at Oxford by my work, the Government, to study economics, and I had chosen to go there. It was high risk, do or die, so much more like life than continuous assessment. That was the reason, I suppose, that it took a few weeks for the penny to drop—for me to realize that I was chatting every day with W. H. Auden.

I have little recollection about the substance of these chats so it was probably general talk about the times—it was the start of the vulgar seventies—and life in Oxford. I do remember that he once asked me what I was studying and gave a little moue of disgust when

I said mostly economics, but philosophy and politics too. Economics is a perfectly respectable way of looking at things economic, and helpful so long as you don't expect too much precision and certainty from what is a human activity, and attempt to number things that can't be numbered or think them unimportant. The moue then was probably a response to my own too-certain attitudes to the subject at the time.

Before Oxford, I had been living in London in a flat at the Elephant and Castle, not the most desirable or salubrious of addresses, but convenient for work. The flats where I was adjoined huge, Victorian, poverty-stricken, buildings and each year, in the spring, the nine- and ten-year-old girls from the buildings could be seen marching together dressed in white or green, as I remember it, after they had been made "Brides of Christ." The poverty, the youth, the dogma, made me very uneasy. Oxford had the same effect, but it was the privilege rather than the deprivation that was the cause of the unease. Perhaps this struck a chord with W. H. and that was why the conversations started, for I think that he was uneasy and out of place too.

I had been taught English at school by Edward Upward, according to my reading a close associate of Auden and Isherwood in the Thirties. Upward seemed at the time of a gentle liberal bent, non-plussed and sometimes disturbed by the post-war generation of bright, South London, working class, boys who were the majority in the school and who saw rock 'n roll coming over the horizon. I passed his house in Dulwich once and it seemed wholesomely bourgeois. It was a surprise then to learn recently that he had been a committed Communist who left or was ejected from the Party in the late nineteen forties over one of those eye-glazing doctrinal disputes that conceals horrendous personal battles. He had a nervous breakdown as a result. Auden was of the left in the Thirties. But he never became a Communist, had some religious beliefs, and spent the war in the U.S. and became an American citizen. So I would guess that there was potential for tension between Auden and Upward as time went on and their lifestyles diverged. (I should note here that Upward lived to the age of 105 and wrote several well-received novels so he seems to have managed to overcome the dissonance between lifestyle and belief.)

I wasn't aware of all this when, after some time, I mentioned my teacher to W. H. and he asked about him. I had little to say as it was

fifteen years before and I was a schoolboy then. So it was a mistake to bring it up. I was breaking the rules of the relationship, which depended upon keeping away from academic and personal stuff.

I made a bigger mistake. I mentioned these meetings in passing to a pushy Canadian post-graduate English student in my College. He nagged at me to come along and, although by then I knew it was a mistake, in the end I relented. He asked W. H. how much literature influenced politics and got the answer that it didn't much, except possibly in the Soviet Union. I had read the question and the response some time earlier in an article and this repetition seemed to me dull: "The Pen is Mightier than the Sword. Discuss." There is interest perhaps in the way that literature may form, reinforce, report, and influence political change, but this exchange had nothing to do with it. At the extreme when literature does directly influence politics perhaps Zola and the Dreyfus affair spring to mind rather more than the Soviet experience, and W. H.'s choice of the latter may be telling. But, as I say, W. H. did not welcome the meeting so perhaps too much should not be read into this.

The meetings petered out, perhaps because I had broken the rules, or perhaps because I had adjusted to Oxford and my priorities changed after the birth of my son in my second year when routines went to pot. But I would still see W. H. from time to time, carting out his empties in a plastic supermarket bag as I walked into the libraries in the morning. A lot of vodka bottles as I remember it. Why cart them out? Why not use Christ Church facilities to dispose of them? An attempt to conceal the extent of his drinking springs to mind.

As I later understood it, W. H. had come back from New York when things went sour for him and had been given a place to live in Christ Church to reflect his eminence and his associations with the College. All very nice, but I got no sense that it was working, that he would not have felt better off elsewhere. "It seemed a good idea at the time" might be a reasonable judgment.

According to Wikipedia, he then went on to live in Vienna, and died there. I worked and played with Austrians while in the Far East, and went back to Vienna regularly for consultations. They could be fun, but they did not travel well, and I remembered the remark ascribed to Bismarck that "a Bavarian was somewhere between an Austrian and a man." I wonder whether for Auden leaving Britain for Vienna was a case of out of the frying pan into the fire.

Why should I remember this now? It was all a long time ago. It may have something to do with the times we live in, which have something of the flavor of the Thirties about them. One of many differences is that there is a lack of ideas at present; there is neither Communism nor Keynesianism to provide some hope for change, for example. The result is a sort of uncomfortable paralysis, and alongside this we have diversionary bogey-men, particularly Muslims and Muslim countries. The teas with W. H. remind me of the ways that lives are distorted in these periods whether they are directly affected by hardship, or not.

NICK BAILEY

Nick Bailey was in his second year at Lincoln College, Oxford, in 1972-73, when he met W. H. Auden. After a career in government as an economist and then dealing with international public sector banks that included living and working in the Far East, the Caribbean, and Africa, he now lives in retirement on the south coast of England with his second wife.

I Really Mean Like

The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose Vol. IV, 1956-62, edited by Edward Mendelson Princeton, 982 pp, £44.95, January 2011, ISBN 978 0 691

In a poem from the early 1960s, "On the Circuit," W. H. Auden describes himself as "a sulky fifty-six," who finds "A change of meal-time utter hell," and has "Grown far too crotchety to like / A luxury hotel." There is plenty of self-parody in this picture—a little later in the poem he identifies his worry about where the next drink is coming from as "grahamgreeneish"—but this was a time when Auden was rearranging his sense of himself and of his world. Comedy was one sort of arrangement, and an important feature of his view of life; but he was seriously "unsettled," as Edward Mendelson says, and had acquired "a profound new sense of menace and dread."

He had become professor of poetry at Oxford in 1956, although he was still mainly living in New York, and in 1958 he had shifted his summer residence from Ischia to a small town near Vienna, taking leave thereby, he said, of all kinds of fantasies he now felt too old for.

Mendelson wonders whether one of Auden's reasons for moving to Austria, although "perhaps too deep to have been conscious," might have been "his wish to live in a culture that ... could not escape from its awareness of its own guilt." This is a plausible thought and, even if not true psychologically, would still work as the kind of parable that Auden, in his prose even more than in his poetry, teaches us how to read. Like other northerners, he had, he suggests in the poem "Good-Bye to the Mezzogiorno," brought questions about change to an unchanging Italian place, "hoping to twig from / What we are not what we might be next," and he needed to take off before the south became a habit:

If we try

To "go southern," we spoil in no time, we grow
Flabby, dingily lecherous, and
Forget to pay bills.

Still, he will "go grateful," he says, glad

To bless this region, its vendages, and those
Who call it home: though one cannot always
Remember exactly why one has been happy,
There is no forgetting that one was.

It is part of the same change that he now wishes to pay homage not to "Provocative Aphrodite" or "Virago Artemis," for all their powers over the world of nature and desire, but to a quieter, more discriminating classical figure, Clio, the Muse of History. In the world of those major goddesses it is "As though no one dies in particular / And gossip were never true." Clio by contrast is "Muse of Time, but for whose merciful silence / Only the first step would count and that / Would always be murder."

She is to "forgive our noises / And teach us our recollections," and Auden reminds us that poetry has no special place in her attention: "I dare not ask you if you bless the poets, / For you do not look as if you ever read them, / Nor can I see a reason why you should."

This last stanza offers us a bit of that humility that Auden was often tempted to overdo, but it also chimes with a recurring trope in modern literature in English. Marianne Moore says of poetry that she

too dislikes it; Eliot tells us that it doesn't matter; Auden says it makes nothing happen. In fact, none of these propositions represents anything like the whole story for any of these poets, but there's an element of affectation here all the same, an unseemly wooing of the philistine. Neither Mallarmé nor Valéry ever expressed any interest in a muse who didn't bother to read poetry—they knew that the world was already full of people saying that it didn't matter, and saw no reason to join the chorus, even out of strategy.

Auden's realignments are the continuing subject of *The Dyer's Hand*, which he published in 1962, the only book of prose, Mendelson informs us, that he devised as a single volume. Auden is characteristically both direct and sly about what he thinks the book is—sly in the way only determinedly direct people can be. He writes poetry for love, he tells us, and criticism for money, and because people ask him to write it. He is glad to have been professor of poetry because without the job "I should never have been able to pay my bills." He doesn't believe in systematic criticism, finds it "lifeless, even false," so he has reduced his critical pieces, "when possible, to sets of notes." None of this is untrue, but truths can be used as smokescreens. The last sentence of the foreword gives the game away: "The order of the chapters, however, is deliberate, and I would like them to be read in sequence." Whatever the origin of these pieces, and however he feels about criticism, he has composed a book, indeed a great book, and we should not be surprised to find him saying in a letter that it "contains all the autobiography I am willing to make public." It is the autobiography of a writer who is also a reader, and it is a reading of its time. Other books published in 1962—the titles really do suggest something of a climate—were *Another Country*, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, *The Golden Notebook*, *Pale Fire* and *The Kindly Ones*.

Volume IV of Auden's prose—Volumes I to III cover the years 1926-1955—is, like the others, edited by Edward Mendelson with unparalleled care and discretion, but it allows us an additional pleasure, since *The Dyer's Hand* occupies its last major part. Thus we can read that book as Auden wanted us to, before or after we look at the rest of the prose. Or we can read the pieces of the book in their chronological order, in which case we shall keep coming across mentions of the initial versions of the chapters of *The Dyer's Hand*, spread out between 1956 and 1962, and we could read the chapters as we meet them in this way. Or we could just dip and skim in the whole volume, go

away and come back, guided by names and titles and chance — there's plenty to keep us busy. It's pretty clear both that Auden needed the money and that he liked this way of making it.

Since *The Dyer's Hand* is an old friend whom I have not seen for some time — if I had a shelf where I could find my favorite books it would sit next to Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral* — and since I have never read its chapters in sequence, I chose the first method: took the book as a book and then went back to the essays and reviews. The result was not just intriguing but moving. It's true that *The Dyer's Hand* is not systematic criticism, or systematic anything, and Mendelson reminds us that Auden "never explained in detail" what he meant by the order we were supposed to follow. There is a critical story here, though, and a very particular critical music in the organization of the themes and their variations. The chief themes are the dream of Eden, the fallen world outside the dream, the chance of innocence, the constant negotiation, in literature and opera, between what we want and what there is, and Auden's method is to see what a whole range of works, heavy and light, have to say about these matters. There is a great deal of shrewd and intimate writing on Shakespeare, there are wonderful remarks on *Don Quixote*, extraordinary essays on Byron, Dickens, Ibsen, Frost, Marianne Moore, D.H. Lawrence; but when Auden wants to evoke "a parable of agape," or "Holy Love," he talks about Bertie Wooster's relation to Jeeves. Bertie in his blithering is a comic model of humility, and his reward is Jeeves's immaculate and unfailing allegiance. There is also an appealing moment when Auden, suggesting that popular art is dead and that "the only art today is 'highbrow,'" suddenly remembers he has to make an exception: "aside from a few comedians." He says he learned long ago that "poetry does not have to be great or even serious to be good, and that one does not have to be ashamed of moods in which one feels no desire whatsoever to read *The Divine Comedy*." At another moment he insists that "among the half dozen or so things for which a man of honor should be prepared, if necessary, to die, the right to play, the right to frivolity, is not the least."

This is about as serious as one could get about not being serious, and helps us to see what his cagey remarks about poetry most often mean. They recur here — Byron's work was dry as long as he "tried to write Poetry with a capital P," the Marianne Moore phrase is cited, we are reminded that it is possible to live without art — but when Auden is not being anxious about poetry's getting above its station he

himself advances amazing claims for it. "The mere making of a work of art is itself a political act" because it reminds "the Management ... that the managed are people with faces, not anonymous numbers." The Management here resembles the administration of what he elsewhere calls Hell, "for in Hell, as in prison and the army, its inhabitants are identified not by name but by number. They do not *have* numbers, they *are* numbers." For Auden the notion of the face is even more important than the name, and appears all over the book. The hero of modern poetry is "the man or woman in any walk of life who ... manages to acquire and preserve a face of his own." Few Americans have faces, Auden says, citing Henry James ("So much countenance and so little face"): "to have a face ... one must not only enjoy and suffer but also desire to preserve the memory of even the most humiliating and unpleasant experiences of the past." We can see why Auden was afraid of going rotten on an Italian island. "A human face," he says again, "is the creation of its owner's past," and "a caricature of a face admits that its owner has had a past, but denies that he has a future." Auden completes this thought with a fine aphorism:

We enjoy caricatures of our friends because we do not want to think of their changing, above all, of their dying; we enjoy caricatures of our enemies because we do not want to consider the possibility of their having a change of heart so that we would have to forgive them.

In this register but now about as far from frivolity as one could be—it's true that Auden isn't always in favor of frivolity; he doesn't like it in the Greek gods, for example—he says that "every good poem is very nearly a Utopia," and "every beautiful poem presents an analogy to the forgiveness of sins." And again, shifting to music but not exactly leaving the other arts behind: "Every high C accurately struck demolishes the theory that we are the irresponsible puppets of fate or chance." Art saves us from anonymity, resembles forgiveness, and dramatizes the freedom of labor and choice. Why would the author of these claims want to be so diffident about it elsewhere, and so eager to believe that the Muse of History doesn't have to pay any attention to it? The short answer has to do with tact and tactics. He is afraid that even true claims for art will become false when stated; their very utterance will do them in, shift them to the realm of pomp and abstraction. The longer answer is found in the thematic arc of *The Dyer's Hand* as a whole.

The book moves from reflections on reading and writing to the role of the poet in the world; from questions of the self to those of re-

lations with others, especially the connection between master and servant, between guilty community and fictions of innocence, and from there to the austere lessons of the work of Franz Kafka. Then comes a section on Shakespeare, including major essays on *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. The move to the animal worlds of Lawrence and Moore is prompted by the inhuman (or all too human) curiosity of Iago about the evil he can do for no apparent reason; and ideas of goodness in Moore invite a section on "the American scene," which is where the otherwise separate worlds of history and desire come closest to meeting—because America is a place where "liberty is prior to virtue," or at least this is the "presupposition ... for which this country has come, symbolically, to stand." And then in two subtle changes of key—you wonder why you didn't expect them—Auden, who has from the very beginning been contrasting the fallen actual world to a whole set of attempts to picture alternatives to it, puts paradise and its opposite together in a theory of comedy, and ends his story with disappointments that even music cannot allay. Every high C is a triumph, but *The Tempest*, for example, cannot live up to the melancholy lyrics of its best songs. Prospero says he forgives his brother, but he only means he has trapped him. "Justice has triumphed over injustice, not because it is more harmonious, but because it commands superior force; one might even say because it is louder." And when Prospero is not too loud he is too quiet. The tone of his talk about returning to Milan at the end of the play, Auden says, is that "of one who longs for a place where silence shall be all."

Auden's readings are predicated on a grim and intricate realism about the way he thinks things are. "In the real world, no hatred is totally without justification, no love totally innocent." Or: "The historical world is a fallen world, i.e. though it is good that it exists, the way in which it exists is evil, being full of unfreedom and disorder." Even the Christian God is in trouble, because he has created "a world which he continues to love although it refuses to love him in return." But then precisely because the world is like this, realism in art must always be subordinate to other projects of the kind we have already seen: rescues of individuality, sketches of forgiveness, proofs of human independence, to which he would certainly add models of redemption. Art can't redeem the world, and that is why we must be modest about it. But it can show us what redemption would look like, and this is why it matters. Auden modulates these thoughts through the idea of Eden, which is the largest connecting theme of the whole

book, and his mode of interpretation is to find a parable, or something like a parable, in every work that matters to him.

Right at the beginning he gives us a questionnaire he has devised for critics, who he thinks need to tell us what their idea of Eden is — his assumption is that writers of poetry and fiction come clean about theirs in their work. Eden is not just paradise but the particular paradise we each like to imagine we were thrown out of. We can't go back, but the imaginary memory will say a lot about who we are. Auden's questions are about, among other things, preferred landscape, language, religion, form of government, means of transport, formal dress and public statues, and his own answers, in order, are "Limestone uplands like the Pennines"; "Of mixed origins like English, but highly inflected"; "Roman Catholic in an easygoing Mediterranean sort of way"; "Absolute monarchy, elected for life by lot"; "Horses and horse-drawn vehicles, narrow-gauge railroads, canal barges, balloons"; "The fashions of Paris in the 1830s and 1840s"; and "Confined to famous defunct chefs." In a slightly less playful tone he tells us that "the fantasy ... which the detective story addict indulges is the fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as the law." He distinguishes firmly between Eden as a dream of the past and the New Jerusalem as a project for the future. In Eden, he says, "it is absolutely required that one be happy and likeable," whereas in New Jerusalem "it is absolutely required that one be happy and good." And in the most brilliant of Auden's riffs on this subject Mr. Pickwick gets thrown out of the Eden of his ignorance of evil, "but, instead of falling from innocence into sin ... he changes from an innocent child into an innocent adult who ... lives ... in the real and fallen world." Falstaff too lives in a kind of Eden until his old friend Hal says he knows him not — there are forms of irresponsibility that would be regrettable in life but in their fictional forms are indispensable for thinking about what life might be — and he can't imagine keeping his word, Auden says, "for a promise means that at some future moment I might have to refuse to do what I wish, and in Falstaff's world to wish and to do are synonymous." As are not wishing and not doing. "In his soliloquy about honor, his reasoning runs something like this: if the consequence of demanding moral approval from others is dying, it is better to win their disapproval; a dead man has no audience." We might put this magnificent argument alongside Auden's half dozen or so things a man of honor ought to be prepared to die

for, including frivolity. Falstaff is saying that not even that idea is frivolous enough.

To see Pickwick and Falstaff in this way is to see them as figures in parables about innocence and wishing, and Auden insists again and again that parables are what he is looking for. A Shakespearean tragedy for him is “both a feigned history and a parable”: *Henry IV* has, “in addition to its overt meaning, a parabolic significance”; Iago is “a parabolic figure for the autonomous pursuit of scientific knowledge through experiment” – bit of a stretch, this one. Henry James’s story “The Great Good Place” is “a religious parable” about “a spiritual state.” Nathanael West’s works are not novels or satires but “parables about a Kingdom of Hell whose ruler is not so much the Father of Lies as the Father of Wishes.”

There is a logical snag here, though, and it reflects not Auden’s unmistakable success in what he is doing but his worry about it. Thinking about Kafka’s parables, he distinguishes the genre from novels and plays in which “a good critic can make others see things ... which, but for him, they would never have seen for themselves.” This can’t happen with parables, whose meaning is different for every reader. “To find out what, if anything, a parable means, I have to surrender my objectivity and identify myself with what I read.” A critic who “tries to interpret a parable ... will only reveal himself.” Auden does seem pretty clearly to be saying that one can’t do at all what he does so well throughout this book. What is happening here? Well, first he is trying to trace out an important distinction, which we might mark by saying that we interpret novels and plays, but apply parables: that we find ways not so much of understanding them as of putting them to use. More significantly and quite characteristically, he is exaggerating the difference between two conceptual siblings. He loves to set up pairs and have them slug it out: reader and writer, chance and providence, deed and behavior, pardon and forgiveness, the sacred and the profane. But his objectivity and his subjectivity are not the opposing parties he takes them to be, nor are they in any critic. Criticism, as Roland Barthes says, begins when we think about our subjectivity, not when we get rid of it. When Auden writes subjectively, he often says what we feel. He does this when he writes objectively too, although sometimes he simply voices the general wisdom of the psychoanalytic mid-century in Manhattan: “Leontes is a classical case of paranoid sexual jealousy due to repressed homosexual feelings.” What he has found in the parables of Shakespeare,

James, West and others is precisely the possibility of different experiences meeting without cancelling each other out or occupying all the interpretative space. Auden is revealing himself throughout the book, but not *only* revealing himself. He is finding shapes and structures in literature that teach us without telling us what to do.

Even his quizzes and classifications have an air of parable about them, a sense that we need to work with them, that they will help us most if we do more than just read them. Here is his test for the critic:

Do you like, and by like I really mean like, not approve of on principle:

- (1) Long lists of proper names . . . ?
- (2) Riddles and all other ways of not calling a spade a spade?
- (3) Complicated verse forms of great technical difficulty . . . ?
- (4) Conscious theatrical exaggeration . . . ?

“If a critic could truthfully answer ‘yes’ to all four,” Auden says, “then I should trust his judgment implicitly on all literary matters.” We can imagine taking this test quite literally, and failing it or passing it, or finding it ridiculous. But we could also think of it analogically. Then we would wonder what kind of critical interests were being sought and excluded, and we could look for examples, just as we are invited to describe our own idea of Eden. Again, in another very funny passage Auden evokes four kinds of critic he hopes a poet might not turn into: “a prig, a critic’s critic, a romantic novelist or a maniac.” The first is a person “for whom no actual poem is good enough”; the second manages “to deprive someone who has not yet read [the poem] of all wish to do so”; the third finds a “happy hunting ground” in the “field of unanswerable questions,” and the fourth has a theory that turns the poem into an endless puzzle. The parable here is a bit like Walter Benjamin’s notion of the story. What it’s asking for is not acceptance but adaptation: we are to find our own four varieties of critic that get on our nerves.

After or apart from *The Dyer’s Hand*, the prose in this large volume feels miscellaneous—because it is miscellaneous. But there are extraordinary treasures here: fine swipes at Rilke (“a lot of humorless and unmanly fuss”) and Dostoevsky (“though . . . of course, a great genius, I cannot bear him”), plenty of complaints about Yeats (“I

sometimes feel that the question 'Is this statement true or false?' has never occurred to him"); a haunting, repeated definition of Hell borrowed from Charles Williams ("nobody is ever sent to hell; he, or she, insists on going there"). There is a letter to the Sunday Times correcting the suggestion that Auden had snubbed Guy Burgess when he was in disgrace. It was true, Auden said, that he had been out when Burgess called, but that was all. "It would be dishonorable of me to deny a friendship because the party in question has become publicly notorious." There is a fine, cautious, detailed review of volumes of verse by Philip Larkin and Geoffrey Hill; there are notes on Ford Madox Ford, Saint-John Perse and many others. And above all there is a beautiful, puzzled essay on Cavafy in which Auden, who firmly believes you need to know his or her language, and perhaps even be a native speaker, to read a poet properly ("to pass judgment on poetry written in another tongue than one's own is impudent"), tries to explain how he can genuinely get so much out of Cavafy, and how Cavafy can be such an influence on him. "I can think of poems which, if Cavafy were unknown to me, I should have written quite differently or perhaps not written at all." All this without Greek. Auden doesn't succeed in his explanation. He suggests it must be "a tone of voice, a personal speech" that comes across, "a unique perspective," a "sensibility." But this is just waving words, saying that Cavafy is Cavafy, and Auden's problem remains, as he well knows. We understand, even expect, poems to get lost between languages, but we scarcely know what it means for a translation to arrive and feel right and stay with us.

MICHAEL WOOD

This review appeared in the 2 June 2011 issue of the London Review of Books and is reprinted by permission. Michael Wood FRSL is a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Princeton and the author of many distinguished books of literary and film criticism. The original text may be viewed at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n11/michael-wood/i-really-mean-like>

Auden's Pronoun Trouble and "Law Like Love"

Pronouns are crucial tools for any poet, and while "I" and "You" are probably the words most often associated with poetry, "we" is almost as common, especially for the group-oriented and civic-minded writer. The pronoun—and explicit meditations on its use—arises throughout Auden's poetry, variously to suggest a coterie, a couple, a congregation or a culture, often within the same poem. But it's a treacherous pronoun for any artist, and was especially so in the Thirties, as Auden responded to the various ideals and consequences associated with the ideologies of "Collective Man," and to the force of crowds and publics in contemporary history (SP 96). How might the poet speak for others without making totalizing claims?¹ Auden's use of pronouns rewards study and suggests the subtle and strategic engagement with personhood and community that informs many of the essays in *The Dyer's Hand*.² In his later work especially Auden's first person plural often implies universality—"each of us" and "anyone" in our "company" in "solitude" as human beings (CP 627; 639). When Auden changes "*Let His weakness speak*" to "*Let Our Weakness speak*" in revising section III of "Memorial for the City," he is working toward this unbounded "we"—a unit congregated only imaginatively—yet the poem's liturgical rhetoric evokes the responsive reading of religious congregation and extends that sense of presence to the poem (CP 593).³ The performative character of the liturgy suggests immediacy and localized voices. In this usage the poet avoids the destructive "us vs. them" rhetoric so embedded in the manipulative speeches satirized in *The Orators*. Often he will shift out of first person plural

¹ Richard R. Bozorth addresses this question in *Auden's Games of Knowledge*, with reference to Auden's homosexuality and his use of parable as an anti-universalizing mode. He addresses the issue of pronouns in terms of their ability to mask gender and sexual preference.

² Critics have of course noted Auden's pronoun use in local instances. Two particularly subtle analyses of his pronoun use can be found in Stan Smith's *W. H. Auden*, pp. 10-11 and Susannah Gottlieb's *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden*, p. 177.

³ See Jacob Korg: *Ritual and Experiment in Modern Poetry*. Surprisingly, Korg does not discuss Auden though he makes reference to him.

into other points of view, or move from a generic to a particular use of “we,” reasserting plurality within the group.

But it is in his stance as a public poet writing on occasions of historical crisis that the pronoun gives him the most trouble. In part because the first person plural in English is so ambiguous, depending on context for its referent, and unclear as to what it includes and excludes, “we” is a powerful and coercive tool of political rhetoric. Precisely because he had a penchant for this rhetoric, Auden would sometimes attack it. If he could rally a public, he also feared this power, for “the public,” as Kierkegaard writes (and Auden included in his later collection of Kierkegaard) “is everything and nothing, the most dangerous of all powers and the most insignificant” (*Living Thoughts* 26). In many poems, Auden shifts and varies the identity associated with the first person plural, returning it to local and particular sites from its universal perch, as if to check the tendency to create an imperial tone or chimerical referent.

“Law Like Love,” for instance, if we accept Edward Mendelson’s dating, can be read as a repudiation of his own forms of public address, especially “Spain” and “September 1, 1939,” well before he abandoned these latter poems in gathering the *Collected Poems*. All three poems appear in *Another Time*, although “Law Like Love,” which has received the least critical attention, is the only one Auden would keep. There has been much commentary on Auden’s excisions and revisions, but less on the way his poems respond to previous poems in a long conversation with himself, especially about the meaning of community and the ability of the poet to speak for others. In “Law Like Love,” Auden expresses his skepticism toward those who make absolute claims from interested and limited perspectives. The poem satirizes those perspectives and postures, but goes on to build up a different, more qualified “we” from horizontal, shifting, I-Thou relations rather than from vertical, abstract principles. This “we” derives from conversation and deliberation, not oratory or decree, from saying, not from the said. It is an ethical rather than a political, institutional or societal “we.” And it is grounded in erotic intimacy. By returning to the interpersonal in this way, Auden may also be looking back to, and modifying, some of the principles that guided him in his Berlin period, even as he absorbs some of his new influences in America.

Is Auden cuing us to “Spain” in the last line of the first stanza of “Law Like Love,” echoing the time frames of his earlier poem with

"To-morrow, yesterday, to-day" (SP 98)? A review of pronoun use in "Spain" suggests the difficulty Auden was having at the time in defining a community for which he could speak. Pronouns suggest inclusions and exclusions, as well as agency and possession, and troubled conditions in the Thirties, when causes and courses of action were so much in dispute. In "Spain" (I cite the March 1937 version in Mendelson's edition of *Selected Poems*) we can observe Auden's pronoun avoidance as he substitutes anaphoric noun phrases and passive constructions for complete structures of intervention and ownership. Not "our yesterday is all past" but the "Yesterday all the past"; history is spectacle rather than owned experience (SP 54). (Later, in "In Memory of Ernest Toller," Auden presents such agent avoidance as a problem of ontology and epistemology: "we are lived by powers we pretend to understand." (CP 247) Auden opens "Spain" with a kind of newsreel-pageant of images. Verbs convert to gerunds, nouns or participles, confusing cause and effect: "the shadow-reckoning," "the carving of angels," "the taming of horses"; "the assessment of insurance by cards"; "the bustling world of the navigators" and so on (SP 54-55). Some of this cataloguing is conventional for public speeches, but given Auden's later emphasis on faces and responsibility, the absence of agents here is significant. As the poet shifts from "Yesterday" to "To-day," "the struggle" remains without an actor: "the fall of the curtain," "the adoration of madmen (SP 55)." Auden is building up to a call for intervention – but, as Mendelson has argued, the poem remains at the threshold of commitment between necessity and choice.⁴

In the second section of "Spain," the pronoun "I" emerges, beginning with "the poet" who "whispers" (presumably in contrast to the politicians who shout). This is a dramatic "I" since the "the poet" is distinguished from the voice of the poem. Indeed, much of the first part of the poem is in quotation, including words of "the poet." Auden goes on to cite other segments of society – the scientist, the poor. The verb mode is the imperative plea "send me" or intransitive reflection "I inquire. I inquire." "The poor" are not given a direct subjectivity ("we") but only a possessive "our" that ironically describes their lack: "'Our day is our loss'" (SP 55). The ventriloquized voices

⁴ See *Early Auden* 322.

build until “the nations combine each cry,” forming an imagined community around Spain’s plight (SP 55).

Abstraction is answered with abstraction when this “cry” produces in response a disembodied voice of “the life” and a chain of predicates: “I am your choice, your decision. Yes I am Spain” (SP 56). We do not suffer History, but make it, the poem suggests by these nouns. But the abstraction of choice in this “I” complicates the transition. “I” is an indexical pronoun—but the “I” here is imaginary, invented by and internal to the text. This “I” that floats above the helpless spectators and sufferers in the poem as a projection of their moral conscience is the catalyst of the emergent “we” in a forming “I-We” relationship. The public gathers into one perceiving body—“the heart / And the eyes and the lungs” and thus becomes the “I” of a collective entity, “the life” that is entirely transpersonal, despite the poet’s reference to the “individual belly” (SP 56). (Mussolini’s slogan “One heart, one will, one decision” comes uncomfortably to mind with these lines.) “The life” thus becomes the higher voice, a host incarnate (as blood seeds arid land), haunted by the transcendental fictions it wants to reject. (Curiously, the later, Christian Auden would rarely invoke such transcendental mysteries.) “Our thoughts have bodies” (SP 56). But since there is really only one “thought,” individual bodies are really one incorporated body in the service of “it”; now the first person is not speaking for the restricted class of “the poor” but in a collective and unbounded “we,” the transmutation of plural I-Thou relations into a unified force: “Our hours of friendship into a people’s army” (SP 56). No individual conscience or consciousness takes responsibility in the impersonal and passive construction: “The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder” (SP 57). And later even the vision of the future forms as crowd imagery and a collective voice: “the beautiful roar of the chorus under the dome”—a line Auden would delete a month later, though the “pageant-master,” kin to some rather sinister figures in *The Orators*, survives all versions of “Spain” (SP 57). Thus when Auden finally claims the pronoun “we” at the end of the poem, its function and mode of potential agency is ambiguous. “We are left alone with our day” does not seem to suggest isolated individuals, but rather an aroused mass (SP 57). “Alone” here may suggest the absence of transcendent forces to intervene in human History, but the personification of Spain has kept in place the authoritative “I-We” relationship, as if “We” might act as an historical force in place of you and I. Who is this normative “we” that

Auden would engage in History? Only individuals in local social relations, Auden later suggests, can constitute a community and form ethical choices.

When Auden later revised and then rejected the poem, it was not only because of the scolding from George Orwell. As he wrote in a famous letter to E. R. Dodds, there was something “degrading” in his ability to “have the audience roaring.”⁵ And the roar itself bothered him, not only his demagogic tendencies. Articulate discourse dissolves in a crowd and words become noise. People are all too ready to become aroused as a mass, to merge into a crowd and roar from a daemonic “we” voice that masks responsibility. In “The Virgin and the Dynamo” Auden writes: “Of a crowd it may be said, either that it is not real but only apparent, or that it should not be” (*DH* 63).

No wonder in writing “September 1, 1939” Auden began with an emphatic first person singular pronoun. But it’s an “Easter 1916,” Yeatsian “I” whose initial anecdotal passivity and alienation are replaced by reflections on History, and vague moral commandments. Auden’s initial “I,” drinking alone, is speaking to himself or no one in particular, but the local, colloquial voice is a mask and does not represent the rhetoric the poem will pursue. Auden increasingly hated the faceless demographic vision of man, finding it antithetical to the ethical life. But “September 1, 1939” still seems more concerned with numbers than with faces, despite the few-line profiles of Hitler and Diaghilev. Auden’s public voice quickly takes over; he may be ventriloquizing public rhetoric to expose hollow concepts such as “Collective Man” and “Important Persons,” but he does not install clear alternatives to public rhetoric (*SP* 96). Indeed one theme of the poem is the intrusion of the public into the private and the need to transcend excessive self-love. The condition of the times forces itself on us, “obsessing our private lives” (*SP* 95). Quickly Auden shifts to an I-We address: “I and the public know”; he is back in the realm of oratory, if not yet in the speech of the demagogue (*SP* 95). (Later, in “Horae Canonicae” he writes of “our public. / The faceless many who always / Collect when any world is to be wrecked” [*CP* 632].) Yet if “the unmentionable odour of death” has entered the private life, Auden’s

⁵ Letter to E. R. Dodds, postmarked July 11, 1939. Bodleian Library. Partially cited in *W. H. Auden: “The Map of All My Youth,”* ed. Bucknell and Jenkins, 100.

response in this poem is to create an “odorless” “public” that he would later find toxic precisely because one can’t sense it.⁶ “A man has his distinctive personal scent which his wife, his children and his dog can recognize. A crowd has a generalized stink. The public is odorless” (*DH* 82). From “I and the public” Auden moves to I-and-the-Just; at least he implicitly numbers himself among “the Just” when he announces he is “Beleaguered by the same / Negation and despair” (*SP* 97). Who “the Just” are or what specifically constitutes justice, he never makes clear. While Auden may distance himself from “the police,” there is more than a bit of the Judge looking down his nose in his notorious sentence: “We must love one another or die” (*SP* 97).⁷ Auden doesn’t strictly follow poetry’s normative progress from I to We in this poem, since after the famously troublesome line he backs off and returns to the first person singular — “all I have is a voice” (*SP* 97). But this “voice” has become strangely faceless and radio-like in speaking for others. The confession of the “I” in “September 1 1939” is a rhetorical modesty. Auden seems more interested in the I-We relation here, not the I-Thou that the commandment to love implies, or that he would later emphasize. He may invoke “faces along a bar,” at the outset, but he is addressing numbers, not faces, to use his favorite opposition (*SP* 95). Even while composing “September 1, 1939,” Auden had doubts about its claim to speak for “everyone.” For instance, he excised this stanza that once came after stanza 7, ending:

No promises can stay
 The ruling of the court
 In session on an act
 Nor magic wish away
 Its summary effect:
 What can I do but recall
 What everyone knows in his heart,

⁶ “~~odor~~” in the Berg Collection typescript; other changes from English spelling are similarly marked in the typescript.

⁷ Auden’s “Aubade” (1972), which reflects back on so much of his art, may remember these lines when it ends with a modified motto, spoken not by the poet but by the “City” of “Human Time”: “Listen, Mortals, Lest Ye Die” (*CP* 885). The imperative is to tell the truth about the past and listen to the tale.

One law applies to us all;
In spite of terror and death
The continuum of truth
May not be torn apart.⁸

The scene is a judicial court and the stanza makes a grandiose pronouncement on “law” such as Auden would satirize elsewhere. Is the “act” historical and dangerous while the “law” is a higher moral principle that calls to us “in spite of” the “terror and death” that the act may bring about? What “court” and “act” might Auden have in mind in the first stanza? Is this court generic or historical? Is Auden alluding, say, to the “Enabling Act” of 1933 that led to Hitler’s dictatorship? Is the “law” in the second part of this stanza, the one that applies to “everyone” and “us all” the same one that sponsors the courtroom scene? Is it a universal law of historical forces, or a moral law of human justice? As with the other excised stanza and several retained stanzas, Auden’s confident tone of assertion does not always support a coherent or substantive idea. The “law” remains hidden even though the poem does not consider it mysterious.⁹

Scholars have stressed Auden’s self-conscious Americanness in “September 1, 1939,” and indeed in revising the poet (or perhaps *The New Republic* copy editor) changed all the spelling to American norms. But as he later wrote to Naomi Mitchison, this poem was a “hang-over from the U.K.” and not at all the kind of poem he came to the U.S. to write.¹⁰ In writing “Law Like Love,” is Auden retracting the very claim in the excised stanza of “September 1, 1939,” to “know” “one law [that] applies to all?” Is “Law Like Love,” with its

⁸ Berg Collection.

⁹ Auden would later write of the “utter patience” of the “The Hidden Law.” That poem, like “Law Like Love,” seems to be revisiting ideas and images from “September 1, 1939.” In drafting “September 1, 1939” Auden evoked a “law” but found no “verbal definitions” for it and abandoned the stanza, but we might consider that he has returned to it in “The Hidden Law.” The “lie”/“die” rhyme and the scene “in a bar” also connect back to “September 1, 1939.”

¹⁰April 1, 1967. Berg Collection. Mendelson writes that the letter was unsent. EA 330.

plurality of voices, its shift from public to private discourse, and its humor, a more “American” poem?¹¹

“Law Like Love,” written, according to Mendelson’s dating, in September of 1939, offers a reflection on the claim to universal “laws” that such “occasional poems” as “Spain” and “September 1, 1939” (as he classified them in *Another Time*) dictate. “Law Like Love,” while abstracted from history, is much more qualified and localized in its ethical commands, and the choral voice at the end is more orchestral than collective, built as much on ideas of limit and difference as on consensus or mandate.

“Law Like Love” reverses the default logic of modern poetry that moves us intractably from the representative “I” to the universal “We.”¹² This poem moves instead from absolutes to more localized and qualified claims, and ends with a “we” voice that has no single orator. “Law Like Love” turns from public faces to private ones, addressing a “dear,” evoking an I-Thou relationship in which propositions are provisional and qualified, involving commitments which are subject to response from other minds; the model for “we” becomes a conversation as in a friendship or marriage, rather than a consensus as in a tribe, aroused mass, or other totalizing form.

“The problem for the modern poet, as for everyone else to-day, is how to find or form a genuine community,” Auden remarked in 1938, in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (Prose I 436). We can read “Law Like Love” in relation to this problem, and in relation to the role of humor in its solution. “Poetry which is at the same time light and adult can only be written in a society which is both integrated and free” (Prose I 436). The introduction is retrospective and laments the absence of those conditions in the contemporary world. If Auden had turned away from light verse since “Letter to Lord Byron” in order to face a fractured and subjugated modern world, he seems to have returned to it in “Law Like Love,” perhaps hoping that “poetry which is at the same time light and adult” might do something to advance a society that is “integrated and free.”

¹¹ Constance Rourke’s *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* had been published in 1931.

¹² Yeats’ “Easter 1916,” and Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” are examples of this conventional shift from “I” to “We,” though of course the tenor of these pronouns varies significantly between these two examples.

Does the modern community require a belief in universals? Or does the conversation between even two individuals connected by mutual interests and acknowledgements rather than abstract laws create the potential for integrated community? In "The Virgin and the Dynamo," Auden distinguishes societies, crowds and communities. Societies are necessary. Crowds are numbers without faces, and disturbing to the poet. But communities, which are always *becoming* rather than fully embodied (at which point they become societal), are clearly where he places his faith. "Spain" moves through the first two, from various social roles (poet, scientific investigator, the poor, nations) to the aroused collective, transpersonal "life." In "Law Like Love," Auden moves through the full sequence: societies, crowds, communities. The groups he catalogs through the first half of the poem are social, indeed institutional types, each operating according to a law-driven "system." I don't have time to explore each one of these here, but a satiric tone quickly builds in the poem. "Law is the wisdom of the old" seems a palatable truism until it is located, in the next line, in the scolding voice of "the impotent grandfathers," and set against the "treble" of their troublesome grandchildren, to create a kind of societal chamber music (*CP* 260). From the family, Auden builds to broader institutions. Priest and judge, as figures with authoritarian power in society, are singular. Auden was always interested in faces—and so is the satirist—and the face the poem puts on as it presents the various voices reciting their laws, is certainly satiric, though remarkably modulated and tuned to types within that mode. The first stanza, "Law, say the gardeners, is the sun" has the neutral tone of a primer whereas the poem builds to mimicry and irony.

The satiric effects in "Law Like Love" are created not only by sound but also by imagery. One source might be Honoré Daumier, the visual artist Auden most admired. Consider "the judge as he looks down his nose" or the "priest with his priestly look" (*CP* 261). "The Just" of September 1, 1939 are not so much sober as faceless; one cannot argue with them; but judges and priests here make faces and we can read them and look behind them. They are men, not angels; the laws they propound are made by men. Ultimately, though, Auden's satire inheres in sound and rhetoric more than in imagery. The simple declarative language of the opening initially suggests matters of fact. But the echo of nursery rhyme ("here is a church, here is a steeple / open the doors and see all the people") in Auden's "people" / "steeple" rhyme undermines the priestly pontifications

(CP 261). The form varies from couplets to alternating rhymes to unrhymed lines as the poem fits itself to various social formations – each may presume to speak for all, but Auden gives each its own sound. The judge is said to speak “clearly and most severely,” but Auden mimics the tautologies and obfuscations of an orator who assumes rather than argues his case. (Auden combines the priest and judge stanzas in *Collected Poems*, perhaps suggesting they are of one type.)

As he wrote in 1952, modifying his earlier remarks on light verse, “A sense of humor develops in a society to the degree that its members are simultaneously conscious of being each a unique person and of being all in common subjection to unalterable laws” (*Forewords and Afterwords* 372). These “unalterable laws” are not social or institutional but are laws of necessity – especially of the body and its limits, to which even those with institutional power must submit. In this way humor fosters community. Auden wrote to Mrs. Dodd early in his emigration to America that he had discovered “one of the best poets in America,” Ogden Nash. He quotes Nash’s poem that begins “As I sit in my office / on 23rd St. and Madison Avenue.”¹³ At least from Auden’s point of view, then, light verse was thriving in the United States, and perhaps this was a sign of societal health. Anyone coming across this letter immediately connects it to the opening of “September 1, 1939.” But there is really nothing at all Nash-like about that poem. “Law Like Love,” on the other hand, shows the influence sharply. Fuller identifies the light verse rhymes of the poem with the much softer, and English, A. A. Milne, but the acerbic, more consequential, and American Nash seems the likelier source.

With the breakdown of social order in the middle stanzas, however, the lighter satire of the poem falls away. “Satire flourishes in a homogeneous society where satirist and audience share the same view as to how normal people can be expected to behave” (*F&A* 385). Modern society has little of this consensus, but it does have hearsay and crowd mentality. Rumor (figured in refrain and repetition) and that chimera, public opinion, follow the presumption of authority: “others say, others say” (CP 261). The poem tracks a collapse of discourse into noise, and noise into roar; not the polyphonous chords of the old and young, but voice becoming sinister, chant-like and univocal until the “loud angry crowd” whose “Law is We” drowns out the

¹³August 7, 1939. Bodleian Library.

sotto voce (an allusion to earlier treble and bass), the “soft idiot softly Me,” and with it any plurality (CP 261). Auden would later describe irony as a *sotto voce*, difficult to hear in a public crisis.¹⁴ But if satire can’t survive the times, humor remains a necessity. The congenial spirit of humor continues in the poem, but not the voice of satire, which requires commonly shared beliefs and cultural values. Instead of mocking others, the voice turns toward the other.

If we follow the categories of “The Virgin and the Dynamo” – societies, crowds, communities – the last third of the poem is devoted to the potential of “community,” as a corrective to this frightening momentum toward the crowd. But in this case community is formed not out of consensus but out of I-Thou relations that are reciprocal, engaged, and shifting. Auden swerves in his use of “we” from an I-We of the loud crowd and the mumbling “me,” to I-Thou of conversational deliberation. Auden’s “dear” at this time is of course Chester Kallman, whom he had met in April, and many of Auden’s I-Thou exchanges in the poetry of his American period are grounded in this difficult quasi-marital relationship. But he may also be looking back to the intense conversations of his Berlin days, when he was reading and taking notes voraciously, and when his sexual experiences were matched in intensity only by emotionally charged conversations with his intimates about the nature of human drives and attachments. Auden writes in his Berlin journal: “John [Layard] in the evening talked alot about Law as love. I was ashamed in fact of Christopher, though on other occasions I agree with a great deal of what he says. That what we think we believe varies with our company.”¹⁵ Auden’s affair with Layard was deeply troubled at the time he wrote these words, and Layard’s attempted suicide was surely something Auden could not have forgotten even more than a decade later, so perhaps, even if the idea of “law as love” is not especially original philosophically, Auden would have associated it with Layard.

When halfway through the poem Auden finally takes his turn in the sequence of commentators on the nature of “the law,” he begins

¹⁴ In “Aubade” (1972) Auden would return to this “*sotto-voce*” with more confidence. He does not dictate laws to a “public” but rather, in his conversations with himself, “sing[s] verses *sotto-voce*, / made on behalf of Us all” (CP 884).

¹⁵ Berlin notebook. Berg Collection.

not with the assertion of an absolute, not with a fiat, but with a qualification and an implicit double negative: "If we, dear know we know no more" (CP 261). The "If" marks a return to reasoning (after the crowd's rage) through the marker of a syllogism, but this is not a new relentless "law" of logical necessity. Reason in fact encounters "the absurd," a subject very much on Auden's mind as he has recently been reading Kierkegaard. His thought pursues a circuitous and nuanced path full of condition and conversation with indefinite borders—if, given, therefore. . . "Although" (CP 262). Ironically, the only universal the poem seems to arrive at is that we all yearn for universals, yearn to "slip out of our own position / Into an unconcerned condition" (CP 262). Conversational deliberation (even within this one-sided form) leads, however, to fellow feeling, and to community formed in acknowledgment of limit.

Auden has shifted ground so that by the end of the poem "Law," even the law of logic with its identity principle, is a ghostly subject, displaced by simile—Law simply "is" —he is as good as his word: "I cannot say Law is again" and like Wittgenstein, he passes over it in silence (CP 262). The real law is hidden and outside discourse. Though the syntax implies the lingering subject "law" for the prepositional "like love," by dropping the subject of the sentence he shifts to the relative world of simile to suit the relative world of human utterance and commitments. But *are* similes "timid"? He does not forswear his will to pronounce general truths (CP 262). Layard's "as" has become "like," and so a little farther from "is," but how much farther? When the syntax of the deliberating mind gets into knots (pun intended), the "timid" qualifying voice finds a new "boast" (though the content is hardly boastful, speaking loud of a diminished thing) and the rhetoric changes again (CP 262). (The deontic modal verb "we shall" before the "I say" puts the emphasis on entering into commitment, rather than on the thought as revealed truth—a vow even as vows are not kept. Indeed, the last line calls up the form of the vow [CP 262].) Vows and boasts are not true or false statements, not claims but acts; they are what J.L. Austin called *performatives*. If stanza eight has shaped a "we" of I-Thou exchange, Auden allows himself a more choral voice at the end, dropping the "I." The last stanza is in the voice of a congregation though not a collective, and without a priest (or judge or poet-orator) singing a kind of hymn to something outside his own "vanity," a hymn to community based on mutual limit rather than the authority of named universals (CP 262).

"Like love we seldom keep" speaks not for others but with others. He hasn't quite echoed Layard in seeing Law as Love, but by dropping "law" in the last stanza he does more than compare—he displaces, as in a trope, and what is lost in absolutes is gained in repetition and unison. In fact, "like" might be said to lose its function as a term of comparison and become a term of endearment. To my ear there's more here than just another interested perspective (*law say the lovers is love*), though not quite a disinterested principle.

In "Law Like Love" we have an example of Auden's attempt to perform community, which as he says later "can only exist in potential" and is in this sense especially a formation of imagination rather than society. I hear a chorus in these last lines in part because Auden uses the chorus so much in his drama and his sense of dramatic ritual is alive in his poetry; the origins of lyric poetry are after all choral and I think Auden tries to revive them in such moments. The reader can join in since a community does not change, Auden says, by the addition of members. "Drama began as the act of a whole community. Ideally there would be no spectators." As he writes in "The Virgin and the Dynamo," a community may consist of $n=1$ (one), where all members are free and equal. And unlike a society, a community is not changed by the addition of members.

Edward Mendelson described Auden's later "I" as "an I who tried to escape the limits of the solitary self not by pretending to *be* something different but by learning to *become* something different" (*Later Auden* 360). In this poem we can see a similar poetics of becoming in the expression of a "we." By the end of this poem, at least, Auden's preference for the World of the Virgin over the World of the Dynamo is clear: "*One law for the ox and the ass is oppression*" (DH 62). Community is formed out of love, not laws, and not out of an abstract, transcendental principle, but out of acknowledging the other. Though he used the pronoun regularly, Auden never defined a "We-feeling" perhaps because, as this poem shows, it has so many moods and treacherous as well as loving relations.¹⁶ But in describing the "I-

¹⁶ In his essay "The Protestant Mystics" Auden distinguishes a Protestant from a Catholic sense of "we." "In our relation to one another as intelligent beings, seeking a truth to which we shall both be compelled to assent, We is not the collective singular We of tradition, but a plural signifying a You-and-I united by a common love for the truth. In relation to each other we are protestants; in relation to the truth we are catholics. I must be prepared to

feeling" and the "You-feeling" he implies a We-feeling: "Common to both the I- and the You-feeling: a feeling of being-in-the-middle-of-a-story (CP 655). The second person precedes the first; we respond and obey before we can summon and command.

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doubt the truth of every statement you make, but I must have unquestioning faith in your intellectual integrity" (FA 51).

Edward T. Callan (1917-2011)

Edward T. Callan, author of *Auden: A Carnival of Intellect* (1983) and *An Annotated Checklist of the Works of W. H. Auden* (1958) died on 17 November 2011 at the age of 93. He was a pioneering scholar of Auden's work and was a friend to many other workers in the same field. The notes that follow are based on an obituary prepared by Western Michigan University, where he taught for twenty-six years.

He was born in Ireland, on 3 December 1917, and lived in South Africa for many years, where he earned a bachelor's degree from the University of the Witwatersrand, and teaching credentials from Teachers College (Johannesburg). He served in the South African Army during World War II as a forward observer with the 6th South Africa Armoured Division and British 8th Army. He earned his doctoral degree from the University of South Africa, and did post-doctoral studies at Oxford. He emigrated to the United States in 1952. After teaching stints at Fordham and Loyola universities, he settled in Kalamazoo in 1957, teaching English at Western Michigan University.

He was an authority on Yeats, Auden, and the literature, history and politics of South Africa. He wrote more than a hundred articles and books, including books on Alan Paton and the Zulu chief and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Albert Luthuli. His essays and reviews appeared in *London Magazine*, *Dublin Magazine*, *Saturday Review*, the *Times* of London, and the *New York Times Book Review*. He was a leading figure in the creation of Western Michigan University's African Studies Program.

After retiring in 1983, he compiled two theatrical one-man shows on figures from Irish literature. "I Am of Ireland," about Yeats, premiered at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and later was performed in Rome, Belfast, and WMU. "Molly's Only Playboy," about J. M. Synge, was staged in Kalamazoo's Epic Theatre in 2002.

Notes and Queries

A selection of things that Auden never wrote, but which have been attributed to him in print or online, appeared in *Newsletter* 29 in December 2007. That list may be supplemented by the quotations in a recent book by Jonah Lehrer, *Imagine* (2012), which purports to quote Auden on his use of drugs. One quotation is about caffeine and nicotine: "I need them quite desperately." The other is about Benzedrine: "The drug is a labor-saving device. It turns me into a working machine." No evidence exists that Auden said or wrote either of these things, although the second seems to derive from his description—in his gatherings of aphorisms "Squares and Oblongs" and "Writing"—of caffeine, Benzedrine, and other substances as "labor-saving devices."

Recent and Forthcoming Books and Events

Alan Jacobs, who recently edited *The Age of Anxiety* for the W. H. Auden: Critical Editions series, has now prepared an edition of *For the Time Being* for the same series, which already includes, among other volumes, Arthur Kirsch's edition of *The Sea and the Mirror*. With this new volume the series now includes critical editions of the three long poems in dramatic form that Auden wrote in the 1940s.

Liberation: Diaries, Volume 3: 1970-1983, by Christopher Isherwood, edited by Katherine Bucknell, was published in the UK by Chatto & Windus in May, and will be published by Harper in the US in November. This volume, which contains many comments and recollections of Auden, completes Katherine Bucknell's edition of Isherwood diaries. A related event, "Don Bachardy and Katherine Bucknell in Conversation," will take place at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, on 20 November 2012, at 7:30 p.m. in Friends Hall.

A conference on *The Rake's Progress: Stravinsky, Hogarth, Hockney, Auden, and Kallman* will take place in the Norlin Library at the University of Colorado on 26-27 October 2012. For further details, see: <http://www.colorado.edu/ArtsSciences/british/rake/index.html>

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The *Newsletter* is edited by Laura Eve Engel. 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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