

F R O M   M Y T H   T O   A L L E G O R Y :

A STUDY OF THE POETRY OF W. H. AUDEN, WITH  
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE POET'S INTENTION

by

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Finally I should like to add that this study is the fulfilment of many years' ambition to make a proper study of Auden's poetry. He is a poet who attracted my passionate interest while I was still at school, and who has held it ever since.

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P A R T I

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P A R T I I

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## INTRODUCTION

The more attentively Auden's poetry is studied, the more one critical problem emerges. How can the poet of the 'twenties and 'thirties be reconciled with the poet of the last three decades? "We've all got to come to terms with the later Auden" writes Professor Richard Hoggart,<sup>1</sup> but he does not explain how. The man who wrote the pungent early poetry with its constant reiteration of warnings to a sick society that what was needed was

". . . death, death of the grain, our death  
Death of the old gang . . ."2

before it could achieve "new styles of architecture, a change of heart"<sup>3</sup>, seems an entirely different person from the man who is on the side of Authority to-day; that is to say in so far as Auden can ever be said to be definitely on one side or another. How can the man

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<sup>1</sup>In a letter to the present writer, (3rd May, 1965).

<sup>2</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 84. (Poems 1930.XVI). (Publication details of Auden's own work are given in the reference list at the end of this essay).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 120. (Poems 1930, XXX)

who wrote in 1939 "We must love one another or die"<sup>1</sup> ("because he wrote those words" says E.M. Forster, "he can command me to follow him")<sup>2</sup> -- be the same man who deleted the stanza containing those lines from the collected canon of his verse in 1944?<sup>3</sup> Can we support John Mander when he tries to defend Auden against the charge of being a political renegade<sup>4</sup> or answer Philip Larkin's cri-de-coeur "What's become of Wystan?" in a regretful review of Homage to Clio written in 1960?<sup>5</sup>

In trying to solve these problems, it must be remembered that Auden has now been writing poetry for forty years, and that he practises his art professionally; that is to say, he earns his living by writing. Nowadays no doubt, his critical essays and reviews, editing of anthologies, lectures, translations and all the work done in response to the demands made on an

<sup>1</sup>"1 September, 1939", Another Time, p. 112.

<sup>2</sup>"Two Cheers for Democracy, (London: Edward Arnold and Co., 1951), p. 275.

<sup>3</sup>And who has omitted the entire poem in his 1967 Collected Shorter Poems, 1927 - 1957.

<sup>4</sup>The Writer and Commitment, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961), pp. 25 -- 65.

<sup>5</sup>Spectator, (July 15th, 1960). pp. 104--105.

established poet, represent the more profitable side of his work. Auden says as much himself:

It is a sad fact about our culture that a poet can earn more money writing or talking about his art than he can by practising it. All the poems I have written were written for love; naturally when I have written one, I try and market it, but the prospect of a market played no part in its writing. On the other hand I have never written a line of criticism except in response to a demand by others for a lecture, an introduction, a review etc.: though I hope some love went into their writing, I wrote them because I needed the money.<sup>1</sup>

All the poems I have written were written for love; in these words lies one of the main connecting links between the "two" poets, for Auden might have added that they were written about love too. Whether it is the 'love' of the early poems or the capitalised 'Love' of the later work, there is no hard and fast distinction between them, for there is a prophetic hint of Agape in the former while Eros is not excluded from the latter. The early Auden, in common with his friends Spender, Day Lewis and Macneice, thought that the cure of Society's malaise in the 'thirties was to be found in political change; and that Utopias could be built on earth by revolutionary means, though even then he had reservations about it; his 'love' was not by any means simply another

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<sup>1</sup> Foreword to The Dyer's Hand, (unnumbered page).

name for the political brotherhood of man. The later Auden, analysing man in society in the same clinical way, finds the answer in the fatherhood of God; by the same token this has much to do with the true brotherhood of man.

This study hopes to show, by a critical comparison of poems taken from different stages of his career, that Auden is a poet -- and a major poet -- who has developed consistently along lines that may be discerned from his earliest poems; that he has never turned his back upon his original ideas but simply expanded them and made them coherent in the light of new beliefs. It will be suggested that Auden, very early in his career, formulated out of these ideas a modern mythology on which he drew heavily for symbols and images to illustrate his poems and the extensive documentation of this mythology here offered has not, as far as the present writer is aware, been attempted before. Sir Herbert Read has said that the poet "is a man who creates his own myths"<sup>1</sup>, which may be as contemporary as their creator, for

. . . the farther science penetrates into the mystery of life, the more it moves into a mythological world. I refer more particularly to the science of the individual psyche where all

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<sup>1</sup>"Myth, Dream & Poem" The Nature of Literature. (New York: Horizon Press, 1956), p. 102.

science culminates; for we know nothing unless we know ourselves. And the more we learn about ourselves by the objective methods of observation and analysis, the more we realise that our knowledge is already crystallised in the ancient myths. Nowhere do we meet these myths playing so vital a part as in the pages of Freud. Myths that were dead are alive again . . . Oedipus lives again, and Electra; and Eros has been revived to indicate that our poor words, sex and love, no longer adequately represent the force and necessity of our most passionate instincts.<sup>1</sup>

In his later period, it is contended here that Auden has retained most of the symbols drawn from his personal myth and simply given them an allegorical reference by fitting them into a specifically Christian framework. But his intention has been consistently the same; to make man recognise his own face reflected in the mirror of art. Again, as far as the present writer is aware, a study of Auden's work in the light of this intention has not so far been made.

It must be realised that Auden has always been a divided artist; the poet and the preacher, the genius and the apostle, the Freudian and the Existentialist, the man and the mask. In all these guises he has pursued in his poetry and is still pursuing, the quest or pilgrimage described by Paul Tillich:

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<sup>1</sup>Myth, Dream and Poem", p. 102.

The wisdom of all ages and of all continents speaks about the road to our depth . . . . But all those who have been concerned . . . with that road . . . have witnessed to the same experience. They have found that they were not what they believed themselves to be even after a deeper level had appeared to them below the vanishing surface. That deeper level was discovered, this happening again and again, as long as their very lives, as long as they kept on the road to their depth.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Shaking of the Foundations, first published 1949, (London: Pelican Books, 1962), p. 63.

CHAPTER 1

POET AS CRITIC

Art in intention is mimesis  
But realised, the intention ceases  
Art is not life and cannot be  
A midwife to society  
For art is a fait accompli.  
What they should do, or how or when  
Life order comes to living men  
It cannot say, for it presents  
Already lived experience.<sup>1</sup>

Most of Auden's critical theory is embodied in these lines from New Year Letter, which was published in 1941. Since then his views have been elaborated and almost codified in his collected essays, published under the title of The Dyer's Hand in 1963, but they reiterate the same themes. The Page Barbour lectures which he delivered at the University of Virginia, and which were published under the title of The Enchafèd Flood, or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea, are really too specific in character to be of much value in a general discussion of his critical theory. They are an interesting example of archetypal criticism, discussing and analysing as

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<sup>1</sup>Lines 76 -- 84. pp. 19 -- 20.

they do the symbols and symbolic clusters used by the Romantic poets in general and by Wordsworth in particular; but it is of interest to us in this essay only in so far as some of these symbols are recurring favourites in Auden's own poetry, especially those of the Sea and the Desert. R.G. Cox sketches the main themes of these lectures in his review of the book:

In general Mr. Auden is concerned with certain special ways of thinking and feeling exhibited in the poetic symbolism of the Romantic period, regarded as lasting roughly from 1770 to 1914. Starting from Wordsworth's dream, recounted in Book V of The Prelude, he notes in it three pairs of symbols; the Desert and the Sea; the Stone of abstract geometry, and the Shell of imagination; the two aspects of the hero, part Bedouin (Ishmael) and part Don Quixote. Each of the book's three sections takes as its text one of these pairs. Discussing first the Sea and the Desert as they appeared in earlier literature, Mr. Auden distinguishes their special significance for the Romantics, the sea as "primitive potential power, the desert as actualised triviality." The various meanings of the Stone and the Shell lead to discussion of Blake's attack on the Newtonian view of the universe, the Romantic reaction from eighteenth century aesthetic theory with its new stress on imagination, and finally to a statement of the dilemma of the Romantic hero, torn between the desire for transcendent stable reality, both impossible for man. The last section is a study of the Romantic hero, in relation to the two type-figures of Ishmael, the self-conscious wanderer and outcast, and Don Quixote, seen by Mr. Auden as the self-forgetful, fully committed religious hero. In the last analysis the Romantic hero was the artist himself . . .<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Auden as Critic and Poet", Scrutiny XVIII, (1951), p. 158.

Cleanth Brooks, who considers Auden to be a fine critic, links The Enchafed Flood with the main body of Auden's criticism as represented in The Dyer's Hand by pointing out that all Auden's criticism is in fact archetypal in nature because of

His general interest in psychology and the recurrent psychological patterns that underlie the literary genes . . . <sup>1</sup>

and when we have learned to understand the mythological background behind all Auden's writing, this point becomes obvious. If some of his essays, published in anthologies and literary journals - - for example, Psychology and Art To-day<sup>2</sup> - - are slightly different in character from the bulk of his criticism as assembled in the book, they are only another aspect of the same general theme.

It should be useful, in the first chapter of this essay, to try and clarify his main points; in subsequent chapters it should then be possible by working more or less chronologically through the poems, to see in what respects the theory arises from his own poetic practice, and how it gives unity to the early and later poems.

In an interesting essay on Auden<sup>3</sup> John Bayley

<sup>1</sup>"W.H. Auden as a Critic", Kenyon Review V, No.26, (Winter, 1964), p. 177.

<sup>2</sup>The Arts To-day. Ed. G. Grigson. (London: Lane. 1935)

<sup>3</sup>Included in The Romantic Survival (London: Constable, 1957).

says:

The whole tenor of Auden's critical pronouncements on poetry (and this was written before the collected evidence of The Lyster's Hand was there to confirm it) has been to imply a separation of the poet as Poet, and as a responsible social being commanded to love his neighbour and behave properly, and do what he can to establish what Auden calls the Just City. The poet can indulge in all the romantic attitudes; the man must conform to the classical moral pattern.<sup>1</sup>

This Platonic dualism, Bayley goes on to say, was echoed by Bacon and by Romantic poets like Poe and Houseman, and stressed again and again by Auden, who sees Art as a mirror world, exactly the image of the real world except that it does not really exist. As Caliban says of Art in The Sea and the Mirror:

All the voluntary movements are possible -- crawling through flues and old sewers, sauntering past shop fronts, tiptoeing through quicksands and mined areas, running through derelict factories and across empty plains . . . all the modes of transport are available, but any sense of direction, any knowledge of where on earth one has come from or where on earth one is going to, is completely absent.<sup>2</sup>

Auden returns to this theme again and again, for the separation of art from life is the cardinal point of his criticism and is vital to any understanding of his poetry, early or late. It is not, of course,

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<sup>1</sup>The Romantic Survival, p. 135.

<sup>2</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, pp. 53--54.

something new or startling, but the stress laid on it by Auden is significant. Art and life are twin worlds, one a replica of the other, but the world of art, the *fait accompli*, is frozen at the point of time at which it represented the real world, which moves on about its business leaving the represented moment behind it. It is life that is important. If art, which is essentially frivolous in character, only succeeds in making this clear, for Auden it will have fulfilled its main task.

The Dyer's Hand contains essays on every conceivable subject, all centered around this basic theme. His advice to aspirant poets is interesting, reflecting as it does his own experience. They must be fluent in Hebrew and Greek, and learn thousands of lines of poetry by heart; they are forbidden to read literary criticism, but must take courses in prosody, rhetoric, mythology, philology, geology and cooking. They must be able to make and maintain a garden; they must keep pets.<sup>1</sup> This is not flippancy on Auden's part, for it underlines his repeated stressing of the freedom and unreality of art when set against the moral absolutes of living.

This attitude of a "literary manichee", as Bayley

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<sup>1</sup>"The Poet and the City", The Dyer's Hand, p. 77

calls him in another essay<sup>1</sup> is present in every aspect of his criticism, as it is in everything that Auden writes. Bayley stresses Auden's continual preoccupation with the dualism between words as objects of play and craft, and as ways of realising meaning and feeling. Both the world of art and the real world he sub-divides again and again; into Eden and the New Jerusalem, or Dingley Dell and the Fleet prison, or the Frivolous and the Earnest. In all this, he is probably guilty of over-simplification, but it has the great advantage of making for critical forth-rightness, with an emphasis on moral judgement which, as Bayley says, "would have pleased Dr. Johnson and should even satisfy Dr. Leavis".<sup>2</sup> Auden is, it seems, trying to carry out the task of the artist as he diagnosed it in 1941 when he wrote:

To set in order -- that's the task  
Both Eros and Apollo ask;  
For art and life agree in this  
That each intends a synthesis.<sup>3</sup>

And he tries to achieve this synthesis by dividing them into these opposing pairs and then maintaining a delicate critical balance between the resulting dichotomies.

<sup>1</sup>"Our Northern Manichee", Encounter XXI, (1963), p. 74, to which the present writer is indebted for some ideas in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>New Year Letter, p. 19.

He has some interesting things to say about the difficulties facing the artist today. Firstly, he says, the artist has to contend with the modern loss of belief in the eternity of the physical universe; with this medieval myth wrested from him "it is difficult for a modern artist to believe he can make an enduring object when he has no model of endurance to go by".<sup>1</sup> Secondly, he must face another loss of belief, this time ". . . in the significance and reality of sensory phenomena",<sup>2</sup> and thirdly, today there is a lack of continuity in human values, so that "the artist no longer has any assurance, when he makes something, that even the next generation will find it enjoyable or comprehensible".<sup>3</sup> In consequence of this "(the artist) cannot help desiring an immediate success with all the danger to his integrity which that implies".<sup>4</sup> He has himself, he admits

Time and again . . . slubbered through  
With slip and slapdash what I do.<sup>5</sup>

and the reason for this, as he says in the Notes, is that "the characteristic vice of the writer today is over-

<sup>1</sup>"The Poet and the City", The Dyer's Hand, p.78

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid,

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>New Year Letter, p. 24.

production, and the major cause of over-production is a need for money".<sup>1</sup>

Fourthly, Auden says that the public realm can no longer be regarded as the sphere of revelatory personal deeds; even the Greeks, it seems, had their Manichean problems:

To the Greeks the Private Realm was the sphere of life ruled by the necessity of sustaining life, and the Public Realm the sphere of freedom where a man could disclose himself to others. Today . . . it is reversed: public life is the necessary impersonal life, the place where a man fulfils his social function, and it is in his private life that he is free to be his personal self.<sup>2</sup>

In a poem called "A Household" Auden makes this point again; a business man (but it applies, of course, to poets as well) is talking complacently to his business friends at luncheon about his brave little son and his dear old mother. He drives home afterwards,

To be avoided by a miserable runt  
Who wets his bed, and cannot throw or whistle,  
A tell-tale, a crybaby, a failure:

To the wailings of a slatternly hag  
Who caches bottles in her mattress, spits  
and shouts obscenities from the landing;

Worse, to find in both an unholy alliance,  
Youth stealing Age the liquor cupboard key,  
Age teaching Youth to lie with a straight face.

<sup>1</sup>New Year Letter, p. 93

<sup>2</sup>"The Poet and the City", The Dyer's Hand, p. 80

Disgraces to keep hidden from the world  
 Where rivals, envying his energy and brains  
 And with rattling skeletons of their own,  
 Would see in him the villain of this household,  
 Whose bull-voice scared a sensitive young child,  
 Whose coldness drove a doting parent mad.<sup>1</sup>

In typical Auden fashion at the end of the poem he shows yet another aspect of the Private Realm, for the man suspects that within his own household there is a further division; he suspects

It is for his sake that they hate and fear him;  
 Should they unmask, and show themselves worth loving,  
 Loving and sane and manly, he would die.<sup>2</sup>

Because the man of action now keeps his real life to himself, the arts, especially literature, have lost him as their traditional human subject. Speaking of him as the doer of public deeds, Auden is using the word public in its Kierkegaardian sense; a man "belongs to the public at moments when he is nothing else, since when he really is what he is, he does not form part of the public".<sup>3</sup> His conclusion is of particular interest to South Africans for, he says, poets leading their real lives in private in the world of today, in addition to being singularly ill-equipped to understand politics or economics, are no longer callers to political revolution

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<sup>1</sup>Nones, pp. 52--53

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 53

<sup>3</sup>"The Poet and the City", The Dyer's Hand, p. 82

for they are not men of action and in any case he says "Today there is only one genuine world-wide revolutionary issue, racial equality".<sup>1</sup> Because of this theory we unfortunately have no poems from him on the subject. It might have sparked off a masterpiece from the Auden of thirty years ago.

Because Auden believes that literature is less important than life, and therefore need not be taken seriously, he is undemandingly tolerant of his fellow writers. His essay on Lawrence, for instance, whose viewpoint one would expect him to dislike intensely,<sup>2</sup> is one of the best in the book. Lawrence has even managed to stay whole; Auden says:

There are a few writers like Blake and D.H. Lawrence [and Auden himself] who are both artists and apostles . . . readers who find something of value in their message will attach unique importance to their writings because they cannot find it anywhere else.<sup>3</sup>

But, says Auden, when you have absorbed the impact of the message and you then re-read the apostle writer simply as an artist, the first excitement will never be recaptured:

<sup>1</sup>"The Poet and the City", The Dyer's Hand, p. 87

<sup>2</sup>At the time of writing this essay, that is; Lawrence was one of the most powerful influences on the early Auden.

<sup>3</sup>"D.H. Lawrence", The Dyer's Hand, p. 278

. . . once I have learned his message, I cease to be interested in a messenger, and should I later come to think his message false or misleading, I shall remember him with resentment and distaste".<sup>1</sup>

This is particularly interesting in the light of Auden's own practice; as he later felt his own early message to have been "false or misleading" he has altered some of his earlier poetry before including it in the Collected Shorter Poems published in 1950. Many meretricious reasons have been attributed to him for doing so, by critics in general who call him traitor, and by the late Professor Joseph Warren Beach in particular, who wrote a whole book about it.<sup>2</sup> Auden explains it himself in his introduction to Dag Hammarskjöld's Markings (which he also translated in collaboration with Sjöberg). His reasons appear perfectly valid. Explaining that Hammarskjöld had altered some of his own earlier work he says:

Some people will condemn such retrospective revisions . . . merely as dishonest, but they are mistaken. I am sure it is everyone's experience, as it has been mine, that any 'discovery' we make about ourselves or the meaning of life is never, like a scientific discovery, a coming upon something entirely new and unsuspected; it is, rather, the coming to conscious recognition of something

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<sup>1</sup>"D.H. Lawrence", The Dyer's Hand, p. 278.

<sup>2</sup>The Making of the Auden Canon, (University of Minnesota Press, 1957).

which we really knew all the time, but because we were unwilling or unable to formulate it correctly, we did not hitherto know we knew. If we desire to re-write things we wrote when we were younger, it is because we feel that they are false and were false at the time we wrote them; what, in fact, our real experience was, we were at the time unwilling or unable to say. To all experiences other than purely sensory ones, the maxim credo ut intelligam applies.<sup>1</sup>

In a situation of this kind, hindsight seems not only perfectly allowable but commendable. Auden puts forward the same theory in the only poem he has written which deals specifically with his conversion (or re-conversion, for he was brought up as an orthodox Anglican). Called "The Prophets" it begins, "Perhaps I always knew what they were saying",<sup>2</sup> and one of the purposes of this essay is to show that he was at any rate aware of their voices all along.

Auden divides a poem into the "contraption" and "the sort of guy (who) is inside it", while, using the mythology of The Tempest, as he does in The Sea and the Mirror, he also divides poetry (and poets) into yet another two classes, distinguishing this time between

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<sup>1</sup>Introduction to Markings, by Dag Hammarskjöld, translated by Sjöberg and Auden with a foreword by Auden. (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), pp. 15--16.

<sup>2</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 112--113.

Ariel-dominated and Prospero-dominated poetry. This seems to mean much the same as De Quincy's distinction between the literature of power and the literature of knowledge. Ariel is the word maker, or the contraptor; Prospero the experience or thought about which Ariel is writing. This verbal element, or Ariel, beautiful though it may be, will always be less important than the idea, personified in Prospero, which Auden has called "sacred". His own poetry seems a good example of a judicious balance between these two mythological figures, for he is acknowledged by most critics to be a "contraptor" par excellence, at home in almost any poetic pattern of rhyme and syllable. But Ariel does not hold a disconcerting balance over Prospero because Auden is also predominantly a poet who is moved to write poetry by ideas, usually put forward under a mythological or allegorical disguise, and these ideas are not obscured by the finely-wrought "contraption" which contains them.

Bayley says that Auden is like Shakespeare:

. . . in his freedom as a contraptor, in the sense in which both are entirely agile in composition, and absolutely emancipated (because we know nothing of their inner life and real feelings) from the conditions of life.<sup>1</sup>

The completed poems of both these poets, which are finished and hung in the mirror world of art, may be

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<sup>1</sup>Encounter, . . . XXI. p. 76

unthinking, but they are what makes the real world think.

Of the arts, only music is exempt from the Prospero/Ariel dualism. Auden says in "The Composer", first published in Penguin New Writing in 1939:

All others translate: the painter sketches  
A visible world to love or reject;  
Rummaging into his living, the poet fetches  
The images out that hurt and connect.

From life to Art by painstaking adaption,  
Relying on us to cover the rift;  
Only your notes are pure contraption,  
Only your song is an absolute gift.<sup>1</sup>

But art in general must be kept in its place; that is, subordinate to the life it can never be. Culture is a facet of art, and therefore essentially frivolous; the necessary qualities in an artist are modesty and humility. This is why Auden sees Bertie Wooster as a kind of inverted quest hero, who gains as his reward the services of the incomparable Jeeves.<sup>2</sup> As Cleanth Brooks remarks:

Through the voices of Bertie Wooster and the god-like Jeeves, Auden is able to hear, in spite of their comic intonations 'the voice of Agape, of Holy Love'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 21

<sup>2</sup>"Balaam and His Ass", The Dyer's Hand, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup>The Kenyon Review, v. XXVI, p. 177.

These virtues are particularly associated with tradition and with what he calls romanitas,<sup>1</sup> upon which, he says, Europe was founded and which she has not ceased trying to preserve.

The fundamental presupposition of romanitas . . . is that virtue is prior to liberty, i.e. what matters most is that people should think and act rightly; of course it is preferable that they should do so consciously of their own free will, but if they cannot or will not, they must be made to, the majority by the spiritual pressure of education and tradition, the minority by physical coercion, for liberty to act wrongly is not liberty but license. The antagonistic presupposition . . . is that liberty is prior to virtue i.e. liberty cannot be distinguished from license, for freedom of choice is neither good nor bad but the human prerequisite without which virtue and vice have no meaning.<sup>2</sup>

In America it is "the antagonistic presupposition" that prevails, but most of Auden's critical and poetic views are based nowadays on the "fundamental presupposition", which he would have despised thirty years ago. In the same way, he says that the artist must obey the rules before he can understand why they should be obeyed; the craftsman can only become free by submitting to the laws of his craft.

Although high convention is one of Auden's strong

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<sup>1</sup>cf. Cochrane. Christianity and Classical Culture, Clarendon Press (Oxford, 1940), p. 72, et seq.

<sup>2</sup>"The American Scene", The Dyer's Hand, p. 318

beliefs, he sees the dangers of romanitas too, for he never sees one side of anything to the exclusion of the other: always the two sides are divided by a gap, a no-man's land, and this is Auden's proper place. Here he can sit, keeping an eye on each side, and this is one of the things that has never changed in forty years of creative writing. "Which Side Am I Supposed to Be On?"<sup>1</sup> he calls one of his poems, and although he has now come down fairly heavily on the side of Authority, he has not forgotten what he called "the lie of Authority" in 1939. In his latest collection of poems, published in 1966, he puts it in epigrammatic form.

At lucky moment we seem on the brink  
 Of really saying what we think we think: <sup>2</sup>  
 But even then, an honest eye should wink.

Of the pitfalls of romanitas he says:

The possibility that De Tocqueville saw from an inspection of America in 1830 has become a dreadful reality in the Europe of today, namely, that romanitas is perfectly capable of adapting itself to an egalitarian and untraditional society: it can even drop absolute values and replace the priest by the social engineer without violating its essential nature (which is and always was not Christian but Manichean). And it was from America, the first egalitarian society, that it learnt how to adapt itself. It took the technique of mass advertising . . . and changed

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<sup>1</sup>Originally Ode V in the Orators. Published under this title in Collected Shorter Poems, p. 147

<sup>2</sup>About the House, p. 22

the sales object from breakfast foods to political passions; it took the egalitarian substitute for tradition -- fashion -- and translated it . . . to the selling of a party line; it took the extra-legal vigilantes and put them into uniforms: it took the inert evil of race prejudice and made it a dynamic evil.<sup>1</sup>

It is the old dilemma, posed clearly enough in his own writing. He began as a dedicated anti-fascist; he abandoned political views for religious views and a general conformity to "tradition", and he found in this very conformity or romanitas the seeds of fascism once again.<sup>2</sup> Art may not be life, but it is sometimes dangerously close to it.

Auden emerges from a series of essays as a Shakespearean critic of precision and sensibility. He complains of the critic in general that "for him a poem is not a work of art by someone else, but his own discovered document"<sup>3</sup> and of the Shakespearean critic in particular that he tells us much about himself, but little about Shakespeare. What Auden himself does is to take Shakespeare's plays and build them into complex allegories. By virtue of his own theory, Ariel's work of art has nothing to do with the food for thought which it

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<sup>1</sup>From "the American Scene", The Dyer's Hand, p. 319

<sup>2</sup>See the identical situation in the poem "The Secret Agent", Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 44-45.

<sup>3</sup>"The Prince's Dog", The Dyer's Hand, pp.182-208

supplies for Prospero, thus, not believing that what he may say has any literal equivalent in Shakespeare's work he is free to display his own wisdom and interest; he is not one of those critics who has conveniently discovered Shakespeare in himself. So he presents us with an allegorised view of Falstaff as a suffering sinner, saintly and unworldly, contrasted with "the Eden of Belmont from which the virgin Portia comes down to do a good deed in the world".<sup>1</sup>

Because of his doubts about the serious value of poetry, Auden has become, if Manichean in his theory of art, almost a literary schizophrenic in his practice of poetry. Never able to be absolutely serious about his political cures for the evils that threatened mankind in 1930, we find him writing in 1960 that he is:

. . . one of those  
 Who feel a Christian ought to write in Prose  
 For poetry is Magic . . . 2

But a poet like Auden, Christian or not, cannot stop writing poetry; what he can do is try to make his work acceptably Christian - - not Pagan, but Christian Magic. The anonymous reviewer of the Times Literary Supplement

<sup>1</sup>John Bayley. Encounter. v. XXI. p. 80.  
 (Bayley is referring to the essay "Brothers and Others", The Dyer's Hand, p. 234.)

<sup>2</sup>Homage to Cléo, Introductory verse to Part II (unnumbered page).

reviewing The Dyer's Hand in 1963, writes

. . . he had evidently decided that (Christian poetry) might take the form of celebrating with appropriate vividness and ritual beauty such perceptions of the happiness in the Just City of the nature of Eden, or of the possible experience of undivided being, as his Christianity and his temperament have endowed him with.<sup>1</sup>

Thus much of his later poetry shows the moments when the poet's imagination believes it has attained perfect unity of being: the moment of waking<sup>2</sup> or a stay in Ischia<sup>3</sup> (1952) and later in The Shield of Achilles the scene of such a moment may even be

. . . a lawn over which  
The first thing after breakfast  
A paterfamilias  
Hurries to inspect his rainauge.<sup>4</sup>

But Auden is never able to follow any course of action whole-heartedly; he can see the dangers even here. Even such devotedly Christian work has within it the danger that it may make both poet and reader forget that they live in the imperfect, fallen world where choice is obligatory to us, and frequently wrongly made. So to prevent our being carried out of the real world into the mirror world of Art, Auden recalls us sharply from

<sup>1</sup>"By Cape Wrath to Eden", Times Literary Supplement, (June 7th, 1963), front page.

<sup>2</sup>"Prime", Nones, pp. 9--10.

<sup>3</sup>Nones, pp. 21--23

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 16.



out in his introduction to Kierkegaard: "The Jews crucified Jesus on the serious charge that he was a blasphemer, the Gentiles on the frivolous charge that he was a public nuisance."<sup>1</sup>

In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Making, Knowing and Judging, Auden for the first time (perhaps being back in the surroundings of his own youth was too much for his usual reticence) reveals how it was that he came to write poetry himself, and prescribes a formula for what he calls apprentice poets to follow. He does not tell us much, but we should be grateful for any crumbs that fall from his usually carefully concealed table, as Auden goes to extraordinary lengths to keep the poet from his poems. In order to prevent any autobiographical conclusions being drawn by his readers, he had the Collected Shorter Poems of 1950 printed in the alphabetical order of their first lines, so that students of his poetry must either buy all the individual volumes (periodically, of course, out of print) or spend endless hours sorting them out into some sort of biographical progression. Cecil Day Lewis reports a conversation between them when they were both in Venice; ~~and they were~~

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<sup>1</sup>Kierkegaard, (London: Cassell and Co. 1955), p. 13.

. . . Auden and I were sitting by the Grand Canal, soaking up grappa. "Did you know," he said, turning on me a face as pale and crumpled as a relief map of the age of anxiety, "did you know that . . . was writing his autobiography?"

"I did."

"Well, why didn't you stop him?"

"How would I stop him?"

"You know perfectly well, Cecil, that no poet should ever write an autobiography."

"Oh!"

"Has he got it here?"

"Probably."

"Then we'll go and burn it."<sup>1</sup>

Much of this lecture is limited by the circumstances of its delivery; as W.W. Robson says in an essay called "Mr. Auden's Profession", he had to offer what is expected on such occasions, in this case "an entertaining mixture of whimsical self-deprecation, interesting personal reminiscences, bright ideas and jokes," but he goes on to say:

There are things in this lecture that could only have come from a poet of his gifts and they deserve to be disentangled and considered for their own sake, quite apart from the attention that may be given to their immediate

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<sup>1</sup>The Buried Day by C.D. Lewis. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), p. 25.

context, because of its interest as an autobiographical or sociological document.<sup>1</sup>

There are indeed. It is not the intention to deal here with what Auden has to tell us about his own early development as a poet; this will be more appropriate further on. But the section on Primary and Secondary Imagination is tantalising because it contains ideas unfortunately not fully worked out in this lecture and not taken up again by Auden in later work. Auden uses Coleridgean terms, but interprets them differently; he no more agrees with Coleridge's Kantian metaphysics than he does with Keats' theory of negative capability. Shelley's fanciful flight about the "unacknowledged legislators of the world" he finds more applicable to the secret police than to the poets;<sup>2</sup> while he says of Arnold,

Mathew Arnold's notion of Touchstones (sic) by which to measure all poems has ~~always~~ always struck me as a doubtful one, likely to turn readers into snobs and to ruin talented poets by tempting them to imitate what is beyond their powers.<sup>3</sup>

And he agrees with T.S. Eliot's pronouncement that Arnold is an academic critic.

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<sup>1</sup>Twentieth Century, V. CLXI (1957), p. 255.

<sup>2</sup>"Writing", The Dyer's Hand, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>"Making, Knowing and Judging", The Dyer's Hand, p. 37.

In his discussion of the Imagination, he says that he is trying to describe the same phenomena as Coleridge, and he goes on:

The concern of the Primary Imagination, its only concern, is with sacred beings and sacred events . . . A sacred being cannot be anticipated; it must be encountered. On encounter the imagination has no option but to respond. All imaginations do not recognise the same sacred beings, but every imagination responds to those it recognises in the same way . . .

The Secondary Imagination is of another character and at another mental level. It is active, not passive, and its categories are not the sacred and the profane, but the beautiful and the ugly . . .

The impulse to create a work of art is felt when, in certain persons, the passive awe provoked by sacred beings or events is transformed into a desire to express that awe in a rite of worship or homage, and to be fit homage this rite must be beautiful . . . In poetry, the rite is verbal; it pays homage by naming . . . there is only one thing all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being and for happening.<sup>1</sup>

Auden does not, unfortunately, explain his theory further by means of examples from his own and other poetry; we can however, see the Ariel/Prospero division reappearing under this new guise. It is certainly applicable to his own practice in writing poetry, and can in fact almost be read as an attempt to rationalise the central anomaly of his work, for these theorisings lead us straight back, as Robson points out, to the strange world of his poetry, the eternally divided yet

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<sup>1</sup>The Dyer's Hand, pp. 54-57

somehow organically whole world of sacred objects and wonderful epithets, haunted by Jules Verne and Struvel Peter, Latin mnemonic rhymes and books like Machinery for Metalliferous Mines;<sup>1</sup> the fascinating mythological world of the poet which we must try and disentangle in subsequent chapters. John Aubrey might have been speaking of Auden when he wrote (of Dr. Ralph Kettel, a famous Trinity Scholar who was a Fellow of his College in 1583)

One of the Fellowes (in Mr. Francis Potter's time) was wont to say that Dr. Kettel's braine was like a Hasty-pudding, where there was memorie, Judgemente, and Phancy all stirred together. He had all these Faculties in great measure, but they were just so jumbled together. If you had to doe with him, taking him for a Foole, you would have found in him great Subtilty and reach; & contra, if you treated him as a wise man you would have mistaken him for a Foole.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See The Dyer's Hand, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>Aubrey's Brief Lives, Ed. Oliver Lawson, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949), p. 182.

## CHAPTER II

### PUBLIC MYTH

Before discussing some of his earlier poems, it should help in the task of reconciling the two Audens if we try to understand something of the period in which he grew up and began to write poetry, for if poetry is a mimetic art, it is the social and political background which provides the material out of which the artist's imitation must be made. The 'thirties in England was a period of great social and political awareness, and its literature, reflecting in the mirror world of art the life that cannot live, is of particular interest (quite apart from anything else) as a socio-political document. Auden's position in the literary avant-garde of his generation was clear almost as soon as he began to write; he was their acknowledged prophet. As a token of this recognition, he, Cecil Day Lewis, Louis Macneice and Stephen Spender were automatically referred to as "The Auden group" even though, as Spender points out:

The facts are that we never met as a group; never referred to ourselves as a movement; curiously, the original three (i.e. excluding Macneice) didn't meet each other collectively until September, 1949, in Venice . . .

We had, nevertheless, much in common. We were all contemporaries, we were all at Oxford, we were all young. Auden's room at Oxford was more or less familiar to each of us. We admired The Waste Land which set up a barrier between our generation and much modern poetry that preceded it . . . set our generation the problem of getting out of the wastes.<sup>1</sup>

This was a difficult task for Auden, who at that time says Spender, hated both politics and literary movements equally strenuously.

But to go back to the beginning: Auden was born in 1907, in the same year as Christopher Fry and as his friends and fellow writers Lewis Macneice and John Lehmann.<sup>2</sup> It was a great year for Irish theatre; Synge, Yeates and Lady Gregory all had plays running at the same time, while on the political front everything seemed quiet under the shadow of the second Peace Conference at the Hague. But by the time Auden was ten years old, the Great War was entering its third year, and nobody in England had the time or the inclination to bother about trades unions, social security and all the other things that were later to dominate domestic politics under

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<sup>1</sup>"It began at Oxford", by Stephen Spender, New York Times Book Review, (March 13th, 1955), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Much of Auden's early poetry was first published in Lehmann's New Writing, one of the first of the "little" magazines to regard literature as inextricably bound up with politics.

successive Socialist governments; in fact, by the time these things had effected a real change in Britain as Auden knew it, he had already gone to live in the United States.

During this decade Dylan Thomas, Lawrence Durrell and Angus Wilson were born: Henry James, Flecker, Swinburne and Synge died. Both prose and poetry seemed to be marking time -- Yeats was the only poet to be steadily growing in stature, and though Conrad was emerging as a novelistic giant, and Kipling, Chesterton and Belloc kept the printing presses busy, only Lawrence seemed to be pointing a new kind of approach to literature.<sup>1</sup> But in 1917, when Auden turned ten, Eliot published Prufrock and other Observations, and, according to Dr. Leavis, poetry was seen to be emerging at last from its century of Romantic somnambulism. In his book, New Bearings in English Poetry, he has put forward the theory that poetry till then had been shackled by Romantic ideas of "the poetic"<sup>2</sup> -- ideas which bore no relation to the new kind of society

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<sup>1</sup> Ulysses was not published until 1922, the year of Conrad's death, though depicting a day in Dublin in 1904.

<sup>2</sup> For another viewpoint see "The End of the Line" by Randall Jarrell, The Nation, Vol. CLIV, (1942), pp. 222--228.

which was developing. Thus the old Romantic idea of the poet as a being too rarified to belong to the ordinary society of the times still persisted, and the "poetry of withdrawal" which resulted no longer fulfilled its mimetic function. Leavis says:

To invent techniques that shall be adequate to the ways of feeling, or modes of experience of adult sensitive moderns is difficult in the extreme. Until it has been once done, it is so difficult as to seem impossible. One success makes others more probable because less difficult.

That is the peculiar importance of Mr. T.S. Eliot.<sup>1</sup>

While some eminent critics make a life's work of disagreeing with Dr. Leavis, this would appear unexceptionable. Later, when The Waste Land was published in 1922, Eliot confirmed that poetry had a new line to follow which must free it from its Romantic past, and make it once more a living tradition.

Though Auden and his "group" were enormously influenced by Eliot they wrote quite differently. It

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<sup>1</sup>New Bearings in English Poetry, (first published by Chatto and Windus, 1932) (London: Peregrine Penguin, 1963), p. 28. One must not forget, however, the considerable debt that Eliot (and Pound) owed to e.g., Browning, who was "nurtured in that fine tradition".

was Eliot who had shown modern society for the waste land it was; it was the early intention of Auden and his friends to reform society so that it could no longer be so called.<sup>1</sup> Thus when Auden first began to write, he was often thought of as the poet who would lead society out of The Waste Land, not only because he offered his readers the cure for what causes modern waste lands, but because his poetic style and practice were so different from Eliot's.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the cures he propounded for the ills of the 'thirties were no more absolutes than the diseases for which they were prescribed. The revolt against the alleged "Victorianism" which followed the Great War and showed itself in the febrile gaiety of the period, did not precipitate any major revolution in values; in the same way the pattern of Left Wing

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<sup>1</sup>"Eliot depicted the twentieth century only to turn aside from it in disgust, but the Auden group began to specify and criticise" Laurence Durrell in Key to Modern Poetry, (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), p. 184.

<sup>2</sup>Nonetheless, many of his poems even today still show strong traces of Eliot's influence, and some (see particularly the Epilogue to New Year Letter) are more Eliotic than Eliot: they read almost like a parody, as Professor Spears says, in that the idea is familiar in both The Waste Land and The Four Quartets, and in the conscious or unconscious aping of Eliot's style and mannerisms.

thought which was so much to the fore in the 'thirties, did not turn out to be an accurate prediction of the mood and method of the 'forties. But the intellectual avant garde of the 'thirties, of which Auden was the chief spokesman,<sup>1</sup> was, generally speaking, left wing and agnostic. Products of public schools and Oxbridge, they were filled with a sincere concern for the life around them, for the sick man in the sick society which was the life they reflected in the mirror of their art.<sup>2</sup> Yet disillusioned despair was not the result: this was rather the mode of the late 'fifties and 'sixties. Auden wrote in his dedicatory poem to the Niebuhrs at the beginning of Nones:

No civil style survived  
That pandemonium

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<sup>1</sup>It is significant that in a book of only 178 small pages Julian Symons quotes extensively from Auden 25 times, and writes far more about him than he does about anyone else. The Thirties, (London: The Cresset Press, 1960).

<sup>2</sup>William Empson remarks "... what they were saying was that you ought to have more socialism at home, you want the Welfare State, and you ought to have the popular front against Hitler abroad, the line up of the allies. They went on saying that through the thirties, and by 1942 the whole country agreed with them... So we needn't all try to laugh it off now, I think, as they rather tend to do". "Early Auden", The Review No. V (February 1963), p. 32.

But the wry, the sotto voce  
 Ironic and monochrome.<sup>1</sup>

-- this in a world that has debased "All sane affirmative speech". But "sane affirmative speech" is the language of his earliest published poems; he presents problems and he offers a cure as he does today, though both problems and cure now appear differently to him. In 1930 he saw, like Yeats and Eliot, that time was running out; like them he was preoccupied with sounding a warning:

It is time for the destruction of error.  
 The chairs are being brought in from the garden,  
 The summer talk stopped on that savage coast  
 Before the storms, after the guests and birds;  
 In sanatoriums they laugh less and less,  
 Less certain of cure; and the loud madman  
 Sinks now into a more terrible calm.<sup>2</sup>

A great many "little" magazines sprang up, all showing the same preoccupation as John Lehmann's Penguin New Writing; they affirmed the relationship of art and society in a way that the magazines of the 'twenties<sup>3</sup> had not done. Differing in tone as widely as the superior sophistication of Cyril Connolly's Horizon and the more realistic social commitment of Geoffrey

<sup>1</sup>Nones, front page.

<sup>2</sup>Poem No.XVI in Poems 1930 (Collected Shorter Poems, p. 83).

<sup>3</sup>E.g. The Egoist which was the official organ of the Imagists, and A.R. Orage's New Age.

Grigson's authors in New Verse they nevertheless all showed themselves, as Katherine Mansfield observed in her Journal, to be "rooted in life".<sup>1</sup>

Another indication of Auden's position as leader of the poets of this time was that Grigson brought out a special double number of New Verse in 1937, dedicated to Auden, in which most of his literary colleagues wrote a tribute to him. It is interesting to compare this publication with a special edition of The Review (undated, but possibly 1963) entitled "The Thirties" which is largely devoted to Auden. It shows that some thirty years after Grigson's special number he is still recognised as the undoubted leader of that era, and as the more modern essays show, he continues to be impossible to pigeonhole. Like the boys in "In Praise of Limestone" he is "never, thank God, in step."

Lawrence Durrell says of the publication of New Signatures in 1932

. . . it is impossible to describe the effect they made on younger writers with this, their

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<sup>1</sup>Though Pound raises a dissident voice, "One of the densest, almost ubiquitous English stupidities of (the) time was the disbelief that poetry was an art. Dozens of block-heads expected the crystal helicon to gush from their addled occiputs 'scientiae immunes . . . anseres naturali'" and he points out that editors wanted verse which would "fit the scheme of their number".  
Patria Mia, R.F. Seymour. (Chicago: 1950), p.39.

first collective appearance. The smouldering embers of Georgian tradition burst into flame, and from the cheerless hearths of papers like the Poetry Review the critics woke up and sharpened their battle axes.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the 'thirties, the literary avant-garde felt that England was moving into some deeply significant new social and political condition. Fascism was beginning to be a powerful force, even if it had not as yet any real significance in power politics, and as well as the little magazines, societies such as the Promethean Society arose. This particular society, Symons says, seemed to come to life almost spontaneously, with two principal motives behind it; the destruction of certain existing institutions (ironically enough, the public school was one of them) and the formation of a twentieth century Weltanschauung. A Credo in the sixth issue of the Twentieth Century<sup>2</sup> called for the creation of a World Commonwealth,

. . . with the objective as the World State of Mankind governed by regional bodies in constant touch with a central World Directorate, the personnel of which administrative bodies would be chosen for their progressive vision and administrative ability, irrespective of race, religion or numerical representation.

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<sup>1</sup>Key to Modern Poetry, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Julian Symons in his book The Thirties, p. 4.

This, together with similar societies, was the articulate spearhead of a large and incoherent mass of people under thirty who believed that to change the world was both necessary and easy. Society seemed to them to be so corrupt that its institutions would collapse with the ease of a rotted tree. Indeed, a comparison of the present paternal Welfare State with the British Government and the social attitudes of 1930 shows how far removed the one has already become from the other, though it has been brought about by a revolution of ideas, not by the revolution of arms envisaged by writers like Day Lewis and Spender. Auden had a different cure for the evils he diagnosed so clearly; commitment to a party political line was never really a part of it.

He considered the waste land of the 'thirties to be a social, more than a spiritual evil: for a social disease he prescribed a spiritual cure:

Get there if you can and see the land  
                                   you once were proud to own  
 Though the roads have almost vanished  
                                   and the expresses never run;

Smokeless chimneys, damaged bridges,  
                                   rotting wharves and choked canals,  
 Tramlines buckled, smashed trucks lying on  
                                   their sides across the rails;

Power stations locked, deserted, since they  
                                   drew the boiler fires;  
 Pylons fallen or subsiding, trailing dead  
                                   high-tension wires;



pointing out that the artist must fight too, for he has suffered in the same way as inanimate things. The Tennysonian metre and style<sup>1</sup> lend themselves admirably to these heroics.

Lawrence, Blake and Homer Lane,<sup>2</sup> once healers  
in our English land;  
These are dead as iron for ever: these can never  
hold our hand,

Lawrence was brought down by smut hounds, Blake  
went dotty as he sang,  
Homer Lane was killed in action by the  
Twickenham Baptist gang.

One can easily see why this poem was never reprinted after 1934.<sup>3</sup> It has the crudities and crassness of youth and sounds in places like a revivalist hymn, but it also has youth's strength and power, and the force of an unqualified point of view; and the first few verses quoted are excellent poetry by any standards. The call to action which concludes it has both the merits and demerits of the sections already quoted; it is certainly powerful stuff which had a great impact on the receptive young intellectuals of the time:

Shut up talking, charming in the best suits  
to be had in town,  
Lecturing on navigation while the ship is  
going down.

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<sup>1</sup>See Maud and Locksley Hall.

<sup>2</sup>Note the strange company Homer Lane is keeping!

<sup>3</sup>This is the reason it is quoted at length here: it is no use referring the reader to any printed collection available today.



Auden then was regarded as the leader in poetic circles of the early 'thirties -- he was the man most discussed, the most admired, the most read. But the figures of his sales show how small a group he actually spoke for. This is not to suggest that any other poet would have sold better, but it shows that the viewpoint of the more mature Auden is correct in that the separation between Art and real life makes negligible the effect of the former upon the latter. The later Auden would have known that poets will never be even the unacknowledged legislators of the world, and the difference between the assured, strongly expressed language of the poems and the number of people reading them was ludicrous if Auden and his friends expected to see the social structure begin to reel under their blows. His first publicly printed book -- Poems (1930) -- was issued in paper-wrappers, probably in an edition of 1,000 copies which sold at half-a-crown each. In spite of the fact that Paid on Both Sides had been printed in T.S. Eliot's The Criterion,<sup>1</sup> and that New Signatures had already begun publication with a great fanfare of trumpets, this impression only sold out in 1933. In November

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<sup>1</sup>The most influential literary periodical of the time, yet it had a circulation of only 800 copies.

of that year the book was published in boards, in an edition of 1,000 copies, and in September 1934 it was reprinted in another edition of 1,500 copies. The next reprint (1,517 copies, which seems a curious number) was in 1937. The Orators was published in 1932 in an edition of 1,000 copies. A second edition of another 1,000 copies was published in September, 1934, and no reprint was called for until September, 1943.<sup>1</sup> As Symons points out, when an artist is committed to some form of political creed, the size of his audience is vitally important, and many of these young writers seemed to be "laying down rules for talking to an empty room".<sup>2</sup> This possibly explains why politically committed writers like Day Lewis and Spender seem to have become out-dated so soon: it is Auden's good fortune (or good management) that he was never committed to Marxism more than superficially and for a very short time -- though his interest in it still remains -- so that while he has been able to grow and expand in a changing society, it was more difficult for the others to shake off the shackles of an outmoded and exploded political cure-all.

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<sup>1</sup>It is interesting to see The Orators being reprinted now. (March 1966).

<sup>2</sup>The Thirties, pp. 21--22, from which these figures are taken.

Under dialectical materialism as preached by Marx and Engels, the artist is a product of society and has a reciprocal action upon it, so that art may reach a point of vitality and vision where it can influence the life of the period down to its very foundations. But even Marx and Engels did not believe that literature should preach political beliefs and, as Trotsky says, "Such terms as proletarian literature and proletarian culture are dangerous because they enormously compress the culture of the future into the narrow limits of the present-day".<sup>1</sup> These poets, who hoped to be heard by the working class as well as by their old school friends, were almost never members of this class. Spender, who so often stresses Auden's disinterest in politics says of him in 1937:

The subject of his poetry is the struggle, but the struggle seen, as it were, by someone who while living in one camp, sympathises with the other, a struggle in fact which while existing externally is also taking place within the mind of the poet himself, who remains a bourgeois . . . may we not say that the position of the writer who sees the conflict as something which is at once subjective to himself and having its external reality in the world -- the position outlined in Auden's Spain -- is

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted by Edmund Wilson in "Marxism and Literature" from Literary Opinion in America (ed. Morton Zabel), (New York: Harper & Bros., 1951), p. 696.

one of the most creative, realistic and valid positions for the artist in our time?<sup>1</sup>

In the same issue of New Verse its editor, Geoffrey Grigson, shows plainly the strength of the esteem in which Auden was held by his fellow poets. Describing the era in which Auden had grown up as one of "bewildered mediocrity, triviality and fudge"<sup>2</sup> he further says in his Introduction to the issue:

We salute in Auden (though we do not forget all that can be said against him) the first English poet for many years who is a poet all the way round. There are angles from which Mr. Eliot seems a ghost and even Mr. Yeats a gleam.<sup>3</sup>

Despite all this fanfare, the poet's audience remained small; it was composed, ironically, chiefly of the very people they were attacking, the educated members of the suburban middle class. Instead of the ideal working class audience of their imagination,

<sup>1</sup>From Spender's contribution to the Auden Double number of New Verse, but for another point of view see George Orwell "Inside the Whale", England, Your England (London: Secker & Warburg, 1954), p. 127. "Mr. Auden's brand of immoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled". (Orwell is referring to the words "... necessary murder" used by Auden in "Spain 1937" and later changed to read "... fact of murder")

<sup>2</sup>"Auden as a Monster", p. 17.

<sup>3</sup>New Verse. Auden Double Number.

it was disconcerting to find it largely composed of middle class sociologists and aesthetes like themselves. It is of course absurd to suppose that anyone else could have read poetry like Auden's with understanding, let alone pleasure; if many eminent literary critics feel obliged to dismiss The Orators as "impenetrably obscure", it was hardly likely to be the favourite reading of the English working class man of the period.

CHAPTER III  
PRIVATE MYTH

The public who read the poems of Auden and his "group" was, in fact, largely composed of ex-members of those public schools which the Prometheans and their friends wished to destroy. We have seen how the public Auden fitted into the public life of the early 'thirties, and the public myth the poets of the time subscribed to emerges from this; it may be useful now to narrow the field to Auden's own group of friends at school and university, for in this way we can discover something of the private myth peculiar to them, which they created, and out of which much of Auden's early work was written. At the same time, his friends tell us (for it is to them we must turn for such biographical details as are relevant to this study -- we have already seen Auden's views about poets writing their autobiographies)<sup>1</sup> much that is interesting about

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<sup>1</sup>Despite these views of his, most of his friends did so. Christopher Isherwood in the novelistic Lions and Shadows, first published by the Hogarth Press in 1938; John Lehmann in The Whispering Gallery (London:

his early opinions, and who were his earliest "masters".<sup>1</sup> The only biographical material as such which Auden gives us (apart from what appears in a few carefully composed essays and lectures) is contained in his "Letter to Lord Byron" which was published in Letters from Iceland in 1937 and never included in any subsequent collections. It is a gay and amusing work, written in Auden's own adaptation of Byron's rime royal in Don Juan,<sup>2</sup> and the poet seems to have been tempted to make a public confidant of the dead peer in a way of which he usually disapproved. It is not the intention here to give a history of Auden's life to date but only to try and make use of those details which help to clear up much of his alleged obscurity, and generally clarify some of the poetry; this becomes a necessity with a poet who makes such extensive use of private myth and consequently private allusions,

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Longman's, 1965); Cecil Day Lewis in The Buried Day (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960); Stephen Spender in World within World (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951).

<sup>1</sup> See The Dyer's Hand, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Byron uses eight five-foot iambic lines rhyming abababcc -- Auden has seven lines rhyming ababbcc.



jokes and references, as Auden did in his early poetry.<sup>1</sup>

In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1956 Auden says "I began writing poetry myself because one Sunday afternoon in March, 1922 a friend<sup>2</sup> suggested that I should: the thought had never occurred to me".<sup>3</sup> He tells us the same thing in verse:

But indecision broke off with a clear-cut end  
 One afternoon in March at half-past three  
 When walking in a ploughed field with a friend,  
 Kicking a little stone, he turned to me  
 And said "Tell me, do you write poetry?"  
 I never had, and said so, but I knew<sup>4</sup>  
 That very moment what I wished to do.

It is remarkable all through Auden's career, how much he has depended on his friends, some of whom have remained the same from his school and university days to the present time. It is they who suggest he write poetry, it is they who provide the strange fantasy world and schoolboy mystique out of which much of the earlier poetry is partly

<sup>1</sup>Similarly, Yeats' poetry is better understood if the reader knows something of his theory of the gyres, and The Waste Land is more rewarding to the reader who is well acquainted with Dante.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Medley, the painter.

<sup>3</sup>The Lyrer's Hand, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup>"Letter to Lord Byron", Letters from Iceland, p. 208.

written; it is they to whom Auden dedicated and continues to dedicate his poems. His earliest published work was dedicated in toto to Christopher Isherwood, and his latest volume<sup>1</sup> also contains a poem dedicated to him, as well as a poem to one of his most thoughtful critics, John Bayley, and another in memory of his old friend, Louis Macneice, with whom he collaborated in Letters from Iceland. Later in his inaugural lecture, he says

The apprentices (i.e. young fellow poets) do each other a . . . service which no older and sounder critic could do. They read each other's manuscripts. At this age a fellow apprentice has two great virtues as a critic. When he reads your poem he may grossly over-estimate it, but if he does, he really believes what he is saying . . . secondly, he reads your poem with that passionate attention which grown up critics only give to masterpieces.<sup>2</sup>

Auden's first published poem appeared in Public Schools' Verse in 1924;<sup>3</sup> at Oxford he edited Oxford Poetry in 1926 with Charles Plumb and included three of his own poems;<sup>4</sup> in 1927 he edited it again, this time with Cecil Day Lewis, and included only one of

<sup>1</sup>About the House.

<sup>2</sup>The Dyer's Hand, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup>"It is a Lovely Sight and Good".

<sup>4</sup>Consider; Cinders; and The Letter.  
(Note the use of titles, unusual for Auden at this period).

his own poems.<sup>1</sup> Only one of these, "Consider if you will how lovers stand", was included in his first anthology of poems and then "stand" was changed to "lie", showing that Auden began changing his poems almost as soon as he began writing them, at a time when no ulterior religious or political motives could have been attributed to him.

Isherwood's excellent account of public school and university life in the 'twenties has a great deal to offer that is of particular value in clearing up much of Auden's "obscurity" at this period. Writing of him as "Weston", Isherwood describes his "narrow, scowling, pudding white face"<sup>2</sup> and goes on to relate how even in those very early days, Auden delighted in speaking as somebody else, the particular role he was playing being indicated by the hat he wore. Two of these are of particular interest, as they have remained favourite poetic masks of Auden's right through his career. Writing in 1935, Isherwood says:

There was, and occasionally still is, a panama with a black ribbon representing (his) conception of himself as lunatic

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<sup>1</sup>In due Season.

<sup>2</sup>Was this retaliation for Auden's reference to Isherwood's "squat, spruce body and enormous head" in Birthday Poem published in 1935?

clergyman, always a favourite role. Also, most insidious of all, there exists, somewhere in the background, a schoolmaster's mortar board.<sup>1</sup>

There are several examples of his idea of the lunatic clergyman (also a chilling figure in Rex Warner's Wild Goose Chase), one of the most notable being the Vicar's harangue in The Dog Beneath the Skin. To show that these masks were assumed as lightly as his hats, when Auden wanted it to appear as an address by a sane clergyman, he was able to publish it perfectly feasibly in the American Collected Poems under the title of "Depravity: a Sermon"; it also reads quite appositely in another <sup>2</sup>publication, where it appears as "Sermon by an Armaments Manufacturer". As for the schoolmaster's mortar board, we are aware of it lurking behind almost everything he writes;<sup>3</sup> often this didacticism is poetically acceptable, but sometimes, as Auden himself admits, he confuses his hats, adopting, as he says:

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<sup>1</sup> Lions and Shadows (London: Four square edition, The New English Library Ltd., 1963 -- first published 1938), p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Life and Letters, X (May, 1934), pp. 164-167

<sup>3</sup> After leaving Oxford Auden went to a school in Scotland as an assistant master and then to another school near Malvern. He taught from 1930 to 1935.

. . . what I would disown  
The preacher's loose, immodest tone<sup>1</sup>

George Barker complains of him in 1935

. . . behind or through the poetry, I  
discern a clumsy, interrogatory finger  
questioning me about my matriculation  
certificate, my antecedents and my  
annual income.<sup>2</sup>

Referring specifically to "obscurity" Isherwood  
says that the young Auden disliked correcting poems  
and would rather throw them away; however

If I liked one line he would keep it and  
work it into a new poem. In this way,  
whole poems were constructed which were  
simply anthologies of my favourite lines,  
entirely regardless of grammar or sense.  
This is the simple explanation of much  
of Auden's celebrated obscurity.<sup>3</sup>

It has become an almost equally celebrated explanation,  
but it is difficult to resist the impression that  
Isherwood is boasting; he is surely at least  
exaggerating his influence over his friend. No doubt  
it is partly true, and may even be entirely true of  
some of the unpublished early work, but there is no  
poem among the published work so impenetrably obscure  
as to have been entirely composed in the manner Isher-  
wood describes.

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<sup>1</sup>New Year Letter, p. 24

<sup>2</sup>In the Auden Double number of New Verse, p. 23

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 6.

But it is he who is the most revealing about the private myth on which all the members of the Auden "group" drew in their writing except, curiously enough, Isherwood himself who made little use of it. We first hear of it in Lions and Shadows; Isherwood says the whole idea originated when he and Edward Upward, while still at school (Auden was junior to them at the same school and intending then to become a mining engineer), invented a private world of their own and when they went up to Oxford continued the fantasy, naming their imagined village Mortmere. It was a strange half world, peopled by sinister figures who were mainly caricatures of old school friends and masters, dons and acquaintances, and the two friends lived their fantasy life almost more than their real one -- though it never, fortunately, lost its tenuous connection with reality -- to the extent of often being quite unintelligible in conversation with other people. They were determined to write a book about it -- the characters included the Reverend Mr. Welken, Rector of Mortmere who had ". . . indulged his taste for ritual to a point bordering on magic, and whose brain, in consequence, was a little turned".<sup>1</sup> And his most intimate friend,

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<sup>1</sup>Lions and Shadows, p. 63

Ronald Gunball, whose

. . . world was the world of delirium tremens: he saw wonders and horrors all about him, his everyday life was lived amidst two-headed monsters, ghouls, downpours of human blood and eclipses of the sun.<sup>1</sup>

There was also Reynard Moxon, "deadly pale in an opera hat and a light overcoat with black silk facings",<sup>2</sup> who was accompanied on his rambles after dark by a large black serpent, not to mention a mysterious character called "the Watcher in Spanish".<sup>3</sup> A great deal of this can be found in Upward's Journey to the Border, and Rex Warner's Wild Goose Chase also draws heavily on Mortmere legend and characters.

Auden and Isherwood, who became friends during Auden's first year at Oxford, also evolved an imaginary world which, while retaining much of the Mortmere flavour, was basically very different. It was composed of a mixture of Icelandic sagas, school life and spy stories; this was the material for poetry that must, said Auden, be classic, clinical and austere;

<sup>1</sup>Lions and Shadows, p. 63

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 65

<sup>3</sup>Possibly this character derives from "The Person in the Spanish Cape" who tried to sit on Sweeney's knees. T.S. Eliot "Sweeney Among the Nightingales", Collected Poems (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), p. 57.

he repeats this in "Letter to Lord Byron";

And through the quads, dogmatic words rang clear;  
"Good poetry is classic and austere."<sup>1</sup>

Isherwood says:

Austerity was also mixed up with Weston's (Auden's) feelings about the heroic Norse literature -- his own personal variety of "war" fixation. Naturally enough, he had been brought up on the Icelandic sagas, for they were the background of his family history.<sup>2</sup> On his recommendation I now began for the first time to read Gretthir and Burnt Njal . . . These warriors with their feuds, their practical jokes, their dark threats conveyed in puns and riddles and deliberate understatements ("I think this day will end un<sup>l</sup>uckily for some, but chiefly for those who least expect harm") -- they seemed so familiar -- where had I met them before? Yes, I recognised them now; they were the boys at our preparatory school. Weston was pleased with the idea; we discussed it a good deal, wondering which of our school fellows best corresponded to the saga character. In time, the school saga world became for us a kind of Mortmere . . . founded upon our preparatory school lives . . . And soon after this, Weston produced a short verse play in which the two worlds are so confused that it is almost impossible to say whether the characters are epic heroes or members of a school O.T.C.<sup>3</sup>

This may have been Paid on Both Sides, the verse charade first published in The Criterion for January, 1930.

Though Auden and most of his "group" drew heavily

<sup>1</sup>Letters from Iceland, p. 209

<sup>2</sup>cf. "Letter to Lord Byron" Letters from Iceland, p. 205.

<sup>3</sup>Lions and Shadows, p. 119

on this myth in their early work, the myth itself was largely, if not completely, an oral affair sparked off and built up in conversation. To try and patch it together from the literature in which it has been only incompletely utilised is a rather uncertain business, but the main pattern emerges clearly enough. Justin Replogle, in a recent essay,<sup>1</sup> describes the world of the myth as a world which is divided by a frontier or border. On one side is the enemy, the forces of disease, inadequacy and corruption; on the other are the forces of health, and usually, youth. These two hostile groups frequently clash, or threaten to do so, and the action in the myth arises from the activities, or proposed activities, of these two groups which are in deadly opposition to one another.

The hero or leader of the diseased group (who is always young, and sometimes a youngest son) frequently undertakes a version of the traditional quest crossing or trying to cross the border into the territory held by the healthy group. He may be unsuccessful, in which case he is usually a victim of his own inadequacies and fears; or he may give up his quest in response to the

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<sup>1</sup>"The Gang Myth in Auden's early poetry"  
Journal of English and German Philology,  
(July 1962), to which the present writer  
is indebted for much of the following  
five pages.

temptation or importuning of those who defend the sick society (often a member of the nobility or a clergyman). Even if he manages to cross the border he may still not be safe, for the seeds of his sickness may remain in him and he may realise that he has failed only when strange symptoms of illness reappear.<sup>1</sup> The hero's method of travel is frequently part of the myth. In Day Lewis' The Magnetic Mountain all the healthy travel by train, and the poet surveys the philosophic issues involved while taking

A light engine back along the line  
For a last excursion, a tour of inspection . . .<sup>2</sup>

while in The Wild Goose Chase the three questers travel by motor-bike.

Auden's hero travels mostly by train, though

<sup>1</sup>The best examples of the working out of these points in the poetry are to be found in the longer works. Paid on Both Sides and The Orators show almost all of them while the undertaking of the mythological 'quest' is fully worked out in The Dog Beneath the Skin. The Ascent of F6 shows a different sort of quest; the questers of The Age of Anxiety show yet another. Many of the shorter poems which show separate facets of the myth such as "Have a Good Time" (Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 163--164) are taken from these longer works, in this instance from The Orators, pp. 46--47.

<sup>2</sup>Collected Poems of C. Day Lewis; (London: Jonathan Cape with the Hogarth Press: 1954), p. 184.

he sometimes approaches the border by ship, but as his methods of transportation carry special significance, so do many things associated with them, such as engines, railheads, junctions, bicycles, piers, harbours and coastguards. After he has crossed the frontier (usually with a small troop of men) the hero and his followers often live in the mountains, planning from these heights their defences and possible attacks on the unregenerate, who usually live in lowlands and valleys. Both Warner (The Wild Goose Chase) and Auden (The Orators) give their hero a specially significant position above the enemy by making him an airman; birds have the same significance in Auden's work, the most commonly referred to being hawks, kestrels and gulls.

Auden adapts the myth to fit in with his beliefs of the time, which were mainly based on those of Freud, Georg Groddeck, Homer Lane and D.H. Lawrence,<sup>1</sup> and which in turn had to be slightly twisted to fit in with his public myth derived, as we have seen, largely from Marx and left-wing liberalism. All society, both private and public, must atrophy when its members become trapped by generations of unchanging

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<sup>1</sup>See "Letter to Lord Byron". Letters from Iceland, p. 210.





But the poems will be dealt with as they arise: a general outline of the myth is all that is needed here.

It is difficult to assess the meaning of the variety of landscape features and incidental imagery in Auden's myth, for he uses it only sporadically. The mythological implication and allegory exist at different levels. The "enemy" may be members of the sick culture, anthropomorphised ideas, or psychological threats to health within the individual himself. All three may appear in a single poem.<sup>1</sup> But once the reader has some understanding of the myth, the confusion is much reduced. As Justin Replogle points out

Within an allegorical framework it makes little difference whether figures are humans or personified ideas, and even less difference whether enemy traits are symbolic of an individual's or a culture's psychological disturbances.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the use of myth, what ideas did the young Auden have about the practice of his art, and who were the other poets who influenced him? He tells us himself that his first 'masters' were Hardy and Edward Thomas, but by the time his work was

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<sup>1</sup>e.g. "The Exiles", Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 166--168.

<sup>2</sup>Journal of English and German Philology, p. 487.

beginning to be published, they had been temporarily forgotten in favour of Eliot.<sup>1</sup> He explains, in Letter to Lord Byron

A raw provincial, my good taste was tardy,  
 And Edward Thomas I as yet preferred;  
 I was still listening to Thomas Hardy  
 Putting divinity about a bird;  
 But Eliot spoke the still unspoken word;  
 For gasworks and dried tubers I forsook  
 The clock at Grantchester, the English rook.<sup>2</sup>

Isherwood, as usual, has something to say,

Quotations and misquotations were allowed, together with bits of foreign languages, proper names and private jokes. Weston was peculiarly well equipped for playing The Waste Land game. For Eliot's Dante quotations and classical learning he substituted oddments of scientific, medical and psychoanalytical jargon; his magpie brain was a hoard of curious and suggestive phrases from Jung, Rivers, Kretschmer and Freud. He peppered his work liberally with such terms as "eututic", "sigmoid curve", "Arch-monad" . . . seeking thereby to produce what he himself described as a "clinical effect." To be "clinically minded" was, he said, the first duty of a poet.<sup>3</sup>

Stephen Spender, who has remained one of his friend's most sensitive critics, has several helpful things to say about Auden's early opinions. He lists some of

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<sup>1</sup>Cyril Connolly said "His (Eliot's) influence on young writers is disconcerting. Auden, I think, is one young poet to survive it." Enemies of Promise, (Penguin Modern Classics: 1938), p.52.

<sup>2</sup>Letters from Iceland, p. 209.

<sup>3</sup>Lions and Shadows, p. 118.

his characteristic pronouncements on poetry, made while at Oxford, and nearly all reversed shortly after leaving.

A poet must have no opinions, no decided views which he seeks to put across in his poetry. Above all, poetry must be in no way concerned with politics.

Politics are just lackeys and public servants whom we should ignore.

The subject of a poem is only a peg on which to hang the poetry.<sup>1</sup>

A poet must be clinical, dispassionate about life. The poet feels much less strongly about things than do other people. Poems should never have titles. Never use exclamation marks and avoid abstractions.<sup>2</sup>

A glance at this list is enough to show that though Auden may have reversed most of these opinions soon after he had formulated them, he has returned to some of them in later stages of writing.

At Oxford, almost the most frequent word in his vocabulary was "symptomatic", a word used both as a term of praise or as diagnosis. For example, he thought Eliot's poetry was excellent because it was "symptomatic" but a hesitancy of speech was also symptomatic of some psychological repression. This

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<sup>1</sup>For an elaboration of this point, see Spender's World Within World, p. 51

<sup>2</sup>W.H. Auden and his poetry", Atlantic Monthly, (July, 1953), p. 74.

idea, of course, of symptoms and cure, is one that runs all through Auden's work, from then until today: the pre-occupation is the same from the early

. . . look shining at  
New styles of architecture, a change of heart<sup>1</sup>

to the concluding lines of the Age of Anxiety

In our anguish we struggle  
To elude Him, to lie to Him yet His love  
observes  
Its appalling promise . . .<sup>2</sup>

The symptoms must, Spender says, be diagnosed, named, brought into the open, made to weep and confess, that they may be related to Auden's central theme of Love leading them to the discipline which is their cure. The symptoms which prove that man needs to love and that

The grossest of his dreams is  
No worse than our worship which for the most part  
Is so much galimatias to get out of  
Knowing our neighbour,<sup>3</sup>

have changed very little; it is Auden's conception of the cure which has changed from his early idea that love -- which meant both Eros and a vaguer and more exalted concept -- was the answer. What the

<sup>1</sup>Poems 1930, No. XXX. (Collected Shorter Poems, "Petition",) p. 120.

<sup>2</sup>The Age of Anxiety, pp. 125--126.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

change was can be seen later; at the time of his first book his concept of love was the beginning and end of it. So his early poems, as we shall see, reflect the amoral, neutral position of the Oxford, clinical Auden. They express a complete detachment in lines of frigid clipped beauty; it is not so much art for art's sake, but art for science's sake; the poet creates poems out of his observations, emotions, private and public myth and literary influences as though he were working in a laboratory.

Letter to Lord Byron is a fruitful source of Auden's early likes and dislikes: the country he admired, and the things in it --

Clearer than Scafell Pike, my heart has stamped on,  
The view from Birmingham to Wolverhampton,<sup>1</sup>

and again --

Long, long ago, when I was only four,  
Going towards my grandmother, the line  
Passed through a coal-field. From the  
corridor  
I watched it pass with envy, thought  
"How fine!  
O how I wish that situation mine!"  
Tramlines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery,  
That was, and still is, my ideal scenery<sup>2</sup>

while as a child he says

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<sup>1</sup>"Letter to Lord Byron", Letters from Iceland, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 51.

But better far than any kings or queens  
 I liked to see and know about machines;  
 And from my sixth until my sixteenth year  
 I thought myself a mining engineer.<sup>1</sup>

Again, showing how school represented all aspects of  
 the world to him, he says

The Great War had begun: but masters' scrutiny  
 And fists of big boys were the war to us;<sup>2</sup>

for

. . . what a prep school really puts across  
 Is knowledge of the world we'll soon be lost in!  
 To-day it's more like Dickens than Jane Austen.<sup>3</sup>

But here we begin to come back to the sources  
 of Auden's private myth and it is necessary now to  
 consider the early poems in the light of what has been  
 outlined in the first chapters.

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<sup>1</sup>"Letter to Lord Byron", Letters from  
 Iceland, p. 205.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 205.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, P. 206.

CHAPTER IV

FIRST POEMS AND PAID ON BOTH SIDES

Stephen Spender tells us, "I spent the remaining part of the long vacation (1929) printing a little volume of the Poems of W.H. Auden, an edition of thirty copies which is sought after to-day".<sup>1</sup> This search has not been entirely successful and all the copies have not so far been run to earth though ~~Mr. Bloomfield~~<sup>Mr.</sup> B.C. Bloomfield, who has produced a comprehensive bibliography of Auden's writings,<sup>2</sup> gives a list of the volumes of this issue which he has traced, and a full description of the book itself.<sup>3</sup> Copy owners include Cyril Connolly, Jack Samuels, John Johnson, George Rylands and Christopher Isherwood, and there is one in the library of the University of Cincinnati.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>World Within World, p. 116

<sup>2</sup>W.H. Auden, A Bibliography. The Early Years Through 1955. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1960).

<sup>3</sup>"W.H. Auden's First Book". The Library: (June 1962), p. 152.

<sup>4</sup>Further notes on known copies may be found in "Commentary" in The Book Collector (Summer, 1962), pp. 156 -- 157.

Bloomfield says, quoting a letter from Spender,

The printing was done on an Adana printing set, price £7, for chemists' labels and the copy was supplied by the Reverend A.S.T. Fisher and, probably, Auden himself, although he has no recollection of it.<sup>1</sup>

Before the work was finished, Spender broke the set, and the Holywell Press in Oxford finished and bound the edition, thus accounting for its professional appearance.

Professor Munroe K. Spears in his book<sup>2</sup> which Auden calls the "only authoritative work"<sup>3</sup> about him, cites twenty-six poems as being published in this first volume -- there appear to be actually twenty-eight, all of which are listed by Professor Spears himself in the invaluable index of first lines in which he gives the published sources of all the poems. It is the inevitable slim volume, and indeed, could hardly have been anything else. Most of the poems were written before Auden was twenty-one; this is a prolific number for such a short period and gives an early indication of the steady output of poetry Auden was to maintain

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<sup>1</sup>The Library, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup>The Poetry of W.H. Auden. The Disenchanted Island. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963).

<sup>3</sup>In a letter to the present writer, May, 1965.

through the years. These early poems have both the weaknesses and the strength of work which is uninhibited by the hindsight of advancing years, and it says much for their calibre that Auden retained fifteen of them in the 1930 volume, which was the first professionally published edition of his work. Nine were kept as separate poems, and six were made an intrinsic part of Paid on Both Sides, which was published again in this volume after its initial appearance in T.S. Eliot's The Criterion of January, 1930.

Professor Spears says that he asked Auden if these six poems were excerpts from a work already in existence and that Auden said that he had written them first as separate poems, but that they had then seemed to be "part of something", showing that even at this stage "the difference between a separate poem and an excerpt from a longer work is clearly not at absolute one for Auden".<sup>1</sup> The first poem of the 1938 volume is itself divided into seven poems which appear quite unconnected, and Professor Spears hazards a guess that they may all be imitations of various styles. This seems a possible answer.<sup>2</sup> Eliot, de la Mare and

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<sup>1</sup>The poetry of W.H. Auden. The Disenchanted Island. p. 20.

<sup>2</sup>For another and more recent theory, see Appendix A.

the Imagists are all recognisable, while the second reads almost like a parody of Hopkins:

Bones wrenched, weak whimper, lids  
 wrinkled, first dazzle known,  
 World wonder hardened as bigness, years  
 brought knowledge, you,  
 Presence a rich mould augured for roots  
 urged, but gone,  
 The soul is tetanous, gun-barrel  
 burnishing  
 In summer grass, mind lies to tarnish . . .

Each imitation, as Spears says, incorporates a discordantly modern element which redeems it from pure parody, though Auden himself, in a comparatively recent essay, has pointed out that unless a writer admires the work he is copying he will never write a good parody of it.<sup>1</sup> But all the poems in the book become "part of something" if they are considered in the light of the myth outlined in the previous chapters. Some or all of the elements of this myth are present in every one of the poems, and it holds them together, illuminates them, and greatly extends and deepens their meaning.

A good example to take is "Control of the passes" which was published in Collected Shorter Poems as "The Secret Agent". It is one of the four poems

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<sup>1</sup>Empson's parody of Auden, Just a Smack at Auden, is a good example of this; Chard Whitlow is another.

that have survived from 1928 to appear in this first English collection of Auden's verse published in 1950.<sup>1</sup>

Control of the passes was, he saw,  
   the key  
 To this new district, but who would  
   get it?  
 He, the trained spy, had walked into  
   the trap  
 For a bogus guide, seduced with the  
   old tricks.

At Greenhearth was a fine site for  
   a dam  
 And easy power, had they pushed the rail  
 Some stations nearer. They ignored  
   his wires.  
 The bridges were unbuilt and trouble  
   coming.

The street music seemed gracious now  
   to one  
 For weeks up in the desert. Woken  
   by water  
 Running away in the dark, he often had  
 Reproached the night for a companion  
 Dreamed of already. They would shoot,  
   of course  
 Parting easily who were never joined.<sup>2</sup>

In its original publication, this unrhymed Rilkean sonnet had no title, as Auden did not believe poems should be given titles when he first began writing.<sup>3</sup> But the title "The Secret Agent" used in the Collected

<sup>1</sup>The others are "The Love Letter" (C.S.P., p. 60); "Taller To-Day" (C.S.P., p. 122) and "The Watershed" (C.S.P., p. 183).

<sup>2</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup>Perhaps he was right, when one considers some of the painfully facetious titles he used in the American Collected Poems of 1945.

Shorter Poems is both appropriate and innocuous, and does help the reader, whether acquainted or not with Auden's mythological imagery, to have some idea of what the poem is all about. Read as it stands, it is not particularly difficult to follow -- its meaning is superficially clear enough, but its significance seems limited; one wonders why Auden should have retained in the official canon of his work a poem which appears so slight in its implications.

But a knowledge of the myth deepens these implications a great deal. It is obvious that we have the usual situation of two opposing groups who are both trying to gain "control of the passes" and so acquire for their side a whole "new district". Auden does not tell us in the poem what these sides represent, but with some background knowledge it is a fair assumption that they show the usual dichotomy; "We" on the one side representing health, youth, and in the widest public aspect of the myth, the working class and the future; "They", on the other representing "the old gang" -- disease, age, and again in the widest political aspect, the effete bourgeoisie and the past.<sup>1</sup> And if

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<sup>1</sup>It is convenient here to use the terminology of Randall Jarrell's We/They dichotomy, which is self explanatory. It is later discussed more fully on p. 81 of this essay.

we are not told all this directly, the hints are plain enough; the spy is "trained" i.e. he has crossed the nebulous disease frontier and (he thinks) become cured of the old society's ills -- he can go back now, to work, as spies do, against his old loyalties. These old affiliations prove to be still strong; he has been "seduced by the old tricks" of these same people despite his training, and been caught by them.

But it is never as simple as this in anything Auden writes; even on this level the allegory spreads much wider. The spy has not only fallen a victim to the machinations of the other side. His side have let him down. They have failed to provide a dam for the water at Greenhearth; to do this and to provide power would have been easy if they had only paid attention to his messages and taken the railhead further, for the passes would then have been bridged and the district "ours". As it is, trouble is going to catch these ineffectual workers as well as him -- they appear to be victims of their own lassitude, or "Classic fatigue", as Auden puts it in another poem.<sup>1</sup> At any rate, although they have fancied themselves "cured" of the old ills, the seeds of psychosomatic disease are still in them.

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<sup>1</sup>"Consider", Collected Shorter Poems, p. 44.

The thought of the undammed water has been tormenting the spy lying sleepless in the desert, listening to the precious stuff "running away in the dark". And here the irony begins to operate on another level, for not only have the other members of his side fallen a victim to their old illnesses; the seeds of sickness are still within the spy himself, although of course, as all the psychologists who fascinated Auden at this time have made clear, he would not be conscious of them. But the symptoms of the death wish are plain; lying in the dark, brooding over the failures of his companions.

. . . he often had  
 Reproached the night for a companion  
 Dreamed of already . . .

and by contrast with these miserable nights the pleasures of the old civilisation such as its "Street music" are still attractive. Thus despite his apparent cure, the spy is caught in the trap of his own unconscious desires, which are potent enemies in both cultures, the We and the They; the sick and the well.

He faces death philosophically. It is "dreamed of already"; like Keats, he is half in love with it. The last lines of the sestet summarise the whole ineluctability of the situation that exists within the half political, half psychological and personal world of the myth.

. . . They would shoot of course  
Parting easily who were never joined.

i.e. it is simple to take his life (and his affiliation) from someone who doesn't really want it. The last line's power derives, as does so much of the power of the whole poem, from the laconic force of the language; had Auden put in the missing ~~xxxxxx~~ <sup>word,</sup> ~~xxxx~~ the line would have been very much weakened.

Randall Jarrell, who has written some excellent criticism of Auden, though he is inimical towards the poetry of his later period<sup>1</sup>, gives his interpretation of the world of the myth in rather different terms from the ones used here, though the meaning is much the same. It further deepens the meaning of "The Secret Agent" if his view is sketched at this point, as it provides an excellent example of everything Jarrell says. Writing in The Southern Review in 1941<sup>2</sup> (at a time when Auden's "new" views and methods were becoming painfully apparent to him) he says that what Auden had done at the time his first poems were published was to reject the established order and set up one of his own.

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<sup>1</sup>Reading Jarrell's poetry, it is plain that much of it is modelled on the early Auden, for whom he must have had a fierce admiration.

<sup>2</sup>"Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry", The Southern Review VII, (1941), pp. 326--349.

He gives six points from which this "New Order" -- and it has some of the Fascist elements of its name -- derives. Firstly from the writings of Marx, secondly from those of Freud and Groddeck, thirdly, he says, Auden's new order contains (as Hitler's did) all the elements of classical myth such as the folk, blood, mysticism and fairy tales. Fourthly from science, particularly biology, and fifthly from recognised schoolboy pastimes such as flying, climbing, fighting, sports and spies.

His sixth point is homosexuality; Auden thought established sexual values to be as wrong as everything else in the established order, and in his new order offered homosexuality as a new and revolutionary sexual value. It must be stressed that this is offered as a symbol, usually devoid of any emotional connotation, and though Jarrell is right in saying that it is frequently alluded to and implied in the early poetry, it is not the only form of sexual deviation encountered; auto-eroticism is frequently referred to, though this is usually unequivocally condemned as "vile", or presented, as in The Orators, as a fault in the hero which must be overcome. At least one commentator<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>J.G. Southworth. Sowing the Spring,  
(Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1940).

has found the homosexual implications in Auden's work of sufficient interest to provide the subject matter for a long essay but this is grossly to exaggerate its importance; certainly there is no space here to track it down under its various disguises. These include rhyming slang, its own lingua franca, and more obvious references such as puns and physiological allusions. It has its accepted place in the myth, and it is sufficient comment if the reader is aware of this; we do not consider the important thing about Astrophel's sonnets to Stella to be the evidence they afford of Sidney's heterosexual inclinations. And in Auden's poetry, the poet himself is seldom emotionally present in his poems; it is one of the faults of his comparatively few love poems -- perhaps because of their homosexual nature -- that the author is always outside the poem moralising its emotions in the same way as he (far more successfully) moralises landscape. When homosexual implications arise in the poems, it is in the same "moralised" way.

To return to Jarrell: he divides the two opposing groups of the myth into "We" and "They" between whom, he says, Auden establishes as complete a dichotomy as possible. "We" are the new order, "They" represent the old effete gang who must die. "We" are healthy, or at

least trying to be, "They" are sick. "We" are the future, "They" are the past. Jarrell says:

When compared with the folkish Us, They are complicated, subtle in a barren Alexandrian-encyclopaedia way. They are scholarly, introspective observers, We have the insight and natural certainty of the naïve, of Christ's children, of fools, of the third sons in fairy stories. They are avidly commercial, financial, distributive. We represent real production, the soil. They are bourgeois -- respectable or perverted. We are folk simple, or else consciously Bohemian . . . there is also a suggestion of the prodigal son, of being reborn through sin.<sup>1</sup>

Above all, "We" represent Love (or love), "They" represent hate, so that however often the signs of sickness may re-appear in Us, We have the only possible means of cure on Our side. Death is a very important symbol to Auden at this stage. They can only die, as animals do; We may use death to become martyrs or heroes. It is a symbol of re-birth, a necessary step to purification and may come about through mere decay, both spiritual and physical, or through outside agencies like ice (glaciers chiefly) or by water. Love must triumph, but to do this it needs death

. . . death of the grain, our death  
Death of the old gang . . .<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Southern Review V. VII, p. 330.

<sup>2</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 84.

-- it needs, in fact, both Our death and Theirs.

If we now look again at The Secret Agent, it can be seen that when all this is packed into the poem as well its significance becomes almost inexhaustible. Even when the mythological implications are fully understood, allegory can be found on still another level. Professor Spears says

The Spy in enemy country symbolises . . .  
 the adolescent in the adult world, the  
 intellectual among philistines . . .  
 the alienated of all sorts.<sup>1</sup>

All this lies behind a simple sonnet; how much more can we expect the ramifications of the myth to spread in a long poem? In fact, the finest examples of its workings are to be found in The Orators (1934) and in the charade, Paid on Both Sides, which incorporates, as has been said, six of the poems published in 1928. It is worth taking a careful look at the latter for this reason, as well as for several others. Auden himself obviously regards it as part of the canon of his writings; it has been included in toto in all collections (though not of course selections) of his poetry except the American Collected Poems, where it is represented only by excerpts; and it is a fascinating example of Primordial Auden -- what Randall Jarrell has

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<sup>1</sup>The Poetry of W.H. Auden, The Disenchanted Island, p. 26.

has called the Ur-Auden.<sup>1</sup> Even Dr. Leavis, though rejecting it, he tells us, after "prolonged indecision" as a subject for discussion in New Bearings, has thought it worth while to re-discuss as an example of "his (Auden's) talent at its most impressive."<sup>2</sup>

In 1931 William Empson published "A Note on W.H. Auden's Paid on Both Sides in a Cambridge magazine."<sup>3</sup> It is of particular interest as a piece of criticism roughly contemporary<sup>or</sup> with the poem and it shows a sensitive understanding of Auden's ideas and methods of the time. Here is his summary of the plot -- it is brief (the whole essay is only two sides of a page) but very helpful to an understanding of the poem, for as he remarks ". . . it (the plot) is not obvious on one's first reading". He goes on:

There is a blood feud, apparently in the North of England, between two mill owning families who are tribal leaders of their workmen; it is at the present day, but there are no class distinctions and no police. John, the hero of the play, is born prematurely from shock after the death by

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<sup>1</sup>"Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden's Ideology". Partisan Review, 1945; p. 437.

<sup>2</sup>Scrutiny, V. III (1934/5), p. 76. Leavis is surely mistaken here; it is an interesting piece of work because it contains so many of the seeds of Auden's later development, as well as so much of the strength his poetry was later to lose, but it remains a piece of juvenilia for all that.

<sup>3</sup>Experiment No. VII: Spring number.

ambush of his father; so as to be peculiarly a child of the feud. As a young man he carries it on, though he encourages a brother who loses faith in it to emigrate. Then he falls in love with a daughter (apparently the heiress) of the enemy house; to marry her would involve ending the feud, spoiling the plans of his friends, breaking away from the world his mother takes for granted, and hurting her by refusing to revenge his father. Just before he decides about it, a spy, son of the enemy house (but apparently only her half-brother) is captured: it is the crisis of the play; he orders him to be taken out and shot. He then marries Anne; she tries to make him emigrate, but he insists on accepting his responsibility and trying to stop the feud; and is shot on the wedding day, at another mother's instigation, by a brother of the spy. This much, though very compressed, and sometimes in obscure verse, is a straightforward play. But at the crisis, when John has just ordered the spy to be shot, a sort of surrealist technique is used to convey his motives. They could only, I think, have been conveyed in this way,<sup>1</sup> and only when you have accepted them can the play be recognised as a sensible and properly motivated tragedy.<sup>2</sup>

Empson calls it a 'play' -- Auden calls it a charade, and it has the feeling that-this-is-all-a-game peculiar to such entertainments; very probably disguised somewhere in it is the word, though so far no critic appears to have extracted it. Though differing in some superficial features from the pattern of the myth, both in its public and private aspects, it is

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<sup>1</sup>Because, as Auden says in The Arts To-day, p.1  
". . . surrealism has adopted a technique resembling the procedure in the analyst's consulting room".

<sup>2</sup>Experiment, No. VII, p. 60.



This is the superficial conflict of organised man -- beneath that again are the aggressive forces which threaten civilisation itself. F.W. Cook says, in a recent essay:

The conflict between the individual and Authority and the struggle of the individual to change himself and/or Authority in order to resolve the conflict, are fundamental to every phase of Auden's thought.<sup>1</sup>

The two opposing cultures of the system are both matriarchies who only live to prosecute the death feud between them. This Freudian mother image is a popular conception of Auden's; here she appears as the dominating factor in the Linzgarth and Natrass families. Joan says, just after John's birth, laying down the pattern of her son's future life:

Unforgetting is not today's forgetting  
For yesterday, nor bedrid scouring,  
But a new begetting  
An unforgiving morning.<sup>2</sup>

But in The Ascent of F6 the mother is far more sinister; when Michael has finally conquered the peak she is waiting for him at the summit promising him the same fairy-tale version of life he thought to have vanquished

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<sup>1</sup>"Primordial Auden", Essays in Criticism, (October 1962), p. 403, to which the present writer is indebted.

<sup>2</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 201.

with the mountain,<sup>1</sup> while another published in Commonweal begins (echoing Blake):

Kicking his mother until she let go of  
his soul<sup>2</sup>

Auden's characters, Cook says, are like Orwell's in 1984, in that they appear to be remnants of the human race after some catastrophe has struck, but unlike the world of Winston Smith, the world of John Nower is not urban but rural; the people are mill-working families living a tribal adventure school life in rustic surroundings made gloomily reminiscent of past glories by rusting machinery and derelict manor houses. The Chorus says:

. . . But proudest into traps  
Have fallen. These gears, which ran in  
oil for week  
By week, needing to look, now will not work;  
Those manors mortgaged twice to pay for love  
Go to another.  
O how shall man live  
Whose thought is born, child of one farcical  
night,  
To find him old? . . .<sup>3</sup>

The charade, like most of the early poems, presents the ambivalent attitude of the doomed bourgeoisie

<sup>1</sup>The Ascent of F6 and On the Frontier  
(London: Faber Paper-covered editions,  
1958), p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>"Mundus et infans", 1942. Collected  
Shorter Poems, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 208.

(of which the poet is a member), driven subconsciously by the death wish and a Marxist view of historical evolution to its own extinction. This predicament is, of course, the kernel of the public myth to which Auden and his "group" subscribe; how could they justify their own continuing membership of the middle class which had all the attributes of "They" and none of "We"? If the future is with the workers, with whom for various reasons the poet cannot altogether throw in his lot, then the only solution to his problem as presented in this poem would be the peaceful union of the two families representing the warring classes. But both in Auden's new plan for society, and in society as it was actually constituted in the 'thirties, he sees this as an impossibility; the "antimonies of the will", as Empson calls them, are too diametrically opposed for a conventional happy ending of this kind. The usual War/Border situation is complicated on purpose to show this impossibility, for there is no "right" side here for John to choose to join, and no "wrong" side for him to abandon. Just before the play's crisis, John's soliloquy points the insolubility of man's predicament:

Always the following wind of history  
Of others' wisdom makes a buoyant air  
Till we come suddenly on pockets where

Is nothing loud but us; where voices seem  
 Abrupt, untrained, competing with no lie  
 Our fathers shouted once. They taught us war,  
 To scamper after darlings, to climb hills,  
 To emigrate from weakness, find ourselves  
 The easy conquerors of empty bays:  
 But never told us this, left each to learn,  
 Hear something of that sonn-arriving day  
 When to gaze longer and delighted on  
 A face or idea be impossible.<sup>1</sup>

It is now that Father Christmas enters to begin the important pivotal episode of the poem and by the appropriate use of surrealist technique<sup>2</sup> we are plunged into the depths of John's mind, (compare the modern use of surrealism in such films as Sellar's "Dr. Strange-love" and "What's new, Pussycat?"). He is about to decide to marry Anne,<sup>3</sup> a fateful decision which means breaking out of his mother's world where it is his duty to revenge his father. But the spy is Anne's half-brother. He must either put an end to the feud

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<sup>1</sup> Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 207--208.

<sup>2</sup> But Auden was also a victim of the same technique. Julian Symons tells us "A glass witch ball arrived at a later (surrealist) exhibition. This had moustaches of various colours stuck around it. A paper frill on top enclosed a pig's trotter which held a cigarette. A newspaper cutting labelled it 'Auden receives Royal Medal'". The Thirties, p. 92. (Auden was awarded the King's Gold Medal for poetry in 1937, and, to the disgust of some of his friends, he accepted it).

<sup>3</sup> Simpson seems to be wrong when he implies that the audience could have had knowledge of this before the episode begins. It is not mentioned earlier.

and marry Anne, or have her brother shot, continue the feud and probably lose Anne. So he relives the episode in his mind (the spy is already dead) through a series of incidents, whose strange cast includes Father Christmas, the Spy (who symbolises both himself and John), the Doctor and his boy, and the mysterious Man-Woman who appears as a prisoner of war behind barbed wire, in the snow. Empson says:

The reason for plunging below the rational world at this point is precisely that the decision to end the feud is a fundamental one; it involves so much foreknowledge of what he will feel under circumstances not yet realisable that it has to be carried through on motives . . . which do not belong to what is then the sensible world he lives in. For the point of the tragedy is that he could not know his own mind until too late, because it was just that process of making contact with reality, necessary to him before he could know his own mind, which in the event destroyed him.<sup>1</sup>

The issue, in fact, is so involved, that it can only be solved by a sort of inspired guess work.

This is one of the clearest indications that Auden's much criticised "change of heart" has been no real change at all; if Auden has anticipated Orwell by twenty years in this poem, he has also anticipated the Auden of thirty years later. The crisis of the play is the crucial and solvent instant of decision

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<sup>1</sup>Experiment, No. VII, p. 60

to shoot the spy -- to try to make the right choice -- but for the reasons outlined above it must be virtually a blind choice, or in the Existentialist terms used by Auden today, a leap. We must, of course, expect the usual Auden double (or in this case multiple) irony to be operating to complicate the issue. John Nower's choice was conditioned for disaster from the beginning; he could not know his own mind until it was too late, because the process of coming into contact with the real world (which, as we have seen, he had to do before he could choose) was what destroyed him. Kierkegaard tells us we must act before we can choose and by then the situation is different, so we had better act correctly. John Nower acted wrongly and so plunged to destruction; a situation as fascinating to Auden in the 'sixties as it was in the 'thirties.

As well as the Norse Sagas,<sup>1</sup> the whole play is of course reminiscent of Greek tragedy in many respects, but the surrealist episode is also very strongly analogous to mediaeval folk drama. The Doctor, the Doctor's Boy and the Man-Woman are all familiar figures

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<sup>1</sup> See The Laxdaela Saga; Trans. M.A.C. Press. (London: Dent, 1935. Temple Classics).  
The Saga of Grettir the Strong, trans. C.A. Night, (London: Everyman; 1913).  
The Story of Burnt Njal, trans. Dasent, (London: Everyman, 1911).



of redemption here through John's mistake -- his attempt may help future generations to succeed where he appears to have failed.

Though he believe it, no man is strong.

He thinks to be called the fortunate  
To bring home a wife, to live long.

But he is defeated; let the son  
Sell the farm lest the mountain fall;  
His mother and her mother won.

His fields are used up where the moles  
visit,  
The contours worn flat; if there show  
Passage for water he will miss it:

Give up his breath, his woman, his  
team  
No life to touch, though later there be  
Big fruit, eagles above the stream.<sup>1</sup>

The style of the charade is exactly right to create the doom-laden atmosphere. The people in the poem live in a closed world; simple (terrifyingly so) rustic folk, they have no refinements of language in which to communicate their more complex and deeper feelings and thoughts to one another. For this kind of character, the terse Anglo-Saxon ellipsis is most appropriate; they live by action, not speech, and like John, they too must act before they can know. This emphasis on action is stressed by the high proportion of verbs, gerunds and verbal adjectives, and concrete

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<sup>1</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 222-223.

nouns in their language, which makes for a very strong or active, not reflective speech.

Such an eccentric, but concrete and powerful variant of ordinary English probably derives (as well as from the obvious influence of the Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon part of the myth), from the extension of tendencies in Hopkins and Joyce. Randall Jarrell, who points this out, has listed some twenty odd characteristics of this language, mostly based on omission, and some of the things frequently left out include: articles, demonstrative adjectives; subjects (usually pronouns); "there" and similar introductory words; conjunctions, prepositions and relative pronouns; auxiliary verbs. Other characteristics are frequent inversion and changes in word-order; a marked tendency to under-punctuation; constant parataxis, and much use of repetition, assonance and alliteration. At best, says Jarrell, this language is magnificent and must be regarded as a creative extension of ordinary English: it is Elizabethan, original and constructive.<sup>1</sup> Either of the choruses quoted above is enough to show the truth of this and by the middle 'thirties Auden had shown a flexibility in the use of language that has developed into the finely controlled rhetoric of today.

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<sup>1</sup>The Southern Review, V. VII. Pp. 337--338.

The resemblance to the old mystery cycles has already been observed. It is interesting to notice too the similarity between the language of Paid on Both Sides and the language of such plays; here is an excerpt from J.S. Purvis' translation of the York Cycle of Mystery plays:

Was ne'er judge in this Jewry  
 of so jocund generation  
 Nor of so joyful genealogy  
 to gentry adjoined  
 As you, my duke doughty  
 doomer of damnation  
 To princes and prelates that  
 your precepts purloined.<sup>1</sup>

This speech of Pilate's wife to her husband shows most of the same characteristics as the language of the charade; the similarity is startling and the studied use of alliteration, though found sometimes in the charade, is used afterwards more extensively by Auden in The Age of Anxiety. In his later work, as we shall see, Auden develops an elaborate rhetoric quite foreign to his early writing, but his preoccupation with language remains constant.

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Life magazine, Vol. XL, No. 13 (1966), p. 79.

CHAPTER V  
THE ORATORS

It is difficult at present to approach The Orators in a properly objective frame of mind. Since its publication in 1932 it has been one of the literary puzzles of at least two generations of critics, and has remained a constant thorn in their side; most of them, like Barbara Everett, simply dismiss it as "impenetrably obscure"<sup>1</sup> after trying, with varying degrees of success, to hazard its meaning. The most successful attempt to give it at least a framework of reference has been made by Professor Munroe K. Spears,<sup>2</sup> but even this is not sufficient to reduce the obscurity to manageable proportions. After a lapse of thirty-two years (it was last reprinted in 1934) it is about to be reprinted, and if Auden follows his usual practice on such occasions

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<sup>1</sup>Auden. Writers and Critics Series. (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1964), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup>The Poetry of W.H. Auden. pp. 45--58.

there is a strong likelihood that he will both have made some alterations in the text, and have provided either a foreword or notes which may elucidate its mysteries at last. On the other hand, considering that it is a puzzle *sui generis*, Auden may well prefer to leave it that way. It seems to be an occupational hazard in this kind of essay -- particularly if its subject is still writing and re-editing as prolifically as Auden is -- to have to risk being exposed as at least a bad guesser. But bearing in mind that puzzles are set to be guessed at, and that the new edition has been on the publisher's list for more than six months without appearing, it seems better to continue the critical guessing game rather than to wait indefinitely for the horse to open his mouth, when he may decide not to do so.<sup>1</sup>

If we try to read The Orators as a functional example of the workings of the mythical background drawn on by Auden, as we have done with The Secret Agent and Paid on Both Sides, we shall find it similarly rewarding. The private side of the myth is, of course, constantly baffling; it is not only the broad outline that Auden draws on here, but all

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix B.

kinds of personal minutiae which no clue can hope to unravel, though it is tantalising to recognise characters from Mortmere,<sup>1</sup> and even Auden himself, in the guise of Uncle Whiz.<sup>2</sup> This is the side of The Orators intended to amuse his friends; unfortunately it cannot amuse anyone else, and the ordinary reader, left out in the cold, can only mutter, Joke! rather mirthlessly to himself and read on -- an aspect of the work which Auden probably intended, and which must have intensified the joke for the select handful of cognoscenti.

The Orators must then be regarded as having been deliberately encoded; what other meaning can be placed on the brief dedication to Stephen Spender?

Private faces in public places  
 Are wiser and nicer  
 Than public faces in private places.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Bob and Miss Belmairs spooning in Spain,  
 Where is the trained eye? Under the sofa.  
 Where is Moxon? Dreaming of nuns."  
The Orators, p. 100.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, (unnumbered page). This is one of the poems found in an early notebook of Auden's, since acquired by the Arts Council of Great Britain. The references to it in this essay are drawn from an article by John Whitehead: "Auden: An Early Poetical Notebook". London Magazine, Vol. V. (May, 1965), pp. 85 - 93.

In his preface to the Collected Shorter Poems of 1950, Auden, speaking of the good ideas which are spoilt by a poet's incompetence or impatience, says, "The Orators seems to me such a case of the fair notion fatally injured"<sup>1</sup> and though he does not specify that excessive private reference is part of this incompetence or impatience,<sup>2</sup> the baffled reader is at times entitled to think it is; it is his misfortune to be intruding his public and uncomprehending face into the private mysteries and rituals of Uncle Whiz and his friends.<sup>3</sup> But the real "Public faces in private places" appear to be the Orators of the title; schoolmasters, politicians, scientists, priests; all those who support the Establishment (or the Hollies, as Auden refers to it in this work) and thus are the mouthpiece of the Enemy.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 9

<sup>2</sup>John Fuller suggests that the "fatal injury" was that The Orators was a product of automatic writing, in which Auden and his friends were interested at the time. See "Early Auden: An Allegory of Love", The Review Nos. 11-12 (no date) pp. 83 -- 90

<sup>3</sup>Another difficulty, pointed out by Richard Hoggart, is that remembering that Auden wrote The Orators when he was only twenty-five, "one may be slightly chilled by the cleverness". Auden: An Introductory Essay, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>Though, from another point of view they are supporters of the Airman's scheme as well.

The Dedication, then, has warned us what to expect; it is rather as if a "keep off the grass" sign has been put up. We must realise that if trespassers will not exactly be prosecuted, it is nobody's -- or at least not Auden's -- responsibility if they get lost. But the general plan is fairly clear: The Orators is about England, about what the Americans call "the state of the nation". It was started, says Delmore Schwartz, in an essay written in 1939

. . . with a good plot in mind, that of a romantic, quasi-Fascist conspiracy to purge and reform England under the leadership of an airman and by means of subversive speeches throughout the countryside, especially to school children and especially against the parasitic habits and values of the lower middle class. But this substantial plan never manages to get a progressive narration for itself, and instead there is a suite of excerpts expressive of the difficulties of the conspirators, their intense devotion to their Leader, and their meager (sic) ideas of the kind of conspiracy which they wish to create. This too in turn is left behind for the journal of the Leader himself . . .<sup>1</sup>

On another level, as Professor Spears says, it can be read as taking place in a public school of the kind Auden went to, the dramatis personae being comparable to boys, both in the classroom and engaged in boy scout and school cadet corps manoeuvres; they are

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<sup>1</sup>"The Two Audens", Kenyon Review VI, (1939), p.40.

also the masters, some of whom represent authority and some revolt against it. The school, in fact, is presented as a microcosm of life in England "this country of ours where nobody is well".<sup>1</sup> Spears continues:

The point of view of The Orators is partly that of the schoolboy, the adolescent with his profound ambivalence to authority and his yearning for heroism and sacrifice, and partly that of the radical schoolmaster, the bourgeois rebel who was formed by the system and is part of it, but rejects it, and is on the boy's side against it.<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting here to look at Auden's views on society as he expressed them in a serious essay written in 1941. Writing of the differences between an open and a closed society, he stresses the superiority of the completely open society as the only kind of society in which democracy is able to function, and he goes on to say

The failure of the human race to acquire the habits that an open society demands if it is to function properly, is leading an increasing number of people to the conclusion that an open society is impossible, and that, therefore, the only escape from economic and spiritual disaster is to return as quickly as possible to a closed type of society. But social evolution, fortunately or unfortunately, is irreversible. A mechanised and differentiated

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<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 12

<sup>2</sup>The Poetry of W.H. Auden, "The Disenchanted Island. pp. 46--47.

closed society is a self contradiction. We have in fact no choice at all; we have to adapt ourselves to an open society or perish.<sup>1</sup>

By making the Airman and his fellow conspirators members of a closed society, as were John Nower and the other characters in Paid on Both Sides, Auden is thus dooming them to failure from the beginning.

The Prologue which follows the Dedication contains no particular difficulties; it has been retained unaltered in the Collected Shorter Poems, under the title of "Adolescence". Here it only applies to adolescence in so far as The Orators (which is sub-titled "An English Study") shows an England in which nobody, whatever their chronological age, is really grown up. This is part of what is wrong with her and the Prologue lays down the theme which is the *raison d'être* of the book -- there can be no such thing as a secular saviour,<sup>2</sup> if only

<sup>1</sup>"Criticism in a Mass Society", The Intent of the Critic, Ed. E. Stauffer. (Princeton University Press: 1941), p. 129.

<sup>2</sup>A preoccupation Auden returns to in later essays. In these he is probably influenced by Charles Cochrane who says it was an "erroneous idea behind the Augustan Empire . . . that it was possible to attain a goal of permanent security, peace and freedom through political action, especially through submission to the 'virtue and fortune' of a political leader". Christianity and Classical Culture, p.6. Like the early Christians, Auden continues to denounce this idea with vigour and consistency.



recognising his mother and the park "orators" as the enemy because of his own psychosomatic illness, he deserves to fall a victim to their machinations. Or to take the Christian view point, man is a fallen creature, and however much he struggles cannot return to the lost Paradise of his childhood -- in this world, at any rate.

Professor Spear's account of The Orators as an analysis of England via the microcosm of the public school is very helpful;<sup>1</sup> it seems possible though to narrow the pattern of construction down further if we read part I of Book I (The Initiates) carefully. Auden has provided a "map of the country" as he says later in the well-known sestina,<sup>2</sup> in the opening speech of his first orator, called "Address for a Prize Day". It is a great mistake to dismiss this

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<sup>1</sup>There seems a possible reason why Auden should have done this; it is a Freudian method of analysis, going back into childhood for the source of England's ills. Thus the book can be seen as an attempt to account for the strange welcome the hero gets in the Prologue by going back to school to seek the cause, and back from there again to see why the boys at school went wrong. Hence homosexuality, masturbation, kleptomania and all the things wrong with the Airman are the reason the Giantess shouts "Deceiver!" The Airman says all along that if his people knew him as he really was, they would reject him.

<sup>2</sup>The Orators, p. 44.

merely as a parody of a headmaster's address, intended only to be funny. It is funny, of course, but under the burlesque guise Auden is giving serious advice; he is trying to answer the question "What do you think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well?"<sup>1</sup> as honestly as he can. The answer is what we might expect, with a knowledge of the myth; what is wrong with England is what is wrong with all of us. It is a failure of love.

From this point, it seems that the clue as to how to read The Orators is put into our hands. The Speaker (whom we must take to be a visiting headmaster or public figure: he is certainly an old boy of the school)<sup>2</sup> says "All of you must have found out what a great help it is, before starting on a job of work, to have some sort of scheme or plan in your mind beforehand." He then goes on to explain that in Purgatory, Dante found sinners divided into three main groups,

. . . those who have been guilty in their life of excessive love towards themselves or their neighbours, those guilty of defective love towards God, and those

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<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup>And one of the orators of the title; the parody of his unctuous and horribly spritely delivery is beautifully done.

guilty of perverted love.<sup>1</sup> Now this afternoon I want, if I may, to take these three divisions of his and apply them to ourselves. In this way, I hope, you will be able to understand better what I am driving at.<sup>2</sup>

It seems as if this is exactly how Auden has built up the rest of the book. "Address for a Prize Day" goes on to analyse these three types of love - failure so that they can be recognised when encountered: the reader should then be able to do just that in the three sections which follow, and in the last two books as well.

Thus Argument which comes next, is a kind of religious exposition, in which rites are celebrated by members of this closed society for the mysterious Him -- the strange God who haunts the book, and who is also the leader of the revolution -- the Airman whom we meet later. The scene is conjured up in a solemn prose rhythm

Speak the name (only) with meaning only  
for us, meaning Him, a call to our clearing.  
Secret the meeting in time and place, the  
time of the offshore wind, the place where

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<sup>1</sup>The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri;  
Translated by Charles Eliot Norton.  
(Chicago: London: Toronto: William  
Benton, 1952), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup>The Orators, p. 12.

loyalty is divided.<sup>1</sup> Meeting of seven,  
each with a talent.

These secret worshippers see their hero or deity with eyes of schoolboy sentimental worship as ". . . (he) who came to us in an extraordinary dream, calming the plunging dangerous horses, greeting our arrival on a windy shore".<sup>2</sup> But this strange idol is made nonsense of in the long litany where not he but various fictional detectives and public houses and finally an ambivalent George,<sup>3</sup> are implored to hear their prayer!

For all parasites and carrion feeders, for the  
double rose and for domesticated animals,  
O Green Man, hear us.<sup>4</sup>

It seems logical to assume that the orator here is a priest whose words show the futility of trying to find a secular saviour, but as he is the servant of this god-like creature, both he and putative saviour must fall under the disqualification of excessive love towards themselves or their neighbours, for they have failed with the real love, "that notable forked one" who now

riding away from the farm, the ill wind said,  
fought at the frozen dam, transforms itself  
to influenza and guilty rashes.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 26

<sup>3</sup>Pub or King?

<sup>4</sup>The Orators, p. 25

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, pp. 26--27.

Statement, the next section, is an assessment of merit based purely on a secular basis. The hope of salvation is here placed in science; the orator is the scientist (who else makes statements, in this categorical form?) but his solution is doomed to failure from the start because it is deficient in love towards God. There is however, an emphasis on man's biological nature as giving some hope of re-birth and growth; Auden was very much influenced by Blake and Lawrence at this time and is probably equating this, that is, man's biological nature, with the God-head in man.

Sun is on right, moon on left, powers to earth.  
The action of light on dark is to cause it to contract. That brings forth.<sup>1</sup>

Letter to a Wound is clearly, under its light and frivolous mask, a plain exposition of the dangers of perverted love; it is a parody of a love-letter, almost intolerably sentimentalised. The writer, who

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<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 32. Compare Blake's Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy". "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell"; William Blake, ed. I. Bronowski, (London: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 94. Also "Joys Impregnate, Sorrows Bring Forth", Ibid, p. 97

has recently undergone an operation,<sup>1</sup> is in love with his wound; this is the kind of death wish which may bring about not only his own death but the death of the whole class, the "old gang" to which he belongs. So the lover as an orator fails too, because of the wrongness of his love, yet some good may come out of it, as a man with a neurosis is often more fortunate than he realises. Lionel Trilling makes this point in "Art and Neurosis" referring particularly to this section of the Orators. Loving his wound is certainly perverted and wrong but such behaviour brings a gift of insight only neurosis can bestow.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to you, I have come to see a profound significance in relations I never dreamt of considering before, an old lady's affection for a small boy, the Waterhouses and their retriever . . . the partners in the hardware shop on the front. Even the close ups on the films no longer disgust or amuse me. On the contrary they sometimes make me cry; knowing you has made me understand.<sup>3</sup>

Read in this way, the parts of Book I seem to make as much sense as they are intended to; the

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<sup>1</sup>As Auden himself did round about this time; cf. Ode I, verse 2, The Orators, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup>The Liberal Imagination, (New York: Viking Press, 1951), p. 163. Cf. "Letter to Lord Byron", Letters from Iceland, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup>The Orators, p. 36. See too D.A. Traversi "Marxism and English Poetry" Arena I (New Zealand), pp. 208--209, no date).

obscurity remaining can be regarded as germane to the intention of the work. It is part of its meaning that it should <sup>appear to</sup> be meaningless, as Auden demonstrates very clearly in the long verbal equation in Statement, by which he demolishes the scientists' claim to be able to save England. Every disaster listed is balanced by a similar success until the idiotic conclusion is reached "Have seen the red bicycle leaning on porches and the cancelling out was complete"<sup>1</sup> -- in other words  $x = 0$ . This is the equation most of the book is concerned with proving, and it does so with depressing finality.

All sections comprising Book I are in prose, but prose of a peculiarly rhythmical and ritualistic kind. Cyril Connolly says that when the book was first published it created a great sensation as showing "imaginative prose coming to life again"<sup>2</sup> and later he says

It is as if (Auden) worked under the influence of some mysterious drug which presents him with a private version, a mastery of form and vocabulary<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 31

<sup>2</sup>Enemies of Promise, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, pp. 143--144.

It is interesting to note that Auden has used a mixture of prose and poetry from the beginnings in The Sea and the Mirror, published in 1955, he does so with almost spectacular success.

Journal of an Airman, which is the next section of the book, is in prose jottings with poems included here and there.<sup>1</sup> The Airman, who is both hero and anti-hero, follows too the pattern of the first speech, for he contains elements of all three kinds of wrong love. Yet he is so very nearly a saviour! But if we know the myth we know that we cannot expect any such thing; in the last analysis We are They and vice versa. We can never have nothing but right on Our side; They can never be wholly bad. The failures of love cannot be so sorted out and arranged that all the good characters belong to one side and all the bad to the other. In an essay written in 1949, Stephen Spender quotes Auden as saying

. . . secretly the poet's sympathies are always with the Enemy because he so hates the idea of there being sides and propaganda, that he inevitably must hate most of the side of which he hears and sees the most, namely his own.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Here again we can see the influence of Blake, particularly in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" which has a similar format. The section "Proverbs of Hell", is very like Auden's prose aphorisms in The Orators.

<sup>2</sup>"W.H. Auden at Oxford" World Review, (August, 1949), p. 48.

Thus in his capacity as hero, the Airman is the bourgeois intellectual who must lead the revolution and overthrow his class; the latter is the Enemy, sometimes referred to by the name of his headquarters, The Hollies. The Enemy is composed of many things, all of which are obviously disagreeable to Auden, but he nonetheless represents Auden's own class, from which the poet has never really seriously tried to escape, even in his Marxist days. Whatever its drawbacks, the Enemy represents Authority, and Auden's "authority" has always been an ambivalent one. We may revolt against a corrupt authority, and indeed its destruction is admitted by Auden time and again to be essential to any kind of re-birth, but we are guilty all the same if we do.<sup>1</sup> So the hero is in a cleft stick -- he is damned if he leads the revolt and double-damned if he doesn't. In such an untenable situation no hero can exist; therefore, says Auden, returning to his depressing equation, any saviour who tries to change a given situation will always be contaminated by his action. And he points out that the enemy's strength lies in the people's

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<sup>1</sup>See "1929" last verse. Collected Shorter Poems, p. 84. Ibid, p. 83, Look Stranger IX; penultimate verse. Selected Poems, p.128.

disbelief in his existence; if they believed, he would be powerless.

The enemy, as we would expect from the myth, uses psychosomatic illness as one of his most potent weapons; consequently, the issues of the actual war being frequently evaded, the real war is fought out within the Airman himself. The Blakean/Lawrentian idea of the enemy as conscious control of man's natural instincts<sup>1</sup> wars constantly with the Airman's sense of guilt at whatever is wrong with him: nobody knows better than this would-be hero that he is really no hero at all. Thus it is made clear all along that the polarities of political Right and Wrong simply do not exist, and it is this that almost drives the Airman mad. In the end he realises that he is part of the enemy after all; the three kinds of love failure are found both at the Hollies, and in those sworn to its destruction. "God just loves us all, but means to be obeyed"<sup>2</sup> is the conundrum he is left with. The first axiom is obviously the Airman's own standpoint, the second that of the enemy,

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<sup>1</sup>"He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence", William Blake, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>The Orators, p. 76.

and the only means of reconciliation is surely "We must love one another or die". But loving one another -- i.e. drawing a balance between deficient and excessive love -- is just what both sides have found to be impossible, so once again  $x = 0$ .

It is interesting to see the seeds of Auden's later development in this impasse. Randall Jarrell puts it neatly:

The hero . . . the revolutionary cult leader -- inadequately understood by his followers, entirely misunderstood by the rest of the world -- is almost wholly isolated. The hero of The Orators resorts to political action of a fantastic sort, which necessarily fails; and he ends by "understanding" that a complete submission to Authority is the only means of reforming . . . It is no wonder that the creator of the Orators . . . ends up "floating over 70,000 fathoms" in complete submission to that Authority who means to be obeyed, the God of Kierkegaard and Barth. Laplace's calculator might have predicted most of Auden's development from the last two pages of The Orators.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the Journal, the reader is confronted by several pseudo-scientific diagrams showing how the enemy can be recognised, and how man should trace his true ancestral line. These diagrams "prove", rather surprisingly (though this is nearly always the case in the Sagas, as it is in

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<sup>1</sup>Partisan Review, (1945), p. 446.

Beowulf<sup>1</sup>) that man's "true ancestor . . . is his uncle"<sup>2</sup> and to the non-scientist, at any rate, Auden's diagrams are clinically convincing, though he has an uneasy feeling that he is probably being gulled by unknown private references. Jarrell however, takes it more seriously. Auden, he says

is guilty and partially rejecting, revolting against authority. That part of us which does not revolt, judged either by Reason or by our own conscious standards, is despicable in its neurotic or diseased, bourgeois, corruptly passive guilt; but that part of us which revolts against the authority of the Father and the State is guilty by their standards, our own unconscious standards; so much so that it desperately seeks sanction in the mythical authority of that hastily invented fiction, our "real Ancestor", the Uncle. It is as if the grown and rock-bound Prometheus has had to postulate a "real" Zeus and a "real" vulture, under whose authority he "really" was.<sup>3</sup>

The first part of this bears out earlier remarks made here, but Jarrell is stretching things improbably when he says the Uncle had to be invented as a kind of counter-authority. It seems far more likely to carry some homosexual implication, probably as earlier

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<sup>1</sup>See also Sir James Frazer: The Golden Bough, (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., Paper-back edition, 1963), p. 503.

<sup>2</sup>cf. Letters from Iceland, p. 59. "Yet though the choice of what is done . . . cries to the shadows of the noble dead".

<sup>3</sup>Partisan Review (1945), p. 443.

suggested, intended to amuse his friends.

The ironic couplet which follows is the Airman speaking to himself:

You are a man, or haven't you heard  
That you keep on trying to be a bird?<sup>1</sup>

But in 1932 any Airman was still sufficiently a novelty to command respect, particularly in the school-boy world of The Orators; high above ordinary people, apart, remote, he was a natural choice as leader by those whose feet were still bound to earth by gravity.

Then comes the sestina previously referred to, which is one of Auden's most distinguished poems. It continues the theme of the Journal, being, like the Prologue, about an adolescent boy receiving instructions concerning his future from whoever represents authority to him.<sup>2</sup> There is a series of prose aphorisms, such as are found plentifully in Auden's critical writings today; they are scattered and disjointed, but all clearly relevant to the central theme of the Journal. Auden even goes so far as to

<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 44. Also one of the poems jotted in the notebook referred to in note 3, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup>For an excellent analysis of this poem see Spears, The Poetry of W.H. Auden, The Disenchanted Island, p.52. The poem is published in Collected Shorter Poems as "Have a Good Time", p. 163.

identify himself personally with the enemy, so as to show the pointlessness of trying to draw a sharp distinction between We and They. He says (among other descriptions of the enemy),

The enemy's sense of humour -- verbal symbolism. Private associations (rhyming slang), but note that he is serious, the associations are constant. He means what he says.<sup>1</sup>

So the enemy may even be said to have crept into Auden's book by way of Auden himself, and wrought the "fatal injury" previously referred to -- in the "know your enemy" series the poet himself must not be forgotten, and is perhaps the most insidious Orator of them all!

The Airman's Alphabet which follows, consists of three-lined alliterative definitions, some of which are very trenchant. The mechanic is seen, as is so much of The Orators, through the curious eye of the schoolboy:

MECHANIC -- Owner of overalls  
and interested in iron<sup>2</sup>  
and trusted with tools.

Again he says

Of the Enemy - His collar was spotless; he talked  
very well  
He spoke of our homes and duty and  
we fell.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 47

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 49

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 52.

-- here is the same middle-class political orator who seduced the adolescent of the Prologue or the Speaker of "Address for a Prize Day" and the sestina shows the same aspect of the enemy -- the "They" who harangue the young man in that poem are doing the same thing. They speak for authority and, it must be re-stressed, in Auden's view, are not necessarily wrong.

The enemy is next defined in sets of three; three kinds of enemy, three kinds of enemy face, three kinds of enemy walk, and so on; that disease is one of his most potent weapons is shown in "Three results of enemy victory -- impotence -- cancer -- paralysis."<sup>1</sup> These hints culminate in the usual warning: "Time for lunch. There isn't going to be very much lunch unless you all wake up".<sup>2</sup>

We do not know exactly what is wrong with the Airman, but it follows the psychosomatic pattern outlined in the myth. Like the hero of "The Secret Agent", the would-be hero of The Orators has within him the seeds and signs of the diseases with which the Enemy

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<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 53. These are reminiscent of the ninth century "Triads of Ireland", some of which are quoted in Auden and Kronenberger's Viking Book of Aphorisms, (1962), pp. 14, 68 and 126.

<sup>2</sup>The Orators, p. 54.

is riddled. There are clear hints that it has to do with the behaviour of the Airman's hands, and sometimes kleptomania, and sometimes auto-eroticism seem indicated. The following paragraph appears to indicate the latter, rather thinly disguised.

Dawn, 13,000 feet. Shadows of struts falling across the cockpit. Perfect calm, light, strength. Yesterday positively the last time. Hands to remember, please, always.<sup>1</sup>

Again, the Uncle seems to indicate homosexuality,<sup>2</sup> though here again, Auden's attitude, as we have seen from the myth, is ambivalent: it is partly bad, but partly, as a sign of emancipation for conventional morality, it is good and also sanctified by the Uncle's position of authority in the sagas. "It wasn't till I was sixteen and a half" writes the Airman

that he (the Uncle) invited me to his flat. We had champagne for dinner.

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<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 57. See too p. 75, when the Airman says "The true significance of my hands. Do not imagine that you, no more than any other conqueror, can escape the mark of grossness". Also "hands in perfect order" (p. 74) -- probably derived from Wilfred Owen's last letter, "nerves in perfect order".)

<sup>2</sup>But for another point of view, see C. Day Lewis. A Hope for Poetry. (London: Basil Blackwell, 1934), pp. 3--5. Mr. Day Lewis sees it as a recognition or anagnorisis.

When I left I knew who and what he was --  
my real ancestor.<sup>1</sup>

But this relationship remains ambiguous; the Uncle is partly lover, partly Father, partly God. The implications in the following paragraph seem endless.

Fourteenth anniversary of my uncle's death.  
Fine. Cleaned the air-gun as usual. But  
what have I done to avenge, to disprove  
the boy's faked evidence at the inquest?  
NOTHING. (never reloaded since it was  
found discharged by your untasted coffee).  
Give me time. I PROMISE.<sup>2</sup>

Interspersed again among these jottings are  
another two poems. One sums up one kind of enemy --  
the press barons, who are the loudest orators on the  
side of the Establishment.

Beethamcer, Beethameer, bully  
of Britain  
With your face as fat as a  
farmer's bum . . .  
Suckling the silly from a  
septic teat  
Leading the lost with lies to  
defeat.<sup>3</sup>

This is schoolboy abuse which like the first address,  
contains serious advice; don't be taken in by the

<sup>1</sup>The Orators, pp. 58--59.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 58. This also ties up with the earlier  
appeals to Sherlock Holmes, and other fictional  
detectives. Auden has written an essay on  
detective fiction in "The Guilty Vicarage",  
The Dyer's Hand, pp. 146--158.

<sup>3</sup>The Orators, p. 62.



2. The only efficient way to destroy it -- self destruction, the sacrifice of all resistance, reducing him to the state of a man trying to walk on a frictionless surface.
3. Conquest can only proceed by absorption <sup>1</sup> of, i.e. infection by, the conquered."

It is no accident, to quote Jarrell again, that the  
Airman:

winds up a couple of miles of cold air  
away from the nearest human being, about <sup>2</sup>  
to commit suicide in an airplane . . .

Once again, Auden has proved his frightening equation:  
 $x = 0$ . Split the atom, and you only find something  
even more difficult to split.

The book is rounded off by six odes, all of  
which carry on the themes of the earlier sections.  
The orator here can be seen as the Airman, or at least  
as somebody still trying to answer the question "How  
can England be saved?" and odes, as Professor Spears  
points out, are the traditional poetic form for  
public utterances.

Ode I is published in Collected Shorter Poems  
under the title of "1st January, 1931", with some minor

<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 75

<sup>2</sup>Partisan Review <sup>Fall,</sup> (1945), p. 446

and rather puzzling changes.<sup>1</sup> A saviour is still being sought, this time in a dream, for looking back over the past year shows only loss and sadness, from the death of Lawrence down to the failure of even the search for individual sensation. Why is the world all wrong? For the usual reason -- love is wrong:

The pair walking out on the mole,  
                   getting ready to quarrel,  
 The exile from superb Africa,  
                   employed in a laundry;  
 Deserters, mechanics, conjurers,  
                   delicate martyrs,  
                   Yes, self-regarders.<sup>2</sup>

When saviours do appear, it is with the usual result; there is no such thing. The ones who offer themselves are all fake healers:

. . . granny in mittens, the Mop,  
   the white surgeon<sup>3</sup>  
 And loony Layard.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>p. 161, penultimate line, 1st verse changed from "Wystan, Stephen, Christopher" . . . to "subjects, objects all of you". 4th verse substitutes "Pretzel" for "Stephen" and 5th verse "Maverick" for "Christopher". 6th verse -- "all self regards" instead of "yes, self-regarders", and 7th verse is changed from the original to

. . . the Judge, the buccolic doctor  
 And the suave archdeacon.

<sup>2</sup>The Orators, p. 83

<sup>3</sup>It is interesting to see the orthodox doctor lumped with Layard; another way of stressing the similarity between We and They.

<sup>4</sup>The Orators, p. 84.

When the dreamer wakes, he looks down to the courtyard below to find all the dream figures vanished and only a beggar left, who is asking hopefully if there is any news of the saviour:

    Won't you speak louder?  
 Have you heard of someone swifter than  
                   Syrian horses?  
 Has he thrown the bully of Corinth in  
                   the sanded circle?  
 Has he crossed the Isthmus already? is he  
                   seeking brilliant  
 Athens and us?<sup>1</sup>

However critics may disagree about The Orators, the reward of finding poetry of this order at the end of it should have made their earlier difficulties worth while.

The same theme is found in Ode II; this time the unlikely saviour is a successful schoolboy rugby team whose triumphant return with the cup exorcises the general and collective neuroses of the whole school. The poem is a parody of Hopkins, often very amusing, but there is serious intention under the mock-heroic disguise. Auden is not, as usual, altogether despising the rugby players, most of whom are singled out individually for praise. Salvation is where you find it; do not ignore it if it comes in this guise, for:

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<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 84.

. . . the cup brought home  
 Not, as the desperate need to, do we  
   clutch at arm  
 Dark fearers, dreading December's harm  
 Not now. Joy docked in every duct, we<sup>1</sup>  
   to the right sleep come.

Ode III shows a band of people arriving in a lonely spot; they hope to find salvation in a sanatorium, but they find only themselves; inevitably in Auden's view this kind of cure worsens the disease, and they simply lose what little initiative they had. The exaggerated alliteration and heavy, steady rhythm makes an empty kettle drum sound, the hopeless hopelessness of the bourgeoisie:

Here we shall live  
 And somehow love  
 Though we only master  
 The sad posture.<sup>2</sup>

They cannot even bother to complain: they are

Saying Alas  
 To less and less.<sup>3</sup>

This poem, with three verses omitted, is retained in the Collected Shorter Poems under the title of "The Exiles"; they are not only exiles from home, but are perhaps exiled further from love than anyone else in the book.

<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 88. The Hopkins parody shows clearly in the last line.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

Ode IV finds the saviour in a newly-born child,<sup>1</sup> Rex Warner's son, whom Auden prophesies will lead England back to greatness, for the politicians can't; they are the ones who

. . . went to sleep  
On the burning heap.<sup>2</sup>

This and two other two-line verses are all that is preserved of this long ~~and very interesting~~ poem in the Collected Shorter Poems,<sup>3</sup>

Youth can't help either; Auden says only "Strewth" to youth, referring to its representatives as Masters Wet, Dim, Drip and Bleak, some of whom are Mortmere figures. Only John, son of Warner, will put England to rights by the typical doubly ironic method (hence its success is questionable) of ensuring, by force if necessary, that

All of the women and most of  
the men  
Shall work with their hands,  
and not think again.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>He resembles the Christian Saviour in other ways too; he is the only one of the putative saviours cited in these odes for whom Auden holds out any hope of success, so the connection with his later period is obvious.

<sup>2</sup>The Orators, p. 96.

<sup>3</sup>p. 134.

<sup>4</sup>The Orators, p. 101.



A birthday, a birth  
 ON English earth                    has  
 Restores, restore will, ^ restored  
    <to England's story  
 The directed calm, the actual glory.<sup>1</sup>

The italics are not Auden's, but this Yeatsian line is worth stressing, for it sums up the whole answer. Love is the answer; the two sides here are at last able to love one another, consequently England is alive again. Only in this poem does Auden hold out any hope that England's, and consequently man's, problems can really be solved. It is typical that he should present it in the form of a prophecy and not as a fait accompli.

Ode V (To my Pupils) is called in Collected Shorter Poems "Which Side Am I Supposed to Be On?" a title which might very well have been applied to the whole book. It sums up the whole indissoluble ambivalence of the human situation as presented all along in The Orators and re-stressed in this poem. There is no right side and wrong side; the youngest drummer, newest recruit to this particular side has been trained from childhood in the belief of his faction, and it is all as pointless as the indoctrination of the hero of the Prologue. To make his point even clearer, Auden has shown the interchange-

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<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 101

ability of We and They by simply reversing them. We in this case is the Establishment or Authority, and They the rebels against it. The poem is too well known to spend time on here, but it reiterates all the themes of the earlier sections. Love is the only answer, but it is impossible for the two sides to come together.

Do you think that because you have  
   heard that on Christmas Eve  
 In a quiet sector they walked about  
   on the skyline,  
 Exchanged cigarettes, both learning  
   the words for  
 "I love you"  
   In either language;  
 You can stroll across for a smoke  
   and a chat any evening?  
   Try it and see.<sup>1</sup>

This only happens in a dream of some far future, such as under John Warner in the last ode; in the last analysis x will always equal 0.

Ode VI is a burlesque of a hymn, down to the archaic inversions and syntactical muddles so often found in hymns, as Professor Spears says. Once again Auden is adopting a conventional form to show up the ironic meaning of the poem.<sup>2</sup> Again, the same themes are repeated; all these odes can be thought of as a coda to the original code. They illuminate the work

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<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup>Compare "Petition", Collected Shorter Poems, p.120.

in retrospect as the Prologue and Address did in anticipation and following their guidance and that of the myth, The Orators becomes perfectly understandable; the obscurity caused by the particular private references is not important. This is not to say that the book might not take on new dimensions were they to be explained, but in all probability only the humorous aspect would become clearer. In this instance, the hymn is one of the weapons used by the Establishment orators; now the rebels are borrowing it, but their petition is not for victory, as one might expect, but for defeat. Like the Airman, the "We" in this poem have realised that "God just loves us all but means to be obeyed". Under these circumstances victory for a particular side simply does not exist. So they ask

Not, father,<sup>1</sup> further do prolong  
Our necessary defeat<sup>2</sup>

Peace is all that is required and even that is a great deal, too much in fact, to ask.

The book concludes with an Epilogue, as it began with a Prologue; this has frequently been called

<sup>1</sup>The "f" is capitalised in Collected Shorter Poems; in the original the first two words of each ode are capitalised so one can only guess Auden's intention. (p.246)

<sup>2</sup>The Orators, p. 110.

obscure, but read in the context of The Orators and with the background knowledge of the myth, it appears quite explicit. The first lines "'O where are you going?' said reader to rider" are a memorable opening to one of Auden's most striking poems, and if the reader is the reader of The Orators, a pun may be intended on "rider", the book having been in the nature of a puzzle. The line is analogous to a line in "The Cutty Wren"<sup>1</sup> ("'O where are you going?' says Milder to Malder") though Christopher Ricks has pointed out a strong similarity to Christina Rossetti's "Amor Mundi"<sup>2</sup> right through both poems.<sup>3</sup> The Epilogue is set in the form of a dramatic riddle, surrounded with the doom-laden atmosphere of the Delphic oracle itself, for the questions and answers set out here are not trivialities, but the questions with which the book has been concerned all along. The Speakers can be seen as two opposing sets of orators, one set speaking for each side. The first speakers are reiterating the themes of the book. They are called reader, fearer and horror, and the similarity in the names of the

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<sup>1</sup>New Verse, October 1935.

<sup>2</sup>First published 21st February, 1895.

<sup>3</sup>In Notes and Queries, December, 1960. "'O Where are you Going? W.H. Auden and Christina Rossetti." p. 472.

people they are addressing (rider, farer, and hearer) is more than a poetic device; it points the kinship and essential likeness between the two sides. In a world where love has gone wrong, firstly, nobody can escape death, and death is nasty

That valley is fatal where  
                                  furnaces burn.  
Yonder's the midden whose  
                                  odours will madden.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, even should man attempt to seek something better, he will never find it. "Do you imagine" says fearer, that:

Your diligent looking (will) discover  
                                  the lacking  
Your footsteps feel from granite to grass?<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, nameless horrors await even those prepared to listen, some of their own making, in the shape of psychosomatic illness.

Behind you swiftly the figure  
                                  comes softly  
The spot on your skin is a  
                                  shocking disease.<sup>3</sup>

In answering these questions in the last verse, those addressed turn their own words back on the warning riddlers; it is the schoolboy retort of the schoolboy world of The Orators: "Same to you", and of course,

<sup>1</sup>The Orators, p. 112

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

as we have seen, this is the constant preoccupation of the work; what applies to one side applies to the other, and if one side cannot find something better, neither can the other.

"Yours never will" replies farer to fearer; and the rider is going "out of this house" despite the reader's warning. As for the bird, and the "shape in the twisted trees" it's not I they want, says the last man:

They're looking for you, said hearer to horror  
As he left them there, as he left them there.

He is going on, as are all the listeners, with his journey, despite the warnings, which apply to the other side, not theirs, (so they think.) If only, as always, the two sides could learn to love one another the artificially created differences, created by the vocal leaders of each side who are the orators of the title, would disappear. But Auden can hold out no hope for this happening, certainly never through the medium of a secular saviour.

The Orators has been dealt with at some length because it is a book usually avoided by critics, and it is hoped that in this chapter some of its alleged obscurity might have been dispelled. As a measure of the value of the book itself, its republication now is

significant. Much of the matter in it is still starkly relevant to the England of today, sharpened and intensified by the shadow of nuclear war. There can be no sides now even more obviously than in 1932. "We must love one another or die" has acquired a new, and absolutely literal, as well as literary significance.

CHAPTER VI  
CHANGING ATTITUDES  
WITHIN THE MYTH

The Orators is not only one of Auden's most tantalising poems, but of all his works it offers the most complete picture of the poet working almost entirely within the framework of the myth. While the signs of Auden's future development are nowhere more plain, they are still able to be contained within the existing patterns of the myth; they are a harmonious part of it and have not yet begun to war with it. Love is still love uncapitalised; most of its aspects, of course, remain the same even when the capital is imposed, but Auden has not yet begun to change the framework of his attitudes, necessitating in turn such changes in his poetry as, for example, the last verse of the Commentary to In Time of War. Originally it read:

"Till they construct at last a  
human justice,  
The contribution of our star,  
within the shadow

Of which uplifting, loving and  
constraining power  
All other reasons may rejoice  
and operate. "

But when reprinted in the Collected Shorter Poems of 1950 it reads:

" Till, as the contribution of our star,  
we follow  
The clear instructions of that Justice,  
in the shadow  
Of Whose uplifting, loving and  
constraining power  
All human reasons do rejoice and operate. "

In the first version, Auden was still working within the limits of the early myth but it is contended here that his intention is exactly the same. Instead of relying simply on "human" justice, Auden, in the second version, now sees the situation as requiring the help of supernatural grace, but the desired result is very similar. We can only regret the passing of the original version in that it is poetically superior; but this is a common result of the changes Auden makes in his poetry when they are made for theological reasons. When they are made simply to improve the poem qua poem, they are usually successful.

The point to stress is that Auden's intention does not change. Taking twenty-seven of the thirty-

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The word "intention" should be qualified  
 with "the intention of the poet" or "the poet's intention"

four sonnets which, with the Commentary, go to make up In Time of War, they form:

an extended philosophical essay on the political and spiritual condition of the world at the time of writing, from the point of view of a man observing the local scene in China, but also familiar with the history of mankind from the beginning of life on the planet. We witness here the separation of man from lower animal life through the development of his higher faculties. We review the phenomena of chivalry, the appearance of the democratic ideal, the search for truth, the rise of prophets and poets, the progress of civilisation in the form of finance, churches, monasticism, scientific discovery, and spiritual disillusionment. Many heroic leaders and deliverers had their turn, until the age ended and "the last deliverer died." . . . There are pictures of the misery and helplessness of the common people and the common soldier . . . But in spite of all this, the poet persists in praising life itself . . . he insists that men do have the power of choice, they can labour in "the little workshop of love" and their destiny is in their own hands.

Thus the late Professor J.W. Beach,<sup>1</sup> giving a surprisingly sensitive synopsis of the sonnet sequence. At this point, however, we must part company with him, for he goes on to attribute the changed last verse to a deliberate intention on Auden's part that the whole poem shall be read as though Auden had written it as "a convinced adherent of . . . strict Christian doctrine".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Making of the Auden Canon, pp. 4--5.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 8.

Professor Beach implies that he does this with the aim of its redounding to the greater glory of Auden and not (as is certainly meant) to the greater glory of God. We may or may not agree with the poetical ethics of such manoeuvring, but it is plain from both versions that Auden's intention is to press for the establishment of what he called then and now the "Just City"; only the means whereby he considers it may come about are in question. So while there is certainly a notable alteration in tone, for the rest the change is negligible.

But this emerges more plainly later on; at this stage in the chronological sequence of his work it is only hinted at. After The Orators the only works which can still be considered as exclusively conditioned by the boundaries of the first myth are the plays, written in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood. There are three of these: The Dog Beneath the Skin, published in 1935, The Ascent of F6 published in 1936, and On the Frontier, published in 1938, immediately after the Group Theatre had been founded by Rupert Doone and Robert Medley in collaboration with Auden himself, for the Group was formed with the avowed intention of producing Auden's work. He was lucky. Stephen Spender points out:

The lesson of the thirties is that above all what the young writer needs today is on the one hand his own individuality and on the other -- to strengthen this -- some sense of having colleagues. Where we were particularly fortunate was in being young at a moment when it was possible to take up an attitude towards a human cause without losing our individuality.<sup>1</sup>

The Dance of Death is worth referring to only as one long example of the exclusively political side of the myth;<sup>2</sup> it preaches doctrinaire Marxism and fails,<sup>3</sup> as do some of Auden's more recent works, because of the extent to which this didacticism is carried, for preaching (as distinct, of course, from teaching) whether it be Marxist or Christian doctrine, is one of the surest ways to spoil poetry.

The Announcer's introduction indicates the usual theme:

We present to you this evening a picture of the decline of a class, of how its members dream of a new life, but secretly desire the old, for there is death inside them.

From then on, remarks a contemporary reviewer ". . .

<sup>1</sup>"It began at Oxford" New York Times Book Review, (March, 1955), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup>For an example of one of the pitfalls into which Auden fell here, see Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy (London: Pelican, 1958) p. 5, quoted in Appendix C.

<sup>3</sup>Auden has preserved nothing whatever from it in any collection of his work.

the theme . . . was developed with a naïveté which might pass muster at a very earnest Communist summer school, but nowhere else".<sup>1</sup> Later in the same review, Mr. Cookman says,

If poetry is to be re-introduced to the theatre, Mr. Auden's use of verse, even in this obviously immature and botched drama, may represent a useful step in evolution.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the aphorisms printed in the programme for The Dance of Death show what Auden, and the Group Theatre as a whole, were trying to do.

Drama began as the act of a whole community. Ideally there would be no spectators. In practice every member of the audience should feel like an understudy.<sup>3</sup>

Drama is essentially an art of the body. The basis of acting is acrobatics, dancing and all forms of physical skill.

The music hall, the Christmas pantomime and the country house charade are the most living drama of to-day.

Drama should not be documentary, the programme notes went on, for that is a province of the film. It should not analyse character; that is the function of the novel. Drama should take for its subjects the

<sup>1</sup>A.V. Cookman. "The Theatre: The Dance of Death by W.H. Auden." London Mercury, XXXIII (November, 1935), p.56.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. the same idea of the Anglican Church in its New Liturgy for Africa.

universally familiar stories of its own society and generation. "The audience, like the child listening to the fairy tale, ought to know what is going to happen next".<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, these ideas were blueprints for dramatic art in a society which did not exist. It should be remembered, all the same, that Auden and Isherwood were the real modern pioneers in the re-introduction of verse to the English theatre. As Ashley Dukes says:

Our new dramatic poetry in the English theatre did not begin (as is often supposed) with the production of Murder in the Cathedral at the Canterbury and the Mercury. It began with the occasional work of the Group Theatre around 1930 under Rupert Doone<sup>2</sup> . . . Eliot's only contribution to this particular movement was a permission to perform Sweeney Agonistes which had been written some time earlier.<sup>3</sup>

The three plays in which Auden and Isherwood collaborated carried what Sweeney had suggested on the linguistic level over to the levels of action and theatrical effects, using some startlingly new and

<sup>1</sup>Quoted by Julian Symons. The Thirties, pp. 79--80.

<sup>2</sup>For a fascinating, illustrated account of the activities of the Group Theatre, see Symons, *supra*, pp. 78--89.

<sup>3</sup>"T.S. Eliot in the Theatre" from T.S. Eliot: a Symposium ed. R. March and Tambinuttur. (London, 1948), p. 11.

and iconoclastic methods, quite different from Eliot's approach in Sweeney.

In an essay on these plays written in 1962,<sup>1</sup> Donna Gerstenberger has some interesting comments to make, showing how Auden and his collaborator are still clearly drawing heavily on the early myth, particularly in its political aspect; the plays, she says:

. . . often reveal marks of immaturity or carelessness, reflected in an almost adolescent delight in viewing the modern world as it is exposed by contemporary psychology or in an extravagant handling of contemporary political and social issues . . . the world in question is always the same: a world in which there is no traditional, no satisfactory role for the modern individual, who stands in no-man's land between the We's and the They's, the Westlanders and the Ostnians, knowing the one choice unsatisfactory, the other impossible. The expression of this complex dilemma and its possible solutions led to wholesale experimentation in the verse drama: it led to the statement of uncomfortably modern themes in vocabulary and images drawn from contemporary science, chemical psychology, Marxian economics, power politics and mechanised warfare.<sup>2</sup>

The first of the plays in which they collaborated was The Dog Beneath the Skin, produced at the Group Theatre in 1935. It is the most interesting as well.

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<sup>1</sup>"Poetry and Politics. The Verse Drama of Auden and Isherwood". Modern Drama, V, (1962) to which the present writer is indebted for some ideas in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 124.

The Ascent of F6 and On the Frontier are technically more accomplished, but they have not the light-heartedness and spontaneity of The Dog Beneath the Skin which charms as much as anything else by its lack of ambition. The Ascent of F6 very nearly succeeds - does in fact succeed in the view of several critics, notably E.M. Forster<sup>1</sup> - in being a tragic masterpiece. The Dog Beneath the Skin is certainly successful in its less exacting genre and is noteworthy poetically for magnificent choruses.<sup>2</sup> These were, of course, written by Auden and are nearly all preserved as independent poems in the Collected Shorter Poems. In his autobiography, John Lehmann says that The Dog Beneath the Skin and The Ascent of F6

. . . were genuine attempts to break entirely new ground, and began an experimental movement behind which one could feel the youthful pressure of new ideas and new notions of form . . . (it was) original to England, taking an entirely different direction from either continental<sup>3</sup> or American avant-garde theatre, as much in its mixture of the styles of cabaret-sketch<sup>4</sup> and charade with elements

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<sup>1</sup>See Review of Ascent of F6 in Two Cheers for Democracy. pp. 271--273.

<sup>2</sup>See the Dog Beneath The Skin, pp.11-12, 15--16, 26--27, 179.

<sup>3</sup>Here John Lehmann is mistaken. It owed much to German expressionism.

<sup>4</sup>Auden's Cabaret-sketch, Alfred was published by John Lehmann in Penguin New Writing.

of Greek drama, as in its philosophical content, its peculiarly Auden-esque message, part Marx, part Groddeck and Freud on the sickness of civilisation.<sup>1</sup>

In The Dog Beneath the Skin, as in The Orators, Paid on Both Sides and The Dance of Death, man is presented as at grips with a deadly enemy; the effete bourgeoisie which in the last analysis, as we have seen, is Everyman, for the distinction between We and They does not really exist. Here the enemy is called the "genteel dragon" in the dedication (to Robert Medley)

Boy with lancet, speech or gun  
Among the dangerous ruins, learn  
From each devastated organ  
The power of the genteel dragon.

The theme is this time presented in the form of a quest. Auden has used the quest before in single poems, notably The Wanderer,<sup>2</sup> and is to use it again

<sup>1</sup>The Whispering Gallery, pp. 303--304.

It should be remembered that what Lehmann calls a "peculiarly Auden-esque message" was only peculiar to Auden at that particular time; the sickness of the state (Hamlet) and of the body politic (Coriolanus in particular, inter alia) might have been called a "peculiarly Shakespearian message" in Elizabethan times, drawn from e.g. Raleigh and Nashe, instead of Groddeck and Freud.

<sup>2</sup>Called in Poems 1933 "Chorus from a Play". Which play is not specified, and it resembles Paid on Both Sides strongly in its Icelandic form and atmosphere and laconic language. It is interesting to see that the chorus on p.81

in the future (the sonnet sequence of that name and The Age of Anxiety) but this is his first full use of the Quest image. It is quite different from The Waste Land in that it is a different quest from the courtly, or ritual-to-romance kind. It has far more in common with Oedipus' search for his own identity,<sup>1</sup> presenting this famous mythical quest in modern terms, as a search for the missing heir, Sir Francis Crewe.

The quest of the hero, Alan Norman, in the company of his faithful companion, the dog Francis, becomes a structural device for taking the playgoer through scenes of social commentary laid in Europe between the wars. Norman encounters Grabstein, the international capitalist<sup>2</sup>, and corrupt journalists and oppressed workmen who suffer . . . executions by the king.

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of The Dog Beneath the Skin ends with an image identical to one in The Wanderer "A bird stone-haunting, an unquiet bird". See M.W. Bloomfield "W.H. Auden and Sawles Warde" Modern Language Notes, (December, 1948) for an account of the middle English origin of this poem.

<sup>1</sup>cf. Emily Dickinson,  
 Adventure most unto itself  
 The Soul condemned to be;  
 Attended by a single Hound  
 Its own Identity.

<sup>2</sup>This symptom of a possible anti-semitism, comparable with Eliot's in "Gerontion" and "Bleistein with a Cigar", T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems, 1909-1935, p.37 and p. 40, comes oddly from a professed anti-fascist like Auden. Like his own spy, he may retain some seeds of an Enemy disease; on the other hand it is difficult to think of a better allegorical name for an international financier.

queen and priests of Ostria. The lunatic asylum of Westland provides pointed comments on the insanity of fascism and the Paradise Park episode satirises various forms of withdrawal.

After other adventures, Alan Norman finally arrives home to find his village assembled to celebrate the formation of a boys' brigade and the marriage of Lady Fair to a munitions manufacturer. A successful quester, he brings with him Sir Francis Crewe, who has of course been hiding in the dog's skin, having a dog's eye view of the dog beneath the skin of the human race. There is a general denunciation before Francis, Alan and five of the villagers go off through the audience to become "a unit in the army of the other side". The villagers who remain on the stage don the masks of various animals, and in a prefiguration of Orwell's Animal Farm, the General, as a bull, bellows an address to them as they reply appropriately with barking, mewling, quacking, grunting and squeaking.<sup>1</sup>

But no synopsis of the plot can sound anything but absurd;<sup>2</sup> like Paid on Both Sides, this play depends on its surrealist method of presentation and use of language to provoke its real response. It was a method already successfully used by the German expressionist playwrights,<sup>3</sup> and it gives Auden and Isherwood a surrealist form in which to express their usual psycho-

<sup>1</sup>Gerstenberger, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup>Though Margaret Cross makes it sound interesting. See Appendix D from her unpublished M.A. thesis (RAND, 1947), pp. 119--120.

<sup>3</sup>Particularly Bertolt Brecht: see Spears; The Poetry of W.H. Auden, The Disenchanted Island, pp. 90--92.

political nightmare world of the myth. The rapid shifting from scene to scene which gives a kaleidoscopic sequence of scenes fading into one another was something new on the English stage, and if the effect is one of chaos and general disintegration, this is of course an exact mirror of the sick and corrupt civilisation which so perturbed the authors.

Miss Gerstenberger complains that ". . . the unevenness of the episodes of the play tends to work against a sense of unity" but this is exactly what was required for a full mimesis of life in 1935 as Auden and Isherwood saw it; if they were looking through a surrealist telescope, so much the better. Miss Gerstenberger herself goes on to point out:

Since the Einsteinian theories had established the fact that time does not exist in traditional terms of continuity and that it must be viewed as a time-space continuum only to be subjectively perceived, a corresponding shift of formal focus was to be expected in an art which concerned itself with the preservation of modern experience.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of the futility of distinguishing between sides, which emerged so sharply in Paid on Both Sides and The Orators, allied to the futility of expecting salvation through a human saviour (who

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<sup>1</sup>Modern Drama, Vol. V, p. 125.





ingenious and essentially poetic method of emphasising Joseph's humanity in contrast to Gabriel's angelic immortality.<sup>1</sup>

As in The Orators, in which there was the long litany which appealed to detectives and public houses to "hear our prayer", so in this play there is a scene in a hospital which shows an operation being performed like a religious ceremony; this looks back to "Argument" (The Orators) and forward to For the Time Being. It must be stressed that by using the form of the creed here, Auden is not intending merely a cheap gibe at the original. On the contrary, he is using its absolute values to debunk the values of man in general and medicine in particular; it is part of the malaise of the body politic that it can credit such god-like attributes to mere medical mystique.

Surgeon: "I believe . . ."

All: "In the physical causation of all phenomena, material or mental; and in the germ theory of disease. And in Hippocrates, the father of Medicine, Galleu Ambrose Pare, Liston of the enormous hands, Syme, Lister who discovered the use of antiseptics, Hunter and Sir Frederick Treves.

And I believe in surgical treatment for duodenal ulcer, cerebral abscess, pyloric stenosis, aneurism and all forms of endocrine disturbance".

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<sup>1</sup>See too Chapter I of this essay.

Surgeon: "Let not the patient react unfavourably to the anaesthetic".

All: "But save him from pain".

Surgeon: "Let there be no unforeseen complications".

All: "Neither let sepsis have the advantage".

Surgeon: "May my skill not desert me".

All: "But guide your hands".<sup>1</sup>

Beneath the beauty of the choruses and the brilliance of the presentation, the puzzle setter of The Orators still lurks. The Song of the Second Journalist, sung at the Nineveh Hotel is clearly rhyming slang.<sup>2</sup>

Oh, how I cried when Alice died  
The night we were to have wed.<sup>1</sup>  
We never had our Roasted Duck  
And now she's a Loaf of Bread.

If there were any doubt on the point, the notebook referred to by John Whitehead puts an end to it; it contains a third and unpublished verse to the song.

At night I weep and cannot sleep  
Moonlight to me recalls  
I never saw her waterfront  
Nor she my waterfalls.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Dog Beneath the Skin, pp. 104--105.

<sup>2</sup>Though to the present writer's knowledge, only Professor Spears has pointed this out. Perhaps other critics regarded it as obvious.

<sup>3</sup>London Magazine, Vol. V, No. II, p. 67.

This was fortunately considered too crude even for the surrealistic cookpot; the authors had to consider the Lord Chancellor, too.

The play ends with a chorus (not preserved in the Collected Shorter Poems)

Love, loath to enter  
 The suffering winter  
 Still willing to rejoice  
 With the unbroken voice  
 At the precocious charm  
 Blithe in the dream  
 Afraid to wake, afraid  
 To doubt one term  
 Of summer's perfect fraud,  
 Enter and suffer  
 Within the quarrel  
 Be most at home,  
 Among the sterile, prove  
 Your vigours, love.<sup>1</sup>

This is the love of the first chorus,<sup>2</sup> the love that there guided the adolescent through his quest, only to be cut off from him at the end of it; the quester then recognises, disenchanted, that both he and his guide are "finite". In this final poem, love is urged to continue his guidance of the now grown man, who must tear both himself and love from the prison of the eternal summer which they reached at the end of the first quest. Its "perfect fraud"

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<sup>1</sup>The Dog Beneath the Skin, p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> Enter with him  
 These legends, love.  
The Dog Beneath the Skin, pp. 26-27.

must be questioned by plunging into "the suffering winter" and the precocious charm of the dream must be renounced. By joining the quarrel between summer and winter, love can demonstrate its power of cure for without love, there can be no hope for "the Sterile". Auden's lyrical power is shown very strongly here; it still shows itself, though seldom, in poems like "Deftly, Admiral".<sup>1</sup> In the same way, his idea of the power of love to restore, fight and heal is demonstrated once again. This shows the early idea of "love is god" that later was to give way to "God is love".<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the plays, this period produced the two travel books; Letters from Iceland (1936) in which Auden collaborated with Louis Macneice, and Journey to a War, a record of the trip he and Isherwood made to the Chinese frontier in 1938, and which they wrote together. They are amusing and interesting, and both show Auden still speaking from a liberal/humanist position. The poem Hong Kong ends

. . . off-stage, a war  
Thuds like the slamming of a distant door:  
We cannot postulate a General will  
For what we are, we have ourselves to blame.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Nones, p. 17. (called "Song").

<sup>2</sup>cf. The Four Loves, by C.S. Lewis. (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1960), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>Journey to a War, p. 23.

while we have already seen the changes Auden had to make to his sonnet sequence In time of War (from the same book) in order to make it conform to his changed ideas.<sup>1</sup> The earlier book contains the long, partly autobiographical poem "Letter to Lord Byron", which is a tour de force of its kind, and the beautiful poem "Journey to Iceland: A Letter to Christopher Isherwood Esq."<sup>2</sup> The first four verses show its quality

And the traveller hopes: "Let me be  
   far from any  
 Physician"; and the ports<sup>3</sup> have names  
   for the sea,  
 The citiless, the corroding, the sorrow;  
 And the North means to all: "Reject"!  
 And the great plains are for ever where  
   the cold fish is hunted,  
 And everywhere: the light birds flicker  
   and flaunt;  
       Under the scolding flag, the lover of  
       Of islands ~~xxxxxx~~ may see at last,  
 Faintly, his limited hope; and he nears  
   the glitter

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<sup>1</sup>This sonnet sequence is one of Auden's most fascinating works, and it is a pity that there is no time to look at it further in this essay. It would be very interesting to compare it with Auden's later sonnet sequence, "The Quest" (published in New Year Letter).

<sup>2</sup>Letters from Iceland, pp. 25--27. Preserved in Collected Shorter Poems with a minor alteration, pp. 23--25.

<sup>3</sup>Auden tells us he originally wrote 'poets' here, but when it was misprinted thus, he preferred it (Letters from Iceland, p. 27)

Of glaciers, the sterile immature  
   mountains intense  
 In the abnormal day of this world,  
   and a river's  
 Fan-like polyp of sand.

Then let the good citizen here find  
   natural marvels:  
 The horse-shoe ravine, the issue of  
   steam from a cliff  
 In the rock, and the rocks, and  
   waterfalls brushing the  
 Rocks, and among the rocks birds. <sup>1</sup>

Auden goes on to compare Iceland with Europe; it is an island and therefore "unreal";<sup>2</sup> he makes play with the mystery and symbolism of the country itself as a place for "the student of prose and conduct" to visit, where every scene is a possible setting for the working out of some elemental human passion. But in spite of this, it has only "its mendicant shadow to present to the world", and the poem concludes:

Tears fall in all the rivers. Again  
   the driver  
 Pulls on his gloves and in a blinding  
   snowstorm starts  
 Upon his deadly journey; and again the  
   writer  
 Runs howling to his art.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Auden shows that Europe and her problems cannot be escaped by running away to islands -- they

<sup>1</sup>Letters from Iceland, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>Changed in Collected Shorter Poems to "a refuge". p. 24

<sup>3</sup>Letters from Iceland, p. 27.

are 'unreal' or 'a refuge' and to do this is as useless as the driver repeatedly setting off in a blinding snowstorm, or the writer making a perpetual refuge of his art.

In both these books, while Auden is still officially outside the church door, he is (particularly in the later one) using some new images and symbols as well as the ones drawn from the original myth. We see more of this city image (Collected Shorter Poems, p. 41) and paysage moralisé (Collected Shorter Poems, p. 63) and less of the war-border-frontier situation, and of diagnosis in terms of psychosomatic illness. The titles of the poems retained in Collected Shorter Poems are significant; "The Voyage", "The Ship", "The Traveller"; these appear to indicate that Auden is beginning to move poetically from the confines of the myth; to shake its chains to earth like dew, as it were, though reversing Shelley's intention.<sup>1</sup> But the great book of this uncommitted period is Look, Stranger! published in 1936.<sup>2</sup> Charles Williams tells

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<sup>1</sup>"The Mask of Anarchy", The Complete Poems of Keats and Shelley, (New York, Random House, (no date), p. 373.

<sup>2</sup>Obviously poets are not all the same: Louis Macneice wrote:  
 . . . this middle stretch  
 Of life is bad for poets: a sombre view

us that it is essential for a poet to work out his conflicts in his poetry, otherwise his work will be full of figures who are just there, but are not able to be accounted for. They will be "mysterious cyphers unable to convey the process by which they were transformed"<sup>1</sup> and, he goes on to say "Poetry has to do all its own work; in return it has all its own authority".<sup>2</sup> This theory may very well account for the superiority of this volume and of its successor, Another Time (published in 1941 but containing many poems printed earlier). Auden is still the seeker, the quester, in Look Stranger! and its poems are the machinery with which he is working out his conflicts; the result is that they are among his most complete and finished works.<sup>3</sup> In the early poems he seemed to have found the answers in the ideas behind the myth, and in the

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Where neither works nor days look innocent  
And both seem now too many, now too few.  
"Day of Revival" in Ten Burnt Offerings (London:  
Faber & Faber, 1952), p. 65

<sup>1</sup>The English Poetic Mind, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), p.166. It is a pity such a useful book should have such a meaningless title.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>3</sup>e.g. "Our City" (Collected Shorter Poems, p.41)  
"Paysage Moralise" (ibid., pp. 63--64), "Perhaps"  
(ibid., p. 104), "A Summer Night", (ibid., p. 110),  
"Through the Looking Glass" (ibid., p. 126),  
"Birthday Poem" (ibid., p. 32).

later poems he has allegorised those ideas to conform with his Christian beliefs, but in these two transitional volumes he is still working out his problems, not, as in the others, telling us the answers.

This accounts for the great superiority in tone of the work of this period; the poet is not lecturing and he is not preaching. For the first time he is "present as a character"; he is not hovering above his poems like the Airman, but speaking through them in his own voice. Because the mask is off<sup>1</sup> the poems are far less satirical in intention and far less obscure in meaning. John Lehmann says of this period in Auden's work

In that full-flowering moment, feeling, thought and technical mastery were . . . in perfect balance; before his passion for rhetorical personifications of abstractions like 'glory', 'desire', 'hunger', 'the will' began to devour his invention . . . Each of these astonishing poems was a new discovery about the world we lived in and seemed to illuminate whole stretches of experience that had lain in a kind of twilight confusion before: disturbing . . . to accepted ideas and habitual sentiments by the unexpectedness of its psychological insight . . . and the images brought together to act as symbols for that insight . . .<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Generally speaking, that is; Auden never makes himself completely vulnerable by taking it right off.

<sup>2</sup>The Whispering Gallery, pp. 254--255.

Most of the contemporary critics felt the same way, if they expressed their views in less florid language, and so did Auden's fellow poets. It was at this time that Geoffrey Grigson brought out the special Auden Double number of New Verse, in which poets as different as Dylan Thomas, Edwin Muir, George Barker and Louis Macneice all paid homage to his genius. Even the restrained Muir used this word.<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, for some reason, would have preferred to honour e.e. cummings, but it is Pound all the same who provides the answer to Dr. Leavis, exhibiting his usual intransigence where Auden is concerned in a review in Scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> Pound advises "Pay no attention to the criticism of men who have never themselves written a notable work",<sup>3</sup> and in another essay says

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<sup>1</sup>"... such direct control of language and boldness of imagination are given only to poets of genius". New Verse: Auden Double number, p. 23

<sup>2</sup>Vol. V (1936/1937) pp. 323--325. In this review it is hard not to feel that so famous a critic is guilty of personal prejudice, for its manifest injustice should be apparent even to him. See Munroe K. Spears' account of the Scrutiny "School's" sustained hostility towards Auden in his introduction to Auden: A collection of Critical Essays; (Eaglewood-Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 1--3. See also Appendix F.

<sup>3</sup>From "a Stray Document". Literary Opinion in America, p. 170.

that, before attempting to criticise ". . . d'abord il faut être un poète".<sup>1</sup>

Leavis has selected only the worst of the poems for comment in his review, from which a reader would never guess at the high standard of most of the work in this book. It is a very high standard indeed; the poems seem to unroll before the reader with something of their own lyrical ease, and very seldom is he brought up short by any jarring of his taste.

John Mander says that Look Stranger! owes its superiority to the fact that here for the first time Auden has a definite audience to speak to, and a common theme to speak on. He says:

. . . an artist must build up a world of his own, a world not identical with reality as such, but recognisable as one man's attempt to analyse, penetrate, label and respond to it. And this world-of-his-own, where the artist's subjectivity has mastered and not succumbed to the world's objectivity is what we find in Eliot's work, or Yeats' and what we miss in Auden's.<sup>2</sup>

But in this book Auden has overcome this difficulty. He is speaking personally, urgently, not preaching and not posing, and what ambiguities remain spring from his position as a socialist intellectual living a

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<sup>1</sup>"Notes sur la Technique Poétique", Literary Opinion in America, p. 170.

<sup>2</sup>The Writer and Commitment, p. 38.

bourgeois life. This, though, is common to his "group" and in this volume he is speaking mainly to his friends<sup>1</sup> in whose company his tone is easy and relaxed. "Equal with colleagues in a ring" he is at his best.

The central theme, as nearly as a book of occasional poems may be said to have a central theme, is socialism, presented as the cure for the ills which as usual are diagnosed in a clinical fashion. But this cure is offered in an even more ambivalent and ambiguous form than usual; Auden is questioning his answer all the time and stressing that it is of no value without a reappraisal of love; he has never sounded the warning against a failure of love more terrifyingly than in this book.

Love is not presented here in the usual rather amorphous way, that is, basically as Eros plus something vaguely bigger and better. Eros is more often shown as a destructive force and the idea of love is abandoning it and moving closer to the concept of Agape, which Auden was later to describe as "Eros mutated by Grace".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Roy Campbell's "Macspaunday".

<sup>2</sup>Reviewing de Rougemont's Love in the Western World in The Nation, 1941. In another essay he says:

Agape requires that we love our enemies,  
do good to those that hate us and



lost this aspect of him to his poetry and with it the feeling of addressing a specific audience, or at any rate, this specific audience. Auden wrote in 1956

. . . every European poet, I believe, still instinctively thinks of himself as . . . a member of a professional brotherhood, with a certain social status irrespective of the number of his readers (in his heart of hearts the audience he desires and expects are those who govern the country) and taking his place in an unbroken historical succession. In the States poets have never had, or imagined they had such a status and it is up to each individual poet to justify his existence by offering a unique product.<sup>1</sup>

G.S. Fraser suggests another aspect of the peculiar Englishness of Auden's poetry at this time. He says:

The facade of English life is a very composed one, the flaws in the surface are difficult to detect, and one of the things that made Auden before the war a poet of such extreme social significance was his ability to put a finger on points of extreme, but hidden, stress.<sup>2</sup>

Fraser goes on to contrast Auden's position in America with his position in England in a very interesting section of his essay. From another point of view, Edmund Wilson, comparing the 'English' and the 'American' Auden, says (of the publication of Collected Poetry in 1945):

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<sup>1</sup>From the Preface to The Faber Book of Modern American Verse, Ed. W.H. Auden. (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>"W.H. Auden", Little Reviews Anthology, ed. Denis Val Baker. (London: 1949), p. 193.

Hardly can we recognise here the young man just up from Oxford, who appeared, under Eliot's patronage, in company with a few select friends. The friends are no longer present! The poems that seemed to herald the British revolution (including some very good ones) have been pitilessly scrapped. We find a volume . . . of over four hundred pages, in which the poems are all run together . . . and . . . have been given new titles of a colloquial, even folksy kind: . . . One saw with surprise that Auden -- so far from being a rarity that could only be appreciated by a few -- was the old-fashioned kind of poet . . . who is at his best when printed and read in bulk. He amuses us, converses with us, does his best to give us good advice; he sings us comic songs, supplies us with brilliant elegies on the deaths of great contemporaries; he charms us, he lulls us to sleep; he lifts us to a moment of inspiration. In metrics, in archetronics, as well as in handling language he is, of course, the most accomplished poet in English since the great nineteenth century masters; . . .<sup>1</sup>

This shows a great change from Wilson's attitude to the 'English' Auden as exhibited in his essay "The Oxford Boys Becalmed", where he says that the mentality of the Auden 'group' has remained that of the classroom and the boy scout.<sup>2</sup>

Auden's standpoint at this time is succinctly put in the poem Our Hunting Fathers, which has been

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<sup>1</sup>W.H. Auden in America". W.H. Auden: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Spears, pp. 58--59.

<sup>2</sup>The Shores of Light. (New York: Farrars, Strauss & Young, Inc., 1952), p. 670.

very differently interpreted by different writers such as, for example, Richard Hoggart,<sup>1</sup> and F.C. Flint.<sup>2</sup>

It is short enough to quote in full:

Our hunting fathers told the story  
 Of the sadness of the creatures,  
 Pitied the limits and the lack  
 Set in their finished features;  
 Saw in the lion's intolerant look,  
 Behind the quarry's dying glare,  
 Love raging for the personal glory  
 That reason's gift would add,  
 The liberal appetite and power,  
 The rightness of a god.

Who, nurtured in that fine tradition,  
 Predicted the result,  
 Guessed love by nature suited to  
 The intricate ways of guilt,  
 That human ligaments could so  
 His Southern gestures modify  
 And make it his mature ambition  
 To think no thought but ours,  
 To hunger, work illegally,  
 and be anonymous?<sup>3</sup>

Acting on the principle that the most obvious meaning is probably what the poet intended, the following is offered here:

Our ancestors, noble savages or country squires, thought themselves superior to the animals which they hunted; man had the gift of reason which his quarry lacked. Both hunters and hunted are shown in the first

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<sup>1</sup> Auden: An Introductory Essay, pp. 101-103.

<sup>2</sup> The Explicator. Vol. II, No. 1 (October: 1943), pp. 1--2.

<sup>3</sup> Collected Shorter Poems, p. 109.

verse as possessors of "love", but in the humans it is transmuted by reason into

The liberal appetite and power,  
The rightness of a god.

But the warning is plain; this is only in the hunter's own viewpoint. It is he who is telling the story, and it is he who sees the inferior "love" behind the quarry's dying glare; he is only a god to himself, and "personal glory" has a perjorative implication -- man is misusing reason's gift for this purpose.

So the question embodied in the second verse is largely satirical. Who, asks Auden, would have guessed that man, "nurtured in that fine tradition", with his liberal appetite and power, his god-like attributes; this amasser of personal glory, could have so changed love, adapting it to follow the path of man's "intricate ways of guilt?"<sup>1</sup> This descendant of our hunting fathers must now be considered to have reached maturity in his species, and what has become of love; what has become of his gift of reason? He (this must be taken to be both man, and "love") has so modified his (and love's) "southern gestures" -- the "liberal appetite and power" in all its romantic

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<sup>1</sup>To which the answer must be Auden himself -- he at least has not been deceived!

expansiveness -- that he has become, and so has love, like the animals he once pitied. Hungry and anonymous, with no personal glory remaining, he is doomed to "work illegally." This last has a double meaning; collectively, love may, in fact should, inspire man to work in revolutionary societies, and he will then come up against the laws of his country. Individually, the reference is probably to love which offends the mores of society, such as homosexual love, which may even be liable to legal prosecution. That the last two lines are, in fact, a direct quotation from Lenin, adds great subtlety to the various shades of meaning for as Richard Hoggart says:

the condition of the beasts heightens by contrast a specific moral conflict, a conflict which . . . the bourgeois intellectual must face and resolve when he becomes a Marxist.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the word is still love, but like the 'love' of this poem, Auden is beginning to modify its connotations. Eros, and the vaguer, larger conception of the earlier poems will no longer do, and the break with this aspect of the early myth is becoming apparent. Many of Love's features are, like those of the animals in the poem 'finished' and they remain an integral part of Auden's specifically Christian period, but love as a whole is to undergo a crucial change.

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<sup>1</sup>Auden: An Introductory Essay, p. 102.

CHAPTER VII  
FROM MYTH TO ALLEGORY

"Reason is not the essential ruler of man, he is directed by other forces", says Georg Groddeck<sup>1</sup> and Auden has been trying to diagnose these other forces since he began writing poetry. As a result, he has negotiated in his poetry much the same Odyssey as Kierkegaard, of whom Paul Holmes writes:

From Either/Or through The Postscript a transition is effected, from an aesthetic view of life which is hedonistic and largely a quest for immediate satisfactions, through an ethical view which is dutiful and describes existence as a responsible and obliged sojourn, into the religious view.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Exploring the Unconscious (C.W. Daniel: 1933) p. 26. Edward Upward made a similar point in Journey to the Border (London: Hogarth Press, 1938), pp. 144-145. "When the disease of reason will have run its course . . . you will sink into a final coma". cf. Collected Shorter Poems, 'Consider', pp. 43--44.

<sup>2</sup>Introduction to Edifying Discourses by Kierkegaard. Trans. D. and L. Swensen. (London: Fontana Books, 1958), p. 10. This scheme of the three categories is subsequently made use of by Auden as a framework for New Year Letter, The Sea and the Mirror and The Age of Anxiety.

If this essay has so far tried to unravel the political and psychological aspects of the myth as they appear in the earlier poems, it is hoped now to show that taken in totality they are only aspects of the whole; a religious philosophy which has shown itself in Auden's work in these ways (psychosomatic ways, if you like) from 1928 to 1966. When considering the poet's intention this point is all-important, and Auden's intention should always be borne in mind. Margaret Cross says that this religious attitude

arises from an inquisitive desire to see everything, foul and fair, and from a search for values which would not be satisfied by anything short of an ultimate.<sup>1</sup>

for Auden has tried many answers and remained unsatisfied by them all; he has, says Nathan Scott,

faced the whole repertoire of beliefs and philosophies, of programs (sic) and ideologies, that the modern world has conceived; though a pilgrim, he has, at the same time, been an explorer who has covered the entire terrain that is accessible to the men of his age.<sup>2</sup>

The contemptus mundi attitude which inevitably arose left him, at one stage, despising his own humanity and unable to answer 'What is love?'

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<sup>1</sup>In her unpublished M.A. thesis, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup>"The Poetry of Auden", Chicago Review Writers; (1957), p. 58.

Alone, alone, about a dreadful wood  
 Of conscious evil runs a lost mankind . . .  
 . . . The Pilgrim Way has led to the Abyss  
 Was it to meet such grinning evidence  
 We left our richly odoured ignorance?  
 Was the triumphant answer to be this?<sup>1</sup>  
 The Pilgrim Way has led to the Abyss.

But as we have seen, through all this pilgrimage, Auden has been following, like Ariadne's thread, the knowledge that the 'word is love'. In all the early poems he never once presented the reader with a clear idea of that love; it was always a vague, larger-than-life concept which left a great deal to his reader's own imaginative ingenuity in responding to it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For the Time Being, pp. 55--56. Cf. Blake's description of the Abyss in "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell":

'By degrees we beheld the infinite  
 Abyss, fiery as the smoke of a  
 burning city; beneath us, at an  
 immense distance, was the sun, black  
 but shining; round it were fiery tracts  
 on which revolv'd vast spiders,  
 crawling after their prey, which flew,  
 or rather swam, in the infinite deep,  
 in the most terrific shapes of animals  
 sprung from corruption . . .'

William Blake, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup>Certainly it means something more than F.W. Bateson estimates when he writes:

'Love', the supreme value for Auden,  
 is social love, not sexual love. It  
 is nearer to the friendship of Pope  
 than to the egocentric 'love' of the  
 Renaissance poets or the Romantics.

English Poetry (London: Longmans Green & Co. Ltd., 1950), p. 171.

It cannot be stressed too often that poetically this is perfectly acceptable. It is even preferable in some ways. Allowing the reader to envisage 'love' more or less as he likes makes for just that poetic 'magic' which Auden now so mistrusts; it also makes for a far superior tone than do the over-confident assertions of the man who knows all the answers.

Unfortunately, Auden could not be expected to remain floundering in the Abyss in order to improve the tone of his poetry, and his new idea of Love<sup>1</sup> begins to emerge clearly at the beginning of the new decade. It is patchworked together out of his reading,<sup>2</sup> as was the early myth; this time it is compounded of a mixture of Kierkegaard, de Rougemont, Charles Cochrane, Charles Williams, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr and a host of other philosophers and theologians.<sup>3</sup> Brought

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<sup>1</sup>It is difficult to know when to impose the capital on 'love'. Auden always does from roughly 1941 onward. He has done so too in all revised and collected editions such as Collected Shorter Poems, as a kind of hindsight. In this essay the word is written, as far as possible, as Auden wrote it in the original versions.

<sup>2</sup>See Appendix E.

<sup>3</sup>e.g. The Attack upon Christendom by Soren Kierkegaard (Oxford University Press, 1914); Denis de Rougemont Love in the Western World (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956, originally published 1940); Charles Williams The Descent

up as an Anglican, these ideas are all enclosed in a working framework of Anglican Orthodoxy, and while it is decidedly an Anglo-Catholic framework, his ideas are strongly Protestant; that is to say his commitment is not to a system but to a candid and continually renewed encounter with reality. This attitude to life and religion is an essentially Protestant one, as Professor W.B. Martin has shown;<sup>1</sup> committed, yet open, intelligent but not intellectual, evangelical rather than sacramentarian; for Auden agrees with Paul Tillich, who maintains that:

. . . religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all of its functions.<sup>2</sup>

Denis de Rougemont gives a definition of the myth of Eros, which is perhaps the nearest approximation to the "love" of Auden's earlier poems. He says,

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of the Dove (New York: Meridian Books, 1956); Charles Cochrane Christianity and Classical Culture (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940); Paul Tillich, The Shaking of the Foundations, (London: Penguin Books, 1949); Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).

<sup>1</sup>"Significant Modern Writers". The Expository Times, (Vol. LXXI: 1959), pp. 36--37.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Professor Martin. The Expository Times, (Vol. LXXI: 1959), p. 37.

Eros is complete desire, luminous Aspiration, the primitive religious soaring carried to its loftiest pitch, to the extreme exigency of purity which is also the extreme exigency of unity. But absolute unity must be the negation of the present human being in his suffering multiplicity. The supreme soaring of desire ends in non-desire. The erotic process introduces into life an element foreign to the diastole and systole of sexual attraction - a desire that never relapses, that nothing can satisfy, that even rejects and flees the temptation to obtain its fulfilment in the world, because its desire is to embrace no less than the All. It is infinite transcendence, man's rise into his God. And this rise is without return.<sup>1</sup> (de Rougemont's italics).

From this it can be seen that this view of love, though not necessarily an un-Christian one, falls into the category of Manichean or Albigensian heresy, embracing as it does their fundamental premise that the soul is divine or angelic and imprisoned in created forms or terrestrial matter, which correspond to Night.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Love in the Western World, translated Montgomery Belgion. (New York: Pantheon, 1956), pp. 61--62. (Originally published in 1940).

<sup>2</sup>cf. Blake who writes "All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following errors:

- (1) That Man has two real existing principles, viz: a Body and a Soul;
- (2) That Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body; and that Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul;
- (3) That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his energies".

From "the Marriage of Heaven and Hell".  
William Blake, p. 94.

This erotic love could not solve the world's problems, symbolised by war and disease, as Auden diagnosed them in his poetry, because it could offer only death as a cure; only by death can the soul escape its prison and be re-united with God. So this kind of love can do nothing for the world of matter and form, and its failure to do so is precisely what Auden complains of time and again in the earlier poems; for it was this kind of love, as we have seen, which

Needs death, death of the grain  
Our death . . .

Auden used Freudian terms like "death wish" to diagnose this failure of love in the early poems, as he used Marxist ones to diagnose the sociological and political situation "love" was required to cure, so that generally speaking Freud can be equated with the myth of Erotic love and Marx with the "classical culture" idea of salvation by political or secular means. But the idea that love was the only hope for man has never faltered; only the nature of the love he advocates has now become specific. Abandoning as a failure the erotic and Manichean version, which is as near as we can get to defining the early "love", he now replaces it with the Christian concept of Love as Agape. Denis de Rougemont sums up the two ideas in these words:

The incarnation of the Word in the World -- and of Light in Darkness -- is the astounding event whereby we are delivered from the woe of being alive. And this event, in being the centre of the whole of Christianity, is the Focus of that Christian love which in Scripture is called Agape.

The event is unique and not to be believed "naturally"! That the Incarnation occurred is the radical negation of every kind of religion - the ultimate offence, not only to our reason, which is unable to countenance the absurd running together of the infinite and the finite, but also and especially to any natural religious disposition. Every known religion tends to sublimate man, and culminates in condemning his 'finite' life. Our desires are intensified and sublimated by the god Eros through being embraced in a single Desire whereby they are abolished. The final goal of the process is to attain what is not life - the death of the body. Night and Day being incomparable, and men being deemed creatures of Night, men can only achieve salvation by ceasing to be, by being 'lost' in the bosom of the divine. But in Christianity thanks to its dogma of the incarnation of the Christ in Jesus, this process is completely inverted. Death, from being the last term, is become the first condition. What the Gospel calls dying to self is the beginning of a new life already here below - not the soul's flight out of the world, but its return in force into the midst of the world. It is an immediate re-creation, a reassertion of life - not of course the old life, and not of an ideal life, but of our present life repossessed by the Spirit . . .

Thereupon to love is no longer to flee and persistently to reject the act of love. Love now still begins beyond death but from that beyond it returns to life. And in being thus converted love brings forth our neighbour.<sup>1</sup> (all italics de Rougemont's).

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<sup>1</sup>Love in the Western World, pp. 67--68.

There are many aspects of the Erotic myth in 'Auden's early use of 'love'. In 1935 he writes in "Birthday Poem" to Christopher Isherwood:

. . . the word is love  
Surely one fearless kiss would cure  
The million fevers.<sup>1</sup>

and a short lyric, Poem XIII of Poems, 1933, ends

Rise with the wind, my great big serpent;  
Silence the birds and ~~the~~ darken the air;  
Change me with terror, alive in a moment;  
Strike for the heart and have me there.<sup>2</sup>

while the fact that the true follower of Eros will reject fulfilment in this world appears when Auden describes himself to the protagonist of "Through the Looking Glass" as

Your would-be lover who has never come  
In the great bed at midnight to your arms.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the poems in Another Time were collected before Auden's final commitment to Christianity, and show clearly his transitional ideas about love. His gods of the time are humanistic gods,<sup>4</sup> and there are

<sup>1</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 34

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 268. For Freud's own version of Eros, see Outline of Psychoanalysis (New York: 1949), pp. 20--24.

<sup>3</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 127.

<sup>4</sup>It must be stressed that Auden's later complete commitment to Christianity is not in conflict with these humanistic ideals, but merely

poems to Yeats, Freud, Voltaire, Arnold, Lear, Pascal, Melville and James. Pure Eros is no longer good enough, and its conflict with Agape shows clearly. "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" still shows love as Eros, understandably perhaps, while "Early Date" shows a mixture of attitudes:

Love has no position  
 Love's a way of living  
 One kind of relation  
     Possible between  
 Any things or persons  
 Given one condition  
 The one sine qua non  
     Being mutual need . . .

I believed for years that  
 Love was the conjunction  
 Of two oppositions  
     That was all untrue . . .<sup>1</sup>

"Herman Melville" shows the Eros/Agape conflict clearly, and ends

And all the stars above him sang as in  
     his childhood  
 'All, all is vanity', but it was not  
     the same;  
 For now the words descended like the  
     calm of mountains -

---

complements them. As R.P. Blackmur points out  
 . . . Humanism cannot substitute for the  
 religious imagination . . . Humanism without  
 religion is sterile but . . . the religious  
 imagination of our world . . . is not likely  
 to survive without the aid of an enriched  
 humanism.

From "Humanism and Symbolic Relation", The Lion and the Honeycomb (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1956), p. 152.

<sup>1</sup> Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 117--118.

- Nathaniel had been shy because his  
     love was selfish -  
 But now he cried in exultation and  
     surrender  
 'The Godhead is broken like bread.  
     We are the pieces . . .<sup>1</sup>

When we come on to the later poems, from about 1941 onwards -- the victory is clearly to Agape, and in "Christmas 1940" he writes (though this poem was only published in 1945 and probably the title does not indicate that Auden wrote it in 1940)

We are reduced to our true nakedness:  
 Either we serve the Unconditional,  
 Or some Hitlerian monster will supply  
 An iron convention to do evil by.<sup>2</sup>

For the Time Being depends extensively on these symbols of Eros and Agape and shows Auden's mature use of them. The title means to live in the present: the time being which must be redeemed from insignificance, and Auden goes on to show that Eros, denying Agape, caused the Fall. The metaphysical significance of the Incarnation is summed up by Simeon:

Because in Him the Word is united to the Flesh  
 without loss of perfection, Reason is redeemed  
 from incestuous fixation in her own Logic, for  
 the One and the Many are simultaneously revealed  
 as real so that we may no longer, with the  
 Barbarians, deny the Unity, asserting that there  
 are as many gods as there are creatures, nor  
 with the philosophers, deny the Multiplicity,  
 asserting that God is One who has no need of

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<sup>1</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, pp.117--118.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 132.

friends and is indifferent to a World of Time and Quantity and Horror which he did not create, nor, with Israel, may we limit the co-inherence of the One and the Many to a special case . . .<sup>1</sup>

It is unfortunate (though perhaps symptomatic) that Auden's writing should in much of his later work break out in such an ugly rash of capital letters. They only succeed in making abstractions out of too many things, and so they destroy the concrete impact of what he is saying; this over-indulgence in abstraction is another reason for the failure in tone previously referred to. They do however, serve a useful purpose in that they make incontrovertibly clear that what Auden is doing is simply to allegorise the symbols he used before, drawn from the earlier myth. The symbols themselves, as we shall see later, remain very much the same, but by devices such as the imposing of the capital, they serve now an allegorical, rather than a mythical purpose. John Blair says that Auden's intention is that

. . . the allegory must first lead the reader to assent to the truth of a widely applicable insight into human existence. Then, hopefully, he will go on to apply the general truth to himself . . . Auden asks that his readers move from the particulars of the poem through its self examination. Such complex indirection is

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<sup>1</sup>For the Time Being, p. 110.

necessitated by the poet's desire to avoid self assertion. To tell the reader what to think directly and specifically would be to preach at him . . .<sup>1</sup>

The consistent use of the symbol of love by Auden should by now be clear and in turn this shows the clear relationship between his ideas in both periods; the imposition of the capital and the way in which he uses the word give it its allegorical significance in the later poems. Although we have seen that in the period of the myth Auden tentatively offers socialistic and psychological cures for the malaise of the times, he was not only aware of the breakdown of the social and economic machinery, but he was already aware of the deeper sources and symptoms of the crisis.<sup>2</sup> He never at any stage accepted in toto the diagnosis of the orthodox left wing group of the 'thirties, who could so precisely locate the cause of the trouble in the social-economic structure, but

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<sup>1</sup>The Poetic Art of W.H. Auden, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp.76--77.

<sup>2</sup>See e.g. "Consider" where he writes:

Long ago, Supreme Antagonist  
More powerful than the great northern whale  
Ancient and sorry at life's limiting defect,  
In Cornwall, Mendip, of the Pennines moor  
Your comments on the high-born mining captains,  
Found they no answer, made them wish to die -  
Lie since in barrows out of harm.

Collected Shorter Poems, p. 43. (Poem XXIX of Poems 1930.)

turned from the beginning to the insecurity of the individual and his isolation from happiness. In 1929 he wrote

So insecure, he loves and love  
 Is insecure, gives less than he expects.  
 He knows not if it be seed in time to  
   display  
 Luxuriantly in a wonderful fructification  
 Or whether it be but a degenerate remnant  
 Of something immense in the past but now  
 Surviving only as the infectiousness of  
   disease . . .<sup>1</sup>

Nathan Scott, who points all this out in his essay referred to earlier,<sup>2</sup> stresses the consistence between the ideas of the myth and those of its later allegorization. He writes,

It may of course be maintained that there was nothing inclinatory Christian in this attentiveness to disorder in society and to the internal distress of the modern individual that unifies Mr. Auden's earlier work - since . . . we have here only the evidence of his tutelage under Marx, on the one hand and Freud, on the other. But surely this is too simple, for the consistency with which he portrayed . . . in all the work of the decade . . . the human individual as living at a point of nexus between both the public world of society and the inner world of the psyche, represented something rather different from either of these major options of modern secular thought for comprehending the human problem.<sup>3</sup> (Scott's italics).

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<sup>1</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 82--83.

<sup>2</sup>"The Poetry of Auden", Chicago Review Writers (1957)

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

Mr. Scott goes on to say that secular sociology has tended to regard the inner life of the psyche as merely an epiphenomenon dependent upon forces and structures that are of an essentially social nature, whereas the psychologies descending from Freud have tended to minimise if not to ignore the social determination of personality -- in other words, as we pointed out in the last chapter, Marx and Freud tend to be mutually exclusive. So that while Auden drew heavily on both their ideas as he formulated them in the early myth, we can see even at that stage that he had reserved a point of view entirely his own. This, while absorbing both their perspectives, still clearly looked forward to the Christian emphasis upon man's creaturely involvement in the concrete stuff of social history and upon the essential inward-looking aspect of man's existence, which makes it impossible to reduce him to a mere cypher in collective socialism. This is the double focus of which we are always aware in Auden's poetry; it is this that shows the need both for new styles of architecture and for a change of heart; it is this that made him write in Sept. 1, 1939

There is no such thing as the State  
 And no one exists alone,  
 Hunger allows no choice

To the citizen or the police  
We must love one another or die.<sup>1</sup>

The same poem shows how constant is this preoccupation; the problems which arose from the mechanics of social living were, to use his favourite word, only symptomatic of their source, what Mr. Scott calls "the crookedness and illiberality of the human heart":<sup>2</sup>

What mad Nijinsky wrote  
About Diaghilev  
Is true of the normal heart;  
For the error bred in the bone  
Of each woman and each man  
Craves what it cannot have,  
Not universal love  
But to be loved alone.<sup>3</sup>

and while the Just can still exchange their messages, it is idle to forget that, as Michael Ransome found out,

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<sup>1</sup>As we have seen, this verse is no longer included in the poem by Auden. Nowadays he calls it "claptrap which he is ashamed to have written" but we can only guess at his reasons for doing so; perhaps he considered it too partisan. In his latest volume of Collected Shorter Poems, 1927--1957, (London: Faber, 1967), which came out after this essay was written, he has omitted, as well as the whole of Sept. 1, 1939, such well known poems as "Petition", "Paid on Both Sides" and "Spain 1937". Fortunately all these have been anthologised too frequently to be erased from the record at this stage.

<sup>2</sup>Chicago Review Writers (1957), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 76.

. . . Love finally is great  
 Greater than all: but large the hate  
 Far larger than man can ever estimate.<sup>1</sup>

But as Auden found, if love is not great enough to conquer hate, then love in this form has failed and must change from its mythical or erotic form, to the Christian allegorical concept of love as Agape, used as a symbol by Auden today in the ways outlined above.

Auden's position is chiefly that of an Existentialist, a follower of Kierkegaard. In an essay written in 1951, Professor Spears quotes some of Auden's remarks when reviewing a translation of Kierkegaard. Auden says:

In contrast to those philosophers who begin by considering the objects of human knowledge, essences and relations, the existential philosopher begins with man's immediate experience as a subject, i.e. as a being in need, an interested being whose existence is at stake . . . the basic human problem is man's anxiety in time; e.g. his present anxiety over himself in relation to his past and his parents (Freud), his present anxiety over himself in relation to his future and his neighbours (Marx), his present anxiety over himself in relation to eternity and God (Kierkegaard).<sup>2</sup>

Spears goes on to say that the anxiety viewed

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<sup>1</sup>The Ascent of F6, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>"Late Auden: The Satirist as Lunatic Clergyman", Sewanee Review (bound volume for 1951), p. 58.

by Freud (or Homer Lane) as a disease consequent on maladjustment, is now seen as purposive, a concomitant of the choice confronting man, who is so frighteningly free to choose. From this point of view Auden's present position may be clearly seen to transcend without denying his earlier Marx-Freud standpoint. Despite the vituperative attacks of some critics such as Jarrell and Beach, his religious convictions have produced no violent changes in his political attitude, though they have given him a new approach; like Reinhold Niebuhr he finds no difficulty in reconciling Christian existentialism with political liberalism, and indeed why should he? They need not, like the doctrines of Marx and Freud, be mutually exclusive. But the right political attitudes alone cannot produce a 'love' that will answer all problems; liberal capitalist democracy has failed entirely to do this, says Auden in another essay,<sup>1</sup> resulting only in a feeling of individual isolation from everyone else, and being relativistic, it provides no basis for stability except force, and so has no real defence against Fascism.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Public vs. the late Mr. W.B. Yeats".  
Partisan Review, Vol. VI (Spring: 1939)  
pp. 46--51.

So, says Auden, we must, though perhaps regretfully (because, as we have seen, he is fully aware of the inherent danger of romanitas)<sup>1</sup> bow to absolute and religious sanctions. As we have shown, the true Christian acts in the present; he redeems the time, and is not, like a follower of Eros, always reaching forward to try and possess something he lacks, but striving for a reciprocal relation with God in answer to His reaching out for Man. Eliot gives this as a considered view in The Dry Salvages:

Fare forward, you who think that you are voyaging;  
 You are not those who saw the harbour  
 Receding, or those who will disembark.  
 Here between the hither and the farther shore  
 While time is withdrawn, consider the future  
 And the past with an equal mind.  
 At the moment which is not of action or inaction  
 You can receive this: "on whatever sphere of being  
 The mind of a man may be intent  
 At the time of death" - that is the one action  
 (And the time of death is every moment)  
 Which shall fructify in the lives of others.<sup>2</sup>

In describing Auden's new allegorical use of the old myth, or the background from which he now draws his 'metaphors for poetry' as Yeats did from the ideas of A Vision, there is not, having established that he now speaks as an Anglican existentialist with a new

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<sup>1</sup>In Chapter I of this essay, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Four Quartets, (London: Faber paperback edition, 1959), pp. 41--42.



And feels he is at fault, . . .  
 . . .; this guilt his insoluble  
 Final fact, infusing his private  
 Nexus of needs, his noted aims with  
 Uncomprehensible comprehensive dread  
 At not being what he knows that before  
 This world was he was willed to become.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly the War/Border situation that was so fundamental an image in the first myth has simply been transposed from the political to the religious realm or from the mythical to the allegorical. The trapped spy we saw in The Secret Agent was unable to escape his class and so cross the sociological frontier, for he was riddled with symptoms of psychosomatic disease; in the same way the narrator of "As I walked Out" cannot escape his time and so cross the chronological frontier for

. . . all the clocks in the city  
 Began to whirr and chime;  
 O let not time deceive you  
 You cannot conquer time . . .

In headaches and in worry  
 Vaguely life leaks away,  
 And time will have his fancy  
 To-morrow or to-day.

Into many a green valley  
 Drifts the appalling snow  
 Time breaks the threaded dances  
 And the diver's brilliant bow.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Age of Anxiety, pp. 22 -- 28.

<sup>2</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 227--228.

In the allegorised version of the myth this bourgeois intellectual is simply Everyman, confronting a choice no longer based on biology or politics, but the ultimate religious choice between Eros and Agape.<sup>1</sup> Writing in memory of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Auden says

He told us we were free to choose  
 But, children as we were, we thought -  
 'Paternal love will only use  
 Force in the last resort

On those too bumptious to repent' -  
 Accustomed to religious dread  
 It never crossed our minds He meant  
 Exactly what He said.<sup>2</sup>

In another essay,<sup>3</sup> Professor Spears has made a study of Auden's six major clusters of symbols, and it is interesting to see that they were all prominent features of the first myth and have simply been allegorised to suit a specifically Christian viewpoint. Nothing shows more plainly that their sources are indissolubly welded together than Auden's continued use of these symbols. They are listed as

<sup>1</sup>Auden uses Kierkegaard's image of a "leap" to represent this choice. See Collected Shorter Poems, p. 136.

<sup>2</sup>"Friday's Child", Homage to Clio, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>"The Dominant Symbols of Auden's Poetry", Sewanee Review, Vol. LIX, 1951, to which the author is much indebted for the basis of this chapter.

- |                       |                            |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| (1) War               | (2) The Quest.             |
| (3) Paysage Moralisé. | (4) Psychosomatic disease. |
| (5) Eros/Agape/Logos. | (6) The City.              |

The Eros/Agape symbol has been sufficiently dealt with here already; it is the thread that binds all Auden's poetry into a consistent oeuvre and the resolution of its difficulties we have seen to have been the object of his search from the beginning. If we trace Auden's use of the other five groups of symbols and see how he has adjusted them from one group of beliefs to the next we find a similar consistency. All the symbols, Spears says, have three principal functions. Firstly:

the technical function of providing a concrete dramatic situation and a unifying principle of organisation for the imagery; second the satirical function of extending satire into the cosmic dimensions and sometimes of implying a satiric norm; third, the didactic function of embodying concretely and dramatically concepts of varying degrees of abstraction.<sup>1</sup>

We have seen how Auden continues to use the border situation, which is an extension of the war symbol; in the same way he continues freely to use the war situation, still regarding it, as he used to, as man's natural condition. But instead of the vaguely

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<sup>1</sup>Sewanee Review, Vol. LIX, pp. 393--393.





the psychology, the politics and the  
theology of love.<sup>1</sup>

So the cause of the wars is always the same -- a failure of Love; love deficient, as was pointed out as early as The Orators, towards both God and man, and win or lose, it comes to the same thing unless we are fighting for spiritual absolutes:

So victory can do no more  
Than make us as we were before,  
Beasts with a Rousseauistic charm<sup>2</sup>  
Unconscious we were doing harm.

The Quest symbol in Auden appears to be a development from the Border symbol; instead of group skirmishing across the frontier, an individual is singled out to undertake a quest of some kind, usually rather mysterious. Sometimes it is a rather ritual-to-romance quest, while Sir Francis Crewe's search for his own identity was an example of another sort of quest. "The Wanderer<sup>Y</sup>", one of Auden's most beautiful poems, which was first published in New Signatures in 1932, is an excellent example of the former type, for its protagonist is not engaged on any specific task, but seems to have been beckoned by spiritual wanderlust into a mysterious follow-the-gleam journey

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<sup>1</sup>"Greatness of Aim", Times Literary Supplement, (August 6th, 1954), (front page).

<sup>2</sup>New Year Letter, pp. 37--38.

with no particular aim in mind. But he is impelled  
by strange forces:

No cloud-soft hand can hold him, restraint  
by women,

But ever that man goes  
Through place-keepers, through forest trees,  
A stranger to strangers over undried sea,  
Houses for fishes, suffocating water,  
Or lonely as fell on chat,  
By pot-holed becks  
A bird stone-haunting, an unquiet bird.<sup>1</sup>

The success prayed for in this quest is the wanderer's safe return; most of the early quest poems try without result to find out what success is. When Auden uses this symbol in later poems the difference is that now there is an answer for the quester -- success is equated with Christian Love, though in Auden's fullest use of this symbol, the sonnet sequence called The Quest, he appears as almost, but still not entirely, committed to the Christian viewpoint.<sup>2</sup> The other long poem which uses the Quest symbol is The Age of Anxiety: here the answer is more explicit in that what the questers were seeking was with them all the time. Rosetta says

. . . for the journey home  
Arriving by roads one already knows  
At sites and sounds one has sensed before

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<sup>1</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup>Compare Eliot's position in The Hollow Men.

The knowledge needed is not special,  
The sole essential a sad unrest  
Which no life can lack . . .<sup>1</sup>

This at least implies that there is an answer,  
but it is to be found where we are; the quest need  
only be undertaken spiritually, not physically.

Simeon says

. . . our redemption is no longer a  
question of pursuit but of surrender  
to Him who is always and everywhere  
present.<sup>2</sup>

Writing in 1939,<sup>3</sup> Auden says

. . . one of Rilke's more characteristic  
devices is the expression of human life in  
terms of landscape

and it is one of Auden's too, probably derived from  
Rilke.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to think of a single poem  
by Auden which can be called a "Nature" poem, of  
the kind written, for instance, by Wordsworth,<sup>5</sup>  
even the Buccolics in *The Shield of Achilles* with  
their specifically 'natural' titles, are moralised,

<sup>1</sup>The Age of Anxiety, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup>For the Time Being, p. 111.

<sup>3</sup>In The New Republic, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup>See Enright, D.G. "A Note on Auden and  
Rilke", Essays in Criticism, Vol. II, (1952).

<sup>5</sup>Auden, like Byron, was no admirer of  
Wordsworth.

as are all his landscape features in both the early and the later poems. We have seen how he uses rusting machinery and abandoned workings to suggest the decay of capitalism in poems like "Get there if you can . . ."; in poems like "The Witnesses," says Professor Spears, he marshalls the landscape features to suggest psychological dread as well:

We were the whirlpool, we were the reef  
 We were the formal nightmare, grief  
                                     And the unlucky Rose...

The sky is darkening like a stain  
 Something is going to fall like rain  
                                     And it won't be flowers.

When the green field comes off like a lid  
 Revealing what was much better hid -  
                                     Unpleasant:

And look, behind you without a sound  
 The woods have come up and are standing round  
                                     In deadly crescent.<sup>1</sup>

The well-known sestina of Look Stranger<sup>2</sup> shows his fullest use of this symbol; called "Paysage Moralise" it begins

Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys  
 Seeing at end of street the barren mountains,  
 Round corners coming suddenly on water,  
 Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for  
   islands,  
 We honour founders of these starving cities  
 Whose honour is the image of our sorrow,

<sup>1</sup> Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 195--196.

<sup>2</sup> p. 22. (Collected Shorter Poems, pp. 63--64).

and it ends

So many, doubtful, perished in the mountains  
 Climbing up crags to get a view of islands,  
 So many, fearful, took with them their sorrow  
 Which stayed them when they reached unhappy cities,  
 So many, careless, dived and drowned in water.  
 So many, wretched, would not leave their valleys.

It is our sorrow. Shall it melt? Ah, water  
 Would gush, flush, green these mountains and  
   these valleys  
 And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands.

Scrappy quotation like this can of course give no idea of the intricate working out of idea and language in this poem, but it is enough to show how Auden's use of landscape is purely symbolic of its relation to man.<sup>1</sup> The only difference in the use of this particular symbol in the later poetry ("Paysage Moralisé" was written in 1936) is that whereas the imagery of the early poems was drawn from the early myth and is thus partly psychological and partly political, now this aspect is dropped and the reference is entirely spiritual, though couched in psychological imagery. In Praise of Limestone is a good example, . . .

That is why, I suppose  
 The best and the worst never stayed here<sup>2</sup> long,  
   but sought  
 Immoderate soils where the beauty was not so  
   external

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<sup>1</sup>e.g. In this poem, city = society,  
 mountain = action, island = escape,  
 water = belief, valley = innocence.

<sup>2</sup>i.e. in Limestone Country.

The light less public and the meaning of life  
 Something more than a mad camp . . .  
 But the really reckless were fetched  
 By an older, colder voice, the oceanic whisper:  
 'I am the solitude that asks and promises nothing,  
 That is how I shall set you free. There is no love  
 There are only the various envies, all of them sad.'

and Auden concludes

. . . when I try to imagine a faultless love  
 Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur  
 Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone<sup>1</sup>  
 landscape.

As late as 1942, Auden wrote,

. . . the true significance of a disease is  
 teleological . . . a neurosis is a guardian  
 angel,<sup>2</sup>

and while, as Spears says, he has rejected "loony  
 Layard", he still believes that organic disease  
 may have a psychic origin.<sup>3</sup> He still retains that  
 ballad of questionable taste, "Miss Gee", in collections  
 of his work; her frustrations turn inward to form a  
 monstrous carcinoma, and the doctor in the poem says

Cancer's a funny thing . . .  
 Childless women get it  
 And men when they retire  
 Its as if there were no outlet<sup>4</sup>  
 For their foiled creative fire.

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<sup>1</sup>Nones, pp.11-13.      <sup>2</sup>New Republic, 1941, p.186.

<sup>3</sup>See "A Change of Air", About the House, pp.51-52.

<sup>4</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, pp.241-242. Georg  
 Groddeck says:

My experience with cases of tumour has  
 convinced me that . . . a symbolism of

He brings these abstractions to life far more vividly and poetically in his early prayer "Petition" which was Poem XXX in his first published volume:

Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all  
 But will its negative inversion, be prodigal:  
 Send to us power and light, a sovereign touch  
 Curing the intolerable neural itch  
 The exhaustion of weaning, the liar's quinsy.

Here then, there has been no change; Auden still regards poetry as "essentially therapeutic and . . . the poet as the spiritual diagnostician".<sup>1</sup> Much the same applies to the City symbol. Charles Cochrane wrote, summing up some remarks made by Sallust,

In these words, the author proclaims his conviction that, despite contemporary degeneracy, Rome provides the best model for the reconstruction of Rome.<sup>2</sup>

We have seen Auden's opinion of what Cochrane calls romanitas in Chapter I of this essay, and we can draw our own conclusions too from his frequent use of the City as a symbol in all his work. It is based on Rome the Eternal City, although of course it becomes

pregnancy is involved and I have used this line of approach in treating cases with some success.

Exploring the Unconscious, p. 80.

<sup>1</sup>Munroe K. Spears, Sewanee Review, Vol. LIX, P. 403.

<sup>2</sup>Civilisation and Classical Culture, p. 95.

universalised in its symbolic form,<sup>1</sup> but Auden uses it extensively both in the earlier poetry, where it is of particular force in predicting the collapse of society as Rome collapsed<sup>2</sup>; and in the later poetry, where it becomes more a symbol of hope in the idea of building the "Just City" of St. Augustine, regarded as rather a forlorn concept in, for example, "Spain 1937". Both Roman and contemporary culture made the mistake of rejecting in the name of reason what they considered the "unreason" of Christianity. In Auden's later view it is Christianity alone that can give reason to both

<sup>1</sup> The City . . . is a state of mind and a way of organising moral experience and has geographical existence only on the map of the emotions . . .  
Richard M. Ohmann, "Auden's Sacred Awe"  
From Auden: A Collection of Critical Essays,  
ed. Spears, p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> And indeed as Lewis Mumford says, may be a contributing factor to this collapse:  
Living thus, year in and year out, at second hand, remote from the nature that is outside them and no less remote from the nature within, handicapped as lovers and as parents by the confine of the metropolis and by the constant specter (sic) of insecurity and death that hovers over its bold towers and shadowed streets, living thus, the mass of inhabitants remain in a state bordering on the pathological. They become the victims of phantasms, fears, obsessions, which bind them to ancestral patterns of behaviour.  
The Culture of Cities, (London: Secker and Warburg, 1938), p. 258.

history and individual life; we have seen time and again his rejection of any idea of a secular saviour. So the city of the early myth has provided an excellent model for the reconstruction of the new allegorical City; like the Phoenix one arises -- and like the Phoenix in the same form -- from the ashes of the other. Auden asks in "Spain 1937"

. . . What's your proposal?  
To build the Just City?  
I will<sup>1</sup>

but that was a city to be built for political reasons, though intended to replace

. . . the city state of the sponge  
. . . the vast military empire of the shark  
And the tiger . . .<sup>2</sup>

The building of the spiritually conceived Just City is fully outlined in "Memorial for the City", with its list of the false cities to which man has devoted his life through the ages; we must come to realise that

This is the flesh we are but would never believe,  
The flesh we die, but it is death to pity  
This is Adam waiting for his City,<sup>3</sup>

and Auden lets us think that on these terms Adam may find it.

<sup>1</sup>Collected Shorter Poems, p.190.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Nones, pp. 37--38.

Louis Macneice says that Auden is a poet who has attempted a synthesis and

considering his range of material and considering how many writers have dropped all suggestion of synthesis, this is an attempt for which we should all be grateful.<sup>1</sup>

If not quite the classic Hegelian pattern of thesis, antithesis, synthesis,<sup>2</sup> it is something closely akin to it, and in Auden's case it represents a tremendous spiritual quest. He is like Macneice's Didymus in his search for truth:

Liar? Not Thomas; he had too much doubt<sup>3</sup> and that he has finally arrived at a standpoint which satisfies him may be attributed largely to heeding the advice of Kierkegaard:

Do not check your soul's flight, do not grieve the better promptings within you, do not dull your spirit with half wishes and half thoughts, ask yourself and contrive to ask until you find the answer; for one may have known a thing many times and acknowledged it; one may have willed a thing many times and attempted it, and yet it is ~~only~~ ~~by~~ ~~xxx~~ ~~xxx~~ ~~xxxx~~ ~~xxxxxxxx~~ only

<sup>1</sup>"Traveller's Return", Horizon (14th February, 1941), p. 116.

<sup>2</sup>For an interesting modern working-out of this pattern, see Rebecca West's The Birds Fall Down. (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 300--309 in particular.

<sup>3</sup>"Didymus" Ten Burnt Offerings, p. 42.

by the deep inward movements, only by the indescribable emotions of the heart, that for the first time you are convinced that what you have known belongs to you, that no power can take it from you; for only the truth which edifies is the truth for you.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Either/Or, Vol. II, translated Walter Lowrie, (Oxford University Press: 1944), p. 294.

## CHAPTER VIII

### LONG POEMS

We have already referred to Another Time,<sup>1</sup> the next book in the chronological sequence of Auden's work, for it is the volume that bridges both the geographical gap between the English and the American poet and the spiritual gap between the uncommitted and the committed Christian. Much of Auden's best poetry is in this book,<sup>2</sup> for, apart from the fact that, as we have seen, a transitional period of belief tends to show its working out in the poetry, to its great advantage, he is often at his best when writing occasional verse, and Another Time is remarkable for the preponderance of this kind of poetry. Auden was writing about Yeats but might as well have been writing about himself when he said

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<sup>1</sup>Page 2 of this essay.

<sup>2</sup>Reviewing it, Randall Jarrell says that the best poems in it 'are very peculiarly good, nearly the most interesting poems of our time'. Poetry in a Dry Season", The Partisan Reader. (New York: Dial Press, 1946), p. 633.

He transformed a certain kind of poem, the occasional poem, from being either an official performance of impersonal virtuosity or a trivial vers de société, into a serious reflective poem of at once personal and public interest.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the many poems about great men already referred to, who may be regarded as Auden's humanistic gods of the period, there are poems like "Oxford," "Schoolchildren", "Danse Macabre", "The Novelist", "Musée des Beaux Arts", "Dover", "Gare du Midi": there is the famous moralised love-poem "Lay your sleeping head, my love"<sup>2</sup> and the equally well known "As I walked out one evening"<sup>3</sup>, both sufficiently good examples of Auden's great lyrical power to make one wish he exerted it more often; there are sonnets and odes and songs,<sup>4</sup> there are ballads like "Victor"

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<sup>1</sup>"Yeats as an Example", Kenyon Review X, (Spring: 1948), p. 193.

<sup>2</sup>Possibly the idea for this came from Byron's description of Juan asleep in Haidée's arms "There lies the thing we love with all its errors." Don Juan, Canto II, Vol. CXCVII, Byron's Poetical Works, (London: Oxford University Press: 1935), p. 671.

<sup>3</sup>Anyone who has heard the recording of Dylan Thomas reading this poem will have had a memorable experience.

<sup>4</sup>Auden's predilection for the latter is possibly explained when he writes "Songs are of all kinds of poetry the least personal and the most verbal." "Foreword to William Dickey". Of the Festivity, (New Haven: 1959), p. xi.

and "James Honeyman". It is a cross section of his work, showing both his skill as a "contraptor" of every kind of poem, and the range and diversity of his thought; Prospero and Ariel are fairly balanced here.

After the move to America, Auden turned his attention to the long poem as a new kind of 'contraption' to contain his now more specific ideas. His only previous experimentation with that form was in "Letter to Lord Byron" which he had handled very successfully, though of course written under the satiric mask of Byron, it was possible for his treatment to be very light and even frivolous. Auden is a great admirer of Byron and both poets bear the mark of "the double man" - G. Wilson Knight, quoting from Teresa Guiccioli's book Lord Byron jugé par les Témoins de sa Vie, tells us how she reports it being said of Byron that "he checked himself in conversation at the approach of any sublime thought" and liked to hide "the noble sentiments that filled his soul", being always ready "to turn them into ridicule".<sup>1</sup> It must always be remembered that a great deal of Auden's best work is written from behind a satirist's mask of one kind or another - this is what sometimes gives away

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<sup>1</sup>Lord Byron, Christian Virtues. (Oxford University Press, New York: 1953), p. 43. The quotation is from Bk.II, Chapter VI, pp. 101-102 of Teresa Guiccioli's book.

his serious moralistic intention, with a consequent failure in tone. But in "Letters to Lord Byron" he establishes through the mask

. . . a form that's large enough to swim in  
 And talk on any subject that I choose,  
 From natural scenery to men and women,<sup>1</sup>  
 Myself, the arts, the European news:

and he adds to this the cultural conditions that confront him. Through all this, he is really seeking, as C. Wallace-Crabbe says in a recent essay ". . . not only a form, but a poetic voice"<sup>2</sup> and though the form may be similar to the form used by Byron for Don Juan, the voice is clearly the voice of Auden.

Wallace-Crabbe points out that it is interesting for Auden to have chosen this particular form, and to have ignored the precedents for long poems set in his own age. Instead, he has chosen to write a genre poem which depends for its success on the survival of modes of response established in a previous age to the poetry of writers like Dryden and Pope. The trend-setters for longer poems in contemporary poetry are of course Pound and Eliot; "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", The Waste Land and

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<sup>1</sup>Letters from Iceland, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>"Auden's New Year Letter and the fate of long poems", Melbourne Critical Review, No. V, (1962), p. 130.

Four Quartets are three of the few successful examples of long poems from the more recent generation of poets; Yeats' "Meditation in Time of Civil War" and Stevens' "Sunday Morning" are not really long enough to serve successfully as a yardstick by which to measure Auden's long poems. Auden has ignored the example of these modern metaphysical poets and gone right back, in "Letter to Lord Byron", to follow Byron's example in writing ruminative, discursive, jocular comment on the times he was living in, though his poem is poetically more slender than its counterpart, "Don Juan", in that it "lacks Byron's profitable clash of sympathies between the ironic persona he speaks through and the romantic hero whose exploits he is celebrating".<sup>1</sup> The time Auden was living in was 1937, when the threat from Germany had become overwhelming and he might have exclaimed with Yeats:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.<sup>2</sup>

Many of his poems at this time and earlier echo Yeats' words, but "Letter to Lord Byron" is far more escapist in character; one feels that Auden might have dictated

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<sup>1</sup>Wallace-Grabbe, p. 130.

<sup>2</sup>"The Second Coming", Selected Poetry, (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd.: 1962), p. 99.

it while lying at ease on a psychiatrist's couch. Its conversational and unhurried manner tends to make the reader less aware of the difficulties in its construction, for it is written in a modified rime royal divided into five parts averaging thirty-five verses each, a feat of which Randall Jarrell remarks that Pope himself might have said "Well enough for such an age!"<sup>1</sup>

Thus as Wallace-Crabbe says

"Letter to Lord Byron" . . . promises well for more ambitious poetry. Auden has made his first steps down a promising path of informal meditative verse: the 'man, god or hero' that he celebrates is merely himself as a recording consciousness and as a representative case history of the educated middle class. The centre of the poem is W.H. Auden dramatised as an epistolatory rambler.

This, he goes on to say

is the mode he (Auden) seeks to develop at a more serious level in New Year Letter, attempting in fluent tetrameters to sustain a speaking voice which is urbanely questioning, rather than flippant and cumulative. This later poem depends, not on a quick-fire succession of perceptions, ideas and jokes, but on the achievement of a 'discursive' mode . . . a staple of argumentative verse sustained by a constant flexible awareness of tone and rhythm.<sup>2</sup>

Wallace-Crabbe does not think Auden has altogether achieved this aim in New Year Letter. Perhaps he has not;

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<sup>1</sup>In a review of "New Year Letter", The Nation, Vol. CLII, (1941), p. 440.

<sup>2</sup>Melbourne Critical Review, V, p. 132.

perhaps it does lack a necessary finality of presentation. It is a little removed, which dilutes the urgency and finality of what he has to say, and there are, as so often, uncertainties of tone. Maintenance of tone seems to be a generic problem in a poem of this length - 1,707 lines of rhyming couplets - and we may find the same difficulty in Pope's "Essay on Criticism" or Dryden's "The Hind and the Panther",<sup>1</sup> to which latter work Auden's poem is markedly similar. But it is a carping critic who will allow a few such infelicities to spoil his response to such a major piece of work, and Pope and Dryden seem to have survived through the years in spite of them. The poem is very reminiscent of Butler's "Hudibras" as well, which is also a political satire with a wider scope than party political polemics. Auden might have written, as Butler did of the Presbyterians -

A sect, whose chief devotion lies  
 In odd perverse Antipathies;  
 In falling out with that or this  
 And finding somewhat still amiss.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>E.g. speaking of the Church of England, Dryden says:  
 "If, as our dreaming Platonists report  
 There could be spirits of a middle sort,  
 Too black for heav'n and yet too white for hell  
 Who just dropt half-way down, nor lower fell."  
Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse, Ed.  
 Grierson and Bullough, (Oxford: Clarendon Press,  
 1934), p. 862.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 591.

Edward Callan who has made a special study of Auden's poetic 'architecture',<sup>1</sup> has some valuable ideas to offer on the construction of the poem.

New Year Letter is a simple construction: it is a three part poem in which the parts correspond to Kierkegaard's triad of Aesthetic, Ethical and Religious spheres. The subject matter of the poem is the problem of order in each of these spheres and therefore might be said to resemble Dante's Divine Comedy in its structure as well as its theme, which ultimately transcends local and temporal order and includes the restoration of Divine Order.

He goes on to say

The choice of Kierkegaard's scheme of categories as a unifying principle served Auden in two ways; for this choice provided the necessary bounds for an imaginative construction and at the same time, paradoxically, allowed the imagination free play over "all that is", since Kierkegaard's triad is not a restrictive, but an all embracing notional scheme. The poet is not chained by a set of philosophic formulae, because the essence of Kierkegaard's thought ~~opposes~~ both formula and system. His own thought is not set forth in systematic treatises, but in such literary forms as the journal, the diary, the symposium or the character sketch, which keeps the existent individual always in view. Auden's choice of a personal letter as the genre of New Year Letter is therefore consistent with the whole scheme of the poem . . . The poem attempts to represent the dialectical relationship of Freedom and Necessity in

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<sup>1</sup>Particularly in his unpublished D. Litt. thesis: "A Study of the Relationship of Structure and meaning in W.H. Auden's major poems, 1940-1955". University of South Africa, 1958. The thesis also contains an annotated checklist of Auden's published writing, 1924-1957.

its structure as well as in its manner, so that the question of the formality or informality of its structure is not resolved by an 'either/or', but is encompassed by 'both/and'.<sup>1</sup>

New Year Letter is perhaps the central example of Auden's art; it looks backward and forward and right around his beliefs from 1928 to the present day, exhibiting his ideas as in constant flux throughout that period. And the mechanics of this presentation are very nearly flawless. In spite of the obvious triumph of Paul over Freud in the poem, a development to which he usually shows marked hostility, Randall Jarrell says:

Auden has accomplished the entirely unexpected feat of making a successful long poem out of a reasonable, objective and comprehensive discussion. It is kept concrete or arresting by many devices: wit, rhetoric, all sorts of images (drawn from the sciences, often); surprising quotations, allusions, technical terms, points of view, shifts of tone; he treats ideas in terms of their famous advocates, expresses situations in little analogous conceits; and he specialises in unexpected co-ordinates, the exquisitely ridiculous term - he is remarkably sensitive to the levels and interactions of words . . . it is a valuable, surprising poem.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>New Year Letter. A New Style of Architecture. In Auden: A collection of Critical Essays: ed. Spears. (Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1964), pp. 153 and 158.

<sup>2</sup>The Nation, V. CLII, p. 440. Compare Mr. Jarrell's warmth in receiving this poem, many of whose ideas are in conflict with his own, with the open bias still maintained by Scrutiny in the review by R.D.C. Winkler "Mr. Auden's Weltanschauung", Scrutiny, Vol. X, (1941/42), pp. 206-210.

For our purpose of showing that Auden's ideas of the thirties are not necessarily in conflict with those of 1941 onwards, we could have no better example than New Year Letter, or, as the American edition is called, The Double Man. This title, which Auden himself prefers, at once gives an idea of what the poem is about. Believing with Montaigne that man is "double in himself,"<sup>1</sup> Auden here sets himself the task of attempting to reconcile his humanistic beliefs with his belief in Protestant existentialism; to try and show that man's responsibilities in time, as a product of historical evolution,<sup>2</sup> can be reconciled with his spiritual beliefs and duties, and to give us his views on the separate worlds of life and art. We have already shown<sup>3</sup> that in his view art is not life, presenting as it does "already-lived experience" - we can now read forward from there and see how this ties in with his

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<sup>1</sup>William J. Grace explains this as meaning (for the purposes of this poem) that ". . . the poet, like the philosopher, must learn the art of detachment from the accidentals of his environment if he wishes to see the truth, but at the same time it suggests that such detachment is an impossibility". From "The Essential Stone in the Bourgeois World", The Commonweal, July 11, 1941, p. 279.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. George Steiner, Language & Silence. (London: Faber, 1967), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup>In Chapter I of this essay.

Kierkegaardian belief in the sharp dichotomy between the 'aesthetic' and the 'ethical' view

Through a convention that creates  
Autonomous completed states.  
Though their particulars are those  
That each particular artist knows,  
Unique events that once took place  
Within a unique time and space,  
In the new fields they occupy  
The unique serves to typify  
Becomes, though still particular  
An algebraic formula,  
An abstract model of events  
Derived from dead experiments  
And each life must itself decide  
To what and how it be applied.<sup>1</sup>

Nathan Scott jnr. explains the existential application clearly:

The difference (between the aesthetic, ethical and religious life) Kierkegaard believed is profound, for the aesthetic mind, is, in his concept of it, primarily characterised by an openness to experience, and by the lack of any impulse to judge the experiences which the human adventure brings our way. And this is why, he would say, it lacks the seriousness of the ethical mind and the religious mind, for, though receptive to all experiences, it does not, in the name of a particular experience, make any attack upon reality. It refuses to "get out of the poetical and into the existential"; it finds the human drama enormously interesting, but it is not lead by its contemplation of it to make any decisive choices, or to embrace any radical imperatives. Art seeks to render the fullness of experience and to make it concrete before the gaze of the mind; and though the poet may impose an order upon life, it is an order "which leaves it still

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<sup>1</sup>New Year Letter, p. 20.

the chaos and confusion which it really is . . . In poetry - in the greatest poetry - experience as it is may be possessed."<sup>1</sup> Or, as Mr. Auden says, art

presents  
 Already lived experience . . .  
 And each life must itself decide  
 To what and how it be applied.

Poetry may, in other words, assist us in feeling experience, with all its concrete richness and plenitude, but it does not enable the will to make decisions as to how and why it should apply or adjust itself to the problematic circumstances of life. That is why art is not serious: it is not serious because it lies outside the realm of the existential, which is the realm of choosing. And the great danger, therefore, in supposing that poetry will save us . . . is that we shall be led to order our lives as though they might be lived in the manner of an aesthetic exercise.<sup>2</sup>  
 (Scott's italics).

Auden tells us what he considers the major role of the artist to be in one of the several poetic highlights of the work:

Great masters who have shown mankind  
 An order it has yet to find . . .  
 Now large, magnificent and calm  
 Your changeless presences disarm

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<sup>1</sup> Archibald MacLeish "The Language of Poetry", The Unity of Knowledge, ed. Lewis Leary (Garden City: Doubleday & Co.: 1955), p. 230.  
 (MacLeish's italics).

<sup>2</sup> Chicago Review Writers, (1957), pp. 63--64. The present writer is much indebted to Mr. Scott for his help in sorting out Auden's ideas in this poem and the next seven pages are freely adapted from his essay.

The sullen generations, still  
 The fright and the fidget of the will  
 And to the growing and the weak  
 Your final transformations speak;<sup>1</sup>

In this way, poetry may yet make something happen for  
 like this the aesthetic view may be brought to serve  
 the religious view.

Auden calls on the great masters by name to  
 judge his case; Dante

By Amor Rationalis led  
 Through the three Kingdoms of the dead<sup>2</sup>

and Blake who

. . . heard inside each mortal thing  
 Its holy emanation sing<sup>3</sup>

- Rimbaud, Dryden "The master of the middle style" -  
 Catullus, Tennyson, Baudelaire, Hardy

And Rilke, whom Die Dinge bless  
 The Santa Claus of loneliness.<sup>4</sup>

To this great tribunal the poet must beg for leniency  
 towards his offences; chief among Auden's, as we have  
 seen -

Time and again have slubbered through  
 With slip and slapdash what I do,  
 Adopted what I would disown  
 The preacher's loose, immodest tone.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>New Year Letter, pp. 20--21.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 22

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 24

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

From this point Auden moves at once into his main discussion.<sup>1</sup> Using detective fiction imagery, he declares

The situation of our time  
Surrounds us like a baffling crime<sup>2</sup>

and like any good detective he begins by investigating all the circumstances which have led up to this situation. They are, significantly, nearly all occasions which have moved him to write poems before, more nearly contemporary with their occurrence. Who, he asks, looking back over the last ten years

Does not hear howling in his ears  
The Asiatic cry of pain,<sup>3</sup>  
The shots of executing Spain,<sup>4</sup> . . .  
The gazed uncomprehending stare  
Of the Danubian despair,<sup>5</sup>  
The Jew wrecked in the German cell,  
Flat Poland frozen into hell,<sup>6</sup>  
The silent dumps of unemployed<sup>7</sup>  
Whose *areté* has been destroyed;

Auden goes on to analyse the reasons for the failure of

<sup>1</sup>"The Essay on Criticism" now gives place to "The Essay on Man".

<sup>2</sup>New Year Letter, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>"Hong Kong", Journey to a War, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup>"Spain, 1937", Collected Shorter Poems, p.189.

<sup>5</sup>"In Memory of Ernst Toller", Another Time, p.111.

<sup>6</sup>"Sept. 1, 1939", Collected Shorter Poems, p.74

<sup>7</sup>"Get there if you can", Poems 1930, No. XXII.

the immediate past; why have even "les hommes de bonne volonté" failed? Why has even a liberal-humanist-democrat position been unable to maintain itself against Fascist threats? Where has Communism, once the chief hope of such people, gone wrong?

Whichever way we turn, we see  
 Man captured by his liberty.  
 The measurable taking charge  
 Of him who measures, set at large  
 By his own actions . . .<sup>1</sup>

These men of goodwill are at a complete loss, for they had believed implicitly that

the human mind could ultimately arbitrate all competing interests and eliminate all conflict

and that

there is a simple path to universal justice and harmony.<sup>2</sup>

They were mistaken.

Using a long metaphorical presentation of the Devil - not unlike Coleridge's<sup>3</sup> - as a peg on which to hang his ideas, Auden relates, comments on and dissects the past for us in an attempt to answer these questions. We must have Mephistopheles; he is the archetype of necessary evil -

<sup>1</sup>New Year Lotter, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, Christianity and Power Politics, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p.54.

<sup>3</sup>The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), pp. 319 - 323.

For how could we get on without you  
 Who give the savoir-faire to doubt you  
 And keep you in your proper place  
 Which is, to push us into grace? <sup>1</sup>

Although the liberal mind, devastated by the failure  
 of its institutions, is

. . . tempted to surrender to,  
 The grand apocalyptic dream, <sup>2</sup>

*i* It must on no account do so, for this is what the  
 Devil has been working for. It is exactly what he wants,  
 that

Repenting of our last infraction,  
 We seek atonement in reaction, <sup>3</sup>

and it is exactly what happened to Wordsworth who

. . . Ended as the Devil knew  
 An earnest Englishman would do . . .  
 Supporting the Established Church,  
 The Congress of Vienna, and  
 The squire's paternalistic hand. <sup>4</sup>

and as a result

O how the devil who controls  
 The moral assymetric souls,  
 The either-ors, the mongrel halves  
 Who find truth in a mirror, laughs.  
 Yet time and memory are still  
 Limiting factors on his will;  
 He cannot always fool us thrice,  
 For he may never tell us lies,  
 But half-truths we can synthesise:  
 So, hidden in his hocus-pocus,  
 There lies the gift of double focus,  
 That magic lamp which looks so dull  
 And utterly impractical,

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<sup>1</sup>New Year Letter, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 44.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 39.

Yet, if Aladdin use it right,  
Can be a sesame to light.<sup>1</sup>

In Part III of the poem Auden says

There are two atlases: the one  
The public space where acts are done,  
In theory common to us all, . . .<sup>2</sup>

and he has defined this outer space in terms of contemporary experience in Parts I and II. The third section is concerned with the province of the second atlas

. . . the inner space  
Of private ownership, the place  
That each of us is forced to own  
Like his own life from which its grown,  
The landscape of his will and need  
Where he is sovereign indeed/  
The state created by his acts . . .<sup>3</sup>

Auden believes now, as he believed earlier (though his symbolic expression of the belief was different) and as Mr. Scott re-iterates, that if there is order in the individual mind there will not be disorder in the City,<sup>4</sup> and that the source of our collective

<sup>1</sup>New Year Letter, pp. 44--45.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, pp. 52--53.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup>Though the City itself can claim no credit, as Lewis Mumford remarks "when one examines the state of the metropolis, one discovers a curious hallucination: the notion that its size, power, mechanical equipment and riches have effected a corresponding improvement in the life of its inhabitants." The Culture of Cities, p. 255.

distress can be pinpointed now as it could then, in  
the desire for what man cannot have

. . . not universal love  
But to be loved alone.<sup>1</sup>

This is still "the error bred in the bone"; that is  
why, as we have noticed, in all his work Auden sees  
hope only in a change of heart and why he so often  
breaks out into prayers and petitions, from his appeals  
to an unspecified Sir<sup>2</sup> or to the Uncle in The Orators,  
to his present day appeals to a conventional God.

For Auden, says Mr. Scott

. . . the ultimate drama is enacted by the  
will as it wrestles with itself in the moment  
of moral choice. Here again . . . is an  
element of Protestantism that may be seen as  
complicating and deepening (his) Anglo-  
Catholic position.<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to compare the early part of Part III  
with a passage from The Dry Salvages:

<sup>1</sup>"1st Sept. 1939", Collected Shorter Poems, p.76

<sup>2</sup>"Petition", Collected Shorter Poems, p. 120.  
Barbara Hardy compares this poem with the  
"Hopkins prayer-sonnet 'Thou art indeed just,  
Lord, if I contend/With thee; but sir, so  
what I plead is just' to which it may perhaps  
owe the idea of God not being an enemy as  
well as the feudal-religious Sir". From her  
essay on Auden in The Review, Nos. 11-12, p.56.  
For the Hopkins sonnet, see Gerard Manley Hopkins,  
ed. W.H. Gardner (Penguin Books, London: 1953),  
p. 67.

<sup>3</sup>Chicago Review Writers (1957) Manley, p. 68.



The sky grows crimson with a curse . . .  
 He hears behind his back the wicket  
 Padlock itself, from the dark thicket  
 The chuckle with no healthy cause,  
 And helpless, sees the crooked claws  
 Emerging into view and groping  
 For handholds on the low, round coping, . . .<sup>1</sup>

But this place, or garden, or field, which may be regarded as the place of undisrupted relationship with God, is not where we live: we keep falling back onto "the same old mountain-side" for we are creatures of history and live in time. We cannot, to use Auden's abstractions,<sup>2</sup> withdraw from the world of Becoming to the Garden of Being. This is to begin to be

. . . the lie  
 That we become if we deny  
 The laws of consciousness and claim  
 Becoming and Being are the same . . .<sup>3</sup>

So because man is a creature of history, and cannot escape from his inexorable creator, man had better take a good look at himself by studying the history which produced him.

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<sup>1</sup>New Year Letter, pp. 47--48.

<sup>2</sup>In his review of New Year Letter in The Nation, Vol. CLII, Randall Jarrell says "The poetry, strained through so many abstractions, is occasionally a little pale, but it is poetry". This is one of the sometimes unfortunate results of Auden's method of allegorising the early myth. p. 440.

<sup>3</sup>New Year Letter, p. 48.

Auden does this for him.<sup>1</sup> Showing in the process his own strong national feeling for England, and unable to conceal his contempt for much that is American, he concludes that

A day is drawing to a close . . .  
 [When] all the special tasks begun  
 By the Renaissance have been done.<sup>2</sup>

"The grapevine rumour" prophesying doom that arose from the mutterings of prophets like Blake and Kierkegaard and Baudelaire has come true. Kierkegaard he calls

. . . a Voice  
 Compelling all to make their choice,  
 A theologian who denies  
 What more than twenty centuries  
 Of Europe have assumed to be,  
 The basis of civility . . .,<sup>3</sup>

So European man is a failure, but

All failures have one good result;  
 They prove the Good is difficult . . .<sup>4</sup>

and man, having realised that aloneness is his real condition, learns the one truth that Auden has discovered for him out of this welter of analysis, reference and cross-reference

<sup>1</sup>Compare Donald Stauffer, "Which Side am I supposed to be on?" Virginia Quarterly Review, Vol. XXII, (1946), pp. 575--577.

<sup>2</sup>New Year Letter, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 52

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, p. 60.

. . . true democracy begins  
 With free confession of our sins . . .  
 And all real unity commences  
 In consciousness of differences,<sup>1</sup>  
 We need to love all since we are  
 Each a unique particular  
 That is no giant, god or dwarf,  
 But one odd human isomorph,<sup>1</sup>

Here we have the answer we expect from Auden;  
 universal love is the only way. But this time he  
 goes on to specify the Christian nature of that  
 Love; we must remember

. . . the powers  
 That we create with are not ours,<sup>2</sup>

and the poem concludes with a prayer, very reminiscent  
 of Eliot, as has been pointed out earlier. No "magic  
 charm" will help us to find the answer, here symbolised  
 as the "unicorn among the cedars" - only love will do  
 this, and Auden neatly conveys both the spiritual and  
 the humanistic nature of that love in the final quintet,  
 for surely the second line sums up what the Incarnation  
 is about, and surely it is about precisely the dual  
 nature of that Love.

O every day in sleep and labour  
Our life and death are with our neighbour  
 And love illuminates again  
 The City and the lion's den  
 The world's great rage, the travel of young men.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>New Year Letter, pp. 72--73.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 75. (Italics not Auden's).

Perhaps the best measure of the success of this poem can be seen in Auden's own words. In a comparatively recent essay he tells us what he finds to-day to be his biggest problem in writing poetry:

In so much 'serious' poetry, poetry, that is to say, which is neither pure playful song nor comic, I find an element of 'theatre', of exaggerated gesture and fuss, of indifference to the naked truth, which as I get older, increasingly revolts me. This element is mercifully absent from what is conventionally called good prose. In reading the latter, one is only conscious of the truth of what is being said, and it is this consciousness which I would like what I write to arouse in a reader first. Before he is aware of any other qualities it may have, I want his reaction to be: 'That's true' or, better still, 'That's true: now, why didn't I think of it for myself?' To secure this effect I am prepared to sacrifice a great many poetic pleasures and excitements.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Some critics consider this sacrifice has been too great, notably Randall Jarrell and G.S. Fraser. Jarrell says "Auden has been successful in making his poetry more accessible but the success has been entirely too expensive. Realising that the best poetry of the '20's was too inaccessible, we can will our poetry into accessibility, but how much poetry will be left when we finish?" "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry", The Southern Review, Vol. II, p. 348. Fraser says bluntly "We can allow no peace to Auden's greatness. He will not be satisfied until he has written something which is utterly moving, persuading, convincing to everybody, and, of course, he will never do this. "W.H. Auden", Little Reviews Anthology, Ed. Denis Val Baker, (London: 1949), p. 199. Auden himself would probably agree with Homer Lane that this search for the impossible is because ". . . all of us have, deeply submerged, a dynamic wish for perfection". Talks to Parents and Teachers. (London: Allen & Unwin:1928),p.118.

At the same time, I want what I write to be poetry as Robert Frost defines it, namely, untranslatable speech. Normally, when we read prose, we are not consciously aware of how it is saying what it says, of either the rhythmical value of the syllables or of each word as a unique entity with unique overtones: in poetry - this is its greatest glory - we are continually aware of them. The ideal at which I aim is a style which shall combine the drab, sober truthfulness of prose with a poetic uniqueness of expression so that if a reader should try to translate a passage into French, say, or Italian or German, he will find that this cannot be done without loss of rhythmical values and precise shades of meaning.<sup>1</sup> (Auden's italics).

In New Year Letter, he seems to have solved this problem with extraordinary skill and dexterity.

Auden continued to experiment in this genre, publishing For the Time Being in 1944. This consists of the title poem, subtitled "A Christmas Oratorio" and The Sea and the Mirror, A Commentary on Shakespeare's "The Tempest." The latter poem is perhaps more useful for the purposes of this essay; although parts of it have been made use of already in clarifying certain points, it must be considered as a whole, for it is undoubtedly one of Auden's most important works, and as Professor Spears says

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<sup>1</sup>"A Symposium on W.H. Auden's "A Change of Air". With Essays by George P. Elliott, Karl Shapiro, Stephen Spender and W.H. Auden. Kenyon Review, Vol. XXVI (Winter, 1964), p. 207.

In terms of Auden's career, it is a definitive renunciation of art as magic, a clear distinction between the roles of man and poet, and an extensive definition of the boundaries between life and art.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically Christian ideas are contained in a pagan framework, whereas For the Time Being embodies in oratorio form<sup>2</sup> the ideas of the Christian myth, contained in a specifically Christian framework. Chapter VI of this essay discusses Auden's views on those ideas fairly extensively, and it would be tiresomely reiterative to analyse the thought behind this work too closely, as has been attempted with New Year Letter.

Before separating the two works, it should be noted that they are not published together only for convenience. Taken together, as mystery and masque, they represent the alpha and omega of the theatrical cycle, and unlike the earlier two long poems, these two are presented in dramatic form. Although they are, of course 'long poems' Auden has completely turned his back on the ruminative, dis-

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<sup>1</sup>The Poetry of W.H. Auden. The Disenchanted Island. p. 230.

<sup>2</sup>Which it follows exactly, though musical setting is not essential to the work. An abridged form has been set to music by Melvin Levy.

cursive poem with himself at the centre which he established so successfully in Letter to Lord Byron and in New Year Letter. The personality cult, as it were, which was part of the original myth, has now given way entirely to the de-personalised abstractions of allegory. Putting The Sea and the Mirror first in the volume is appropriate, as Harry Levin points out in a review written at the time of publication

. . . for Shakespeare's ending is far too happy to be conclusive; it suggests disparities between literature and life which neither Prospero's magic nor the audience's make-believe can altogether reconcile.<sup>1</sup>

Caliban is the fulcrum here, for

If he is nature, art is his mirror, and Ariel is . . . the spirit of reflection. If Ariel is the idealised image of Caliban, Caliban is the gross echo of Ariel, and metaphysical reality lies behind the proscenium - on the other side of the mirror. The oratorio picks up the whimsical theme of the commentary . . . the perplexities and strivings of the intellectual, the man with the mirror, are profoundly grasped and impressively orchestrated . . . Auden . . . affirms a positive faith by a kind of double negation, a denial of doubt, a questioning of skepticism (sic).<sup>2</sup>

Here we are back to "the gift of double focus", Auden's belief in the essential dichotomy in the nature

<sup>1</sup>The New Republic, (Sept. 18th, 1944), p. 348.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

of man, which gives the long poems their special view point, just as it did to the poems written previously. It is appropriate that Auden's work can be so naturally divided into the 'old' and the 'new', for this consciousness of the dual nature of man, this 'double man', is once again the key to a proper reading of this double volume. It is essential that the creative artist, aware of the divided nature of man, should do all in his power to understand, not to feel partisan preference. It is the cry of The Orators, of Paid on Both Sides, of all the longer works and many of the shorter; it is the basis of understanding to all Auden's work, early and late. As R.J.P. Blackmur points out, and as Auden illustrated so clearly in The Orators

. . . the rule of universal love becomes intelligible policy on the probability that God loves our enemies as much as ourselves and sometimes more.<sup>1</sup>

Auden shows the divisions, but never takes sides, a strong contributing factor to his 'obscurity';<sup>2</sup> and it is this dislike of taking sides which causes him

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<sup>1</sup>From "Towards a Modus Vivendi", The Lion and the Honeycomb, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1956), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>When the poems are read in the light of this understanding, much of the obscurity is dissipated.

to strike out the partisan pieces when revising his poetry. John Blair carries this point a step further, looking at it more in terms of polarities than as a simple dichotomy. He says

(Auden's) habitual attack on a subject is to distinguish two equal but opposite extremes that are relevant, and, employing his pungent wit, to describe them in their most extreme forms. In religious terms he may isolate two basic heresies, monism and dualism; in relation to the audience for poetry the opposites may be the highbrow and the lowbrow; in political theory, he may deliberate the competing claims of freedom of action versus equality of treatment . . . Once he has abstracted the opposites, Auden's point is nearly always that neither extreme is satisfactory . . . the value of . . . isolating and then rejecting both extremes is that Auden can make his comment on the subject while leaving to his reader the precise formulation of the reconciliation of the extremes.<sup>1</sup>

Or, as Richard Ohmann says, more concisely ". . . (Auden) is a celebrant of things, not a partisan."<sup>2</sup>

To look at some of the most interesting features of the oratorio, there is firstly its construction, which follows a rather intricate form. The separate episodes are Advent, the Annunciation, the Temptation of St. Joseph, The Summons, The Vision of the Shepherds,

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<sup>1</sup>The Poetic Art of W.H. Auden, pp. 70--71.

<sup>2</sup>"Auden's Sacred Awe", from Auden: A collection of Critical Essays, ed. Spears, p. 178.

At the Manger, The Meditation of Simeon, The Massacre of the Innocents, and The Flight into Egypt. Each is presented differently, varying, as B.J. Brooks wrote in 1947

. . . between the hieratic encounter of Gabriel and Mary, the scene between the wise men and the shepherds which reminds one of those piano pieces where one man plays Tipperary and the other The Lost Chord, the sacred farce of Joseph, who, set by the Holy Ghost in one of the stock comedy situations, has to pay in his own humiliation for all the wrongs men have ever done to women, and finally the liturgical drama of "The Meditation of Simeon" and the Shavian comedy of Herod's monologue, with its parody of Marcus Aurelius.<sup>1</sup>

The opening chorus depicts man's spiritual decay in lines as impressive as any Auden has written. They declare the disintegration of man's personality, the classic sparagmos:

Darkness and Snow descend;  
The clock on the mantelpiece  
Has nothing to recommend,  
Nor does the face in the glass  
Appear nobler than our own  
As darkness and snow descend  
On all personality.<sup>2</sup>

Only an act of faith can eliminate the self, which poisons personality. This is a rooted conviction, which owes nothing to "conversion". It shows itself

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<sup>1</sup>"The Poetry of W.H. Auden", Twentieth Century, (1947), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>For the Time Being, p. 61.

in all Auden's work and is particularly emphasised in The Orators. As early as 1935 he called evil 'anything that is self-centred'.<sup>1</sup> The whole poem is concerned with man's desperate need for belief in a Primal Cause, but as usual the situation is paradoxical, for man, if he is to accept the Incarnation now being celebrated, must accept the Absurd which lies at the heart of existence, and his belief in logic, fact and reason (which Auden thinks better suited to sub-human creatures and inanimate things) only points the absurdity of the Incarnation. As the Chorus asks St. Joseph

Joseph, have you heard  
What Mary says occurred;  
Yes, it may be so. <sup>2</sup>  
Is it likely? No.

"The Annunciation" shows the sparagmos completed, and man's personality neatly classified into the four faculties of intuition, feeling, sensation and thought; dispersed by the Fall, they are now to be re-united by Love, symbolised by Gabriel's meeting with Mary. Ordinary love, on the other hand, is shown to be full of pitfalls - again, the pattern is the Eros/Agape

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<sup>1</sup>"The Good Life", Christianity and the Social Revolution, Ed. John Lewis, Karl Polanyi, Donald Kitchin. (London: Gollanz, 1935), p.34.

<sup>2</sup>For the Time Being, p. 77.

conflict, or rather, choice. Thought finds that  
reason and logic are limited forces:

. . . Where I was,  
The haunting ghosts were figures with no ground,  
Areas of wide omission . . .  
. . . an embarrassed sum  
Stuck on the stutter of a decimal  
And points almost coincident already  
Approached so slowly they could never meet.  
There was nothing could be stated or constructed,  
To Be was an archaic nuisance.<sup>1</sup>

We have already referred to the "Temptation of  
St. Joseph" and shown the reasons for its presentation,  
as it were, in modern dress. Taunted by the chorus,  
he implores Gabriel just for one

Important and elegant proof  
That what my love had done  
Was really at your will  
And that your will is Love<sup>2</sup>

but is reproved by the Narrator

To choose what is difficult  
all one's days  
As if it were easy, that is faith.  
Joseph, praise.<sup>3</sup>

Brooks says:

"The Summons" is the most powerful section of  
the poem, with its development of the  
implications of the star, changing the direction  
of mankind from the well-planned and reliably  
intellectual conception to the unexpected, lonely  
and challenging attitude of Christ and of life  
itself.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For the Time Being, p. 72

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 79

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 81

<sup>4</sup>Twentieth Century (1947), p.38.

Beware. All who follow me are led  
 Onto that Glassy Mountain, where are no  
 Footholds for logic, to that Bridge of Dread  
 Where knowledge but increases vertigo:  
 Those who pursue me take a twisting lane  
 To find themselves immediately alone  
 With savage water, or unfeeling stone,  
 In labyrinths where they must entertain  
 Confusion, cripples, tigers, thunder, pain.<sup>1</sup>

This section makes an interesting comparison with Eliot's "Journey of the Magi", Auden treating the subject as another manifestation of the Absurd which man must accept - a sort of intellectual absorption of the comic - Eliot more broadly, depicting the details of the journey with a materialistic realism but showing the wise men's intuitive acceptance of the mystery they had seen. Eliot in fact, is aware, like Webster, of the skull beneath the skin, while to Auden the awareness is always of the Dog. The whole poem is full of Eliot likenesses, particularly in parts of the Narrator's speech and of the recitative which forms part of the first movement; as Richard Hoggart points out

. . . Auden uses the same kind of 'pointing' as Eliot to describe the moment when the Horror strikes, when we see the Abyss beneath - in Eliot there is the waiting room at the country junction, the moment of silence in the tube train, and Charles in The Family Reunion who sometimes feels "As if the earth should open as I was about to cross Pall Mall."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For the Time Being, p. 84.

<sup>2</sup>Auden: An Introductory Essay, p. 183.

Again, in the fourth section, Auden makes frequent use of the garden and desert symbols which occur so often in Eliot.

The garden is unchanged, the silence is unbroken  
For she is still walking in the sleep of her  
childhood:

Many before  
Have wandered in, like her, then wandered out  
Unconscious of their visit and unaltered,  
The garden unchanged, the silence unbroken:  
None may wake there . . .<sup>1</sup>

The fugal chorus to Caesar is one of the highlights of the work. Caesar is given satiric praise for his conquest of seven kingdoms; what he actually has destroyed is man's true nature, making it a willing tool of the secular saviour, a phenomenon whom we know Auden will never admit to exist. The Christmas message is made part of the life of modern man through a description of the horrors of 'modern' civilisation in 4 B.C. A contemporary broadcast shows the fatuity of belief in progressive world conditions:

. . . Mankind is on the march.  
The longest aqueduct in the world is already  
Under construction; the Committees on Fen Drainage  
And Soil Conservation will issue very shortly  
Their Joint Report; even the problems of Trade  
Cycles  
And Spiralling Prices are regarded by the experts  
As practically solved; and the recent restrictions  
Upon aliens and free-thinking Jews are beginning  
To have a salutary effect upon public morale.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For the Time Being, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 90.

"The Vision of the Shepherds" shows man patiently waiting for the Good News from Bethlehem to cast a refulgent light on the bad news of modern civilisation, while Herod, the very pattern of a modern liberal, as Harry Levin says, is "out-heroded by Simeon, prototype of the convert".<sup>1</sup> Herod, a theorist of the rational life, weeps as he orders the massacre of the innocents. The human race will never be able to fit the knowledge of the birth of God into its present pattern; anarchy will undoubtedly ensue if the child is allowed to live; Herod must do his duty and have the babies slaughtered, which he does, crying out

I object. I'm a liberal. I want everyone to be happy. I wish I had never been born.<sup>2</sup>

Simeon, on the other hand, in his meditation on the Fall, recites all the conditions which were necessary before the Incarnation could occur; he is like a well-schooled candidate for ordination, and none the less absurd for the incontestable theological correctness of what he says. But his absurdity is part of the Absurd man must learn to accept; it is for this that he has been reduced to his present stage of fragmentation.

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<sup>1</sup>The New Republic, p. 348.

<sup>2</sup>For the Time Being, p. 117.

The Word could not be made Flesh until men had reached a stage of absolute contradiction between clarity and despair in which they would have no choice but either to accept absolutely or to reject absolutely, yet in their choice there should be no element of luck, for they would be fully conscious<sup>1</sup> of what they were accepting or rejecting.

After the "Flight into Egypt" where the duologue between Joseph and Mary is conducted in rather staccato couplets, reminiscent of Blake, the Narrator brings us back to the present human situation. Christmas is over. All the decorations must be put away and the tree dismantled. Once again

. . . Euclid's geometry  
And Newton's mechanics would account  
for our experience,<sup>2</sup>

although we have lived for a time in the presence of marvels, we are now back in the Time Being, "the most trying time of all." But if we have absorbed the Christian message, we have absorbed also the consciousness of guilt, and for this guilt we can only atone by an act that involves suffering. It is not necessary to pray for temptation and evil to come our way so that we may make this act, for

They will come, all right, don't worry;  
probably in a form  
That we do not expect, and certainly  
with a force

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<sup>1</sup>For the Time Being, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 123.





dramatic symbols. It also allows him to exhibit . . . his abundant technical skill.<sup>1</sup>

For the purposes of this study, there could be no better example than The Sea and the Mirror of Auden's interest in and fundamental dependence on a mythological framework within which to deploy his ideas. The mythological background to The Tempest suits the plan of this poem ideally. As Bent Sunesen says in an interesting essay:

The reason why a definite literary source for The Tempest has never been found would seem to be a good one in a sense that it is itself the source of most literature, intrinsically folkloristic, mythical as it is, full of the typical themes of fairy-tale and legend, the magic of music, the purifying storm, the reconciliation through young love, the test of character, the omnipotent familiar spirit. It actually even includes what Robert Graves has taught us to recognise as the myth-motif: the camouflaged account of the suppression of the matrilinear goddess-cult (Sycorax) by the conquering patriarchal worshippers of Apollo, Woden or some such oracular god of magic (Prospero).<sup>2</sup>

As Sunesen points out, the dominant feature of this mythical background is the tempest of the title, the purgatorial storm at sea.<sup>3</sup> But Auden's interest

<sup>1</sup>Auden: An Introductory Essay, pp. 180--181.

<sup>2</sup>"All We Are Not Stares Back At What We Are", English Studies, Vol. XL, (1959), p. 443.

<sup>3</sup>cf. Auden's comments on G. Wilson-Knight's The Shakespearean Tempest in The Enchafed Flood, p. 22.

here is not to define and analyse the archetypal symbolism behind The Tempest mythology, but to make use of it within the context of his own poem, which begins at the point at which Shakespeare's play ends. The purification and reconciliation on the stage, or as far as art is concerned, is over; Auden's task is to show, as Sunesen says:

. . . that their work is only half done; now the illusion has to find a foothold in the real world beyond the proscenium. Thus the universal drama of reconciliation between the sinner and his victim is made to comprise also the universal drama of reconciliation between the chaos of life and the order of art. And the link between the two dramas is the paradox of Prospero: though his magic is all powerful, it has no power to protect his heart from being wounded by the treachery of Antonio or Caliban and though the magic of Prospero-Shakespeare is overwhelming, the harmony of forgiveness it creates will remain a tinselly drama unless we spectators accept it as a living reality, which is actually made more difficult for us by our aesthetic pleasure in the magic.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the danger to both artist and his reader or audience is that the pleasure given by the work of art will be so intense that we may expect to carry it over into the real world just as it is, in its art-magic form.

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<sup>1</sup>English Studies, Vol. XL.



It is at this point that Auden's Stage Manager appears to begin The Sea and The Mirror; accustomed to presenting the illusions of art on the stage, he is not himself deceived into thinking that they are anything more.<sup>1</sup> Children in the audience recognise make-believe for what it is, for they

. . . laugh  
When the drums roll, and the lovely  
Lady is sawn in half.<sup>2</sup>

but older people know that fear and death are real enough; they

. . . catch their breath  
For the nonchalant couple go  
Waltzing across the tightrope  
As if there were no death  
Or hope of falling down.<sup>3</sup>

No matter how art may "purge" us, it does not help us when in real life we meet

The Lion's mouth whose hunger  
No metaphors can fill,<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>cf. the similar opening scene of Goethe's Faust which also stresses the importance of the world-stage metaphor.

<sup>2</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. Notice the deliberate use of 'hope' here, instead of the expected 'fear'.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

and Auden and Shakespeare are both well aware

That this world of fact we love  
Is insubstantial stuff;  
All the rest is silence  
On the other side of the wall;  
And the silence ripeness  
And the ripeness all.<sup>1</sup>

Here Shakespeare's images are re-combined ~~xx xxxxxx~~  
~~xxxxx~~ ~~xx~~ ~~xxxx~~ ~~xxxxx~~ ~~xxx~~ to suggest very cleverly  
the idea of Shakespearean continuity; his art is being  
subtly carried past the curtain into real life by this  
means.

The construction of The Sea and the Mirror is  
of great interest - it is so imaginatively conceived  
and tautly executed as to eliminate almost completely  
the uncertainties of tone permitted by the looser and  
more rambling construction of New Year Letter. As  
Edward Callan observes, it is conceived of both as

. . . a criticism of literature paving the  
way for the religious themes of the  
Christmas Oratorio . . . and (as) a work  
of art in which the abstractions of  
theoretical criticism take flesh and  
prance on the stage like the characters  
in morality plays.

The work, he goes on to say

. . . is arranged like a triptych with  
separate panels for the artist, the work  
of art and the audience. Part I, 'Prospero  
to Ariel' is a dramatic monologue in three  
movements marked by interpolated lyrics;

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<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and The Mirror", For the Time Being, p.8.

Part II 'The Supporting Cast, sotto voce' is a cycle of lyrical monologues broken in upon by the voice of Antonio, who stands alone; Part III 'Caliban to the Audience' is an artful prose symposium in which Caliban, speaking for the audience, echoes their various attitudes to art.<sup>1</sup>

The work is undoubtedly Auden's most ambitious, perhaps an attempt to fulfil what he calls the poet's 'anti-mythological myth'.<sup>2</sup> The process of digesting his early myth is by now complete, and the allegorical figures of The Sea and the Mirror are as fully three-dimensional as allegorical figures can be. Just as Dante always uses personified images of real people instead of personified abstractions, Auden has allegorised the mythological figures of The Tempest into personified images of themselves, reflected in his artist's mirror. This makes for much more forceful writing than do, for example, the personified abstractions of "The Proof".

When stinking Chaos lifts the latch . . .  
 And Form and Colour part,  
 What swarming hatreds then will hatch  
 Out of Love's riven heart.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Auden's Ironic Masquerade: Criticism as Morality Play". University of Toronto Quarterly, Vol. XXXV, No. 2, (Jan. 1966), pp.133--134. The present writer has borrowed freely from Prof. Callan's article in parts of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup>"In praise of Limestone", Nones, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>The Shield of Achilles, p. 43.



As you have served my revelling wishes:  
   then, brave spirit  
 Ages to you of song and daring, and to me  
 Briefly, Milan, then earth . . .<sup>1</sup>

The verse rhythm of this speech is not determined by foot measurements: it depends, as Professor Hoggart has shown<sup>2</sup>, on the stresses and pauses of ordinary speech. This makes for blank verse of great rhythmic fluidity and adaptability. One of the most interesting features of this poem is the variety of verse forms which Auden uses - each character has his own, and Prospero's flowing blank verse is interspersed with three lively lyrics which divide his monologue into three movements. Auden's early working notes and sketches for this poem have been given by him to what is now the State University of New York at Buffalo, and they show clearly how carefully its construction was planned and the extent of his preoccupation with the technicalities of rhyme schemes, stanza forms and syllable counting.<sup>3</sup> Even

<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Auden: An Introductory Essay, p. 172.

<sup>3</sup>cf. what Auden writes much later of Dag Hammarskjold " . . . in the last three years of his life he took to writing poems . . . proof to me that he had at last acquired a serenity of mind for which he had long prayed. When a man can occupy himself with counting

at that stage he had decided to use the sonnet form for Ferdinand, the villanelle for Miranda, and the sestina for Sebastian, while Stephano's ballade remains unchanged. These early notes on the characters show his allegorising hand at work, building personified types out of The Tempest mythology. There is a list of the play's characters with a parallel list of other Shakespearean characters, e.g. Prospero/Hamlet, Antonio/Iago, and then a later list in the same notes shows an expansion of the idea: Antonio-Iago-the Demonic; Sebastian-the redeemed by failure; Stephano-Falstaff-Lymphatic-flight from anxiety into unconscious. Edward Callan, who tabulates these personifications, points out that what Auden's later list does is to adjust the first Shakespearean parallels and add mediaeval psychological types or humours. This has the expected result in Auden's later period - he successfully allegorises the Shakespearean mythical characters to provide living, concrete symbols for his own poem.<sup>1</sup>

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syllables, either he has not yet attempted any spiritual climb, or he is over the hump."  
Introduction to Markings, p. 22

<sup>1</sup> Though as Julian Symons shows, this treatment is also Shakespearean comment, for the characters "are almost all shown in a way that bodies out Shakespeare's sketch of their characters and lends meaning to their parts in the play".  
"The Double Man", Focus II, ed. Rajan & Pearse.  
(London:Dennis Dobson Ltd.:1946), p.129 (footnote).





Prospero closes with the third of his lyrics

Sing, Ariel, sing  
Sweetly, dangerously<sup>1</sup>

As Professor Callan says

. . . 'sweetly', because art represents the possibility of a perfect harmony, 'dangerously' because its ideal order may become, for some, a refuge from the necessary existential struggle . . . and for others a temptation to impose on society the arbitrary order, which the artist has power to impose on his materials.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to suggest that the human characters (excluding Prospero) in Auden's meticulously constructed poem, each of whom has, as we have seen, a specially appropriate verse form, are, in Miranda's phrase

. . . linked as children in a circle dancing;<sup>3</sup>

This circle, which may be seen as the macrocosm, represents the ideal order of art as well as an ideally ordered real life existence. From this only Antonio stands apart in his own circle, representing the microcosm. Antonio is shown here as the symbol of Eros, whose end, as we have seen, is negation and death. He is a 'self-regarder', poisoned by the will,

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<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p.15.

<sup>2</sup>University of Toronto Quarterly, Vol.XXXV, No. 2, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p.29.

whereas the members of the harmonious circle from which he is excluded have faith in the world of the wish. As the early sketches and notes indicate, Auden conceived of Antonio as the demonic, or negative religious hero, always searching for faith and never finding it because of his dependence on himself alone. When Miranda concludes her villanelle

So, to remember our changing garden, we  
 Are linked as children in a circle dancing;  
 My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely  
 And the high green hill sits always by the sea.<sup>1</sup>

Antonio replies

One link is missing, Prospero,  
 My magic is my own  
 Happy Miranda does not know  
 The figure that Antonio  
 The Only One, Creation's O<sup>2</sup>  
 Dances for death alone.<sup>3</sup>

Antonio announces his independence from the reconciled circle and his refusal to co-operate in Prospero's plans in the first poem of Chapter II,

<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p.29.

<sup>2</sup>The image in this line carries many subtle overtones: Creation's O represents Antonio's own microcosmic circle opposed to Miranda's - it also implies his negative effect on and attitude to humanity or creation, for it is a zero as well as a circle. It may be regarded too, as the wooden circle of the Elizabethan stage: notice the negative re-iterative effect of the three capital O's.

<sup>3</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p.30.

which he speaks in terza rima. As long as he refuses to conform, Prospero's dream of happiness in human existence will be spoiled.

As I exist so you shall be denied  
 Forced to remain our melancholy mentor  
 The grown up man, the adult in his pride

Never have time to curl up at the centre  
 Time turns on when completely reconciled  
 Never become and therefore never enter  
 The green occluded pasture as a child

Your all is partial, Prospero

My will is all my own:

Your need to love shall never know

Me: I am I, Antonio

By choice myself alone.<sup>1</sup>

Ferdinand takes up the theme next in an irregular Petrarchian sonnet, opposing to Antonio's self love his love of Miranda, but in calling her "Dear Other" the implication is broadened beyond merely personal love. In the last analysis it is once again a conflict between Agape and Eros, between Life and Death. Ferdinand perceives

. . . another tenderness  
 That neither without either could or would possess.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p.18. Antonio's ripostes are printed in italic script to emphasise his separation from the rest of the characters. It is not repeated here, as the underlining becomes tiresome to the eye.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 19.

whereas Antonio's erotic flame "burns in the dark,  
alone."

The allegory is strengthened in this work in that Auden always works from the general to the particular, so that his personifications are firmly rooted if not in real life, at least in The Tempest mythology. This gives them a convincing reality; the next speaker, who is Sebastian and drunk as usual, in a neat ballade turns his habitual drunkenness into an allegorical search for the womb. The ballade refrain, "A lost thing looks for a lost name", contrasts sharply with Antonio's comment that his nature is his own.

All this time the audience is in imagination still following Shakespeare's characters beyond the bounds of Shakespeare's play; Auden has so constructed The Sea and the Mirror that his work is literally as well as figuratively attempting to bridge the gap between art and life. Gonzalo who speaks next, continues the illusion

Evening, grave, immense and clear  
Overlooks our ship, whose wake  
Lingers undistorted on  
Sea and silence; I look back  
For the last time as the sun  
Sets behind the island where  
All our loves were altered . . . 1

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<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being,  
p. 20.

The Shakespearian continuity is strengthened by an analogy with Polonius; Gonzalo describes himself as having been

. . . the councillor  
In whose booming eloquence  
Honesty became untrue. <sup>1</sup>

Looking forward to For the Time Being, he says his fault was that he should have

. . . trusted the absurd  
And straightforward note by note  
Sung exactly what I heard,

and had he done so he would not have stood

. . . convicted of  
Doubt and insufficient love. <sup>2</sup>

Antonio makes a cynical reply to Gonzalo's pious platitudes

Decayed Gonzalo does not know  
The shadow that Antonio <sup>3</sup>  
Talks to, at noon, alone

The desperation of Antonio's position is emphasised by the implication that this shadow is non-existent; a noon-time shadow must be an imaginary one, so that here he is plainly evading both aesthetic and natural laws.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 22.

There is a brief couplet from Adrian and Francesco - the tone and terms of homosexual reference that they use seem to show that this does not debar them from being a harmonious part of the life circle, though they do not know

The drama that Antonio  
Plays in his head alone.<sup>1</sup>

Alonzo, the central figure of the circle, now addresses his son in an original verse form, reminiscent of an Horatian epistle. G.S. Fraser suggests that he has, for this poem, which he calls "Auden's most perfect poem to date" borrowed syllabic metre from Marianne Moore. Each line, he says,

. . . has exactly nine syllables, the stanzas have an elaborate and difficult rhyme scheme, but since stressed can rhyme with unstressed syllables, the number of possible full rhymes in English is greatly extended; the general effect of the metre, in Auden's use of it, is to give an effect of careful but successful concentration, like a military slow march with the soldiers counting their steps . . . His use of the metre is quite unlike Miss Moore's who always has the air . . . of doing something surprising, difficult, acrobatic . . . indulging as she does, in lines of varying length and slyly concealed rhyme patterns. Auden's use of the metre is more straightforward, his effect smooth, grave and majestic . . . It would be a mistake, of course, to read "Alonzo to Ferdinand" without any stresses at all; what the reader will find himself stressing is what the French call "The mobile accent"

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<sup>1</sup>The Sea and the Mirror, For the Time Being, p.22.

. . . or those words on which from the sense pattern (of the individual line, not of the sentence or paragraph) there is a natural rhetorical stress. That stress, however, will be a modulated one, so as not to rack the slow and grave syllabic pattern.<sup>1</sup>

Alonzo's speech is built around two images, those of the sea and of the desert. Always favourite symbols of Auden's, he uses them here to show desolation. But if his son has the good fortune to be purged by suffering, acquiring wisdom the hard way, he will find renewal because of desolation. He will be able to steer a course

Between the watery vagueness and  
The triviality of the sand,<sup>2</sup>

remembering that

. . . the fire and the ice<sup>3</sup>  
are never more than one step away . . .

<sup>1</sup> The Little Review's Anthology, (1949), pp. 194--195.

<sup>2</sup> "The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> of. "Some say the world will end in fire  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favour fire.  
  
But if it had to perish twice  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice."

Robert Frost. Come In and other Poems.  
(Jonathan Cape, London: 1944), p. 143.

But should you fail to keep your kingdom  
 And like your father before you, come  
 Where thought accuses and feeling mocks,  
 Believe your pain: praise the scorching rocks  
 For their dessication of your lust,  
 Thank the bitter treatment of the tide  
 For its dissolution of your pride,  
 That the whirlwind may arrange your will  
 And the deluge release it to find  
 The spring in the desert, the fruitful  
 Island in the sea, where flesh and mind  
 Are delivered from mistrust.<sup>1</sup>

It is interesting to compare this with the first section of The Enchafed Flood, where Auden expands and explains his use of these symbols by comparing and contrasting them. Mr. E.M. Forster has analysed this by saying that they are alike in that both are wildernesses, and attract quest heroes as well as providing a refuge for those outside the law; and they are like in that their desolation contains the earthly paradises of the Happy Island and the Oasis. But while the desert is totally dead apart from its oasis, the whole wilderness of the sea breeds life, and constitutes a threat to man's cities in that though it provides, as Auden says in an early poem "houses for fishes", it may overwhelm man and his cities with "suffocating Water".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, pp. 24--25.

<sup>2</sup>"The Wanderer", Collected Shorter Poems, p.50

Mr. Forster concludes:

The Enchafèd Flood . . . is itself a poem. Though its tone is critical, it is not constructed like a lecture course or thesis. Brooding in it is the ruined or unbuilt city, and we must either build it or die. We cannot escape any more to the sands or the waves and pretend they are our destiny. We have annihilated time and space, we have furrowed the desert and spanned the sea, only to find at the end of every vista our own unattractive features. What remains for us, whither shall we turn? To the city which we have not yet built, to the unborn polity, to the new heroism.<sup>1</sup>

These are exactly the same conclusions which Auden's Caliban finally draws after his long prose exposition of the aesthetic impasse. Mr. Forster's comment on Auden's book contains the same advice which Alonzo gives to Ferdinand in the body of his fine speech. He decides that it is art which has awakened him to the reality of ordered existence in a world after death, and if Ferdinand takes his advice and creates harmony and order in his earthly kingdom, it will be a Platonic reflection of this "heavenly harmony" in which art will have played an important part. Antonio scoffs at this; he and his world are determined to convince themselves that they are entirely self-sufficient.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Enchafèd Flood", Two Cheers for Democracy, p. 276.

One crown is lacking, Prospero  
 My empire is my own  
 Dying Alonzo does not know  
 The diadem Antonio  
 Wears in his world alone.<sup>1</sup>

Alonzo's speech also looks forward to Caliban's later demolition of the theory that art's ideal order can be successfully imposed on life without destroying it.

After an amusing and lively song from the Master and the Boatswain emphasising the transitoriness and impersonality of life, Antonio for the first time shows a trace of wistfulness at his exclusion from the circle

Nostalgic sailors do not know  
 The waters where Antonio<sup>2</sup>  
 Sails on and on alone.

the sea image being a true desolation for him. Next Sebastian draws attention to the fact that he is one of the reconciled, although:

I am Sebastian, wicked still . . .<sup>3</sup>

He muses on his island experience, which has, as Mr. Callan says, brought home to him the relationship between dream and reality. Auden is an expert in the sestina form, and this one is impeccably contrived to suggest a melancholy, dream-like soliloquy.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p.25

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 26

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 28.

He concludes

In dream all sins are easy, but by day  
It is defeat gives proof we are alive;  
The sword we suffer is the guarded crown.<sup>1</sup>

Trinculo, using brisk quatrains of iambic tetrameters, reiterates the difficulty of "getting out of the poetical and into the existential", and this section is concluded by Miranda's beautifully measured villanelle. The controversial line "My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely" is made to yield some impressive symbolism by G.S. Fraser, who says

. . . the sadness and the beauty of the line come partly . . . from the fact that mirrors are so obviously a symbol both of understanding and separation; I am reflected completely in the mirror but I also, my real self, remain completely outside the mirror; or, in love with you, I reflect you completely, but you are free, as a person, to move away, while I possess - for a little time - your image. And if both you and I are like mirrors, we only know each other as reflected in each other, and being in love is important as a way of possessing oneself. But this possession is illusory, for the surface never melts away, never quite dissolves even in love, and we can never, like Alice, enter the looking-glass kingdom, and wander together there, hand in hand.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup>Little Reviews Anthology, (1949), p. 196.

The Black Man, the Witch and the Ancient she mentions carry many meanings too - ordinary figures in fairy-tale mythology, they are also reminiscent of Struwel Pieter, and represent as well her childhood impressions of Caliban, Sycorax and Prospero. The last verse, as we have seen, explains the formation of the harmonious circle, while Antonio's last reply makes plain how great his removal is from this happy circle and how impossible is his reconciliation to it.

The formally correct presentation of this section as a carefully arranged masque makes it move like a stately and elaborately decorated dance - a dance which is formal, controlled and kept within very close constructional limits. It is reminiscent of Sir John Davies' description of how the formal order of a dance was imposed on the elements themselves:

The fire, air, earth and water, did agree  
 By Love's persuasion, nature's mighty king,  
 To leave their first disordered combating  
 And in a dance such measure to observe  
     As all the world their motion should preserve.  
 Since when they still are carried in a round  
 And changing come one in another's place;  
 Yet do they neither mingle nor confound,  
 But everyone doth keep the bounded space  
     Wherein the dance doth bid it turn or trace.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Orchestra". The Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse. Clarendon Press. (Oxford: 1932). p. 743.

This tight control is suddenly lifted in the third section, which, liberated like Ariel from the "cloven pine", explodes into Caliban's torrent of prose. It is as if the poem, as Sunesen says ". . . suddenly gathers its strength and makes a desperate leap across the very gap Caliban mentions"<sup>1</sup> in the following passage

. . . he (the dedicated dramatist) must strengthen your delusion that an awareness of the gap is in itself a bridge, your interest in your imprisonment a release, so that far from your being led by him to contrition and surrender, the regarding of your defects in his mirror, your dialogue, using his words, with yourself about yourself, becomes the one activity which never, like devouring or collecting or spending, lets you down, the one game which can be guaranteed, whatever the company, to catch on, a madness of which you can only be cured by some shock quite outside his control, an unpredictable misting over of his glass or an absurd misprint in his text.<sup>2</sup>

Referring back to this passage, Sunesen makes an interesting point when he says

This passage . . . shows how not only the general structure but also the surface texture is made to serve the multiple, pervasive symbolism of sea and mirror. For the saving 'misting over of his glass' (!) can be taken to refer to the the astonishing fact that in The Tempest Antonio and what he stands for remain unregenerate for all we know and for all he is forgiven by Prospero. So it also

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<sup>1</sup>English Studies, Vol. XL, p. 446.

<sup>2</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p. 56.

points back to Antonio's own words to Prospero in Ch. II. Art comes alive in us precisely because the struggle for reconciliation must go on and is never won;<sup>1</sup>

. . . as long as I choose  
To wear my fashion, whatever you wear  
Is a magic robe; while I stand outside  
Your circle, the will to charm is still there.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on

This is just one example of a close network of cross-references bearing on the various allied meanings of the mirror and often intercrossing with other patterns,<sup>3</sup> as e.g. when Caliban defines Ariel as "the spirit of reflection" - in the context evidently in a double sense: the reflection of the mirror that art holds up to nature plus the pale cast of thought of the isolated artist. For that lights up a passage in Chapter I where Prospero, the artist-magician addresses Ariel as his familiar spirit, his imaginative power:

We have only to believe you, then you  
dare not lie  
To ask for nothing, and at once from  
your calm eyes  
With their lucid proof of apprehension  
and disorder  
All we are not stares back at what<sup>4</sup>  
we are . . .

which naturally leads him on to the artist's disillusioned view on the main theme again

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<sup>1</sup> English Studies, Vol. XL, p. 446.

<sup>2</sup> "The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p.18.

<sup>3</sup> cf. G.S. Fraser's remarks on Miranda's mirror image, *supra*, p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> "The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p.10.

Could he but once see nature as  
 In truth she is for ever  
 What oncer would not fall in love?  
 Hold up your mirror, boy, to do  
 Your vulgar friends this favour.  
 One peep, though, will be quite enough  
 To those who are not true,  
 A statue with no fig-leaf has  
 A pornographic flavour. <sup>1</sup>

Caliban, "the begged question" of The Tempest,  
 using the brilliant, circumlocutory prose of Henry  
 James, puts forward a variety of view points, as we  
 would expect from Auden. He speaks to and for  
 Shakespeare, he speaks for Auden, he speaks for God  
 and he speaks for humanity deprived of Ariel, the  
 artistic inspiration without which man cannot create  
 a work of art. The unbiased nature of such a verbal  
 symposium, particularly when all views are delivered  
 in the Master's pontifical accents, makes for a  
 convincingly objective tone - there is no need to say  
 "yes, but . . .", for Caliban/Auden anticipates each  
 point of view. The Prospero-Ariel symbols in criticism  
 that Auden uses so freely to-day are fully elaborated  
 here, and as usual the dichotomy allows for great  
 flexibility in such criticism. Addressing his fellow  
 artists, Caliban/Shakespeare/Auden says

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<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being,  
 p. 11. Quoted by Sunesen, p. 446.

. . . you have decided on the conjurer's profession. Somewhere, in the middle of a salt marsh or at the bottom of a kitchen garden or on top of a bus, you heard imprisoned Ariel call for help, and it is now a liberator's face that congratulates you from your shaving mirror every morning.<sup>1</sup>

Liberated Ariel thus becomes his liberator's obedient slave, and the liberator becomes the artist - the "conjurer" - and becomes as well a man of sensitive understanding and knowledge.

No perception, however petite, no notion however subtle, escapes your attention or baffles your understanding . . . a five minute chat about the weather or the coming elections is all you require to diagnose any distemper, however self assured, for then your eye has already spotted the tremor of the lips in that infinitesimal moment while the lie was getting its balance, your ear already picked up the heart's low whimper which the capering legs were determined to stifle, your nose detected on love's breath the trace of ennui which foretells his early death, or the despair just starting to smoulder at the base of the scholar's brain which years hence will suddenly blow it up with one appalling laugh . . .<sup>2</sup>

The partnership, says Caliban, is a brilliant success

until one day which you can never either at the time or later identify exactly, your strange fever reaches its crisis and from now on begins, ever so slowly, maybe to subside.<sup>3</sup>

Annoyed, the artist tells Ariel to go. He does not.

Furious, you (the artist)

<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p.43

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

. . . glare into His unblinking eyes and stop dead, transfixed with horror at seeing reflected there, not what you had always expected to see, a conqueror smiling at a conqueror, both promising mountains and marvels, but . . . the only subject that you have, who is not a dream amenable to magic but the all too solid flesh you must acknowledge as your own; at last you have come face to face with me, and are appalled to learn how far I am from being, in any sense, your dish; how completely lacking in that poise and calm all forgiving because all understanding good nature which to the critical eye is so wonderfully and domestically present on every page of your published inventions.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, looking into Ariel's mirror the artist comes face to face with himself<sup>2</sup> - Caliban, the unsolved problem, common man himself, who, while he works through Ariel finds he can detach himself sufficiently from life to create as an artist. After a time the limitations of this detachment prevent his achieving a proper mimesis of life in his work, and so he is dissatisfied and gives up his "magic". Auden's double focus technique is employed here with great skill.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p.44.

<sup>2</sup>While this is a shock, it is a lesson that every artist must learn: i.e. that man himself is the reason for life. cf. Traherne in "News":  
 But little did the infant dream  
 That all the treasurers of the world were by:  
 And that himself was so the cream  
 And crown of all which round about did lie  
 Yet thus it was . . .

Oxford Book of English Verse, p. 475.

When the artistic impasse has been fully discussed from all sides and a tentative diagnosis arrived at by an allegorical examination of the symptoms, it is shown to be useless, as we saw in The Orators and in For the Time Being to attempt to solve such a problem by a mathematical equation. Thus if the answer is not to be found in "magic" it is also not to be found in logic and reasoning, and although Ariel represents God in this section we are, as Edward Callan points out, made aware through ironic overtones of the word made Flesh, the theme of the Christmas Oratorio which follows. He goes on to show that Auden's ironic intention becomes plain if we compare in The Sea and the Mirror the discomfort of the audience at the intrusion of the real world in the person of Caliban upon their aesthetic occasion, with the despair of Herod in For the Time Being when God incarnate intrudes upon his rational, liberal world.

While art and life are separate worlds, the poet, says Caliban, must attempt to reconcile them into a harmonious partnership. It is wrong both to try and identify the two, or to try and impose the ideal order of art upon the chaos of life.<sup>1</sup> What then

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. "The Poet and the City" The Dyer's Hand, p. 85, where Auden writes:  
A society which was really like a good

is the artist, or to take Caliban's last instance, the "dedicated dramatist" to do? In showing to the audience, as Caliban/Auden has just shown all of us, man's condition of estrangement from the truth, he has shown that man is "doomed to fail the more he succeeds, for the more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly can he indicate the truth from which it is estranged."<sup>1</sup> But as we saw earlier, now that we are aware of this gap, this awareness is itself a bridge, for, concludes Caliban

. . . at this very moment when we do at last see ourselves as we are . . . swaying out on the ultimate wind-whipped cornice which overhangs the unabiding void - we have never stood anywhere else - when our reasons are silenced by the heavy, huge derision. There is nothing to say. There never has been - and our wills chuck in their hands - There is no way out. There never was -, it is at this moment that for the first time in our lives we hear . . . the real Word which is our only *raison d'être* . . . it is just here,

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poem embodying the aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy and subordination of detail to the whole would be a nightmare of horror, for, given the historical reality of actual man, such a society could only come into being through selective breeding, extermination of the physically and mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars.

<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p. 55.

among the ruins and bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours.<sup>1</sup>

And of course, after Ariel's final song, it is just here that Auden begins his Christmas Oratorio with the same message - from the ruins of reason arises faith in the Absurd, which is God made man.

After the Sea and the Mirror, Auden's other 'long' poem is the Age of Anxiety published in 1948.

In this work, he has, as Professor Beach puts it

. . . given an impressive rendering of the average sensual man adrift in a tragic world with nought to guide him but his wavering appetites or velleities of sentiment and the vulgar slogans of a hand to mouth ethics. His mankind has ceased to have faith in his slogans and appetites; has learned to distrust his rationalisations, associates his pleasures with his organs of excretion; and only half-heartedly seeks to return to the mother-fostered innocence of childhood. The conversations of Rosetta, Quant, Emble and Malin build up a formidable sense of the human soul irresolute; disheartened, and suffering from a general anxiety malaise and queasiness of spirit.<sup>2</sup>

It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay to attempt to deal adequately with this interesting

<sup>1</sup>"The Sea and the Mirror", For the Time Being, p. 58. Cf. Shakespeare's similar point in Prospero's speech quote on p. 244.

<sup>2</sup>"The Poems of Auden and the Prose Diathesis", Virginia Quarterly Review, (Vol. XXV, 1949) p. 379.

piece and to analyse in detail Auden's ideas on contending, in Langland's phrase, with "the wasters and wicked who would us destroy".<sup>1</sup> Auden's whole poem is reminiscent of Piers Plowman,<sup>2</sup> with its adaptation of Langland's alliterative method and of the poem's basic structure;

When in wanhope I wandered away and alone  
 How brag were the birds, how buxom the sky  
 But sad were the shallows and slow were the brooks,  
 And how dismal that day when I danced with my dear.<sup>3</sup>

As with Piers Plowman, the reader of The Age of Anxiety must travel through many desert wastes before a sudden dazzle of poetry is his reward, for Auden in this poem is following Langland and Milton in trying to "justify the ways of God to man", and, as his predecessors found out, this task is too great for a single poem, no matter what its length. When it is the thread running through a poet's entire oeuvre, as we have tried to show is the case with Auden,

<sup>1</sup>Piers the Ploughman. Tr. Goodridge. (London: Penguin, 1959), p. 126.

<sup>2</sup>For an excellent and amusing account of Auden's use of Old English as a model for the modern English of this poem, see "Notes on the Metre of Auden's The Age of Anxiety", by Christine Brooke-Rose. Essays in Criticism, Vol. XIII, (July, 1963), pp.253-264.

<sup>3</sup>The Age of Anxiety, p. 104.

it becomes a very different matter and is at the very least, a perfect justification of the ways of the poet to his reader, irritating though some of these ways may appear when considered out of this major synthesising concept. Auden, who is a great devotee and excellent critic of opera, might perhaps agree that The Age of Anxiety suffers from too few arias and too much recitative, but if the poem is considered as one aspect of this over-all poetic intention, its place in his work is as interesting as that of the poetically far more successful The Sea and The Mirror. The poem is, of course, based on a Quest construction, and most questers do have to negotiate a dreary journey, whether physically or spiritually. And as Auden wrote recently of poets

. . . We're not musicians: to stink of Poetry  
Is unbecoming, and never  
To be dull shows a lack of taste.<sup>1</sup>

It has been Auden's last long poem so far, and his success in this genre encourages one to hope that he may return to it at a later stage. For a poet to whom ideas are all important, it is an ideal method of expanding and explaining them, giving a view of them in the round, instead of the tantalising

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<sup>1</sup>"The Cave of Making", About the House, p. 21

glimpses afforded by short, single poems. And ideas are what have interested Auden in all phases of his career - as Graham Hough wrote as recently as 1967 -

His liveliest response is to ideas, and the response is to mythologise them. Marx, Freud, Groddeck, Kierkegaard, a miscellany of anthropologists and historians have provided the ideas. Auden has recombined them into a kaleidoscopic series of images . . . each serving as a moral flashlight, a momentarily-illuminated metaphysical signpost.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"Macneice & Auden", Critical Quarterly, Vol. IX (Spring, 1967), p. 15.

## CHAPTER X

### LATEST POEMS: CONCLUSION

Possibly the trouble with some of the shorter poems published subsequently to The Age of Anxiety may be that Auden has temporarily lost interest in new ideas. These poems are in four volumes, namely, Nones (1952), The Shield of Achilles (1955), Homage to Clio (1960), and About the House (1966). There are fine poems to be found in all these volumes, but, generally speaking, they are the work of a man who has ended his quest and whose conflicts are resolved. Ariel has been dismissed, and the magician, left all too human, remains to give thanks in what is mostly slight, conversational, ruminative verse.<sup>1</sup>

Of its kind, it is, as always, interesting, dexterously composed; sometimes marred by a slightly

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<sup>1</sup>See the review of About the House in Time (Aug. 13th, 1965), p. 68.

"The old bourgeois baiter composes a contented ode to his new kitchen and a hymn to hot baths, a worried incantation against insomnia and some earnest lines on the higher significance of regularity".

glib facility:

Some thirty inches from my nose  
The frontier of my Person goes,  
And all the unfilled air between  
Is private pagus or demesne.

Stranger, unless with bedroom eyes  
I beckon you to fraternise,  
Beware of rudely crossing it  
I have no gun but I can spit.<sup>1</sup>

This is a fair sample of his most recent book - light, amusing, contented; "The Cave of Making" shows affectionate nostalgia for Louis Macneice, and "Elegy for J.F.K." is an interesting short poem. Although these two poems are about people who have died, there is a lack of feeling of real grief at their loss.<sup>2</sup> ~~wxxxk~~ Though it might have improved them poetically, this is, of course, foreign to the belief of conventional Christianity out of which Auden's most recent poetry is written. These poems are, in Lawrence's phrase, the songs of "a man who has come through" - but while Lawrence's work continued to show the tensions and conflicts of a man who might have come through one phase but was still contending vigorously with life itself, Auden's most recent poetry does not. It has

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<sup>1</sup>Postscript to "The Birth of Architecture",  
About the House, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup>A comparison with the elegies written on Sigmund Freud and W.B. Yeats will point the difference at once.

lost the spring and force of the quester and shows a tacit acceptance - wry-faced, certainly - of the status quo. Chester Duncan makes a good point when he says that in his later poetry, Auden expends his feelings on:

. . . the disregarded, the neglected, the shy humiliations and frailties of the weak and the unpopular, Christians with the most unlikely crosses, unsuspected heroes. With a charming lightness of touch and a humanity that is quite mature, Auden is thus demonstrating his "affirming flame" in a way that the militant effectiveness of some of his<sup>1</sup> early poems did not seem to promise.

Auden's acceptance of life is wry-faced in that while he no longer fights it, he continues to point out and analyse its mistakes as he always has done. He remains a poet of serious intention concealed behind a fool's mask - although his moralistic attitude shows far more clearly in his later poems, even if only because the mask is often no longer funny, but merely facetious.

In a recent essay, F.W. Cook compares Auden's own poetic practice with what he wrote about Lear and the Fool in The Dyer's Hand. The Fool represents the poet, who, realising that Lear is deaf to ordinary communication, speaks to him in rhymed adages aimed

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<sup>1</sup>"The Compassion of W.H. Auden", The Canadian Forum, Vol. XXXIV, (April, 1954), p. 13.



In his capacity as Fool poet, he reminds him of his weakness, though, as he points out in Memorial for the City, these weaknesses are, paradoxically, humanity's one ground of hope, representing as they do the basis of humility.<sup>1</sup> But the Managers<sup>3</sup>'s backs are not bowed in humility; they are:

. . . bent over some report  
 On every quarter,  
 For ever like a god or a disease  
 There on earth the reason  
 In all its aspects why they are tired,  
   the weak  
 The inattentive seeking  
 Someone to blame . . . <sup>2</sup>

Man may still exhaust the Management with his humanity;  
 more, he may even be seen

Outwitting hell  
 With human obviousness<sup>3</sup>

but as usual with Auden there is no right or wrong side in humanity's struggle. The Managers themselves are trapped in the Management, and Auden diagnoses familiar polarities in Under Which Lyre. Man must follow either Hermes or Apollo, but the conflict will never be resolved - there is little to choose between

<sup>1</sup>Here Auden is re-iterating Caliban's final speech in "The Sea and the Mirror".

<sup>2</sup>"The Managers", Nones, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup>"Cattivo Tempo", Ibid, p. 44.

"precocious Hermes" and "Pompous Apollo", though they may appear to be diametrically opposed.

Related by antithesis  
 A compromise between us is  
 Impossible;  
 Respect perhaps, but friendship never  
 Falstaff the fool confronts forever  
 The prig Prince Hal.<sup>1</sup>

The last two lines can be read as a symbol of the Poet-Fool, always confronting the average man with his conformity to the Management. The Poet, Mr. Cook says, should remain on the stage as long as possible, for there is always a chance of changing the Management - indeed, only a Fool will remain with the people to suffer the consequences of the politician's folly. As Shakespeare's Fool sings to the mad king;

That sir which serves and seeks for gain  
 And follows but for form  
 Will pack when it begins to rain  
 And leave thee in the storm<sup>2</sup>

It is tempting to continue to use poems from Nones to illustrate Auden's later poetry, for as well as poems like "Under Which Lyre", "Memorial for the City" and "The Managers", it also contains one of his finest poems, "In Praise of Limestone".

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<sup>1</sup>Nones, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup>Shakespeare's Complete Works. (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), "King Lear", Act II, Scene IV 78-82, p. 1065.

But this poem was ten years old when Professor Hoggart drew attention to its qualities in 1951, and while representing the 'new' Auden at his best, it is not a fair sample of his work during the following decade. For this we must go back to his latest book, About the House.

Perhaps the most interesting poem in the book is "A Change of Air" - particularly interesting from the point of view of this essay as it lends itself very well to comparison with some of the earlier poetry.

Corns,<sup>1</sup> heartburn, sinus headaches, such minor ailments  
 Tell of estrangement between your name and you,  
 Advise a change of air: heed them, but let  
 The modesty of their discomfort warn you  
 Against the flashy errands of your dreams.

To grow a sailor's beard, don monkish garb  
 Or trade in an agglutinative tongue  
 With a stone-age culture, would be mollycoddling:  
 To go elsewhere is to withdraw from movement,  
 A side step, a short one, will convey you thither.

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<sup>1</sup>When reproved by a critic for the "whimsicality" of this word, Auden replied "There is one, only one, autobiographical detail in the poem, and I couldn't help smiling at Mr. Elliott's objection to it. Evidently he has never had the misfortune to suffer, as I do, from corns. (I have never had heartburn or a sinus headache in my life). If he had, he would know firstly, that, for their victims, they are anything but 'whimsical', and secondly, he would be only too familiar with their psychosomatic whims".

The Kenyon Review, Vol. XXVI, p. 206.

"A Symposium on W.H. Auden's 'A Change of Air'".





same significance. They are the psychosomatic symptoms of an inner malaise, in this case of a personality at war with itself, and they must be taken seriously. But the cure does not lie in corn plasters, bicarbonate of soda or aspirin - still less, if you attempt to get at the root of the trouble, does it lie in a further retreat from reality. To indulge in far-fetched dramatic "changes of air" would be "mollycoddling" - as in earlier poems the cure was not to "Escape humming down arterial roads"<sup>1</sup> or even to "dream of islands",<sup>2</sup> here it is not to join the navy, enter a monastery or travel to Greenland on business. You are not, in fact, obliged to make any dramatic changes in your ordinary life. A short side step is enough to get you out of the moving world of time, where another world, very like the real one, will keep you a prisoner of stasis while you take a long, cool look at yourself.

Who is "you"? The differing views of some critics on this point indicate that Auden's "obscurity" still baffles them, though in this case it seems to be of their own making. George P. Elliott suggests

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<sup>1</sup>"Consider", Collected Shorter Poems, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>"Paysage Moralisé", Ibid, p. 64.

that it must be "an important government official . . . a prime minister or a secretary of state, someone of that sort . . ." <sup>1</sup> This seems an unnecessary and quite unwarranted complication. Karl Shapiro, in the same discussion, suggests that "you" is a poet and that "name" in the poem should really read "fame". This is certainly one aspect, but not the chief one. It seems clear on a careful reading of the poem that "you" is exactly what it says - "you - the reader", and that for the time that Auden was writing this poem - and for that time only - it was he, the writer as well. Auden confirms that this was his intention in his "Reply", though he is careful to point out

I am not sure that I know what an author is supposed to do when he 'replies' to his critics. If he agrees with what they have written, he has nothing to say except 'thank you': if he disagrees, he cannot, except on some point of historical or technical fact, refute them, for as any reader reads a poem so, for him, the poem is. <sup>2</sup>

Once within this almost - but not quite - looking-glass world, the reconciliation between "your name and you" begins. It is no more foreign in concept than another country - say France; the usual professions

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<sup>1</sup>The Kenyon Review, Vol. XXVI, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 200.

are there and the usual rules of civilised conduct apply, for it is simply a withdrawal into one's own "inner life", a withdrawal from the circumstances which govern and complicate the outer life.

"Elsewhere", as Auden calls it, (and which seems another baffling word to the critics of "A Symposium"; Stephen Spender even taking several paragraphs to complain that its use like this is ungrammatical), will effect a cure simply by its "healing disregard" of both the warring elements in the personality. It will reconcile what Auden call "the inner and outer biographies"<sup>1</sup> to each other, and it will do so without comment. The same lack of comment will greet the integrated personality on his return to the real world. Some slight evidence that he has been away may emerge, but nobody will be able to relate it to his sojourn "elsewhere". This preserves his anonymity from would-be biographers in the way Auden has always felt to be necessary, and, in this case, regards as essential to a successful 'cure'.

Auden's account of how the poem came to be written is interesting and illuminative. He says

As is the case with most poems, the germ of "A Change of Air" was a real historical

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<sup>1</sup>The Kenyon Review, Vo. XXVI, p. 205.

event. I had been reading Goethe's Italienische Reise and was fascinated by the circumstances under which it began - how, without telling his friends, Goethe suddenly bolted from Carlsbad to Italy under an assumed name; his Weimar persona, his epistolatory love affairs with Charlotta von Stein, etc., had become intolerable to him. For some time I had considered writing a poem specifically about Goethe, but decided against it for two reasons. I had in the past written a number of poems about historical characters, and wanted to do something different this time; then, Goethe's actual flight into "elsewhere" was much too dramatic to suit the basic theme for my intended poem, the contrast between a person's inner and outer biography. It is surely, a general experience that those events in a person's life which to other people seem decisive . . . are never the same as those moments which he himself . . . knows to have been the crucial ones; the inner life is undramatic and unmanifestable in realistic terms.

I set out, therefore, to try and write a poem in which it would be impossible for a reader to be distracted from its personal relevance to himself by thinking of Goethe, or, even more mistakenly, of me. One relic of the never-written poem remains, the Grand Duke in the last stanza. There exists a letter written by the Grand Duke of Weimar . . . in which he complains that since his return from Italy, Goethe has become, not less amusing, but more aloof, the old intimacy has gone. I debated removing him but came to the conclusion that, since not one reader of mine was likely to know a Grand Duke personally, he would do as a parabolic figure, standing for Society, Literary Critics, etc.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Kenyon Review, Vol. XXVI, p. 205.

In his contribution to the symposium, George P. Elliott makes the comparison with Auden's early poetry specific - he takes a well-known early poem, "Consider", and contrasts it point by point with "A Change of Air". In doing so, he refers to the later poems "total superiority" over the earlier one,<sup>1</sup> a view with which the present writer is totally unable to agree. Neither does Mr. Elliott's interpretation of "Consider" seem to show much critical judgement, but there are points of interest arising from the comparison which are useful. The most interesting (not pointed out by Mr. Elliott) lie in the far more poetic use of psychosomatic imagery which characterise the earlier poem. Instead of "corns, heartburn, sinus headaches" we have "soils that make the farmer brutal", the "infected sinus", the "explosion of mania" and the much quoted concluding line "or lapse forever into a classic fatigue".<sup>2</sup> Such symbols would, of course, be totally unsuited to this poem - "the average elsewhereishness" of the place demands symptoms of a humdrum kind if it is to effect a cure by its very ordinariness. But, by

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<sup>1</sup>The Kenyon Review, Vol. XXVI, p. 193.

<sup>2</sup>"Consider", Collected Shorter Poems, pp.43--44.

the same token, it is a far more ordinary poem.

It is an ~~inter-~~<sup>esting</sup> one all the same, and there are not many of its calibre in About the House. In both this book and its two predecessors, the reader has to set himself the rather melancholy task of separating the gold from the dross, for there is gold, as well as much that is painfully facetious, or made tiresome by too many capital letters. But even these critics who are most appreciative of Auden's work up to this point now seem to lose heart. We have already noticed how some of the more perceptive, such as Randall Jarrell, showed their dismay at Auden's changed attitude to his work after his "conversion". Jarrell, in fact, in essays like "Freud to Paul", lost no opportunity to sneer at the openly avowed Christian beliefs now expressed by the ex-humanist.

There is one real name for Auden's latest period, Paul; but it is hard to resist Grace Abounding; The Teleological Suspension of Ethics; Waiting for the Spark from Heaven to Fall.<sup>1</sup>

Yet despite his dislike of Auden's use of poetry as a proselytising vehicle, Jarrell, as we have seen, was honest enough to give New Year Letter the praise he thought it deserved.

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<sup>1</sup>The Partisan Review (Fall, 1945), p. 440.

A. Alvarez, reviewing Homage to Clio, writes

. . . something has gone peculiarly wrong. It is as though a vagueness had settled over his work, a vagueness which is not so much a cloud of unknowing as a cloud of not caring . . .

. . . one of the best of the longer poems, "T. the Great", ends with a turn of pure academic wit:

Though T cannot win Clio's cup again  
From time to time the name crops up again  
E.g. as in a crossword anagram  
II down - A NUBILE TRAM.

It is all very amusing until you remember that this is by the man who wrote The Orators and The Sea and the Mirror.<sup>1</sup>

Professor J.W. Beach, writing as early as 1949,

says

We must allow for (Auden's) desire, in a sophisticated age, to shield his serious feeling with mask and domino. In a sense, Auden is always "dramatising" in that he is always ventriloquising. He is a good deal of a mimic. And this will account for many of the odd notes in his elocution. But then we have to consider that Ogden Nash has his ironic intentions, that he too is always clowning. And his deliberately baggy rhythms and line-lengths might pass for a reductio ad absurdum of the less exaggerated performances of Auden. Again, we might say that Auden is, like Joyce in prose, a great master of the intellectual wisecrack, and that the intellectual wisecrack may be an exhilarating form of wit, and have its hindsight to throw on the spiritual landscape of our time. But then again, we cannot forget that Groucho Marx is an equally distinguished master of

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<sup>1</sup>"The Slimmest Volume", The Observer, July 10, 1960.

the intellectual wisecrack, and that even so, we have a certain reluctance to see the Marx Brothers take over the field of Imaginative art.<sup>1</sup>

We can safely ignore the fulminations of Scrutiny which long since put itself out of this particular court by its obvious bias in regard to Auden.<sup>2</sup> Thus the strictures of R. Mayhead, reviewing Nones as "a spectacle of dissolution" may be treated with the mistrust such exaggerated prejudice earns for itself; as we have seen, Nones contains some of Auden's best work. But the other critics cannot be so lightly dismissed; their complaint stems from a regard for Auden's poetry, not from a personal dislike of its author and his "Group". They represent only a section of several well-known critics who are concerned with the direction Auden's latest work is taking; to the present writer's knowledge, no critic <sup>maintained</sup> has, or could maintain seriously that Homage to Clio, for example, is a better book than say, Look Stranger!

The inferiority of the latest poems must be admitted as common cause, but while it cannot be denied, it can be explained, and explained, as always,

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<sup>1</sup>Virginia Quarterly Review, Vol. XXV, p. 369.

<sup>2</sup>See Appendix F.

in the light of Auden's intention. If we take Beach and Alvarez - the specific substance of their complaint appears to be that Auden is guilty of a lack of seriousness - or worse, of real frivolity. A similar charge is levelled by Bernard Bergonzi, this time directed at Auden's prose writings in general and poetic theory in particular, as shown in The Dyer's Hand. Mr. Bergonzi says:

Playfulness and sincerity are not, indeed, qualities that necessarily go together; and one can argue that in poetry this isn't so important, since the "sincerity" of a poem need not be the same as the sincerity of ordinary discourse . . . but a literary essay is not a poem.<sup>1</sup>

Now a glance back at Chapter I of this essay will remind us that Auden's conception of art as a whole, and in his own case including both poetry and prose, is as something essentially frivolous. From his point of view, this is vital, or the artist will be in grave danger - and so may his reader - of making a religion of his art. The writer is, as we saw, reproved for "running howling to his art" (a form of magical refuge) as early as 1936, and the reader is referred on this point to the quotations from Auden's essay "The Frivolous and the Earnest" on pp. 18--19

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<sup>1</sup>"Homo Ludens", Spectator (May 17th, 1963), p. 640.

of Chapter I. Auden regards it as generally accepted in a Christian society (as opposed to a polytheist society where "the artists are its theologians")<sup>1</sup> that:

. . . an artist can no longer put on sacred airs . . . (but) has gained his personal artistic liberty instead. So long as an activity is regarded as being of sacred importance, it is controlled by notions of orthodoxy. When an art is sacred, not only are there orthodox subjects which every artist is expected to treat and unorthodox subjects which no artist may treat, but also orthodox styles of treatment which must not be violated. But once art becomes a secular activity, every artist is free to treat whatever subject excites his imagination, and in any stylistic manner which he feels appropriate.<sup>2</sup>

And there can be no doubt that Auden now feels it appropriate that his poetry should be written only within specifically Christian limits.

For Poetry is magic - born in sin, you  
May read it to exorcise the Gentile in you.<sup>3</sup>

And you may write it only with the same intention.

It is, of course, the purpose of this essay to consider Auden's work to date as a whole, and with specific reference to the artist's intention. And if it is his intention to make man recognise himself for what he is - neurotic, unhappy, guilty,

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<sup>1</sup>"Christianity and Art", The Dyer's Hand, p.456.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 460.

<sup>3</sup>Homage to Clío, p. 53.

unable to live without love, or without God - if, like Milton, he is attempting to "justify the ways of God to man"<sup>1</sup> how can a charge of frivolity possibly be brought against him?

Critics are free to consider, as Alvarez does, that Homage to Clio is greatly inferior to The Sea and The Mirror, - it would be a poor critic who thought differently. But if it is regarded as a stage on "the road to his depth" and in the light of the poet's intention as we have tried to show it, it simply is not true to say, as Alvarez says, that the inferior poetry is the result of "not caring" or as Beach says, from being "a mimic". It is the result, if you like, of caring too much: the result, poetically unhappy, of refusing to allow the enticement of striking metaphor and arresting phrase to obscure the real point of his intention. If a true Christian must be constantly on his guard against making a religion of his art, or against falling a spiritual victim to poetic "magic" and if in his writing he must protect his readers from falling into the same trap, then Auden is doing exactly what he set out to do, and, as we have tried to show, set out to

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<sup>1</sup>But not, as was pointed out earlier, in a single poem - it is the overall intention of all his poetry when considered as a whole.

do from the beginning. It is after all a short step - no further than "elsewhere" - from "Love is God" to "God is Love".

Those of us who have been guilty, from Auden's point of view, of putting a higher value on his best poetry than we do on the propagation of the Christian ethic, and are nostalgically trying to make the same sort of response to it as we did to poems like "The Wanderer", "Birthday Poem", "In Praise of Limestone" or "The Sea and the Mirror" are, as Professor C.S. Lewis has shown in his Experiment in Criticism,<sup>1</sup> guilty of a common fault in some readers of poetry, that is, of looking for a stock Auden response by trying to use his more recent poetry to recapture a familiar thrill. Poetry cannot be used - but it can use the reader, as Auden is well aware. If, as Professor Hoggart says, "We've all got to come to terms with the later Auden"<sup>2</sup> it can only be on Auden's terms, and he has proved himself a sufficiently significant poet to be able to dictate them. As Ted Hughes wrote on the occasion of Auden's sixtieth birthday

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<sup>1</sup>Cambridge University Press, 1961.

<sup>2</sup>See Introduction, p. 1.

We who, as Tobias  
Found in the great fish, found  
Saturn and Mercury joined  
In you, to you

Give thanks, give thanks.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Sunday Times, (London, 19th February, 1967), p. 28. Other poets who wrote poems to celebrate this occasion were Stephen Spender, Christopher Logue, Maurice Wiggin and John Betjeman.

APPENDIX A

From "Early Auden. An Allegory of Love".

The Review, XI - XII, pp. 87--88. Undated. By  
John Fuller.

(the parentheses refer to the letters by which each  
part of Poem I was labelled).

". . . it seems fairly clear that they form a  
perfectly intelligible sequence despite particular  
obscurities. I would say that they are a kind of  
farewell to the homoerotic romanticism of school,  
the

". . . dazzling cities of the plain  
  where lust  
Threatened a sinister rod" (f)

One of the poems (d), if we can trust Isherwood's  
accuracy here, was in existence at Christmas, 1925,  
(Lions and Shadows), p. 187, and might therefore  
have been written while Auden was still at school,  
or just after. The first poem sets the scene,

The sprinkler in the lawn  
Weaves a cool vertigo, and stumps are drawn;  
The last boy vanishes,  
A blazer half-on, through the rigid trees.

It is a sequence celebrating calm after intoxication,  
 a calm which is nonetheless evasive, for these  
 emotions will ~~recur~~ recur: sp

This peace can last no longer than the storm  
 Which started it. (d)

and

. . . if, though we  
 Have ligatured the ends of a farewell  
 Sporadic heartburn show in evidence  
 Of love uneconomically slain . . . (f)

The suggestions of a particular relationship here  
 are borne out by (c) and (e), the affair symbolised  
 (curiously) by a buzzard:

We saw in Spring  
 The frozen buzzard  
 Flipped down the weir and carried  
 out to sea (c)

Earlier, the romantic moment involved buzzards;

"Buzzards" I heard you say  
 And both of us stood still  
 As they swept down the sky  
 Behind the hill  
 I, though a watcher too,  
 Saw little where they sped,  
 Who could have dreamed that you  
 Would turn your head. (e)

But the mind and the body are divorced from birth (b),  
 love cannot be entered freely though the sexual  
 pressures are cyclical:

Amoeba in the running water  
 Live afresh in son and daughter  
 "The sword above the valley"  
 Said the Worm to the Penny. (g)



APPENDIX B

Auden's foreword to The Orators, 1966 edition.

"As a rule, when I re-read something I wrote when I was younger, I can think myself back into the frame of mind in which I wrote it. The Orators, though, defeats me. My name on the title page seems a pseudonym for someone else, who might well, in a year or two, become a Nazi.

The literary influences I do remember more or less. The sections entitled "Argument" and "Statement" contain, as Eliot pointed out to me in a letter "undigested lumps of St.-John Perse". I had recently read his translation of Anabase. The stimulus for writing "Journal of an Airman" came from two sources, Baudelaire's Intimate Journals, which had just been translated by Christopher Isherwood, and a very dotty semi-autobiographical book by General Ludendorff, the title of which I have forgotten. And over the whole work looms the shadow of that dangerous figure, D.H. Lawrence the Ideologue, author

of Phantasia on the Unconscious and those sinister novels Kangaroo and The Plumed Serpent.

The central theme of The Orators seems to be Hero-worship, and we all know what that can lead to politically. My guess to-day is that my unconscious motive in writing it was therapeutic, to exorcise certain tendencies in myself by allowing them to run riot in phantasy. If to-day I find "Auden with play-ground whistle" as Wyndham-Lewis called him, a bit shy-making, I realise that it is precisely the schoolboy atmosphere and diction which act as a moral criticism of the rather ugly emotions and ideas they are employed to express. By making the latter juvenile, they make it impossible to take them seriously. In one of the odes I express all the sentiments with which his followers hailed the advent of Hitler, but these are rendered, I hope, innocuous by the fact that the Fuhrer so hailed is a new-born baby and the son of a friend.

APPENDIX C.

From The Uses of Literacy by Richard Hoggart.  
(London: Penguin Books, 1958), p. 5

". . . there is a vast amount of important and inspiring material about working-class social and political aspirations. But it is easy for a reader to be led into at least a half-assumption that these are histories of the working-classes rather than, primarily, histories of the activities - and the valuable consequences for almost every member of the working classes - of a minority. Probably the authors would specifically claim no more for them, and these aims are important enough. But from such books I do sometimes bring away an impression that their authors overrate the place of political activity in working-class life, that they do not always have an adequate sense of the grass-roots of that life."

APPENDIX D.

From "An Aspect of the Poetry of W.H. Auden"  
by Margaret Cross. Unpublished M.A. Thesis.  
(RAND 1947), pp. 119--120.

"The play might be described as the Quest for the Heir, an allegory of life . . . The play is a Morality, with a Morality's fun and a Morality's serious purpose. The writers are not intending to write a modern "character play", all the personae are humorous. The hero is not a Peer Gynt type, but the "Idiot". He seeks the hero at various false addresses until he finds that he has been beside him the whole time; then they go on together to seek the Good Place . . . The vicar once had the dog, but the Vicar became clouded over with a smokescreen of the Church of England mixture and lost the Dog. The General had him, but when the General became the genteel dragon, he too lost his "George". The Colonel wouldn't know - "stone-deaf, thank God!" The Dog likes his spirit neat. The only photograph of him that there is, was taken when he was six months old, and even if he's a Love, he looks just like the Barman's baby. He is sick as soon as he tries to show off; the two worlds are in each others arms occasionally when they are drunk."

APPENDIX E.

We are always aware of this in Auden. Behind his work is a wide-spread background of books later mythologised or allegorised for his own purposes. Compare what George Steiner writes in Language and Silence. (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), pp. 28--29.

"What I have been aiming at, throughout, is the notion of humane literacy. In that great discourse with the living dead which we call reading, our role is not a passive one. Where it is more than reverie or an indifferent appetite sprung of boredom, reading is a mode of action. We engage the presence, the voice of the book. We allow it entry, though not unguarded, into our inmost. A great poem, a classic novel, press in upon us; they assail and occupy the strong places of our consciousness. They exercise upon our imagination and desires, upon our ambitions and most covert dreams a strange, bruising mastery. Men who burn books know what they are doing. The artist is the uncontrollable force: no western eye, since Van Gogh, looks on a cypress without observing in it the Start of Flame."

APPENDIX F.

There has been a curious love-hate relationship between Auden and Scrutiny - which is to say between Auden and Dr. Leavis - since Auden first began publishing poetry. It is described by Kenneth Trodd in an article called "Scrutiny in the Thirties", published in The Review, No. XI-XII (no date given). Mr. Trodd says:

"There was, from the beginning, an important basis of sympathy between Scrutiny and the Public School intellectuals - a sympathy practically demonstrated in the publication of several reviews by Auden during the first four years of the journal. The grounds for sympathy are implied in Leavis' 'This Poetical Renaissance' (Vol. XI, p. 65) of 1933, where the familiar claim is made that the time fails to provide conditions congenial to the development of poetic talent.

"Favourable reviews and reputation are no substitute for the conditions represented by the existence of an intelligent public - the give and take that is necessary for self-realisation, the pressure that . . . determines direction, the intercourse that is collaboration . . . in the absence of these conditions it is natural to make the most of the Group . . . and it is very difficult to see how a start can be made in any other way . . .

"Scrutiny itself was, of course, a Group, responding in a similar way to the identical situation, and the spirit of its treatment of Auden's 'Group' in those early days implies clearly enough the hope that collaboration between a critical and a creative élite might and should be possible (because so obviously desirable)."<sup>1</sup>

But, says Mr. Trodd, it did not work out that way, and the Scrutiny group and the Auden "group" by 1935 had ceased to be on good terms. The Scrutiny review of the Ascent of F6 was "almost the last time that Auden and those who stood with him in Scrutiny eyes, received anything like charitable quarter . . ." <sup>2</sup>

1935 was also the year in which Auden's last reviews for Scrutiny were published. They appeared in Scrutiny IV (Sept. 1935), p. 200--202, and were reviews of Growing Opinions edited by Alan Campbell Johnson, I was a Prisoner by W. Holt, Means Test Man by W. Brierly, and Caliban Shrieks by Jack Hilton. (One would have liked to read his review of Lord Baden-Powell's Lessons from the 'Varsity of Life, which appeared in Scrutiny II (March, 1934), pp. 405--409). But after 1935 there were no more reviews, and Scrutiny's own reviews of Auden's books began to show the hostile bias that made them untrustworthy criticism from then on.

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<sup>1</sup>pp. 13--14.

<sup>2</sup>p. 14.

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