W.H.AUDEN: A STUDY OF HIS POETRY AND ITS CRITICS, 1930 - 1960.

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INTRODUCTION

How does a poet fare nowadays at the hands of his critics? This study examines the critical reception Auden received from 1930 to 1960*; through a close consideration of a selection of the poems written in this period it will be demonstrated that a considerable discrepancy exists between Auden's poetic achievement and the criticism it received.

The main reason for this discrepancy is the lack of attention to individual poems in favour of sweeping surveys of a volume of poetry or the poet's total output. The core of the thesis lies here and the thesis as a whole derives from concern for a poet's reputation during his poetic career.

* Analysis of criticism which appeared after 1960 is included where it is relevant to the poetry published up to and including 1960.

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CHAPTER 1

A Brief Survey of the Times, 1930-1960, with an account of the artistic critical climate.

CHAPTER ONE

A Brief General Survey of the Times 1930-1960, with an indication of the conflicts in the artistic critical climate

(i)

By quoting from various books written at different times over the period one can best indicate the complex variety of feeling, thought and attitude that surrounds poetry in this century. Two opposing persuasions are in the following:

First, a passage from Ortega y Gasset's THE REVOLT OF THE MASSES:

> There is one fact which, whether for good or ill, is of utmost importance in the public life of Europe at the present moment. This fact is the accession of the masses to complete social power ...
>
> Perhaps the best line of approach to this historical phenomenon may be found by turning our attention to a visual experience, stressing one aspect of our epoch which is plain to our very eyes ... Towns are full of people, houses full of tenants, hotels full of guests, trains full of travellers, cafes full of customers, parks full of promenaders ... and beaches full of bathers. 1
> ...
>
> For me, then, nobility is synonymous with a life of effort, ever set on excelling oneself, in passing beyond what one is to what one sets up as a duty and an obligation. In this way the noble life stands opposed to the common or inert life, which reclines statically upon itself, condemned to perpetual immobility, unless an external force compels it to come out of itself. Hence we apply the term mass to this kind of man - not so much because of his multitude as because of his inertia. 2

Secondly (allowing for the moment each quotation to speak for itself and effect in its own way a relationship of contrast or coincidence with the other passages), a passage from Richard Hoggart's THE USES OF LITERACY:

> To isolate the working-classes in this rough way is not to forget the great number of differences, the subtle shades, the class distinctions, within the working-classes themselves. To the inhabitants there is a fine range of distinctions in prestige from street to street. Inside the single streets there are elaborate differences of status, of 'standing', between the houses themselves; ... There are differences of grade between the occupants; this family is doing well because the husband is a skilled man and there is a big order in at the works; the wife here is a good manager and very houseproud, whereas the one opposite is a slattern; 3

> But by many, and especially by younger people, almost everything old-fashioned is increasingly coming to appear stuffy and probably laughable ... All periods before our own were unknowing, old, and prudish, it is assumed ... 'To be in the fashion', to 'have the latest' is therefore to have the best ... To this is related the glorification of youth ... 4

> Among working-class people, then, how much of a decent local, personal, and communal way of life remains? It remains in speech, in forms of culture (the Working-Men's Clubs, the styles of singing, the brass bands, the older types of magazine, the close group-games like darts and dominoes), and in attitudes as they are expressed in everyday life. Marriage and the home retain their importance ... And there is the ability to keep on 'putting up with things' ... cheerfully. 5

One need scarcely quote to remind the reader of the misery in the Thirties caused by unemployment, short hours, strikes. The imagination of the reader can be left to react to the mere mention of Fascist atrocities in Germany, Italy and Spain, and persecutions by the state in Russia. These and other happenings and forces seem to be sufficiently rounded up in Stephen Spender's words:

> We accept the idea that there is an almost autonomous world of science, inventions, power, evolving and revolving according to laws of economics, etc., which have become unimaginable within the individual consciousness. This was not so for Shakespeare or Milton. Their imaginations roamed over the whole world and over the forces that controlled the history of their time. Here surely, there is a real difference between past and present. 6

But we have this from R.G. Collingwood's THE PRINCIPLES OF ART, which influenced Auden and which he refers to in NEW YEAR LETTER:

> In the case of literature, the only way which I can see of establishing such contact (audience and author) is for authors to give up the idea of 'pure literature', or literature whose interest depends not on its subject-matter, but solely on its 'technical' qualities, and write on subjects about which people want to read. This does not mean turning away from art proper to amusement or magic; for the kind of subjects about which I am thinking does not consist of subjects chosen for their power of arousing emotion, whether for discharge in the reading itself or for discharge in the affairs of real life. They are subjects about which people already have emotions, but obscure and confused ones; and in wanting to read about these subjects they are wanting to raise these emotions to the level of consciousness, to become imaginatively aware of them. ... Some writers will regard this as a lowering of their artistic standard. But that is only because their artistic standard is entangled in a false aesthetic theory. Art is not contemplation, it is action. 7
> (My underlining.)

In the Twenties and Thirties the theories and practice of Marx, Freud and Jung, Homer Lane, Croddeck and others, became publicised and no serious-minded person could neglect their impressive potential effectuality (or danger if one was satisfied with the status quo) in a time when there was little else to look to or hope for to put things right in an upset world. To read these writers and see their ideas as easy panaceas, to talk glibly about revolution or unconscious sexual manifestations, are very different things from being, as Auden was, impressed, hopeful, but never able to ignore the total complexity of the individual in society. As this thesis will try to show, Auden's personal anguish, his sense of being cut off from the middle class to which his whole instinctive, spontaneous being belonged, and his inability to identify himself with other classes of the similarly lonely, oppressed, displaced, or abnormal, dominated his poetry even when he seemed leftish or propagandistic, topical and knowledgable.

Auden was like most serious-minded, unsettled, uncertain and morally sensitive intellectuals of the decade following the First World War. He read a great deal, searched continually for answers and of course for personal adjustment, being at all times existentialist, that is, testing

absolute ideas and beliefs against what he knew and felt. He finally embraced Christian dogma in his own highly personal way. First one writer, one thinker or poet, then another, pulled him and influenced him. This need not automatically be decried as is done by many critics when the influences in the poetry are very apparent. Few of Auden's poems are without the unmistakeable Auden stamp predominating.*

To quote Collingwood again:

> Let all such artists as understand one another, therefore, plagiarize each other's work like men. Let each borrow his friends' best ideas, and try to improve on them. If A thinks himself a better poet than B, let him stop hinting it in the pages of an essay; let him re-write B's poems and publish his own improved version. 8

In other words, one of the things to admire in Auden is his querying, questing mind which never withdraws behind some self-integrating form and fixed belief or vision, even when the conversion to Christianity had made this seem likely. Auden would agree with the following extract from Walter Kaufmann's book THE OWL AND THE NIGHTINGALE. Kaufmann tries to show that the more commonly accepted tradition in philosophy and literature has serious defects, one of which is to make it seem that the present time is especially bad for, or to blame for, the low standard of art. This extract contradicts the quotation from Spender on p.2.

> 'Having been born in an unsettled society' (Eliot) is the condition Elijah and Jeremiah, Plato and Aristotle, Paul and the Buddha, Leonardo and Michelangelo, Shakespeare and Spinoza have in common. Perhaps Dante, who lived in exile, and Aquinas, who saw his religion menaced by the discovery of Aristotle's pagan world view, should be added to this list ... The modern world is a waste land, but the world never has been - and surely never will be - a flower garden. What we make of that is largely up to us ... What needs to be denied is that the world of Dante and Aquinas was less ugly, crude, and cruel. Greatness is possible, but exceptional, at all times. 9

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* Especially well demonstrated by R. Roth, discussedp297 ff

It is interesting to see what A. Alvarez, the young British poet and critic, has to say about this waste land (THE REVIEW, April-May 1962):

> When I went to Auschwitz, it was the most appalling traumatic experience I've ever been through. Even now, it's still appalling. I tried to write a poem about it ... There is no Auschwitz in it at all ... It has become a personal poem about loss. 10
>
> ..... all sensitive people nowadays are in the same boat. In the same ghastly position. We are all standing there with our hands against this stone wall against which there presses, on the other side, a flood tide of neurosis, both inner and social. 11

These extracts are from a discussion with another young poet, David Davie, who is more inclined to Yeats's world-view of, say, 'Lapiz Lazuli', with its cheerful contempt for those who fear possible disaster to their over-prized civilization. Yeats had, as Auden was gradually to have, a wider view of the modern world, and saw it in the context of a historical, never-ending cycle of growth and decay.

The different extracts which have been quoted illustrate what are the very definite dichotomies in attitude towards modern art and the times. It comes down to each critic's personal feeling about what poetry - to leave the vagueness of 'art' now - ought to be or has always been for that critic. Some critics are instinctively suspicious of certain attitudes in Auden's poetry, the topicality, exhortation, jauntiness; the not-obviously-discernible unity or man behind the poem; the not-so-apparent individual consistency of mood and belief; and the seeming absence of an oeuvre, a unified body of work over the years. Others tend to be vaguely sympathetic to a poet doing something different and difficult, attempting to write poems out of a strong consciousness of modernity, new knowledge and far-reaching world-events. But very few critics ever get down to the job of detailed analyses of poems. Very few try to establish whether, by some criterion, the poems work as poems at all. Are the poems in, say, the strict Coleridge sense, poems at all?

Certain especially searching and original books of literary criticism, from just before or in the period 1930-1965, are of special importance when considering Auden's situation in the critical climate.

Edmund Wilson's AXEL'S CASTLE, published in 1931 (and so making no mention of Auden), would perhaps, had he read it, have encouraged Auden to try something not so much new, as uniting the two dominant kinds of writing of the previous fifty years:

> I believe therefore that the time is at hand when these writers, who have largely dominated the literary world of the decade 1920-30 (Wilson is concluding a discussion of Eliot, Yeats, Proust, Joyce, etc.), though we shall continue to admire them as masters, will no longer serve us as guides. 12
>
> .....
>
> The reaction against nineteenth-century Naturalism which symbolism originally represented has probably now run its full course, and the oscillation which for at least three centuries has been taking place between the poles of objectivity and subjectivity may return toward objectivity again ... Our conceptions of objective and subjective have unquestionably been based on false dualisms; our materialisms and idealisms alike have been derived from mistaken conceptions of what the researches of science implied - Classicism and Romanticism, Naturalism and Symbolism are, in reality, therefore false alternatives. And so we may see Naturalism and Symbolism combine to provide us with a vision of human life and its universe, richer, more subtle, more complex and more complete than any that man has yet known ... 13

Wilson mentions the economic and political issues of the time; by Naturalism he means topicality, detailed reporting, but detail inevitably reacted to, moulded, by a single individual vision with its unique symbolism. Rather than say that Auden tried to synthesise a variety of knowledge, experience and topicality, it is more accurate to say that he always freely acknowledged the impact of 'externality'. He reacted to it with the complexity of his own being. He seldom achieved the rhythm-sound flow of say, Yeats and the better Dylan Thomas. Auden often forges a poem out of discernible parts. His poems have a different <u>kind</u>

of vitality and depth, a different stamp and unity that cannot be generalized about but which can be demonstrated in a critique of the individual poems.

Three other books of criticism, to be discussed now, are useful in considering the reception Auden either got, or could have expected, in the Thirties especially, but also afterwards. These are A SURVEY OF MODERNIST POETRY, by Laura Riding and Robert Graves (1927); NEW BEARINGS IN ENGLISH POETRY, by F.R. Leavis (1932); and THE PERSONAL HERESY, a controversy between E.M.W. Tillyard and C.S. Lewis, first published in ESSAYS AND STUDIES, 1934-6. Edmund Wilson's book needs further discussion.

(ii)

The first book, A SURVEY OF MODERNIST POETRY, is concerned with the gap between what poetry the 'average intelligent person' in most periods of History likes to read, and what successive, younger, then-contemporary poets, modernist and so inevitably unfamiliar in expression, are busy writing. As one of the various ways of integrating into poetry the multifarious changes and fragmentation of society, some poets, the authors maintain, go 'slumming' by echoing the speech of 'low life':

> In this way much modernist poetry, in attempting to justify itself to civilization, which is always the civilization of the average intelligent person, succeeds so well that it is rejected by him as <u>too</u> advanced; when it turns to a smaller audience or no audience at all, consoling itself with its advancement. For as the average intelligent person has no real sympathy with low life except from vague humanitarian principles, so he is only interested in civilization as a sentimental idea; he does not want to think harder or work harder; he does not want to advance, but to be flatteringly reminded that he belongs to the twentieth century. Nor does he have, or want to have, new or different

> feelings. The poet formally devoted to modernism, on the other hand, generally has or affects historically new feelings about things. And so the space between the general reader and the poet who is responding to the demands of this imaginary client becomes wider and wider. 14

The attitude of this book to 'the average intelligent person' is mostly more polite than here. One is given an insight into what an untrained or non-specialist reader must feel when considering any modern poems he might come across:

> The contemporary poetic scene, then, appears to the interested but perplexed reader a chaotic conglomerate of free-lance originality or group originality; a restless multitude of types, imitation of types, antithesis and synthesis of types. Variety is the most characteristic general feature of contemporary poetry, and variety means quantity. 15

If Auden had read this book he would, I think, have found himself in accord with, among other things, what is said in Chapter IX, 'The Humorous Element'. In it there is an attempt to sum up 'The Lost Generation', Gertrude Stein's phrase for those born just in time to experience the First World War as adults. Auden of the Thirties, too young for the War, would feel himself at least half in tune with the following:

> The vanity of the world seen without other-worldly compensation does, in fact, demand a wilful cheerfulness in the poet ... The present lost generation does not feel its lack of ideals as sinfulness, but rather as sophistication.* It does not love itself, but it does not hate itself. It does not think much of life but neither does it think much of death ... 16

However, when the above is followed by the continued quotation below, one senses the big difference between Auden and T.S. Eliot. Whether it was the effect of the Slump or the advent of Fascism or the sheer

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*cf. R. Roth on sophistication, p 298 f

boredom after a period of cynicism, what Auden's poetry offered, mingled with the cynicism still, was a kind of bold positivism which it never lost. The above quotation continues:

> It is a cynically common-sense generation which would not, for example, consider dying for the freedom of a small enslaved nation or for literary fame, or for that matter ...
>
> Because it is a common-sense generation, it must claim experience, it must have tried everything. Because it emphasises the wit in common-sense rather than the common-sense in wit, and because wit is cynical, it is a cynical generation ..... It is not interested in denouncing. It cannot be bothered any more about the failure of Heaven to answer prayers, or the hypocrisy of the 'unco guid', or the inconstancy of lovers and fortune. It declares, more definitely, a drastic alteration in traditional values; but without the violence characteristic of minds that have reached this stage by more emotional paths. It is a generation opposed to stress; and to go on living is always easier than to die. Above all things, it is interested in self-preservation. 17

Auden would have agreed with 'drastic alteration', and essentially, or unconsciously, in spite of the things he ostensibly 'meant' in some of his poems, he felt 'self-preservation'. But the tension in his poetry comes from his attempt not to be passive and wittily cynical or uncommitted, not to be 'above all things', subjective only. Auden would have agreed with this:

> The other set of experiences beside the War that have most impressed this generation might be called knowledge experiences. It has witnessed, as well as variegation, a fresh synthesis of intellectual interests. It must not only revise traditional values; it must appreciate now ones. 18

One senses that Auden was very conscious of himself coming within the scope of the following, which generalises from an illustration of the poetry of E.E. Cummings and Marianne Moore:

> The mental agility required of the poet who wishes to reconcile poetry to modernism and modernism to poetry gives him an exaggerated nimbleness that one modernist poet may have had in mind when speaking of the 'athleticism' of this generation.

> Much of his superfluous energy is consumed in an ostentatious display - sometimes childish but in general harmless - of the Protean powers of poetry ... He completes and in a sense contradicts his clownishness by revealing that even clownishness is a joke: that it is a joke to be writing poetry, a joke to be writing modernist poetry. By this token he belongs to the most serious generation of poets that has ever written. 19.

In the concluding chapter the authors re-emphasise, as so many other critics were doing, that poetry has become a specialized activity, not at all embracing society as a whole as once it did. In trying to deal with the situation, poets become highly conscious of what they are trying to do, and tend to have 'an exaggerated preoccupation with criticism'.[20] It is possible that there is now, the authors maintain, less chance of a poet's writing badly, but also less chance of there being a sense of freedom and spontaneity.

There is an interesting survey of what has happened to the philosophical and religious unity of the Middle Ages since the Renaissance:

> Poetry in the past had found it expedient to accept barbaric philosophical or religious 'ideas' and to cast itself within the limits imposed by them. They were barbaric ideas because they were large but definite; infinite, yet fixed by the way that they fixed man; ... (later) gross time was superseded by relative time - the sense of many things going on at once; as we talk of the suburbs being five years behind the town, of the country being ten years behind the suburbs, of the colonies being ten years behind the country, of the primitive community in Africa being a thousand years behind the colonies; ... Living, in fact, in different communities of time, or more than this, in different personalities of time, means the same degree of freedom that living in barbaric time does. The poet in the first case need make no historical effort because he has such perfect control over time; he need make none in the second case because time has such perfect control over him. 21

The writers express their final doubts about the modernist 'critical' efforts, exemplified by THE WASTE LAND, to restore barbarism or gross time; the poet becomes 'an unhappy strained product of sophistications'.[22]

The theories of Hulme and the writings of Gertrude Stein are among the efforts to restore barbarism, the pure and absolute, which is interpreted by Graves and Reding as a dead end:

> The most serious flaw in poetic modernism has been its attachment to originality ... Criticism became more dogmatic and unreal, poetry more eccentric and chaotic. 23

Perhaps the most pertinent quotation from this book, asking for good sense, individuality and a more intuitive, less sophisticated reading of poetry, is this:

> Criticism has been so busy talking about criticism (criticism has been so philosophical, that is) that it has had little either relevant or helpful to say about poetry itself - not poetry as a philosophical abstraction but as poems* and as the poets, who are potential poems. 24

If this book influenced readers they would, it seems logical to think, have been inclined to be sympathetic to Auden from the beginning. It is surprising that Graves was so disparaging about Auden in THE LONG WEEKEND, first published in 1939:

> Auden was a synthetic writer and perhaps never wrote an original line: but modern literature was so extensive that his communistic use of contemporary work was not suspected. He wrote satirically of existing British society and rather vaguely drew the moral that only the teachings of Marx and Freud and George Groddeck could reform it; 25

In a book of this kind which was likely to be fairly widely read and which became a best-selling paperback, this kind of reference to a poet is especially cheap and harmful. Considering the ten years of Auden's output up to 1940, one can only assume that Graves and Hodge had skimmed through occasional poems and come to a conclusion convenient enough for the purpose of a social-survey. A SURVEY OF MODERNIST POETRY says, in a nutshell,

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* cf. Cleanth Brooks's view, p. 110.

that a poet ought nowadays (post First World War) to be more unconscious, more himself as an ordinary human being, than T.S. Eliot or Gertrude Stein would have. The book asserts that the traditional understandableness of poetry was made unfashionable by THE WASTE LAND, and by learned academic criticism, both of which imposed on a poet a crippling awareness of, and sense of obligation to, all poetry ever written. The poet would be acutely conscious of being in an age supposedly so against him that he must perform intellectual feats to be noticed at all. Of course, the book implies, the lessons learnt and the experience gained from a T.S. Eliot can never be lost; but he must be considered as a phase, not an enduring era. The book (though it is sympathetically aware of the problem) does not suggest how a poet is to write poetry as a person, unique and private, and at the same time as a person sensitive to the Eliot-climate and the forces in the world that were very reql and very dangerous to civilization. Auden of the Thirties, with all his faults, is more, as it were, a disciple of the book's intention and thesis, than its authors seem ever to have realized.

(iii)

The thesis of Edmund Wilson's AXEL'S CASTLE is that the modern poetry of the period 1870-1930 was so strongly influenced by the French symbolists that it tended to be escapist and private, full of defeatism and resignation to the general way things were going in the world. It must have suggested that Auden was, as far as Wilson was concerned, pretty well on the right tracks:

> I believe therefore that the time is at hand when these writers, who have largely dominated the literary world of the decade 1920-30, though we shall continue to admire them as masters, will no longer serve us as guides. 26

Wilson devotes a chapter each to such writers as Yeats, Valery, T.S. Eliot, Proust, and is both stimulating and often favourably appreciative, so that he has unwittingly nullified the too-easy dichotomy of predicament by the time he says:

> There are, as I have said, in our contemporary society, for writers who are unable to interest themselves in it either by studying it scientifically, by attempting to reform it or by satirising it, only two alternative courses to follow - Axel's or Rimbaud's. 27

Axel, the name taken from Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's book AXEL, represents a private, insulated world, where the self is devoted to itself and its own morality. Rimbaud represents escape into another part of the world, from the civilized and technological to the opposite of these.

Wilson appreciates what the symbolists did, but pleads for an adapting of what they did for literature to affairs of the world, 'politics', 'action', and perhaps ultimately this:

> And who can say that, as science and art look more and more deeply into experience and achieve a wider and wider range, and as they come to apply themselves more and more directly and expertly to the needs of human life, they may not arrive at a way of thinking, a technique of dealing with our perceptions, which will make art and science one? 28

In a nutshell Wilson says let us end the remaining traces of art for art's sake and try not to run away from public affairs.

Wilson was, in fact, enthusiastic about Auden's first two books, but in July 1937 expressed disappointment with the succeeding works. It seems that at the time (and Wilson changed from his left-wing optimism)

what he missed was the revolutionary toughness and direct satire. In the same article of 1937, however, Wilson reasserts his high evaluation of Auden:

> With all this - and at times out of all proportion to the interest of what he has had to say - Mr. Auden's imagery and language have been remarkable for an energy, a felicity, a richness, a resource, a nerve, which have made him a conspicuous figure ... he has invented a new satire for the times. 29

There is little support for the favourable or unfavourable remarks in the way of precise reference to poems or plays. It is another of the many summing-up progress-reports that reviews and magazine appreciations so often offer.

In 1948 Wilson added a footnote to his essay 'Is Verse a Dying Technique?' first published in THE TRIPLE THINKERS of 1938:

> The recent work of W.H. Auden has not shown a running-to-seed of the tendencies mentioned above, but has on the contrary taken the direction of returning to the older tradition of serviceable and vigorous English verse. His NEW YEAR LETTER must be the best specimen of purely didactic verse since the end of the eighteenth century ... 30

Wilson has written some detailed and stimulating things about modern writers but regrettably, as yet, little on Auden. However, since Wilson is widely read, and since he praises Auden for the most part, he must have added to Auden's reputation.

(iv)

THE PERSONAL HERESY,* a controversy between Tillyard and C.S. Lewis, makes a frustrating book to read. Nevertheless it is enlightening, not only because

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* First published as separate articles in the form of 'attack', 'counter-attack', 'attack' and so on.

it has much that is clear and definitive to say about personality and poetry, or art generally, but because it shows how a critic's words can be taken in different ways, how he can be vague or careless in his terms and so lay himself open to misinterpretation. By arguing and being forced to struggle to express clearly things he had only intuitively believed, the critic can find it very difficult adequately and persuasively to justify his predictions.

What makes the book frustrating is that the subject is nebulous, difficult to say anything very definite about. Both men have something to say which they themselves feel only too often to be not mutually contradictory. Each man writes three chapters, and after Lewis's opening, a large part of each of the other chapters is taken up with denying 'charges', rewording previous assertions, and then reaffirming a point of view in another way.

The argument, in brief, seems to be this: Lewis feels that it ought to be acknowledged that the personality of a poet has nothing to do with his poetry, and that what we find in his poetry is a skilful expression of experiences common to all people:

> It is not only poems or statues which seem to say, 'I am myself alone'. A sunset, a flight of birds past the window, the gesture of an athelete, or the sudden onset of rain - any of these, at a favoured moment, may come over us with just that sense of unity and individuality which you (Tillyard) describe and extort from us a verweile doch. 31

Lewis's real intention is this:

> It will be seen that the tendency of my theory is, in some degree, to lower the status of the poet as poet. But that is because I think the only hope for poetry now lies in lowering his status. Unless he speedily returns to the workmanlike humility of his great predecessors and submits to the necessity of being interesting and pleasing as a preliminary to doing anything else, the art of poetry will disappear from among us altogether. 32

Tillyard will have none of this equating of the poet with the common man:

> Yet the ordinary man's courage differs from the poet's. The first takes what comes his way and makes the best of the tricks of chance; the second does something different and, I think, harder. 33

Tillyard also says:

> I agree that the line between a poetical utterance in ordinary life and a poem is impossible to draw. But Mr. Lewis appears to allow the word poet to be valid at a lower stage of mental distinction than I should. 34

The whole argument seems somewhat futile when the common-sense compromise is put by Tillyard:

> Exactly what percentage personality accounts for in those things which poetry is most truly about I do not feel called on to conjecture. All I can say is that personality accounts for only a part, and that it is usually interwoven with other elements.[35]

In his Note at the end of the series of essays, Lewis, after reconsidering the controversy, more or less comes to the same conclusion:

> We can now restate what seemed contradictory. Poetry does record ordinary experiences, in the sense that it expresses in their concreteness the sort of things that are happening to us all the time. But then we do not ordinarily attend to their concreteness: we are content to take most of them as mere signposts to the gratification of our appetites. To attend to them disinterestedly, to replace them in a less personal context, to correct our personal perspective, not (like the scientist) by making abstraction of hopes and fears but by turning on hope and fear themselves an impartial eye - that is to have a very new experience indeed. More briefly, poetry presents concrete experience (which we have every day) and, in so doing, gives us an experience of the concrete, which is a very different matter. To find out what our experience has, all along, been really like, is to remake experience. 36

This book is relevant to a study of Auden in that it roughly presents the two opposing points of view about him. Tillyard is the traditional critic who, with great sensitivity, intelligence and humanity, lives in literature. Though both Lewis and Tillyard attack poetolatry, Tillyard

seems to feel there is something very special and very rare in a poet. This feeling would incline him towards conservative hesitancy about, or even neglect of, modernist poetry, especially that which might be topical and close to the untransformed ugliness of the world. Lewis, on the other hand, would like to narrow the gap between life and literature, between poet and public, by a diminution of the hallowedness with which great writers of the past are regarded and by an alert readiness to appreciate the different kinds of poetry produced, as it were, next door to one. As Lewis says:

> ... and I for my part submit that a false exaltation of poetry has led Dr. Tillyard to overlook the downright interestingness in the real world which meets, or even besieges him, daily whenever he is not ill, or tired, or preoccupied. One of my chief grievances against the Personal Heresy and its inevitable attendant Poetolatry, is that disparagement of common things and common men which they induce. 37

But although here one suddenly has clarity of expression on a difficult subject, one soon senses that it is at the expense of doing justice to Tillyard. It is the same kind of charge that H.G. Wells made against Henry James; Wells, sometimes impatiently and even rudely, charged James with eliminating 'reality', the touch and smell of everyday life, from his novels. James replied, as everyone knows, that art makes life and not vice-versa. In the controversy between Lewis and Tillyard one cannot but see the truth of the following reply by Tillyard, even though one senses the truth of what Lewis was getting at:

> When Mr. Lewis speaks of personality being 'that which distinguishes one man from another', he seems to mean something that one personality has and no other has. But surely that is a false simplification. What distinguishes one man from another is often the degree of excellence in which he has a common human quality, or the way in which several common human qualities are blended. Even the very exceptional man will be so because he gives a new turn to the old rather than because he produces a genuine novelty. His main function is to infuse new life into the already familiar ... In other words, the general truth and personality are simply not to be separated. 38

This kind of thing is the real frustration of the book. Neither man talks nonsense, and Lewis, with something unusual to assert, exaggerates (as he admits in the Note p. 147). Surely the better way of arguing would have been for each to offer an appreciation of a poem (a few are lightly touched on or referred to) and to compare results. To philosophise and generalise without this kind of a basic groundwork, makes for the woolliness of which this book is full, and which obviously perplexed both critics.

(v)

Leavis's book, NEW BEARINGS IN ENGLISH POETRY, 1932, is the very opposite of a frustrating book. One can understand why it should have established Leavis as one of the few outstanding critics of the next twenty years. Just as Leavis acknowledges an unreserved debt of gratitude to the writers of THE CALENDAR, so one senses the discipleship likely to come from this book:

> ... THE CALENDAR, that uniquely intelligent review which, from 1925 to 1927, was, it is hardly excessive to say, the critical consciousness of the younger adult generations. 39

Leavis speaks always in terms of judgement, of a then-and-there assessment. He is at once humble, warm, sharply elucidating and persuasively enthusiastic, when talking about the real thing, a T.S. Eliot or Pound, Hardy, Hopkins and others. He is equally persuasive, though mainly to the already persuaded, when a poet, or would-be poet, is to be dropped, put in his place. The first chapter of the book, 'Poetry and the Modern World', establishes very clearly the premises from which dismissals are made. There is a clear, simple, bold assertion

that poetry matters, now, and a clear reason is given:

> Poetry matters because of the kind of poet who is more alive than other people, more alive in his own age. He is, as it were, at the most conscious point of his race in his time ... The potentialities of human experience in any age are realized only by a tiny minority ... 40

Inevitably then, to follow poetry, to be close to it, is to be as close as possible to the real power and knowledge - no matter how unrecognised - of one's 'own age'. To know one's age in poetry is to know what went before and to know what is outworn, what is imitation, what is pretension, escapism, and so on. Leavis makes it plain that at the time of his writing the book there was for him very little real poetry amongst the great deal of verse-writing. Bottrall is offered as the best of the young poets.

The book ends pessimistically. It is unlikely, says Leavis, that the trend in the modern world towards standardization and specialization will make poetry's position any different from its present one of neglect. The final sentence is in its own way the battle-cry, or rear-guard action-call, of the minority group: 'Those who care about it can only go on caring.'[41]

Something of the priggishness of the Leavis type of persuasion is to be felt in this book. One can, he offers, with one's intelligence and honesty, side with the right against a very conspicuous and threatening wrong; wrong is bad poetry, whether Georgian or modern poetry with its own newly-established clichés of expression. New poetry must be closely watched and tested against the best criteria. The possibility of being heavy-handed with a young, promising poet, is implicit in this attitude. But of all the critics writing at this time only Leavis seems to have a

positive, almost text-book, attitude, towards the problem of poetry and the modern world. It is regrettable that Auden should have fallen foul, as it were, of the limitations of a predominantly healthy persuasion. Perhaps the worst of these limitations is the difficulty for the Leavis disciple of reassessing, once a verdict has been given, a sentence pronounced. The lesser disciples of Leavis seemed unable to offer anything other than obvious discipleship. C.B. Cox, who took over Leavis's carefully considered dismissal of Auden, and who wrote the Auden chapter for the PELICAN HISTORY OF LITERATURE, has, to whatever extent this intangible thing can be gauged, or believed in, done harm to Auden's reputation.

To sum up this introductory, background chapter, one can safely say that in the post-First World War period up to the beginning of the Slump, the poetry acceptable to most people who read poetry at all, was of two kinds: firstly, the Georgian kind, having qualities that appealed to those with a Victorian tradition of understandableness, sensuous pleasantness, and preordained worthiness of attitude and subject-matter. Secondly, what Pound and T.S. Eliot wrote, culminating in THE WASTE LAND, and which appealed to the few with an acute consciousness of, and urgent need for, a voice of the decade or generation. It appealed to many students and those of the intelligensia who saw in this kind of thing a consoling (because public) confirmation that the western world was in a state of collapse and sterility. All things seemed possible, including, no doubt, the self-justification for sterility of personality, and fashionable knowingness. Nothing now could be regarded in simple terms, and positive, reformative attitudes seemed crude.

The period of the Thirties brought a change. The Georgian or quasi-Georgian poetry continued, as it continues today. But the second kind of poetry, the T.S. Eliot kind, saw a distinct division into two kinds. There was the mature, calm, world-view poetry of the older T.S. Eliot and Yeats; and the poetry of Graves, Frost and Alan Tate in which the tradition of say, Donne-Milton-Tennyson-Hopkins, had resettled into a modern expression conspicuously within the tradition. The off-shoot of this poetry, bringing its own shock, surprise, novelty-delight that Pound and Eliot first gave, was all Auden's doing. But Auden's occasional overt, and frequently inferred, positivism, worldliness, action-and-reality emphasis, meant that he and the lesser writers, Spender and Day Lewis, for example, fell foul of academic criticism. ~~Those~~ The critics who wrote favourably of Auden were mainly those who desperately wanted poetry and world-effectuality, poetry and politics, poetry and science, to join up.

From the variety of points of view indicated in this chapter, it is clear that there were, or are, no firm, clear criteria for judging poetry. As will be seen from the many superficial judgements in the critical writing considered in this thesis, the one possibility of some order and balance, some degree of objectivity and humility, namely, the close analysis of poems, was largely ignored.

CHAPTER 2

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XXIX.

Consider this and in our time
As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman:
The clouds rift suddenly - look there
At cigarette-end smouldering on a border
At the first garden party of the year.
Pass on, admire the view of the massif
Through plate-glass windows of the Sport Hotel;
Join there the insufficient units
Dangerous, easy, in furs, in uniform
And constellated at reserved tables
Supplied with feelings by an efficient band
Relayed elsewhere to farmers and their dogs
Sitting in kitchens in the stormy fens.

Long ago, supreme Antagonist,
More powerful than the great northern whale
Ancient and sorry at life's limiting defect,
In Cornwall, Mendip, or the Pennine Moor
Your comments on the highborn mining-captains,
Found they no answer, made them wish to die
- Lie since in barrows out of harm.
You talk to your admirers every day
By silted harbours, derelict works,
In strangled orchards, and the silent comb
Where dogs have worried or a bird was shot.
Order the ill that they attack at once:
Visit the ports and, interrupting
The leisurely conversation in the bar
Within a stone's throw of the sunlit water,
Beckon your chosen out. Summon
Those handsome and diseased youngsters, those women
Your solitary agents in the country parishes;
And mobilize the powerful forces latent
In soils that make the farmer brutal
In the infected sinus, and the eyes of stoats.
Then, ready, start your rumour, soft
But horrifying in its capacity to disgust
Which, spreading magnified, shall come to be
A polar peril, a prodigious alarm,
Scattering the people, as torn-up paper
Rags and utensils in a sudden gust,
Seized with immeasurable neurotic dread.

Financier, leaving your little room
Where the money is made but not spent,
You'll need your typist and your boy no more;
The game is up for you and for the others,
Who, thinking, pace in slippers on the lawns
Of College Quad or Cathedral Close,
Who are born nurses, who live in shorts
Sleeping with people and playing fives.

Seekers after happiness, all who follow
The convolutions of your simple wish,
It is later than you think; nearer that day
Far other than that distant afternoon
Amid rustle of frocks and stamping feet
They gave the prizes to the ruined boys.
You cannot be away, then, no
Nor though you pack to leave within an hour,
Escaping humming down arterial roads:
The date was yours; the prey to fugues,
Irregular breathing and alternate ascendancies
After some haunted migratory years
To disintegrate on an instant in the explosion of mania
Or lapse for ever into a classic fatigue.

POEM XXIX

Consider this and in our Time

The first line is a command, made acceptable by the flattering implication in the word 'consider' that we possess a reasoning faculty. The line is tactful yet assertive, setting the tone of the whole poem within whose complexity obvious things are inferred. Crude obviousness and didacticism are tempered by close details of intimate involvement, given with wide intelligence and bold reference. The poem is an indirect tribute to the complex many-sidedness of the nevertheless obvious fact of social injustice.

The phrase 'in our time' is isolated by the unusual placing of 'and' as a seemingly superfluous conjunction. The effect is to stress that 'this', the concrete images of life, offered in their immediacy as the poem develops, must be considered as particular symptoms of a general disease which has existed in other times. Already, therefore, we have an historical culpability, an intelligent rationalising of the evil, an inevitable humanising of the 'enemy'. The humanising quality continues throughout the poem, and does two things: it makes the anger - to be opposed to the evil - less blind and subversive in that there is something to appeal to; and it makes the enemy as much inheritors of a tradition of insensitivity, as modern, evil oppressors.

We are already aware of that most difficult-to-define thing which emerges from the poem: the nature of the mingling of 'external' and 'internal'. A body of ideas; the abstraction of justice; sheer concrete modernity and immediacy, all containing and yet contained by a single individual

conscience, strain unsuccessfully against the unity of form, the overall calm and control that the poem imposes on such diversity. The tone remains paradoxically at variance with the 'subject', and it is in this tension and paradox that the real 'meaning' of the poem lies.

The 'hawk' and the 'helmeted airman' do more than vivify the concept of perspective and objectivity. Secondary associations with prey and warfare suggest impending action; 'helmeted' is vaguely heroic; let people but see clearly and there will be those ready to act. However, when 'The clouds rift suddenly', there is no singled-out, naively simplified or abstract prey or 'enemy'. We are given an inferred condemnation of a group or type (garden-party); but we are immediately close to them, acutely conscious of detail. The human comes through the non-human 'cigarette-end'; a deep, perennial weariness of these people is felt through the placing of 'end' and 'first', indicating a self-consuming circle of unfulfilling group-devotion. Absent-mindedness and intense self-preoccupation cling to 'smouldering on a border', and there are less distinct but deeper associations in 'smouldering' with the steady anger of those who are, like the cigarette, carelessly forgotten.

We are invited to look further, and again we are taken intimately close for a while to those who sit and look at the mountains from their hotel. The average man's inclination to escape, to be on vacation, to be insulated against his reality (plate-glass), to luxuriate in things which his susceptibility to tourist-jargon and current fashion holds out as a real achievement (Sport, massif) all combine to universalise the 'enemy'. We are invited to 'join' these people, these 'insufficient units', a term which can be taken in two ways: insufficient for themselves, and insufficient for society as a whole. The dry impersonality of both

words suggests that the people have become victims of abstract forces beyond their understanding.

The partial sympathy with, or at least an insight into and a close, detailed experience of, the enemy, is linked to the vague 'easy' by the undirected potential of 'dangerous'. The effect is to make difficult the pull away from our part-identification with the 'enemy' and to suggest the difficulty of sustaining an obvious, 'socialised', condemnation of these people. Straightforward emotionalism in hatred could be seen as closely allied to envy. The vague 'dangerous' focuses attention on elsewhere suffering, so that the perpetrators again become synonymous with forces, much as they must be seen as personally guilty.

The sexes among the 'units' are loosely divided by 'furs' and 'uniform' into the pampered and the standardised. Each word has a direct bearing on the society and way of life beyond the 'plate-glass', over the 'massif', from which their respective owners come. A hierarchy yields uniforms and privilege; 'uniform' suggests conformity and a kind of defensive relationship with society; 'furs' suggests defensive withdrawal and the flaunted rewards of inequality. The actual individual unhappiness of these 'insufficient units' hovers, though we are not asked to help them or pity them.

These words lead into 'constellated', gathering the people of power still further into a static belief in an eternal and vaguely deified order of things. In the context of selfishness and implied aggression the word 'reserved' evokes / social orderliness and considerateness within the immunisation. 'Supplied with feelings' both dehumanises these people and also implies their unconscious need for 'feelings'; 'efficient' denotes the streamlined

slickness of modern entertainment which can be so effective as a general social anaesthetic that 'farmers and their dogs' participate passively. The extreme contrast between the remote, luxury hotel and 'sitting in kitchens' emphasises the technological harmonising of society with, unfortunately, the emotional sterilization which power and mass-communication can together effect. Once again the 'enemy' is linked to common humanity, in this case through the ignorance and servility of the common man with his reluctance to initiate a revolution. But there is understanding too in these lines of the universal domestic roots of all life. People have to struggle to be secure, inside, sheltering from 'the stormy fens'. But if the struggle is excessively successful, or was never required, then people need shelter from moral awareness. The class-less, universal tendency in human nature is above all to feel, here-and-now, physically safe and spiritually conscience-free.

The second part of the poem contains abrupt juxtapositionings of opposites. There are extreme contrasts in tenses, in tones (casual and the deliberate), and in the particular ('barrows', 'Pennine') and the general ('they', 'your admirers'). The result is that what appears to be a call to action is filled with the quiet irony of intelligence which cannot but express itself with a sense of complexity and many-sidedness. The poet cannot bring himself to call out the slogans, but, rather, with a scrupulous attention to the concrete close-up detail of whatever his thoughts lead him to, he compels himself to have his personal impetus of anger contained by an intellectual response to 'externality'. With our inevitable, momentary dwelling within the detail, we participate in so many associations that the current of urgency in a call to action breaks up into a realisation which embraces mankind as a whole. We remember, namely, that people have

little imagination, or sense of wrong and right, whoever they are, however they may feel in their particular condition. (The first seven lines of this second part of the poem are unnecessarily difficult, owing mainly to unusual punctuation).

The image of the whale, with the dignity and global spaciousness of 'great northern', suggests vast non-human (stored-up) power and energy. There is a deliberately created feeling of remoteness, similar to that of the 'hawk' and 'airman', in the possibility of overall judgement and universal remedy. 'Ancient' adds to the quality of universal symbolism. This pure, almost traditionally impersonal 'Antagonist' is removed from immediate circumstances in the affairs of mankind. It is a force in itself unaffected and unchanging, like abstract truth or spontaneous conscience. The rather crude analytic tone of 'life's limiting defect', linked to 'sorry', so intentionally trite and immediately humanising, has the effect of both paradox and synthesis. The 'Antagonist' seems like the sum total of all civilizations' formal and theoretical justice, now suddenly personified, brought close by the simple purpose of such theory and tradition: the single, spontaneous, particular impulse of pity. Just as the whale has the 'defect' of mortality, so this sum total, this body of truth, only has life when a person, humbled by a sense of the same 'defect', admits pity.*

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* It is precisely in this way that much of Auden's poetry, often dismissed for its social propaganda, lives; the poet has battled with the difficult business of coming to terms with both a theory and an instinct for social justice, by putting his temperament and imagination at grips with abstract ideal, and instinct. While some critics have found Auden limited, earth-bound by being concerned in poetry with matters of politics, psychology and sociology, it could so easily be suggested that the major universal themes of poetry - love, death, God - are vitally bound up with what have only recently become these -ologies, categories of study or consideration in the affairs of Man. A man involved in political commitment is involved with everything that goes to make up a man; unfortunately, most people so committed do not realise this.

The sequence of three names, 'Cornwall, Mendip, or the Pennine moor', ancient names of geographically permanent regions, aggravates the sense of human exploitation. Industrialists, assuming titles of leadership (captains) which once belonged to a social unit, direct the careless, transient industrialism and impose it on an older humanising of non-human earth. The 'Antagonist' is related to the non-human earth in its antiquity; the existence of a body of truth is as old as civilization with its words, names, its humanising of earth and brute existence. Never has the 'Antagonist' of anti-civilization felt so ready to destroy.

The line 'Lie since in barrows out of harm' is subtly linked to mining, shovelling and transporting; unwanted ideas can appear to be less valuable than wanted ore. The means of expression, books and pamphlets, can be easily ignored and physically conveyed from sight in the belief that both the ideas and the conscience are effectively dealt with. The places where these ideas germinate or take root are the kind where you might expect to find disused 'barrows', i.e. 'strangled orchards', 'Silted harbours, derelict works', all unwanted and neglected, all breeding-places of ideas about injustice.

'Order the ill' is an appeal to the 'Antagonist', historical and theoretical justice, to go against its nature and assert itself positively, to give expression to a single individual's sense of helplessness in the face of injustice. It is in reality an appeal to those who are suffering injustice to acknowledge their own condition. But the disposition of human nature acts against this possibility; 'leisurely conversation' indicates innate lack of aggressiveness while 'sunlit water' will always induce a sense of relative consolation. There are possible associations

here with Lake Galilee and the disciples of Christ. Perhaps one or two of those who have reason to be discontented will understand what the 'Antagonist' is and implies. Their immediate and obvious allies will be among people who have only life itself to hate for cheating them of normality ('handsome and diseased youngsters', spinsters); and there will be those whose primitive side can easily be stirred and used. The cynical view that the force of revolution will be found in neurosis and perversion rather than in the conversion of the more 'normal' is realistic, not the romanticism of a dreamer of utopias.

The 'disgust' is a cynically accurate prediction of the immediate, superficial reaction of those caught unawares by ugly violence. The 'disgust' is unable to offer any real defence against the crumbling of each person's sense of identity which the status quo had sustained. Just how much this identity is sustained by externality is conveyed by the blind panic of 'Rags and utensils in a sudden gust', an identity becoming as no more than equipment without the direction of social use or functional meaning. The Antagonist's actual weapon, latent and enduring, is seen as 'rumour'. It will induce a prevailing climate of antithesis - love and hate, wrong and right - creating 'neurotic dread'. Everyone suffers. It is 'the people', not one group of them, who are 'seized'.

The third part of the poem is a straightforward, almost leering, threat.* An enemy is pointed at: the money-maker; those who are pretentious and sterile in church and university; those (nurses) who make constant repairs to the old order; those who are vaguely enthusiastic about their own desires. What partially saves this grouping from a facile villainising, with the corollary of a facile ennobling of their opposites,

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* First eight lines omitted in Collected version.

is the quiet, casual phrase that must embrace virtually all people:

> Seekers after happiness, all who follow
> The convolutions of your simple wish,

The putting together of 'convolutions' with 'simple' does justice to the complexity of the human nature in each self-absorbed individual, so that, by implication, selfishness is not a simple course to whatever idea of 'happiness' we might have.

The next lines remind us of the beginning of the poem, the ceremonious ordering of life within the closed circle of the powerful:

> Amid rustle of frocks and stamping feet
> They gave the prizes to the ruined boys.

They are 'ruined boys' because the reward for achievement within the closed circle of family, school and social class is also that which insulates them from society as a whole and from sympathy with either the kind of success or the kind of failure experienced by other people. The feminine adulation and the boys' approval (frocks, stamping) noticeably predominates over whatever masculine-father-adult approval there was. What is enforced is the sense of the 'Antagonist' having to deal with people who are emotionally immature. The consequences of what they do are inescapable in two ways: the revolution against them will engulf the world so that they can never be refugees; and their class-guilt is past individual expiation. The individual guiltlessness is again asserted in the 'prey to fugues', that is, they are individual victims subjected to a restless repetition of unconsciously inherited traditional themes and established ways.

All the kinds of enemy are fundamentally sterile because of their understandable yearning to recapture a once satisfying past, whether this is the past of childhood or of legends about the historical tradition.

In this way the pursuit of pleasure, or defensive mental sterility, or money-making, have that complex seriousness which is in any 'simple wish'. The enemy is therefore not flat and stereotyped. But because these people do not know what it is that drives them, what it is they are looking for, they are blindly self-asserting, or blindly self-withdrawing, liable 'to disintegrate' when thwarted, losing the theme of the 'fugue'. But, what is worse, there is the alternative to this 'explosion of mania' which at least has the suggestion of some vitality; the alternative is the 'classic fatigue'. This phrase beautifully describes righteous conservatism; 'classic' is the flattering interpretation of fixity, completion, safety, comfort; while 'fatigue' euphemistically suggests laziness rather than weariness.

There is a seeming didactic and admonitory obviousness in this poem but what really emerges is a sense not of opposing courses but of fallible human nature suffering from an unhealthy social and cultural tradition. This tradition encourages the seduction and deluding of people into an inert acquiescence in anything that will sustain human nature's innate materialism, which is really its need for a sense of belonging, of reflected identity. A great change is possible, but on either side of the 'Antagonist' - the self-restoring and purging capacity of mankind - are people who do not really understand deeper principles. A complete levelling out is the logical answer, but part of the poem's truth, tension, and imperfection is Auden's inability to take seriously the consequences of his own logic. He is no naive dreamer of utopias.

Two qualities run counter to what might have been this poem's would-be prophetic pessimism. Firstly, there is the steady, casual, conversational

note within the overall formal dignity of tone. Through the complex shifts of thought this note makes of the poem a modest offering or suggestion, a democratic outward-going of an intellectual aristocrat. Secondly, through the detail closely recorded, we have a sense of the complexity of life which an awareness of superior principles cannot alter; the root cause of evil must be looked for within this complexity. Instead of social propaganda there are the tensions of a great paradox. Civilized man can still grapple with paradox, and in this lies real hope.

XVI

1

It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens
Hearing the frogs exhaling from the pond,
Watching traffic of magnificent cloud
Moving without anxiety on open sky -
Season when lovers and writers find
An altering speech for altering things,
An emphasis on new names, on the arm
A fresh hand with fresh power.
But thinking so I came at once
Where solitary man sat weeping on a bench,
Hanging his head down, with his mouth distorted
Helpless and ugly as an embryo chicken.

So I remember all of those whose death
Is necessary condition of the season's setting forth,
Who sorry in this time look only back
To Christmas intimacy, a winter dialogue
Fading in silence, leaving them in tears.
And recent particulars come to mind;
The death by cancer of a once hated master,
A friend's analysis of his own failure,
Listened to at intervals throughout the winter
At different hours and in different rooms.
But always with success of others for comparison,
The happiness, for instance, of my friend Kurt Groote,
Absence of fear in Gerhart Meyer
From the sea, the truly strong man.

A 'bus ran home then, on the public ground
Lay fallen bicycles like huddled corpses:
No chattering valves of laughter emphasised
Nor the swept gown ends of a gesture stirred
The sessile hush; until a sudden shower
Fell willing into grass and closed the day,
Making choice seem a necessary error.

2

Coming out of me living is always thinking,
Thinking changing and changing living,
Am feeling as it was seeing -
In city leaning on harbour parapet
To watch a colony of duck below
Sit, preen, and doze on buttresses
Or upright paddle on flickering stream,
Casually fishing at a passing straw.
Those find sun's luxury enough,
Shadow know not of homesick foreigner
Nor restlessness of intercepted growth.

All this time was anxiety at night,
Shooting and barricade in street.
Walking home late I listened to a friend
Talking excitedly of final war
Of proletariat against police -
That one shot girl of nineteen through the knees
They threw that one down concrete stair -
Till I was angry, said I was pleased.

Time passes in Hessen, in Gutensberg,
With hill-top and evening holds me up,
Tiny observer of enormous world.
Smoke rises from factory in field
Memory of fire: On all sides heard
Vanishing music of isolated larks:
From village square voices in hymn,
Men's voices, an old use.
And I above standing, saying in thinking:

'Is first baby, warm in mother,
Before born and is still mother,
Time passes and now is other,
Is knowledge in him now of other,
Cries in cold air, himself no friend.
In grown man also, may see in face
In his day-thinking and in his night-thinking
Is wareness and is fear of other,
Alone in flesh, himself no friend.'

He say 'We must forgive and forget',
Forgetting saying but is unforgiving
And unforgiving is in his living;
Body reminds in him to loving,
Reminds but takes no further part,
Perfunctorily affectionate in hired room
But takes no part and is unloving
But loving death. May see in dead,
In face of dead that loving wish,
As one returns from Africa to wife
And his ancestral property in Wales.

Yet sometimes man look and say good
At strict beauty of locomotive,
Completeness of gesture or unclouded eye;
In me so absolute unity of evening
And field and distance was in me for peace,
Was over me in feeling without forgetting
Those ducks' indifference, that friend's hysteria,
Without wishing and with forgiving,
To love my life, not as other,
Not as bird's life, not as child's,
'Cannot', I said, 'being no child now nor a bird.'

Order to stewards and the study of time,
Correct in books, was earlier than this
But joined this by the wires I watched from train,
Slackening of wire and posts' sharp reprimand,
In month of August to a cottage coming.

Being alone, the frightened soul
Returns to this life of sheep and hay
No longer his: he every hour
Moves further from this and must so move,
As child is weaned from his mother and leaves home
But taking the first steps falters, is vexed,
Happy only to find home, a place
Where no tax is levied for being there.

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
Or in the malicious caricature of drunkenness;
Its end glossed over by the careless but known long
To finer perception of the mad and ill.

Moving along the track which is himself,
He loves what he hopes will last, which gone,
Begins the difficult work of mourning,
And as foreign settlers to strange county come,
By mispronunciation of native words
And by intermarriage create a new race
And a new language, so may the soul
Be weaned at last to independent delight.

Startled by the violent laugh of a jay
I went from wood, from crunch underfoot,
Air between stems as under water;
As I shall leave the summer, see autumn come
Focussing stars more sharply in the sky,
See frozen buzzard flipped down the weir
And carried out to sea, leave autumn,
See winter, winter for earth and us,
A forethought of death that we may find ourselves at death
Not helplessly strange to the new conditions.

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.

The falling leaves know it, the children,
At play on the fuming alkali-tip
Or by the flooded football ground, know it -
This is the dragon's day, the devourer's:
Orders are given to the enemy for a time
With underground proliferation of mould,
With constant whisper and the casual question,
To haunt the poisoned in his shunned house,
To destroy the efflorescence of the flesh,
The intricate play of the mind, to enforce
Conformity with the orthodox bone,
With organized fear, the articulated skeleton.

You whom I gladly walk with, touch,
Or wait for as one certain of good,
We know it, we know that love
Needs more than the admiring excitement of union,
More than the abrupt self-confident farewell,
The heel on the finishing blade of grass,
The self-confidence of the falling root,
Needs death, death of the grain, our death,
Death of the old gang; would leave them
In sullen valley where is made no friend,
The old gang to be forgotten in the spring,
The hard bitch and the riding-master,
Stiff underground; deep in clear lake
The lolling bridegroom, beautiful, there.

POEM XVI

It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens

This poem is chosen for detailed analysis for the following reasons: (a) it is referred to, quoted and discussed by many of Auden's critics; (b) it contains all the elements of Auden's poetry that have been considered by some critics, mostly with disparagement, to be typically his or of the Thirties, namely, the psychological and obviously Freudian, the political and revolutionary, though only touching on Marxism; (c) technically it displays obscurity, unevenness, an unfused variety of styles.

Firstly, here is a summary of the 'meaning' of this long poem:

The poem expresses the difficulty of gaining and vital need for, self-knowledge. One's loneliness is caused by the failing in this self-knowledge, and society - with its habit-controls and impersonal organisation - composed of people without self-knowledge, can never cure this loneliness or be just to all its members. Self-knowledge of everyone in society, that is, individuals in the best sense of the word, and perfect social justice, are inseparable. This fact is tantalizing, in theory and to people given to idealism; it is baffling in the common-sense unlikelihood of realisation.

The root-cause of all inefficacy of individuals is, this poem says, the longing to return to the womb of unthinking security and comfort. To break this longing, and the habits formed by that longing, such as self-absorption and insensitivity to others' suffering, is the real struggle of all men.

The poet feels in himself an instinctive urge to withdraw from sensitive awareness of the world's sufferings, even sufferings as close as a friend's struggle for self-understanding. His temptation is to be an impartial observer and listener, loathing any violence and crude commitment. He has a strong sense of history and the cycle of the seasons, and knows the passive, self-forgetting delight in aesthetic beauty. These feelings tend to seduce him from active moral concern. He himself, though he can listen to a friend's self-analysis, knows the significance of his own escapes into the countryside. He is not sure about his attitude to women and sex; the precise region of his psyche's struggle to 'Be weaned at last to independent delight' lies in sexual uncertainty.

Summer in this poem is the season of complacent self-indulgence; winter is the season of suffering into self-knowledge. A sense of one's eventual death can spur one to new perceptions; winter is therefore the season of personal revolution and of that yearning for violent social change which is the product of partial self-knowledge. The 'old gang' who sustain the structure and insensitivity of society because of the special womb-complacence and comfort of power and prestige - in its turn the result of inadequate self-knowledge - are being undermined by a gradual infiltration of self-questioning. The poet links his own need for death-into-knowledge with the need for the death of the 'old gang'. Until both are achieved he cannot love adequately.

The poem ends, appropriately, with imagery of literal death. The note of personal satisfaction in 'hard bitch ... stiff underground' is the poet's concession to his active and vulgar dislike. The 'lolling

bridegroom' 'deep in a clear lake' is a concession to a feeling of destructive violence towards the procreation of privilege and insensitive 'normality'. Not only is it time for each individual to attempt to destroy the 'error' in his or her person, psychologically, but it is time to destroy those who are the products of error and can never change but can be removed and prevented from perpetuating their error. What lingers, and deeply, is not the crudity of threat and warning but the sense of need to be released from hatred of the successful and apparently belonging, so that there should be no social outsiders like the poet himself. The ultimate anguish and meaning of the poem lies in the inability of an intelligent, educated, sensitive but personally unhappy individual to separate self-happiness and society's happiness. Love cannot be complete without a wide social context for individuality. So much for an outline of the poem's meaning.

Until the 'But' in the ninth line, the first paragraph of Part 1 has a tone that is 'without anxiety' as the poet dwells on the varied forms of renewed vigour that come with Spring. For a while the poet feels amorally part of new love, new ideas, new power. Then comes, quite suddenly, a single instance of that which cannot be renewed and which cannot participate in the general uplift of Spring. The solitary man's condition insists with a kind of unintentional obscenity that there is nothing beautiful in human neglect. The image, 'embryo', reminds us that there is nothing obviously beautiful in the physical beginnings of new life. Just as a repulsiveness in birth balances the miraculous, so too a kind of repulsiveness deters sympathetic understanding of poverty and failure.

The line 'Watching traffic of magnificent cloud' emphasises the poet's need to find some or other context for his human subject. A stale 'magnificent' and here-and-now 'traffic' are blent appropriately with the clouds which are, together with 'open sky' and 'exhaling', physical generators of Spring. Traffic is man-made, impersonal and unseeing, like the society as a whole of which this man is a victim. Society is also suggested by the 'public gardens', ironically a place of recreation for the successful, and not intended as a refuge for beggars. But 'public gardens' are socially undesignated and impersonally used for recreation, so that refuge in them is not denied. The conspicuous public juxtaposing of privilege and defeat is inevitable.

In the following paragraph we find a juxtaposing of birth and death, success and failure. 'So' clearly tells us the blunt, logical sequence of thought which leaves out, for the time being at least, resolution or acceptance:

> So I remember all of those whose death
> Is necessary condition of the season's setting forth,

The formal archaism of 'setting forth' suggests old, irreversible transition, the inevitably cruel arrogance of new life towards those who can only remember sadly. The officialese of 'recent particulars' sustains the impersonal tone of demonstration and proof of some very personal experience of the failure and misery in individual lives. Overall redress, through the lives of those who succeed in finding happiness and who survive, is part of nature's own impersonal 'cruelty' or lack of discretion for individuals. The poet has, for the moment, a kind of average, luck-of-the-draw attitude, which is nature's own. He matches nature's lack of concern for those whose lives go wrong, with his own inferiority implied in the

solemn reverence for the individual who finds success:

> Absence of fear in Gerhart Meyer
> From the sea, the truly strong man.

This is a private reference, and is, at first, no more than vague, unsubstantiated praise, all the more dubious because of the lame gravity of 'truly'. But coming after the two cases of illness, one physical, the other mental, we can feel that 'truly' and 'strong' mean healthy in mind and body. When one has dwelt on the poem in its entirety these lines stand out as the only ones that are not qualified by doubt, analysis and irony. They are what the poet wishes he and the nation could, ideally, become. It is a moment of very human, possibly naive, fastening on to an ideal which overwhelms the intellect and world-awareness. 'From the sea', and the confident simplicity of 'truly strong' in the rhythm of Anglo-Saxon poetry, evoke an ancient sea-farer. Psychologically it is the final emergence into individuality from the archetypal sea of flux and danger in the unconscious.

The short paragraph which concludes Part 1 of the poem is passive in mood and feeling. Humanity seems particularly feeble, and its equipment for living, neglected:

> A 'bus ran home then, on the public ground
> Lay fallen bicycles like huddled corpses:

Both loneliness and belonging are felt in 'A 'bus ran home'. The observer's intellect is subdued. A battlefield dignity and gravity attaches to 'fallen'. These implements of man have not been abandoned by their owners but have succumbed in their own identity like frail, ill-protected soldiers. They 'huddle' for comfort in their death, and the battlefield, ironically, is 'the public ground', devoid of any hint of humanity. A

certain absence is most felt at this moment, of vitality and cheerfulness, 'chattering valves of laughter', that is, of human and non-human harmonised. Also absent ~~is~~ are formal, considerately elegant, human (~~movement of~~) manners, 'the swept gown ends of a gesture'. The overall hush is 'sessile', stunting, the peace of a growth gone wrong, instead of the peace of natural and healthy rest.

So the poet (~~with his (sense of) balance and inevitability~~) is here prevented by mood and sensuousness from asserting an intellectual grasp and sense of proportion. The scene is too quiet, depopulated, and when the 'sudden shower/ Fell willing into grass and closed the day', the poet is subdued by the impression of nature's kindly reciprocity within herself, the caring, serving, and grateful receiving. So strongly is he under this impression that it makes 'choice seem a necessary error'. So far is human society from harmony and reciprocal love, that, compared with the perfection of this aspect of nature, human choice will always ~~be~~ seem imperfect.

Part 2 begins with something like despair. The poet cannot rest from his conscience. Whatever he sees, he interprets, and to be alive means to think, think, that is, with knowledge of contrasts and of that which is not merely here-and-now:

> Coming out of me living is always thinking,
> Thinking changing and changing living,
> And feeling as it was seeing -

I interpret the third of these quoted lines as 'Am feeling as <u>if</u> it was seeing' since the theme in this paragraph is the contrast between the here-and-now of comfort and the over-there that has made the 'homesick foreigner'. So the poet finds he cannot simply enjoy ducks lazing on a river, and by

implication he cannot condone any human being's self-absorption and luxuriating. Both these things suggest ignorance or neglect of suffering not immediately visible.

In the next paragraph Auden specifies vividly the brutality of violent social change. One is disgusted by 'a friend/ Talking excitedly' when what he has to say is felt as sadistic enjoyment of the particular pain of the girl, a pain which we feel and which the friend, self-absorbed, casually reports. Auden hears the story impartially. His friend may have been indicating who was who, but it comes over simply as 'That one' (twice) and 'Those'. The conscious cowardice of not denouncing the condonement or enjoyment of brutality is clearly confessed to in a way that again makes us feel the split in the poet. ~~The opposition between self and other~~ This makes him juxtapose rather than integrate opposites: 'Till I was angry, said I was pleased.'

In the following paragraph we find the detached observer again, 'Tiny observer of enormous world'. A sense of different things going on, unrelated except visually through the observer, induces a melancholy mood. There is a great sense of history, time and tradition; 'factory in field' unites industry and nature; the 'music of isolated larks' and 'voices in hymn' unite human and non-human. By his calling the singing of hymns 'an old use' the poet jolts us out of his own near seduction into an amoral feeling of total harmony and passivity. This leads into the next paragraph of conscious, turgid effort to think out the origins of individuality and sensitivity:

Is first baby, warm in mother,
Before born and is still mother,
Time passes and now is other,
In knowledge in him now of other,
Cries in cold air, himself no friend.

His abstract, arrived at, conclusions have now been expressed. Perhaps one justification for the unusual placing of 'is', and the omission of articles - which omission makes it sound like a semi-literate foreigner, or a child speaking - is the truth that one is always struggling to understand, that is, one is a foreigner to one's own destiny and impulse. The fumbling and clumsy tone here is appropriate for saying that no one has a fully sympathetic friend, no eternal mother. One has, in addition, difficulty in befriending oneself.

The baby becomes a child and then an adolescent bothered by the body: 'Alone in flesh, himself no friend'. The adult works out principles for making life tolerable. The epigram of folk-wisdom sounds appropriately stale, (as it is) followed by its practical inefficacy:

He say 'We must forgive and forget',
Forgetting saying but is unforgiving

The person has only one genuinely-felt longing or love and that is the death-wish, the return to the womb. This conflicts with normal sexual satisfaction without which no 'normal', assertive, satisfying place in society can be felt. This yearning is linked to the clinging to traditional comfort at the expense of possible fresh experience and adventure:

As one returns from Africa to wife
And his ancestral property in Wales.

This paragraph, like the previous, has a kind of fumbling obscurity that could be justified in the same way. It is dominated by the continuous

tense of the verbs, merging thought and feeling. The blur of a mind without adequate self-knowledge damages clear grammatical language. The omission of articles and the pidgin English of 'man look and say good' gradually diminishes and has gone by the middle of part 3, as the clear-headed awareness of Part 4 approaches. The 'embryo' of Part 1, the first image of loneliness, has been linked to each man's struggle to be born, to grow up, to gain an identity that is not blurred by the womb-longing as a child's is. The language of the child changes into the language of the struggle to sustain adulthood. It never succeeds in becoming mature and confident, but, in the variety of thought and externalising, it is humble and intelligent.

In the final paragraph of Part 2 the poet maintains that moments of dignity or deeply-felt beauty are experienced by anyone as an instinctive response to the indefinable appeal of symmetry and gracefulness. The placing of 'Yet' immediately after the previous paragraph suggests a close relationship between this response and the womb-wish. It is as though this 'pleasure' is a kind of irresponsible self-annihilation. And now, with evening, the poet cannot but feel this same sense of beauty as a soothing unity, a moment requiring neither justification nor understanding. But, because within this peace the poet is unable to forget the things that irk his moral sensitivity, he feels the unnaturalness, the strain, of constant moral alertness:

> In me so absolute unity of evening
> And field and distance was in me for peace,
> Was over me in feeling without forgetting
> Those ducks' indifference, that friend's hysteria ...

From this we understand that the poet insists that there be a clear qualification of experience, a 'feeling without forgetting'. This takes the

guilt out of the moment of yielding to moods of peace or beauty. The assertion is that all people who do not recognise the qualification are like children or birds. To be human is to care about suffering. To be able to care, one must oneself suffer. To suffer one must break from the womb of self-absorption. The reward is self-knowledge and the freedom that a clear morality brings.

Part 3 is the poet's admission that he knows the weakness of wanting to forget his conscience by a return to rural isolation, the womb of not-thinking. The journey by train into the country is expressed as too easy, too arranged and mechanically calculated:

> Order to stewards and the study of time,
> Correct in books, was earlier than this
> But joined this by the wires I watched from train,

'Order' and 'stewards' indicate duty, obedience, service, that prepare the fixed routine of the railways; 'study of time' is in a way ironical, coming as it does after various feelings and thoughts about 'time'. The ordinary railway-timetable is felt as having violated the sense of history and nature, and as being a mockery of the difficult freedom of movement and choice that humans have to face. The kind of freedom that the railway offers encourages escape to the womb.

In spite of the guilt at yielding to the urge to go back (the 'sharp reprimand'), the last of these five lines perfectly evokes the smooth arrival at comfort and intimacy: 'In month of August to a cottage coming'. Particularly effective is the placing of 'coming'; the alliteration, following the steady warmth of 'month of August', makes the arrival all-too-easy. Nevertheless the placing of 'coming' is in a tradition of poetry which Auden very seldom follows. This archaic intrusion into the

otherwise modern word-order indicates the ultimate speciousness of the pastoral interlude. But, humanly, the episode, the idyll, was irresistible.

Again the poet is face to face with his temptation which he analytically tries to understand. Another form of the temptation to yield to the womb-wish is to be found in the love between man and woman. In trying to assess what love is, two interpretations conflict. The first is the sense of participating in the wonder of reproduction. The second is the sense of the pull and power of the sex-urge which seems to have 'the infectiousness of disease' and the power of destroying one's self-possession and dignity of bearing 'in the malicious caricature of drunkenness'. Some people, 'the careless', think nothing more about it, but it is disturbing 'To finer perception of the mad and ill' who are the acutely individual and painfully sensitive.

The paradox here is not supported or developed in the poem, and contradicts the idea of the 'truly strong man' who would, surely, be 'careless'. The tone of this paragraph is pompous with polysyllabic words acting as a defensive gloss over the direct, probably unconscious, truth underneath. The Anglo-Saxon roots of the language have been stifled as if the poet is disguising his aversion to normal reproduction or love-making. One suspects the easy alliance with 'the mad or ill', the praise for their 'final perception'. The two possible interpretations of the sex-urge, the spiritual and the bodily, seem irreconcilable, but each is considered in the same tone of presumptuous confidence. The irreconcilables are unified only in this very limited kind of thinking about what love is. The statement of the problem still requires a great deal of self-analysis, which is what, perhaps unconsciously, the poet now returns to in the next paragraph.

The process of becoming adult, 'truly strong', is as slow and difficult as it is for 'foreign settlers' to feel at home in a 'strange country'. The hope is that a blending of native and foreign will produce a new soul:

> so may the soul
> Be weaned at last to independent delight.

Whilst there is nothing new in the assertion that we must know ourselves, through the imagery the idea is given a wide context appropriate to Auden's sense of society in a restless age where nationalities are constantly mingling through enforced emigration, exile or flight. These large changes and hardships are the direct result - though often indirectly executed - of the world-wide lack of moral sensitivity. Being a foreigner is often to be a victim, but to become an individual we must deliberately look for strange surroundings, deliberately break with the safe and comfortable. Individuality and society are inextricable, with the health of the individuals creating a healthy society. The poet's own suffering and his sustained consciousness of others' suffering create a consoling ideal of justice based on self-knowledge.

In the last paragraph of Part 3 we are made aware of Auden's clear, appreciative observation of nature. There is just enough individuality in the lines to keep the same deliberate, unlyrical, sternly terse and unforgiving tone from getting lost in the more impersonal, intellectually ranging previous paragraphs:

> Air between stems as under water;
> As I shall leave the summer, see autumn come
> Focussing stars more sharply in the sky,

In previous portions of the poem we have been made aware of the unfulfilling quality of an emotional response to nature when the unhappy

affairs of humanity are considered. But we cannot avoid this response, nor can we despise the inborn tendency in ourselves to live as birds or children do, without choice or responsibility. It is ironical now that a bird, a jay, should, with a human-like sound, wrench the poet out of musing and abstracted thinking and all but compel him to be identified with the eternal ways of nature and to have transcendental feelings. Ending as this response does with the words 'new conditions', there is a final, subtly infused optimism about the search for self-knowledge. It must involve an awareness of winter and death. This awareness makes us part of the cycle of the seasons, now humanised with that necessary conscience which makes winter meaningful and summer a time to be careful of:

> See winter, winter for earth and us,
> A forethought of death that we may find ourselves at death
> Not helplessly strange to the new conditions.

This paragraph fuses the seasons into a single sense of the cycle. The poet belongs to all the seasons, and he can apprehend the detailed particularity of each, with winter the all-important, final consideration. The parallel of human and natural life in winter can disturb one into moral sensitivity.

The fourth and final part of the poem begins in a very different tone: 'It is time for the destruction of error'. The uncompromising statement is a tremendous generalisation that places all and every individual and social weakness or inadequacy ('error', and so not a deliberate evil), against a word, 'destruction'. Long frustration has now quietly arrived at the moment of decision. The time of tolerant substitutes for direct blame and guilt is over. The time is the end of summer, when 'chairs are being brought in from the garden'. It is the end of comfort and injustice and

disease, and near the winter of new things, social revolution, self-knowledge, mental health, which all go together. The human at its potentially finest is opposed to the natural. Nature's winter is not human death. It is the chance for the non-bodily side of human nature to assert itself through the death of self-love and the death of womb-longing, into the life of self-knowledge and other-love.

The images which follow are of general comfort, and disease. We find 'birds' occurring again, linked to 'guests', and to unthinking idlers of the summer season when the deceptively health-giving, physically replete time of the year makes spiritual concern less likely to be in evidence. There is a prevailing insanity of people who have not the sense, let alone sensitivity, to see the obvious. This is the normality of brotherly awareness, or, failing this, the inevitable storm of winter, revelation, rebellion and unrest. The basic impulses of life are hidden by comfort and bourgeois security, so that the 'savage coast', innately vital but frustrated, seems to be England's permanent condition, a holiday-resort in the service of the privileged. Deep down the officially certified insane, cheerful as they may be in their condition, want to know the normality of love and social awareness, and now they somehow realise that their condition is not going to be put right as there will never be a self-reforming society. So there is nothing left but to react violently, not, one feels, to reconstruct, but to destroy completely in blind vengeance. These 'insane' are extreme cases of neurosis, suffering, neglect, and are the most readily definable forms of a society's guilt. But they exist, as it were, within everyone in the country, privileged or not, normal-seeming or not, all without self-knowledge:

In sanatoriums they laugh less and less,
Less certain of cure; and the loud madman
Sinks now into a more terrible calm.

The next paragraph extends the range of half-conscious awareness that a great change or some violence is at hand:

The fallen leaves know it, the children,
At play on the fuming alkali-tip
Or by the flooded football ground, know it -
This is the dragon's day, the devourer's:

Cleanth Brooks writes of this:

> The children are like the falling leaves, natural - in a sense in which the fuming alkali-tip is not 'natural', and yet it is natural that the children should play upon it. They have no place but the industrial rubbish heaps on which to play. The children pull it into the relevant world of the poem. The fuming alkali is a significant part of the world upon which the storm is to descend, and for which the visitors at the summer hotel are responsible, whether or not they care to acknowledge it. The children, with their innocent play, do acknowledge it and in a sense know what is to occur as the adults of the ruling class do not.
>
> Moreover, the reference to the children prepares for and acclimatizes the dragon reference. Children believe in dragons as adults do not, and ironically therefore - as well as literally - it is appropriate that it should be they who know that the dragon's day is at hand. As these ironies develop, further relationships emerge; the children, the madman, the sick, the leaves become related in their sharing of a knowledge which, ironically is withheld from the mature, the sane, the healthy, and the human. 1

But the actual 'storm' is not quite yet. The preparation for it goes quietly, with seeming co-operation on the surface between the rebels and the 'enemy'; this is indicated by:

Orders are given to the enemy for a time
With underground proliferation of mould,
With constant whisper and the casual question,
To haunt the poisoned in his shunned house ...

There is an apparent illogicality in the reversal of the expected giving of the orders. But the waiting revolutionaries are really in

power, no matter what the surface of things suggests. According to Auden and felt through his quiet confidence, the 'enemy' is already entering the winter of destruction. He is kept unaware of the obvious and, pending his 'destruction', he is allowed just to sense, in a way that irks and saps his happiness, something imminent. This weakens the enemy's faculties until he will have no resistance to the enforcement of:

> Conformity with the orthodox bone,
> With organised fear, the articulated skeleton.

The pleasurable, visible and amoral 'efflorescence of the flesh' must be cut away to show what it depends on, a framework with an implicit orthodoxy of justice and an inherent relationship of parts to a whole. The skeleton is a traditional symbol of death as the frightening physical extinction of individuality. In these lines of the poem this symbol is linked to the limitedness and selfishness of the kind of individualism which goes with such a fear. It is part of the neurosis which is cured by awareness of others and acceptance of death as a social thing as much as an individual one.

The final paragraph of the poem makes us realise that what has been said is in a way linked to the poet's love for a person. He asks this person with him (one is reminded of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' or 'It was a beauteous evening') to accept the inadequacy of love-fulfilment. There is sufficient succinct detail here, such as 'abrupt self-confident farewell', for us to believe in a particular loved one. The dramatic precision of 'The heel on the finishing blade of grass' has overtones of brutal indifference to other life.

The assertion is made yet again that moral sensitivity makes it impossible to be happy without social justice and that a sufficiently

drastic change involves not only the 'destruction' of the 'old gang', but 'our death'. This is a moment of more obvious personal guilt for the total situation, a moment of Auden's identification with the 'enemy'. He means, I think, not only a stronger renunciation of natural, personal love and a merciless extinction of the 'gang', but also the death of the womb-wish with its selfishness that creates or maintains this 'gang'. The metaphor of 'valley' tends with Auden of the Thirties to mean stagnation, useless 'vegetating', just as mountains are associated with enquiry, creative challenge, development.* The only possibility of finding and admitting beauty and grace in the 'enemy' is when they are powerless and dead. Beauty and moral rightness cannot be separated:

deep in the clear lake
The lolling bridegroom, beautiful, there.

The season of autumn to come offers us special insight. To see humans believing in an eternal status quo, a long high summer of comfort and convenient ignorance, of unwillingness to face the necessity of death, cannot but make us see a wisdom in nature.

The lines quoted above are remarkably effective. There is a strange quality of peace within the brutality which cannot but be felt; 'bridegroom' is associated with an ancient, somehow humbling tradition, with the person concerned youthful and hopeful. Here he is 'lolling', violated with in the very sanctuary of tradition. However, this is the point. The price of 'a clear lake' or purified and more natural society becomes uglier the longer the reform is delayed. The last two words, coming where they do in these lines, just manage to balance the elemental brutality with the sense that a man, involved in the procreation of society, can only be fully

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* M.A. Thesis, Wits. University, M.R. Cross, 1947.

appreciated if he does no harm to others and is immunised from doing so by being part of a more natural marriage of man and nature.

To conclude. The poem as a whole succeeds in spite of faults. The urgent personal note unites the four parts as much as the cycle of the seasons. The change of style and tone is always appropriate to the shift in attention and interest. It is a poem of uncertainty, exploration and at the end, exhortation and prediction. I do not find this contradictory. The poet makes it clear that he also suffers from 'error' and womb-longing, that, though he is able to struggle towards self-knowledge and love, he is close to the 'solitary man'. In a way the poem is possibly the cry of a homosexual who, being particularly unplaced and unrecognised in society, pleads for sensitive tolerance at the same time as he proclaims the effort to become more normal. Whether this is true or not, the particular and personal are felt as the general and universal in matters of suffering, self-knowledge, social justice.

Clearly the psychological element is no crude intrusion of Freudian jargon or seeming panaceas. The very personal, awkward and inescapable emotional reactions of a sensitive person are felt in the first paragraph. In the second paragraph one senses the poet's rather helpless exasperation at the interminable self-expression of his friend; and in the turgid, blurred language of the fourth and fifth paragraphs of part 2, we sense not Freud or text-book or panacea, but anyone's mental struggle, the struggle not succeeding, but with issues becoming clearer.

The political element is fused with the psychological and Auden seldom veered from this fusion. That he was no revolutionary prepared

for violence is clear in most of his poems. The impersonal 'externalising' is always controlled, with varying success, by an inner anguish. The various shifts in attention and changes in style - lyrical and passive when required, jumpy and clumsy with good reason - are unobtrusively dominated by the Anglo-Saxon metre with its reminder, often dim, of a tribal poetry, a tradition of tribal belonging and the poet's once central position in society.

Essentially the poem is true to human experience and the world as it was and is. Self-knowledge, very difficult to achieve, is the only really important pursuit. It is the difference between adulthood and childhood; the child-adults of the 'old gang', those with power over many lives, will always seem like the 'enemy' to the sensitive or unhappy. The feeling of final, if necessary, commitment to violence to create a new kind of freedom, sounds the very human note of universal frustration. In this poem such a drastic final note is preceded by so very much willingness not to act in this way if at all possible, that the feeling left is of frustration, of one person's condition, not of slogans or preaching.

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CHAPTER 3

(i)

Geoffrey Bullough

The Trend of Modern Poetry: 1934

In this summary of 'general tendencies and individual achievements'[1] in modern poetry, Auden figures briefly in Chapter Eight, 'Metaphysicals and Left-Wingers'. Bullough says that Auden, Day Lewis and Spender were a healthy change from individual isolation, 'the murky polarities of Lawrence and the mystical ecclesiasticism of Eliot',[2] and so on. The usual things are said about obscurity and poetry that diagnosed a sick society. What Bullough does see, though does not develop, is that the seeming call to revolution is 'a romantic adventure ... full of fantasy'.[3] He sees also in the best of Auden a combination of dignity and the popular in the best sense.

The 1949 revision of this work shows continuing sympathetic regard for Auden's poetry:

> His work during the War showed that Auden did not lose the source of his inspiration by leaving England and Left-Wing politics. His range widened, and his thought took on a more positive quality; his freakishness diminished; the dualism of his style was less pronounced. But his manner was still not mature. 4

Obviously in a small book that covers so much ground, very little of a penetrating nature can be expected. The book is not persuasive except insofar as it devotes as much space to Auden as to Eliot or Yeats and so implies academically authorised honour. It pats Auden on the back.

(ii)

C. Day Lewis

A Hope of Poetry: 1934

The modest purpose behind this short book is its failing. By not wanting to say anything very urgent, it says very little. In the Foreword we have:

> This book is an examination of a section of post-war poetry. It is neither an apology nor a defence; truth is poetry's only defence ... It is based on the belief that some post-war writers, notably W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender, are true poets having more in common than mere contemporaneousness, and the belief that a discussion of their social and literary influences, their aims and their technique, may lead the reader to verify this for himself ... 1

Auden comes off very well most of the time, except that Lewis does not believe that anything really first-class was being done in his time. He denies that there is a revival:

> But it is difficult not to suspect that renewal of interest in poetry proceeds largely from an interest in the social connections to be found in much 'left-wing' work. 2

The hope that Lewis sees lies in the possibilities created for poets in Hopkins' and Eliot's refreshment of word-usage and form. This offers a new adventure for poets to fuse public and private lives in their poetry. Some had succeeded:

> The poet today, I have said, is as it were starting again at the beginning. His starting point, therefore, is love. We shall not begin to understand post-war poetry until we realise that the poet is appealing above all for the creation of a society in which the real and living contact between man and man may again become possible. 3

The actual praise for Auden is left to sing for itself. The poem, 'Sir, no man's enemy', is quoted in full, supported only by 'When he is sensible and sober, the result is very good indeed',[4] and by some brief remarks on the theme of a diseased society being diagnosed. This is followed by sweeping generalisations:

> At present he suffers from an extreme sensitiveness to the impact of ideas combined with an incapacity to relate them with any scheme of values, which is apt to give his work a flavour of intellectual dilettantism. 5

This seems to me to be a short-sighted verdict, especially in this book where Lewis tries - as so many other writers, like Graves and Riding, were also doing - to assess the difficult task of being a poet in the post-war period. It is all the more surprising since Lewis had only read Auden's work up to 1933-34. Surely it was only too obvious that Auden had a 'scheme of values' with which to yoke together his experience and knowledge. The scheme was, put simply: a lot in my time is wrong, a lot in individuals is wrong; Marx and Freud must be felt to exist as living forces to put the wrongs right, but I am a complex being living in the imperfect present and my poetic resolutions cannot be crude and clear-cut.

Something similar to this is said by Lewis in Chapter VIII:

> Yet the bourgeois critic must remember that there is no reason why poetry should not also be propaganda; the effect of invocation, of poetry, and of propaganda is to create a state of mind ... Nothing, however, is gained by accusing the poet of employing each poem as a solution of his own difficulties, of drugging himself and thus unfitting himself through his poetry to be a happy class-warrior. 6

Chapter X is an interesting comment on lyricism in poetry. The view is put forward that at that time it was impossible for anyone to write pure lyrics because of 'trained self-consciousness',[7] yet the lyrical impulse lies behind all poetry:

> But the effect of mystery, of untold implications, which the romantics achieved by the juxtaposition of words in such a way as to soften their outlines and make them fuse into each other, Auden achieves by constantly introducing phrases flat and precise on the surface yet suggesting mystery below.
>
> Take for example:
>
> > Nights come bringing the snow, and the dead howl
> > Under the headlands in their windy dwelling
> > Because the Adversary put too easy questions
> > On lonely roads ...
>
> In the first two lines 'headlands' and 'windy' derive value from their own connotations, in true romantic style: but in the last two lines every word, even 'lonely' is precise, and the mystery - the poetical meaning - is generated by the phrase as a whole. 8

The last three pages of the book are full of tribute to Auden. The view is expressed that the finest poetry is rare in any writer's output, but that Auden has these rare moments 'in those lines where Auden fights free of self-consciousness, aesthetic theorising and contemporary despair.'[9]

What impact did this book have on the readers of 1934? It may have cleared up many things and have seemed a courageous defence of the new against the tradition. But the fact that it is so modest and polite makes one doubt that it had much effect. This kind of thing is genteel and lazy:

> so, when other critics assert that there is not enough poetry in post-war verse to raise one hair upon them and make them catch a single breath; I can only say that I am sorry but I have found it otherwise ... 10

(iii)

Dilys Powell

Descent from Parnassus: 1934

The Foreword states that a new style of writing poetry has definitely come about. This poetry offers two kinds of change in form: a tendency towards obscurity and difficulty; but also a tendency towards 'simplicity produced by a contempt for art'[1] (by this the writer means more or less all that is unelevated and not formally dignified). The foreword maintains that the coming of Auden, Day Lewis and Spender has meant a transference of poetic attention from inner conflict to the conflict 'between poetry and environment'.[2] Poetry is, now, the opposite of resigned, and does not look to the past for a comparative evaluation of present times.

The chapters that precede the last one, the one in which Auden figures, attempt to place D.H. Lawrence as 'great', T.S. Eliot as not quite this but one who was necessary to shock us 'into recognition of the unfamiliar'.[3] Edith Sitwell is called a poet of a new romantic escapism which contains its own justification. Siegfried Sassoon is dismissed as no more than a poet of the war.

The final chapter, 'Advance Guard', offers far more attention to Auden than to any of the other younger poets. What was useful to say in 1934, when only POEMS and THE ORATORS and THE DANCE OF DEATH had been published, is now tedious to repeat. The treatment is very sympathetic, and clearly Dilys Powell is all in favour of 'a move from despair to a

desperate hope: a move from inertia towards a militant morality'[4] in modern poetry. She sees Auden as both impersonal and personal in his poems. She indicates that 'despite its individualistic air the verse is rooted in a feeling of solidarity',[5] offered with the confidence of one who knows he speaks for many of his kind. The final verdict on Auden is 'an uncommon talent, but a talent as yet uncertain of its direction'.[6] His toughness 'accords with the temper of his generation'.[7]

(iv)

Edith Sitwell

Aspects of Modern Poetry: 1934

Edith Sitwell is concerned predominantly, as critic and poet, with what she herself calls 'texture'. Whenever she quotes from any poet's work, her analysis of the quotation is about rhythm and sound, colour and clarity, and she relies heavily on assertions of 'beautiful', 'lovely', 'exquisite'. She has nothing but praise for Hopkins, Yeats and Eliot. In her defence of Sacheverell Sitwell the limitations of her conception of poetry are most apparent. She expounds with great delight on the music and sensuousness of her brother's work with its strong Miltonic and Keatsian flavour, and quotes from some other modern poets who, she says, are wrongly praised while Sacheverell is wrongly condemned. By placing the latter's poetry next to, for example, a few lines from Auden, she feels she has made her point that the very latest poetry, of Auden, Day Lewis, Cummings, Bottrall, Empson and others, is fundamentally boring. They are devoid of the visual and tactile sense without which, Edith Sitwell holds, texture is impossible. Curiously enough, the passage she puts side by side with Sacheverell's colour, music, romantic woods and legends, is a piece of Auden's best early writing:

> Taller today, we remember similar evenings,
> Walking together in the windless orchard
> Where the brook runs over the gravel, far from the glacier.
>
> Again in the room with the sofa hiding the grate,
> Looking down to the river when the rain is over,
> See him turn to the window, hearing our last
> Of Captain Ferguson ... (the next three lines are also quoted).

These lines are quoted because there is a similar subject treated in such lines as the following, taken from two whole pages of Sacheverell's poem:

> These evening legends to dark pits of ghosts
> Grow in Gargantua's parallels to the cold,
> For his matches the winter with its raps on door and window,
> By iron-mail on the winding stair
> And a white horse at barred windows that no hand dare open.

Of Sacheverell's lines Edith Sitwell says among other things:

> A dark and mournful air moves through all these strange lines, so full of long shadows, so full of lengthening echoes dying away into a silence that is like music. 1

Of Auden's lines she says, in her comparison:

> We shall be told, as usual, that this is a fragment of real life (because life is boring and this fragment is boring), whereas Mr Sitwell's is an unreal world. But is this so? Is not the passage from the unnamed poet merely the flatly-written and unliving record of an unlived and undigested incident? Is not the passage quoted from Mr Sitwell an assimilated and transmuted experience recorded in inevitable poetry in which the texture and the shape are born from the theme? And in any case, which of these two fragments is the more beautiful in sound, which is the more subtle in vision, which evokes the deepest memory of actual life as well as of the life of a dream? Which more increases our experience? Which gives us the more delight? 2

Little wonder, from this, that the opening chapter of the book seems largely devoted to a sarcastic would-be invalidation of Leavis whose NEW BEARINGS IN ENGLISH POETRY had already appeared. Leavis was still favourably impressed by Auden's poetry. In Edith Sitwell's book the very qualities which Leavis asked for in a critic and in modern poetry are dismissed:

> Dr Leavis is very attached to the words "sensibility", "awareness", "cultivation" and "modern consciousness". 3

Such Leavis terms as the following are also declared 'graciously antiseptic':[4] 'tension within', 'inner disturbance', 'pressure of emotions', 'pressure of experience, an impulsion from deep within'.

Geoffrey Grigson and Wyndham Lewis are also treated with the sarcasm of pretended amusement rather than anger. The purpose of the book seems finally to put Sacheverell in the same rank as Eliot and Yeats, and to force the newest poets back into the mould of Keats and Milton, Tennyson and Browning.

In the last chapter Edith Sitwell writes:

> Mr Auden has an able mind, but, unhappily, he writes uninteresting poetry, or, at least, his poetry nearly always lacks interest. 5

She goes on to talk about the same things as most other critics of Auden, viz. obscurity, disintegration:

> In the power of assimilating details into a whole, in the visual and the tactile sense, Mr Auden is, at the moment, almost entirely lacking. 6

Just how completely lacking Edith Sitwell is in perceptivity about the kind of poetry which has no conspicuous loveliness to delight the senses of touch and sight, can be deduced from the fact that one of Auden's best early pieces is quoted to represent poetry 'tasteless in the sense in which food cooked without salt is tasteless'.[7] It is the poem 'From the very first coming down', analysed in detail by Barbara Hardy, Review 11, 1964, an analysis referred to in this thesis, p.345.

(v)

Louis MacNeice

Poetry Today

in THE ARTS TODAY: 1935

To one reading this article thirty years after, with the later critical writing on Auden having had its effect, it holds little that is worth going into. It sweeps through modern poetry from the Imagists to the Thirties with a favourable regard for Auden and the others. Pound and Eliot are seen to have done their work; theirs is now tired, or overworked poetry. The new poets have taken their and other influences in their stride. MacNeice uses the word 'tricks'[1] to describe the techniques which he lists (from Hopkins, Owen, Graves, Riding, Yeats, Joyce) and innovations of all kinds. Since these 'tricks' are not used for their own sakes, but to say important things, the term is intentionally non-academic and against pomp and the wrong sort of intellectualism. MacNeice prefers PAID ON BOTH SIDES to THE WASTE LAND because, for one thing, it is not derived from literature, nor is it defeatist, but tragic. This kind of allegiance, considered now, is either ludicrous, or at best, badly in need of real examination. MacNeice likes Auden's gusto and curiosity, the freshness of his, as opposed to Eliot's, sophistication.*

The following statement is worth quoting as an indication that people like MacNeice and the educated people savouring Marx and Freud, that is, positivism, were tired of academic theory that found no application anywhere:

---

*cf. 'Sophistication of W.H. Auden'; Robert Roth, discussed p297 ff

It is inferior philosophy, like pragmatism, that influences action, and it is a narrow and limited criticism that encourages the production of art. What the artist and the reader need is an Aristotle or a Dr Johnson.

Poetry at the moment is becoming narrower and less esoteric. The narrower it becomes, the wider the public it represents and the nearer it comes to being popular (representing the masses) but it seems at the moment in England to be reaching a stage where it will represent and be acceptable to a considerable minority. 2

CHAPTER 4

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Introductory Note:

All serious journals seem from time to time to indicate by their appeals for more readers the narrow limits of their influence. Of the few people who read poetry fewer still read reviews; or if they do, they are not likely to be greatly influenced. Readers of poetry, being in the main teachers and students and fellow-poets, know that most reviews are superficial. A review indicates a verdict of good, indifferent, or bad, roughly speaking. Some reviews, such as those in SCRUTINY, THE CRITERION, THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, are quite lengthy, two or three pages perhaps, but even so there is simply not enough space to give adequate, detailed and balanced support for generalisations and judgements, especially of the glib and barbed sort.

A consideration of what reviewers said about Auden in the Thirties has little bearing, I think, on the actual establishment of his reputation. It is true that people strongly under the influence of Leavis's teaching would, after 1936, have been persuaded to ignore Auden if they read SCRUTINY. It is also true that certain journals are considered 'reputable', their reviewers or editors are well-known, and their pronouncements are considered 'authoritative'. Nonetheless, the majority of people who actually take the trouble to read poetry judge largely for themselves and probably do not read reviews anyway.

The interest in looking at some of the reviews of Auden of the Thirties lies really in what one person, the reviewer, 'subject' perhaps to the policy of the journal, felt at the time of publication.

Reviews of Poems 1930 (and 1933) and of other works up to LOOK, STRANGER!

SCRUTINY

Both in the review of THE ORATORS (by Douglas Garman), September 1932, and in Leavis's review of PAID ON BOTH SIDES, June 1934, one finds quite high praise for the promise and achievement of POEMS. Yet POEMS was never reviewed so there is no way of knowing what the Scrutineers really liked in Auden's first publication, which is a pity since time and time again reviewers for SCRUTINY referred to an early promise that was never realised.

In the two reviews mentioned above the verdict is of disappointment and from Leavis we have a fairly painstaking attempt to justify this verdict. One is left with the feeling that the journal will be watching Auden closely and sympathetically. Auden was invited to review for it. Leavis was prepared in his review to weigh up Empson's comments on PAID ON BOTH SIDES, and to evaluate Empson via, as it were, Auden. The review could only have done Auden good and given his name some authority. Leavis says as if giving Auden the benefit of the doubt:

> He has nevertheless achieved enough in the matter of technique to impress upon the reader a highly individual sensibility. 1

This is the last time that this journal gave Auden the kind of consideration that is allied to sympathetic, constructive criticism. So, by SCRUTINY's helping to make it seem that Auden only associated with left-wing people and journals, he was stamped with far more leftism than is in fact to be found within the subtle texture of his best poems.

THE CRITERION

This journal, edited by T.S. Eliot, both published poems by Auden and gave generous reviews of his books. Much more attention was given to the plays than to the poems, and these plays were much more favourably reviewed than otherwise. In July 1935 THE DOG BENEATH THE SKIN was given four pages of enthusiastic attention - 'it is the work of a dramatist who is also a poet'.[2] In October 1936 THE ASCENT OF F6 is carefully considered and it is gently suggested that it does not come off.

POEMS was never reviewed, but it was referred to in a later review of LOOK, STRANGER! as having been 'difficult'. THE ORATORS was reviewed by John Hayward in October, 1932, and though considered 'exceedingly difficult to understand', was considered 'the most valuable contribution to poetry since THE WASTE LAND'.[3]

THE LONDON MERCURY

This journal, edited by Scott James, did not give much attention to Auden in the Thirties. In January 1934 a reviewer says of ~~the~~ THE DANCE OF DEATH: 'In Mr Auden I have little faith'.[4] Edwin Muir wrote an article called 'The Present Language of Poetry'.[5] He found Auden class-conscious in an unpleasant way, but nevertheless ranks him with T.S. Eliot as the only poet of the period whose poetry is not spoiled by politics.

In January 1935, before LOOK, STRANGER! had appeared, but by when many of the poems in that volume had been published in magazines and journals, THE LONDON MERCURY published an article called 'Poetry and Propaganda', by Michael Roberts, editor of the left-wing NEW SIGNATURES. Roberts insists that Auden, Spender and others <u>are</u> poets and that their poetry is one of

the many acceptable kinds of poetry. Roberts also insists that a direct, involved interest in the modern world is necessary. But the article is really a review, neither deep nor detailed.

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

POEMS was reviewed in March 1931. There is no praise and the writer comes out strongly against obscurity. Auden's poems are 'extreme examples of that withdrawal from the objective into the subjective world.'[6]

THE ORATORS was reviewed in the issue of June 9, 1932. The space allotted and the tone are generous. There is mention enough of obscurity, the oblique, capricious, and, as it were, from a distance.[7] The enduring verdict is in these lines:

> He is insolently but exhilaratingly new ... (What he does, the reviewer says, would be dull and silly in a bad writer - in Auden it shows only that) an artistic conscience which is really scrupulous can avoid this. [8]

The DANCE OF DEATH was not well-received in the review of March 15, 1934. It was considered refreshing to turn to his earlier poems.

In the issue of January 24, 1935, there is an article, 'New Poetic Drama in Europe', in which the writer places Auden with Eliot and O'Casey as among Europe's best.

On July 11, 1935, a review says of THE DOG BENEATH THE SKIN: 'To bemoan defects now would be captious.'[9]

POETRY XXXVIII (1931) 'Dawn is my Britain', M.D. Zabel.

In this review of POEMS we have a fully-extended welcome:

> He wishes neither to ignore the motives established by science, nor to lapse into that lethargy of irony and despair which has overtaken most of the 'realistic' novelists and life-forcers of recent years. He hopes to invest with new moral and ethical necessity the ideals of affection, sympathy, and honor. 10

THE NATION XXXIX. August 8, 1934: Review, James Burnham

In this brief editorial in the review section we have a sympathetic consideration of the work of Auden up to that time and a general grouping with him of Spender, Day Lewis, Michael Roberts and others:

> They have absorbed the lessons of Joyce in prose, and of Pound and Eliot in verse ... Their newness comes out in a number of ways; in the influences ... new enthusiasms, the very willingness to be enthusiastic, in contrast to sterility and despair; a looking forward, instead of chiefly back; and, as always in a genuinely new development, the direct thrust for metaphors into immediate personal experience. 11

Auden is considered a better prose writer than a poet. The reason for this unevenness in development is given as his difficult and admirable intention of reintegrating his personality with his social vision. THE ORATORS is sympathetically summarised to show that Auden is putting an end to his romantic leanings as a way out of the waste land. Auden's and the presumed group's communism is excused as a means to a better educational system through the destruction of the standardising effects of capitalism. Clearly, here, the world-wide disillusionment with Russian communism had not yet started.

Concluding Note to the period 1930-1935

With the publication of three works, POEMS, 1930 and 1933 (with excisions and new poems included), THE DANCE OF DEATH, 1933, and THE ORATORS, 1932, Auden had established himself as a young poet worth noticing, worth devoting space to in full-length books, and worth reviewing. On the whole his reception was favourable and encouraging, but clearly he was stamped as a leftist, a positivist, an exhorter and satirist. Little was realised of the anguished person who was writing poetry full of self in a considerably masked and oblique way.

The next volume of verse, LOOK, STRANGER!, 1936, which included poems written as early as 1933, was to disappoint those who looked for the leftism and reform-propaganda, and to please very few of those who might have been expected to recognise a poet's development within the English tradition of poetry.

CHAPTER 5

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XVII

Here on the cropped grass of the narrow ridge I stand,
A fathom of earth, alive in air,
Aloof as an admiral on the old rocks,
    England below me:
Eastward across the Midland plains
An express is leaving for a sailor's country;
Westward is Wales
Where on clear evenings the retired and rich
From the french windows of their sheltered mansions
See the Sugarloaf standing, an upright sentinel
    Over Abergavenny.

When last I stood here I was not alone; happy
Each thought the other, thinking of a crime,
And England to our meditations seemed
    The perfect setting:
But now it has no innocence at all;
It is the isolation and the fear,
    The mood itself;
It is the body of the absent lover,
An image to the would-be hero of the soul,
The little area we are willing to forgive
    Upon conditions.

For private reasons I must have the truth, remember
These years have seen a boom in sorrow;
The presses of idleness issued more despair
    And it was honoured,
Gross Hunger took on more hands every month,
Erecting here and everywhere his vast
    Unnecessary workshops;
Europe grew anxious about her health,
Combines tottered, credits froze,
And business shivered in a banker's winter
    While we were kissing.

To-day no longer occupied like that, I give
The children at the open swimming pool
Lithe in their first and little beauty
    A closer look;
Follow the cramped clerk crooked at his desk,
The guide in shorts pursuing flowers
    In their careers;
A digit of the crowd, would like to know
Them better whom the shops and trams are full of,
The little men and their mothers, not plain but
    Dreadfully ugly.

'Already behind you your last evening hastens up
And all the customs your society has chosen
Harden themselves into the unbreakable
    Habits of death,
Has not your long affair with death
Of late become increasingly more serious;
    Do you not find
Him growing more attractive every day?
You shall go under and help him with the crops,
Be faithful to him, and to your friends
    Remain indifferent.'

And out of the turf the bones of war continue;
'Know then, cousin, the major cause of our collapse
Was a distortion in the human plastic by luxury produced,

Never higher than in our time were the vital advantages;
To matter entire, to the unbounded vigours of the instrument,
To all logical precision we were the rejoicing heirs.

But pompous, we assumed their power to be our own,
Believed machines to be our hearts' spontaneous fruit,
Taking our premises as shoppers take a tram.

While the disciplined love which alone could have employed these
engines
Seemed far too difficult and dull, and when hatred promised
An immediate dividend, all of us hated.

Denying the liberty we knew quite well to be our destiny,
It dogged our steps with its accusing shadow
Until in every landscape we saw murder ambushed.

Unable to endure ourselves, we sought relief
In the insouciance of the soldier, the heroic sexual pose
Playing at fathers to impress the little ladies,

Call us not tragic; falseness made farcical our death:
Nor brave; ours was the will of the insane to suffer
By which since we could not live we gladly died:
And now we have gone for ever to our foolish graves.'

The Priory clock chimes briefly and I recollect
I am expected to return alive
My will effective and my nerves in order
    To my situation.
'The poetry is in the pity', Wilfred said,
And Kathy in her journal, 'To be rooted in life,
    That's what I want.'
These moods give no permission to be idle,
For men are changed by what they do;
And through loss and anger the hands of the unlucky
    Love one another.

Deaf to the Welsh wind now, I hear arising
From lanterned gardens sloping to the river
Where saxophones are moaning for a comforter,
From Gaumont theatres
Where fancy plays on hunger to produce
The noble robber, ideal of boys
And from cathedrals,
Luxury liners laden with souls,
Holding to the east their hulls of stone,
The high thin rare continuous worship
Of the self-absorbed.

Here, which looked north before the Cambrian alignment,
Like the cupped hand of the keen excavator
Busy with bones, the memory uncovers
The hopes of time;
Of empires stiff in their brocaded glory,
The luscious lateral blossoming of woe
Scented, profuse;
And of intercalary ages of disorder
When, as they prayed in antres, fell
Upon the noblest in the country night
Angel assassins.

Small birds above me have the grace of those who founded
The civilization of the delicate olive,
Learning the laws of love and sailing
On the calm Aegean;
The hawk is the symbol of the rule by thirst,
The central state controlling the canals;
And the blank sky
Of the womb's utter peace before
The cell, dividing, multiplied desire,
And raised instead of death the image
Of the reconciler.

And over the Cotswolds now the thunder mutters:
'What little of the truth your seers saw
They dared not tell you plainly but combined
Assertion and refuge
In the common language of collective lying,
In codes of a bureau, laboratory slang
And diplomats' French.
The relations of your lovers were, alas, pictorial;
The treasure that you stole, you lost; bad luck
It brought you, but you cannot put it back
Now with caresses.

POEM XVII

Here on the Cropped Grass of the Narrow Ridge I Stand (New Oxford Outlook, 1933)

This is an example of a poem with considerable flaws but which is still well worth considering. In it Auden expresses the end of the period of hope he had had for a new Britain. The country is much worse than itwas when he was last on this ridge with his loved one. Not only is he now completely alone, but cut off from the comradeship of international idealism and from any actively felt sympathy with the ordinary people of the country with whom he had experienced a period of identification. He can no longer be warm towards these people; they are no longer the humanising element of earlier socialist theory and hope. They are part of the long history of a nation's self-delusion.

History is sensed as an inevitable series of periods, some good, most bad. The present industrial period is the worst imaginable, threatened with spiritual death if not by physical violence or invasion. The enemy is mass entertainment, the wrong kind of religious worship, 'collective lying'. All the poet is left with is the memory of a friend or two, a book or two, and the need to go on surviving.

It is a bitter poem, conveying the defeat of intelligence, the collapse of an educated awareness of the world, the end of youthful hope. It is, deep down, a lover's lament, a withdrawal of all sympathy. When a generalised reason is fabricated to support a heart-felt inability to love the world so long as the single loved person is absent, the poetry breaks

down. It is an honest poem for the most part and painfully, unconsciously dishonest in trying to answer to a moral sensitivity for an inability to meet that morality's seemingly logical demands, namely, to care about the world and its inhabitants.

The poem begins as an experience of the hard, remote, and austere ('cropped', 'narrow', 'aloof'). Chill orderliness is all that is now possible, as if the absence of the loved one has drained away normal human subjectivity. The poet has a firm hold on himself while he observes the 'England below me'. Any earlier leftish associations with 'the retired and rich' are subdued by a sense of transcendent geographical and by the unqualified dignity grandeur/of 'an admiral' who is in a national as well as in an aristocratic tradition.

In the second verse we learn that the poet has been here before, with a loved one. England seemed very different then, with the poet's personal intactness, though not colouring England favourably, giving it an 'innocence'. This was in spite of the fact that the country was the judge of 'a crime'. Possibly the 'crime' was the decision to become homosexual lovers,* the legal prohibiting of which was one of the aspects of the wider social injustice. The 'innocence' is the projection of personal happiness on to the world no matter how unjust it is, no matter how other people may be suffering. In the same way personal anguish can colour one's awareness of others' happiness and welfare.

Earlier, the loved one's presence was fused with hope of social reform. Now the absence of the loved one makes it impossible for the poet to feel concerned for others or to be interested in reform.

Auden admits that England now is

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*Suggested by G. Southworth; see p II2 f

The mood itself;
It is the body of the absent lover,
An image to the would-be hero of the soul,
The little area we are willing to forgive
Upon conditions.

This is tenderly, sadly put, honest in the admission of personal opinion, a humble disqualification of any pure reasoning he may be capable of in his attitude towards England. There is self-mockery in 'would-be hero' and clear perception that the presumed state of a country may be no more than the colouring of things by disgruntledness. Judgement of a country in this mood can change easily, according to the selfishly demanded 'conditions' in the person's private life. 'The little area', an image neatly allowing feeling for a country and love for one person to overlap, beautifully captures the blending of one's affectionate self-diminution and tenacious self-preservation in matters that are personally important.

The third verse contains one of Auden's most frequently-used techniques, namely, the lumping or stringing together of evidence to support a statement or to justify a mood. The line 'These years have seen a boom in sorrow' quite cleverly links commerce and industry with human misery, suggesting an inverted standard by which to judge a nation's prosperity. The rest of the verse, however, is scarcely poetry, but the comments of a journalist made just that much more acceptable in the contrasting of the winter of economic life with the summer of private life.

It must be said, however, that this summary of events can be partly excused in that it is a personal and urgent beginning of the scrounge through History 'For private reasons ...' and for what always goes on historically 'While we were kissing'. These lines are like a quick flip through a magazine on current topics to see what has been missed while one was busy. The reader is not made to feel guilty and the attempt to make

the poetic statements interesting and fresh is too obvious. The enlivening of abstractions with vague imagery is done three times, 'boom in sorrow', 'presses of idleness', 'Gross hunger took on', so that the poetry itself has a ring of the mechanical, and indicates the poetic failure to achieve an adequate imaginative sense of generality, of current affairs, of topicality. Yet this failure is more acceptable by the fourth verse in which the poet admits that there is something wrong in being over-concerned with guilty feelings when personal happiness does not coincide with wider social happiness. He needs now deliberately to observe the close-up particularity of people who make up the generality.

He calls himself 'A digit of the crowd, (who) would like to know/ Them better whom the shops and trams are full of'. Clearly he knows that the masses of people are there but he can only get near them by seizing on the obvious public display of their existence. His observation of 'The children at the open swimming pool/ Lithe in their first and little beauty', is compassionate, but the compassion is for something aesthetically beautiful and so not unfamiliar to a person of another social class. The compassion within the curiosity towards 'The little men and their mothers' is frankly hesitant, for Auden finds them 'Dreadfully ugly', with ugliness, of course, a symptom of poverty and economic enslavement, not a justification of it. Nevertheless the ugliness is a deterrent to actually-felt sympathy, as opposed to a moral, questioning and sympathetic consideration. In other words, the earlier self-projection of personal hope into social cure is now seen for what it was, something that blinded the poet to the reality he now thinks he sees as not worth the sympathy.

In the fifth verse we are with the poet again on the ridge but his thoughts are of entertainments and religious services whose devotees all

express 'The high thin rare continuous worship/ Of the self-absorbed.' The three adjectives seem at first to be vague, and even mutually neutralising; but the effect is appropriate when one senses the lack of rational unity everywhere and what rootedness and worship ought to be. The 'worship' is as sterile as any life without awareness of relationships. Rootedness, relatedness, and worship within this strength, are expressed in the seventh verse with its 'civilization of the delicate olive'.

These present-day victims of innate 'hunger' and yearning for a 'comforter', duped or drugged as they may be by music, cinema or church, are seen as at least partly responsible for the condition of the country. This creates an interesting situation, for the poet can appeal neither to the duped masses nor to the duping controllers of their lives. In this 'predicament' the poet can find a kind of consolation in a long look at historical precedent. He sees a justification for withdrawal of active commitment from a country whose history explains itself. The country is responsible for what it is.

The sixth verse begins the survey of History:

> Here, which looked north before the Cambrian alignment,
> Like the cupped hand of the keen excavator
> Busy with bones, the memory uncovers
> The hopes of time;

There is a sense of unity in returning to the first verse of the poem with its evocation of the ancient and enduring. The sharp alliteration of 'cupped' and 'keen' suggests care and scholarship; the alliterated b's in 'Busy with bones' lend vigour to an activity in itself so redolent of death; recollection of the past thus becomes a living thing.

Now we find a bold, sweeping summary of historical ages, each of which is clearly evoked with significance-charged detail. All empires are suggested in the first line, while 'stiff' neutralises the 'glory' into something sterile and unnatural. The loveliness of those regions of the world to become parts of empires is combined, or tightly interwoven like some tropical undergrowth, with the suffering that empires bring. 'Scented, profuse' has a kind of soporific effect on the 'woe', just as the convenience of an empire can lull moral enquiry; 'woe' is appropriately archaic, an emotion kept remote from those 'in their brocaded glory'.

All this is balanced by the next lines which tell of the tragic nature of the cycles of civilisation, the challenge and response of the Toynbee kind. The assassins kill in the name of necessary good, while 'the noblest' die with all the rest in invasion and revolt. The two words 'Angel assassins', coming together in the last line as they do, powerfully emphasise the paradox and fall musically, yet like a sword. Those who are killed 'prayed in antres', that is, during devotion and mystical self-preservation.

Viewed in retrospect, the incident is beyond morality. It is an instance of historical 'inevitability' in a time when wide tolerance and sensitive appreciation of other tribes or cultures seemed not to have existed, or to have been thought inconceivable.

The seventh verse, in many ways similar to Yeats's 'Lapis Lazuli' or Byzantium poems, shows a yearning for a civilisation in which there is natural order and grace, an ideal interrelatedness and belonging in everything from love to sailing. This is felt both in the birds near the poet and in his imagined picture of the Aegean. But another bird, also graceful, 'is the symbol of rule by thirst', that is, of nations founded

on the suffering of the people. Coming straight after 'on the calm of the Aegean', the phrase 'central state controlling the canals' emphasises realism and understandability in history with its bloody invasions and its many examples of enforced centralisation. Eventual civilization then, no matter what the original price, has a quality which the sky has, a peace, a unity, a oneness like a cell in the womb. History changes each such civilization. Units have always broken up and the mindless, satisfied death-wish of seeming completion and control changes into the anguished search for a 'reconciler'. People need a metaphysical consolation for the primal deprivation of earthly oneness.

> And the blank sky
> Of the womb's utter peace before
> The cell, dividing, multiplied desire,
> And raised instead of death the image
> Of the reconciler.

The warning of the thunder in the eighth verse has all the poetic faults of the third verse. There is a rather slap-dash listing and agglomeration of things wrong with England, with too heavy a leaning on slickness like 'collective lying', and on the take-it-or-leave-it tone of 'The relations of your lovers were, alas, pictorial'. The ninth verse enlarges on and continues the blunt uncompromising admonition that the predominant ways of life in England are 'Habits of death'.

By now one may feel there is too much of this kind of thing, the abstract and general, ever to be assimilated into the total poem. But there is again the fusing of the socio-political and the psychological. The limited nature, virtually amoral, of the normal love-affair is equated with all hardened, immediately-comforting habits that prevent what moral awareness is, discomfort. The six three-line ~~stanzas~~ verses and one four-line stanza are further explanations of past wars, and of a present condition

that makes further wars inevitable. There is little in these verses that is worth close attention. What is said and the way it is said is stale and laboured in its efforts not to be wholly obvious. We do not think, the verses say, and we take the easiest way in everything; hate is easy, love is very difficult; not to fight this condition is the acknowledged insanity of most periods of history, including our own. The tone is unpitying, even contemptuous, and one's common sense dismisses the generality of 'we gladly died'. Only three lines have a tone and incisiveness that is more than superficial commentary:

> But pompous, we assumed their power to be our own,
> Believed machines to be our hearts' spontaneous fruits,
> Taking our premises as shoppers take a tram.

Security in material possessions is mistaken for the best that human nature is capable of, and is the measure of human warmth and generosity. The intellectual tone of 'premises', used with 'shoppers', neatly dismisses the possibility that such a word as 'premises', indicating consciousness of assumptions, could really be used by the people concerned.

The last verse restores the personal note and expresses wryly the need for the poet to go on living even if it means the hypocrisy of useful, sane conformity:

> I am expected to return alive
> My will effective and my nerves in order
> To my situation.

The feeling that a poet's only real audience, conscience or consolation, is his books or friends, comes from the reference to Wilfred Owen and Katherine Mansfield. They too wrote about their helplessness. Auden communes with them for a moment but

These moods give no permission to be idle,
For men are changed by what they do;

The last statement of the poem recovers much of the best tone of the earlier parts of the poem. The overall vision of the poet with his partial aloofness and sense of all ages and cycles of history, is here relaxed, humbled into the personal good sense of his own immediate presence in the present cycle of history. He admits the consolation that comes from identifying oneself with all 'the unlucky'.

The weak portions of this poem are an interesting indication of the way Auden was developing as a poet. He still wrote as impersonally, or indirectly, as he believed a poet ought to, involving his single, particular self in matters that can loosely be called 'external', or non-self. Clearly, what he was doing at this time was to write personally through, or via, the external. Modernity and history could now offer both a rational justification for losing interest in socialist morality and suggest symbols of rootedness and belonging which are so remote from present-day England, that the direction of the poet's search for meaning in his own life must now change. He must confront 'externality' with a frank, spontaneous admission of what matters to himself, vitally, genuinely, and what does not matter to him in this way. The reaction of the would-be lover of the unhappy is to see their unhappiness as not his fault, but theirs, or that of history.

The weak portions of the poem, especially what 'the bones of war' said, are weak because history is made to seem a matter of forces and events, not of people. Verses six and seven, however, are alive with the poet's personal feelings, an imaginative presence in the periods of history. There is pity and horror in 'fell/ Upon the noblest in the

country night/ Angel assassins'. There is the poet's sensitivity in 'the delicate olive' and his own anguish in 'the womb's utter peace'.

The poem first appeared in NEW OXFORD OUTLOOK in November, 1933. Already it is clear that, though he was not yet ready finally, publicly to admit it, Auden was on his own in his predicament. He has his friends, his intelligence and education, his wit and courage, his energy and his poetry. But he has no clearly transcending, dynamic-making focal point for these qualities and accomplishments.

IX

The earth turns over, our side feels the cold,
And life sinks choking in the wells of trees;
The ticking heart comes to a standstill, killed,
The icing on the pond waits for the boys.
Among the holly and the gifts I move,
The carols on the piano, the glowing hearth,
All our traditional sympathy with birth,
Put by your challenge to the shifts of love.

Your portrait hangs before me on the wall
And there what view I wish for, I shall find,
The wooded or the stony - though not all
The painter's gifts can make its flatness round -
Through the blue irises the heaven of failures,
The mirror world where logic is reversed,
Where age becomes the handsome child at last,
The glass sea parted for the country sailors.

Where move the enormous comics, drawn from life;
My father as an Airedale and a gardener,
My mother chasing letters with a knife:
You are not present as a character.
- Only the family have speaking parts -
You are a valley or a river bend,
The one an aunt refers to as a friend,
The tree from which the weasel racing starts.

False; but no falser than the world it matches,
Love's daytime kingdom which I say you rule,
The total state where all must wear your badges,
Keep order perfect as a naval school:
Noble emotions organized and massed
Line the straight flood-lit tracks of memory
To cheer your image as it flashes by;
All lust at once informed on and suppressed.

Yours is the only name expressive there,
And family affection the one in cypher;
Lay-out of hospital and street and square
That comfort to the homesick children offer:
As I, their author, stand between these dreams,
Son of a nurse and doctor, loaned a dream,
Your would-be lover who has never come
In the great bed at midnight to your arms.

Such dreams are amorous; they are indeed:
But no one but myself is loved in these,
And time flies on above the dreamer's head,
Flies on, flies on, and with your beauty flies.
All things he takes and loses but conceit,
The Alec who can buy the life within,
License no liberty except his own,
Order the fireworks after the defeat.

Language of moderation cannot hide;
My sea is empty and the waves are rough:
Gone from the map the shore where childhood played
Tight-fisted as a peasant, eating love;
Lost in my wake the archipelago,
Islands of self through which I sailed all day,
Planting a pirate's flag, a generous boy;
And lost the way to action and to you.

Lost if I steer, Gale of desire may blow
Sailor and ship past the illusive reef,
And I yet land to celebrate with you
Birth of a natural order and of love;
With you enjoy the untransfigured scene,
My father down the garden in his gaiters,
My mother at her bureau writing letters,
Free to our favours, all our titles gone.

POEM IX

The earth turns over, our side feels the cold

(NEW VERSE, February, 1934)

This poem - one of Auden's very best - is difficult, open to charges of obscurity and private reference, unless one is clear about the meaning of the 'you' to whom the poem is addressed. One might be inclined at first to think 'you' is a loved one, or life itself. When taken to mean 'respectability', and all that is associated with middle-class orderliness, restraint, and conventionality, the poem becomes clear. It is an expression of great sadness by one who was brought up to be middle-class, to satisfy the sex-urge in conventional marriage, to have children and become part of the conventional Christian tradition with its ritual for birth and death. The poem is a lament for this person that the poet might have become. It is Christmas, and being home again everything is charged for him with acute childhood associations.

The opening lines of the poem stress the inevitable dividedness of human life; while some people thrive, others wilt. But while the Christian tradition offers warmth and meaning in times of cold and death, it seems also to demand a kind of bourgeois normality; or, at least, a middle-class upbringing would persuade one to feel this. The poet is acutely aware of the cycle of life and death in man and nature. To the children playing on the ice it is just another season and the fact that 'the pond waits' indicates nature's longing to be used in its death for

something so vital and suggestive of Spring to come. The last line of the first verse, with 'shifts of love' stressing the irregularity, the deceptiveness of the sex-urge, gives the basic problem. It is the pervading 'challenge' that the middle-class way of life, which the poet found so difficult to abjure, throws in the face of a sex-urge that demands an unconventional expression.

In the second and third verses the poet lets his imagination loose. The unnatural, illogical, the impossible, are all made positive. Instead of growing old, one grows young; an unnatural sea responds to the unnatural, unbelonging 'country sailor'. The poet's parents lose their dignity (shown in the last verse of the poem) and yield to impulse and spontaneity. They break from the image of themselves which the poet finds so much a barrier to their acceptance of what he is. The 'you' in the imagined reconstruction of a landscape picture on the wall, in which all these things happen, is relegated to the non-human. Trees and valleys and rivers cannot change, and for that one can be glad. They are so clearly defined, so strong, that any person can personify them - 'an aunt' can speak of them as familiar and living - and no one minds. If only people had the strength to change, and to recognise the capacity to change as real strength. The message of Christ is nowhere in the 'traditional sympathy with birth' (first verse). The eccentric or different has no place. The wholly unexpected, highly unusual forms of energy and expression, like 'weasel racing', are cut off from any appreciation by middle-class habits in and among which they occur. Christmas, this middle-class Christmas, is blind and intolerant.

The fourth verse asserts the poet's awareness that these fantasies of the unusual and topsy-turvy are false. But he asserts that the world

as it really is, people as they really are, is falsely expressed by middle-class standards and values. One is as compelled to conform as if one were in a totalitarian state. Since 'lust' is 'suppressed', one loves vicariously, standing as at a sports meeting on puritan sidelines watching the exceptions to the rule, the performers. The public occasion makes adoration of the exceptional respectable. Like art, sport divides experience into the vicariously bold, and the actual that remains unadventurous, safe, intolerant.

The fifth verse is a bitter, though restrained, indictment of this home-Christmas, an occasion supposedly associated with a limitless capacity for love and tolerance. What prevails is middle-class correctness and orderliness. The order and impersonal purposefulness of 'Lay-out of hospital and street and square' offers a feeling of security to adults who are really 'homesick children', and limits their capacity to extend the range of their sympathies.

This verse ends with a wonderfully subtle fusing of uninhibited sexual fulfilment with a code of behaviour that insists on prescribed controls of the impulse. The poet has not been the lover within the convention. The way it is put suggests a woman waiting for her loved one, and being denied. Underneath the middle-class code is the unacknowledged yearning for the different, the unexpected, the abnormal; an inability to change will mean lasting frustration, ever-empty arms. The bourgeois really yearn for what the poet represents, as he yearns for their acceptance, that is, their real selves.

In the sixth verse the poet draws back from recrimination or criticism; 'dream' becomes useless delusion, a waste of time, and wholly

self-centred. It is a cheapening of spirituality as if to 'buy the life within' and, above all, it is an escape in imagined victory from the then complete defeat ('fireworks after the defeat').

In the very real sorrow of the seventh verse the nostalgic backward look at childhood is tempered with near-anger at a child's inability to realise what is happening in his development. The wholly 'selfish' drawing on others' strength and love, and the complete self-absorption within a security of 'the shore', make possible fantasies of individual courage, 'a pirate's flag'. There is a moment of real disgust with the primitive earthiness of childhood in 'Tight-fisted as a peasant, eating love'.

In the last verse comes the realisation that only humility and acceptance are left. Conscious effort, 'steer', can do nothing. To yield to a force greater than regret or criticism, a 'Gale of desire', that is, to acknowledge the yearning to belong to this home and this day and these parents, will work its own miracle. The scene need not be transfigured; the 'gaiters' and 'bureau' are not middle-class, suspect symbols, but just some aspect of a mother and a father. The last line contains all the ease of natural family relationships, the ability to receive from each other with the unpretentiousness ('all our titles gone') of three people celebrating 'Birth of a natural order and of love'.

This is an especially fine, successful poem. The personification of respectability allows Auden to employ the technique of the private monologue. It is almost a dialogue because we feel the presence of a something which does not so much refuse to answer, as it is unable to answer. Consciousness of itself, the questioning of its values, is not for the middle-class morality.

The tone of the poem is quiet and dignified. Assonance and half-rhyme control with inevitability the accusing statements, containing the poet's acceptance of the impossibility of being either understood or answered. The inevitableness of the tone matches perfectly the Christmas occasion which, though middle-class in its particular expression and celebration here, is nonetheless rooted in birth and death since the poet is a son of very real parents who can never change that relationship, ~~or~~ (of course, ultimate) their attitude to his extinction as a representative of their kind can never change either.

II

(To Geoffrey Hoyland)

Out on the lawn I lie in bed,
Vega conspicuous overhead
     In the windless nights of June;
Forests of green have done complete
The day's activity; my feet
     Point to the rising moon.

Lucky, this point in time and space
Is chosen as my working place;
     Where the sexy airs of summer,
The bathing hours and the bare arms,
The leisured drives through a land of farms,
     Are good to the newcomer.

Equal with colleagues in a ring
I sit on each calm evening,
     Enchanted as the flowers
The opening light draws out of hiding
From leaves with all its dove-like pleading
     Its logic and its powers.

That later we, though parted then
May still recall these evenings when
     Fear gave his watch no look;
The lion griefs loped from the shade
And on our knees their muzzles laid,
     And death put down his book.

Moreover, eyes in which I learn
That I am glad to look, return
     My glances every day;
And when the birds and rising sun
Waken me, I shall speak with one
     Who has not gone away.

Now North and South and East and West
Those I love lie down to rest;
     The moon looks on them all:
The healers and the brilliant talkers,
The eccentrics and the silent walkers,
     The dumpy and the tall.

She climbs the European sky;
Churches and power stations lie
     Alike among earth's fixtures:
Into the galleries she peers,
And blankly as an orphan stares
     Upon the marvellous pictures.

To gravity attentive, she
Can notice nothing here, though we
     Whom hunger cannot move,
From gardens where we feel secure
Look up, and with a sigh endure
     The tyrannies of love:

And, gentle, do not care to know,
Where Poland draws her Eastern bow,
     What violence is done;
Nor ask what doubtful act allows
Our freedom in this English house,
     Our picnics in the sun.

The creepered wall stands up to hide
The gathering multitudes outside
     Whose glances hunger worsens;
Concealing from their wretchedness
Our metaphysical distress,
     Our kindness to ten persons.

And now no path on which we move
But shows already traces of
     Intentions not our own,
Thoroughly able to achieve
What our excitement could conceive,
     But our hands left alone.

For what by nature and by training
We loved, has little strength remaining:
     Though we would gladly give
The Oxford Colleges, Big Ben,
And all the birds in Wicken Fen,
     It has no wish to live.

Soon through the dykes of our content
The crumpling flood will force a rent,
     And, taller than a tree,
Hold sudden death before our eyes
Whose river-dreams long hid the size
     And vigours of the sea.

But when the waters make retreat
And through the black mud first the wheat
     In shy green stalks appears;
When stranded monsters gasping lie,
And sounds of riveting terrify
     Their whorled unsubtle ears:

May this for which we dread to lose
Our privacy, need no excuse
     But to that strength belong;
As through a child's rash happy cries
The drowned voice of his parents rise
     In unlamenting song.

After discharges of alarm
All unpredicted may it calm
     The pulse of nervous nations;
Forgive the murderer in his glass,
Tough in its patience to surpass
     The tigress her swift motions.

POEM II

Out on the lawn I lie in bed
(Listener, March 1934)

In this poem, as in the previous, there is a saddened acceptance - with clear awareness of both personal inadequacy and continuing social unrest - of what is. All that goes into the making of the pleasurable present, including the rather hazy moral awareness of its not being justifiable, will one of these days disappear, as will the way of life that the poet and his few friends represent in spite of their critical attitude to that way, the middle-class way. When this happens, the poet says, may the memory of the immediate present, with its intimacy, mutual trust and sharing, provide the strength for the sharers to build the new way and accept it.

In the first stanza there is an unhurried, untroubled noting of incontrovertible facts, a preamble of certainty before any moral rumblings begin. The following three ~~verses~~ stanzas reveal acute awareness of the transiency of this personal contentedness, this magical interlude of calm and friendship that cannot last long. It is a microcosm of the ideal society, but it is, even for these few friends, 'lucky', an accidental moment in history really, rich, sensuous, relaxed, the stuff of which memories are made.

The lax, almost nostalgic pleasureableness of the occasion is stressed in a way that makes us realise how keenly Auden feels the pull and sweetness of this aspect of living. His moral concern is far from

being the irritating self-projection of one who is temperamentally incapable of being anything but a rebel. There is a balance and richness of soul in this acceptance of his own human weakness:

> Enchanted as the flowers
> The opening light draws out of hiding
> From leaves with all its dove-like pleading
> Its logic and its powers.

The group of people in the moonlight are 'enchanted as the flowers'. Just as the moon elicits flowers from the gloom of leaves, very gently begging them to accept the offer of partial illumination, so the group of friends seems to be offered the enlightenment which the moon is able to convey to the human capacity for appreciating 'Its logic and its powers'. These 'powers' are in the service of love and peace (dove-like). The moonlight and the occasion, the sense of belonging and brotherhood, limited as it is 'to ten persons' (tenth ~~verse~~ stanza), all point the way to the ideal of universal belonging in which each belonging individual will experience neither fear, nor grief, nor a sense of death. Loneliness and the inevitable neuroses of people whom sensitivity and conscience make into the 'stranger', 'spy', or 'refugee' in their own countries or social groups, can at least be countered to the degree that a microcosmic ideal condition of society is actually enjoyed.

In the second stanza both 'lucky' and 'this point in time and space' are banal, intentionally suggestive of stale, lazy expression of experience; 'lucky' is thoroughly colloquial, with the virtues of a colloquial tone such as friendliness, unpretentiousness. The word itself, in the context, implies a kind of humility within the sense of fatalism at not being in command of an individual destiny. There is also, for the reader, an absence of dignity or any heightened feeling to engage

the attention in the moment. These two sections of the first line evoke the different kinds of barrier against further perception or penetration into worthwhile feeling: 'lucky', because a friendly democratic gesture will tend to preclude subtler, more difficult, perhaps esoteric expression; while 'this point in time and space' is the slapdash offering in conversation of the more educated person who has some command of remembered phrases. The whole line, then, fits the mood of leisure and idleness, and appropriately expresses Auden's admitted part-identification with the way of life in which he was brought up. This line is followed by: 'Is chosen as my working place'; we are immediately aware of the contrast between effort and relaxation. The preceding line is the lazy awareness of a person temporarily idle. The phrase 'working place' is a subtle shift to an acknowledgement that some people live by effort. The simplicity of the phrase unifies any who 'work' and lends a kind of honesty to them.

The following three lines are straightforward evocations of physical pleasure and ease: 'sexy' is deliberately cheap, lazily acknowledged, a gesture of common humanity; 'the bare arms' is precise and sensuously fresh. The last line is remarkable for the use of 'good'. The 'newcomer' is Auden as a visitor here as well as the millions of city-dwellers who have little chance to enjoy the country tenor of life; 'good' is paradoxical, suggesting soporific and escapist pampering, as well as genuinely healthy refreshment and change; one cannot ignore the moral meaning in the word. In this way two things are fused, namely, the neutral aspect of innocuous rural pleasure, and the touch of innocence which people have when they are idling and uncommitted in any obvious and hurtful way. The sheer effort, the persistent 'working' at moral

perception, is made to seem all the harder in that the judging observer of life around him will be subject to the very human weakness of envying an 'enemy'.

In the tenth stanza the whole problem is reduced to essentials. It is the difference between 'Our kindness to ten persons' and our attitude to 'The gathering multitudes outside'. In this stanza it is the 'multitudes' who are prevented from getting to know the more privileged by 'The creepered walls' which are inanimate and man-made and which hide the innocuous privacy. There is no deliberate evil purpose in the existence of these walls. But those who are 'gathering' are unable to realise that the privileged are human. The walls are unconsciously preserved by the privileged who thereby invite their own destruction as non-human enemies. The irony in this stanza is delicately handled. The 'creepered wall' is made into the real enemy, the immunised, insensitive, amoral side of the same human nature that experiences the 'metaphysical distress'.

The eleventh stanza is an enlargement of the poet's sense of being encroached upon by the justifiable actions of the 'multitudes' who act out what he and his group can only talk about or plead for. One feels the retrospective contempt of 'our excitement' but also the latent guilt, failure, of 'But our hands left alone'. The accepted guilt and sheer physical reality of 'dykes of our content' (thirteenth stanza) is contrasted with the nebulous awareness of that which requires moral sensitivity. The image of dyke and flood is common-place, but the development of it touches on the transcendental and mysterious so that what might be taken for facile preaching and warning is rooted in the limitations of universal human nature. It is not simply dashed off in a

narrow and undistinguished presumption that the affairs of the world can easily be seen in terms of crude, simple opposition:

> Hold sudden death before our eyes
> Whose river-dreams long hid the size
> And vigours of the sea.

'River' and 'sea', more so than 'flood' or 'dyke', suggest forces existing independent of individuality, conscience, moral decision; 'dreams' deals in kindly fashion with a limited, personality-bound spirit of discovery and passive sensitivity to 'vigours of the sea' beyond the dykes. There is a close and obvious relationship between a river and the sea into which it flows and by which it is also fed. A 'river-dream' is therefore a limited sense of that ultimate force, freedom, energy, 'the sea', which can never for long be cut off from its creations - river in this case. A limited leftism, the hope of a bourgeois reform rather than a proletarian take-over, was all that Auden's middle-class idealism stretched to. He had flirted at times with something more drastic, but his best poetry reveals clearly that in overt leftism he was not being true to himself. In this poem he acknowledges three things: (a) the first importance of his metaphysical self; (b) the inherent limitations of his middle-class temperament; and (c) that a growing acceptance of his inadequate self meant less and less commitment to the social upheaval which nonetheless was coming.

The fourteenth stanza begins, 'But when the waters make retreat', implying that the flood will come, that it is too late, hopeless, to expect people to improve those 'river-dreams' and give up 'creepered walls'. The flood will be succeeded by 'shy green stalks' and 'riveting', a new age for nature and for man. The 'monsters' who are 'stranded' or 'Unsubtle' are the defeated power groups. The imagery, except for 'riveting', is of any

age. The long historical perspective is not unlike Yeats's; Yeats, far less reform-conscious about the present than Auden, finds that:

> All things fall and are built again
> And those that build them are gay. (Lapis Lazuli)

Yeats, with his vision, finds it no less than silly to stand for this or that party or system, or to be scared and concerned about crises ('I have heard hysterical women say'). Nonetheless there was hunger and unemployment in his time, and a world war followed soon after his death. Would he not have been shaken out of his private consolation for old age and diminishing vigour which he found in enduring art forms? He was moved from his visionary detachment into unexpected admiration for the active doers and reformers, the rebels, in 'Easter 1916'.

The archetypal monsters, sea, 'dyke', and 'flood', and the feeling of enormous destruction, are now restored to something more mundane, domestic. This is a bold jump, in a way defying credibility, fracturing the organic logic of the poem. Yet it is right. The imagery of destruction serves the purpose of getting underneath 'The Oxford Colleges, Big Ben', the 'art-galleries' and 'creepered walls', with that primal, universal energy that is often hidden but is always the basic fuel of civilization and culture. This fuel is also what ensures resistance to overt injustice. That this energy will not be likely to destroy everything - the monsters of power are still alive, their ears still hear - is good common sense. Civilization is and has to be self-purging.

The last stanza makes the flood and the reconstruction offer a further dimension to the flat jargon of international tension. 'The pulse of nervous nations' extends the image of the sick individual with his 'metaphysical distress' and his 'content', to a nation like a single

individual with a similar self-preserving instinct. Good and evil are once again really health and sickness; other-awareness is opposed to uncreative self-indulgence. The last three lines imply forgiveness of those who are brought to a point when it is impossible not to kill. The guilt is in the murderer's reflection, 'in his glass'. At the present moment, while the poet and his 'ten friends' sprawl at ease in the garden, this man is preparing tenaciously for the kill. Not the real man, but the reflection - that is, what he is compelled to be for the moment - is 'tough in its patience', no wild, disordered impulsive creature, but an organised, purposeful, necessary agent of destruction.

The poem ends therefore with everything condoned. The 'it' of the last stanza, which is the 'this' of the previous, is the peace of mind and strength of character that come with acceptance, guiltlessness, and self-understanding. The poet is able at present to live as a morally aware and potentially loving person in an unloving society. He asks that these same qualities of love, helpless and inactive as this love may now seem, should 'need no excuse' after the violent changes have finished. This love should be that which heals all the wounds, forgives all the crimes, and makes final sense out of violence to come.

The success of this poem lies in the balance achieved between regularity and precision (form, rhythm, rhyme) and the overall implication of chaos, surrender, violence to come. One could almost say its fascination lies in the fact that the subject-matter is not suitable for the objectification and ordering that art inevitably offers, and in the fact that the kind of art, so formal, so traditional, so self-conscious, is indecent for conveying that subject matter. The uselessness of art, the failure of traditional forms of art, and so, of our culture, is

cleverly flaunted. Yet, we are left to feel, an art form has been needed to say what needs to be said, what cannot be said, publicly or privately, in any other way that involves completely the fallible individual in an imperfect society.

CHAPTER 6

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SCRUTINY

In Leavis's review of LOOK, STRANGER!, December, 1936, he finds no 'signs of development'[1] though he continues to pay general tribute of a kind:

> The talent, an impressive one, is apparent here in the familiar ways. There are those striking and so characteristic phrases and images. For he certainly has a gift for words; 2

But the review is otherwise all adversely critical, intelligently so, but supported by very little quotation and text-analysis. After dismissing ASCENT OF F6 the review ends:

> That kind of badness, when a writer of Mr Auden's gifts is led into it, implies not only a complete absence of exposure to criticism, but also a confident awareness of an encouraging audience. In other words, the present is the time when the young talent needs as never before the support of the group, and when the group can, as never before, escape all contact with serious critical standards ... 3

The above seems too easy and personal a thing to say. One wonders how many talents would ever achieve anything unusual or experimental if they were first to submit to prescribed discipline. The faults they would avoid might easily not be balanced by the sheer bold untidiness of being spontaneous. One might add that Auden has always been a voracious reader and that he was early influenced by Hardy, Hopkins, Yeats and many others, which is, of course, not the same as being in 'contact with serious critical standards';[4] but it is at least an indication of a talent not grossly asserting itself in ignorant, presumptuous isolation.

From this time the reviews of Auden's works become impatient and ungenerous.

THE CRITERION

LOOK STRANGER! was reviewed in the issue of October, 1936. The reviewer is critical of the difficulties of understanding, though she (Janet Adam Smith) thinks they are less than in POEMS. She does not like the doctrine which she sees emerging from the volume, namely, that there are 'no precise rules for behaviour ... but a sharper use of (intelligence).'[4] This sharpness, she says, makes Auden simultaneously aware of two or three things which he tries to write into a poem with simultaneity. This reviewer says nothing either penetrating or warm.

ENGLISH STUDIES

This annual was published in Holland under the editorship of R.W. Zandvoort. A certain Frederick Wood gave regular summaries and estimates of the year's drama, poetry, and fiction. Auden is not mentioned until 1935 though Spender, Day Lewis and Aldington figure significantly.

In the 1937 issue, which reviewed the writing of 1936, LOOK, STRANGER! is dismissed as pessimistic and critical of everything. The assumption is made that in 1930, with POEMS, 'Auden was immediately acclaimed as one of the poets of the future'.[5] The saving grace of LOOK, STRANGER! is considered to be its 'semi-facetious style'.[6]

In the 1938 review of 1937, THE ASCENT OF F6 is rather reluctantly praised as a play 'which leaves us thinking and wondering'.[7] In 1939 there is a favourable, if brief, mention of ON THE FRONTIER, and in the same issue there is a full-length article on Auden entitled 'Left-wing Poetry - a note'. Although it is an article, it has an up-to-date review flavour in that it covers not just a volume of poetry, but all Auden's

works, and cannot but be superficial when it comes to demonstrating that the poems are poems. The leftish purpose they might serve is another matter altogether. The writer, H.W. Hausermann, is very favourably impressed by Auden and says he wishes Auden were not so little known. He makes out a case to show that Auden lost his communistic faith as early as 1933 and says:

> Auden's private allusions, however, derive mostly from an exuberant feeling of solidarity with those few with whom he shares his experience. 8

He quotes from an article by Auden in a book by Naomi Mitcheson, published in 1932*, AN OUTLINE OF WRITING FOR BOYS AND GIRLS:

> But whenever society breaks up into classes, sects, townspeople and peasants, rich and poor, literature suffers. There is writing for the gentle and writing for the simple, for the highbrow and lowbrow; the latter gets cruder and coarser, the former more and more refined. And so, today, writing gets shut up in a circle of clever people writing about themselves for themselves, or ekes out an underworld existence, cheap and nasty. Talent does not die out, but it can't make itself understood ... What is going to happen? If it were only a question of writing it wouldn't matter; but it is an index of our health. It's not only books, but our lives, that are going to pot. 9

Hausermann already realised what some English critics did not realise until much later - that the left-wing literary movement was anything but unified.

THE LONDON MERCURY

November 1936. Dilys Powell's review is short but generous, without being enthusiastic. She sees the poems as giving 'an impression of increasing stability.'[10]

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* Given as 1923 in the article.

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

November 7, 1936. There is an encouraging word for Auden and Isherwood's 'brave attempt to revive the poetic play'.[11]

November 28. The reviewer of LOOK, STRANGER! sees communism excised since the first publication of some of the poems and finds there are 'several fully articulate and finely balanced poems in this volume, among others which are - and it is understandable - imperfectly projected and fumbling'.[12] This reviewer thinks that Auden's real worth lies in his dramatic works.

THE POETRY REVIEW, Vol. XXVXX, 1937. The New Auden. Laurence Whistler.

This review shows a sympathetic appreciation of what is good in Auden's poetry and a willingness to look for, or wait for, the best, and to overlook the faults. LOOK, STRANGER! is taken as showing a definite progress from POEMS, perhaps mainly because the 'meaning' of the poems is clearer, and there is far less crudity, strain, obscurity without justification.

> These poems demand close attention, do not all yield their content readily, but the alert and sympathetic reader should be able to find in them much that is arresting, and much that will move and please. 13

CHAPTER 7

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NEW VERSE, November 1937, Auden Double Number.

Needless to say one finds mostly praise or eulogy in this left-wing poetry magazine, which was not likely to be read by anyone not already in sympathy with Auden's poetry. Among those paying tribute are Isherwood, Macneice, Spender, Geoffrey Grigson, C. Day Lewis, Edwin Muir and Dylan Thomas.

Isherwood sees the early Auden as essentially a scientist, then musician and ritualist, and thirdly, Scandinavian steeped in saga. He is also steeped in 'a school-boy world, with its feuds, its practical jokes, its dark threats conveyed in puns and riddles and understatements'.[1]

Spender tells us that Auden was a prolific writer, techniques coming easily, but that he was too lazy to do much polishing. He tells of the powerful influence of T.S. Eliot when Auden was at Oxford, and of other influences later, such as Homer Lane's theories of psychosomatic disease, and how Auden tried to write clinically:

> Poetry, he said, must concern itself with shapes and volumes. Colours and smells were condemned as romantic: Form alone was significant. Auden loathed (and still rather dislikes) the Sea - for the Sea, besides being deplorably wet and sloppy, is formless. 2

We are told that Auden actively liked the industrial Midlands 'particularly in districts where an industry is decaying'.[3] He liked mountainous scenery and,

> His romantic travel-wish was always towards the North. He could never understand how anyone could long for the sun, the blue sky, the palm-trees of the South. His favourite weather was autumnal; high wind and driving rain. He loved industrial ruins, a disused factory or an abandoned mill: a ruined abbey would leave him quite cold. He has always had a special feeling for caves and mines. 4

Isherwood goes on to say that the short-lived crazes of influence and imitation did not change Auden from an essentially traditional poet.

Spender speaks of Auden's communism; it was preceded by the interest in psychology and never was separated in the poetry from the personal. Spender says that Auden and all the left-wing intellectual poets did no more than sympathise with the workers while remaining thoroughly bourgeois. However, Spender says:

> ..... 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 one of the most creative, realistic and valid positions for the artist in our time? 5

Macneice's contribution is an informal letter to Auden. The tone is quiet and balanced, neither eulogising nor acerbic:

> You go to extremes, of course, but that is all to the good. There is still a place in the sun for the novels of Virginia Woolf, for still-life painting and for the nature-lover. But these would probably not survive if you and your like, who have no use for them, did not plump entirely for something different. 6

Among Macneice's other comments is this:

> I think you have shown great sense in not writing "proletarian" stuff (though some reviewers, who presumably did not read your poems, have accused you of it). You realise that one must write about what one knows. One may not hold the bourgeois creed, but if one knows only bourgeois one must write about them.[7]

The final paragraph again reveals that tone which is ideal for criticism. Unless a critic feels that a writer is deliberately false and a dangerous influence, a friendliness of attitude, a willingness to concede virtues, can only be of use, helping the poet and preventing the critic from losing an ultimate humility:

> These are the criticisms which occur to me at the moment. I have no time to expand on your virtues, but I must say that what I especially admire in you is your unflagging curiosity about people and events. Poetry is related to the sermon and you have your penchant for preaching, but it is more closely related to conversation and you, my dear, if any, are a born gossip. 8

Geoffrey Grigson's article is called Auden as a Monster. The sum total of adverse criticism of Auden seemed to Grigson to amount to the charge of 'monster':

> Auden does not fit. Auden is no gentleman. Auden does not write, or exist, by any of the codes, by the Bloomsbury rules, by the Hampstead rules, by the Oxford, the Cambridge, or the Russell Square rules. Auden writes about boys at school. Auden bites his nails. Auden uses rhyme. Auden uses any kind of form ... 9

Grigson's answer is this:

> If you have, then, a medical, moral and practical view, more or less, about the arts, if art is a releaser of tension, something which cleans and polishes up the raggedness of the soul, something which "can help us immensely by casting light upon the ground on which we stand, and dissolving by its warmth the cold mist of indifference and unconscious falsehood in which we are all more or less enclosed," then you must find Auden perhaps the most valuable poet alive. 10

Macneice is very conscious of the adverse outside criticism of NEW VERSE writing:

> One expects ignorance and impudence from Evening Standard reviewers (Mr Howard Spring wrote "Mr W.H. Auden, I understand, is a celebrated young man. Mr Louis Macneice, I believe, is also not unknown to juvenile cognoscenti") or scurfy rudeness from an old bull like Mr St. John Irvine, but the authors of the malignant and silly ineptitudes thrown from Cambridge and the weeklies are educated men ... 11

One can sense why these contributors addressed one another in their poetry and felt their reading public to be not only very limited but in danger of becoming even more so.

There are sixteen brief comments in this issue of NEW VERSE, mostly balanced and sensible, ~~with a sense of~~ criticising to be helpful. Dylan Thomas's footnote* is amusing and indicative of the influence and reputation of Auden within the group:

> P.S. Congratulations on Auden's seventieth birthday.[12]

(ii) F. Cudforth Flint

'New Leaders in English Poetry'; VIRGINIA QUARTERLY REVIEW, XIV (1938)

The writer has some useful things to say. He tries to analyse the nature of the quality that unifies Auden's poetry into a 'body':

> The basis of the style is the forthright statement, in which words are in general used denotatively; that is to say, the full force of a word is confined within limits completely bounded by one or more of its dictionary definitions. There is a complete absence of the charged atmosphere, the imminent but not clearly evident over-world of romantic poetry. In this precise matrix are sometimes imbedded statements which are not merely non-connotative, but positively flat. To balance these, the more imaginative moments in the verse are to be found in images and metaphors which derive their effect from the exciting exactness with which they apply to experience. 1

Unfortunately, as so often in articles of this kind, an interesting point is not at all adequately developed or illustrated to make it convincing. Flint sees Auden's importance to poetry of the times as lying in a constructive attitude of life, inspired with the new beliefs of Marx and Freud. His sympathetic patience with Auden carries little weight and penetration, simply because the writer clearly regards the dual banners

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* This remark is commented on in LETTERS OF DYLAN THOMAS TO VERNON WATKINS, pp 32-3, edited by the latter. The remark was also intended to hint at Auden's presumptuousness.

of Marx and Freud as an exciting new hope for mankind. The assumption is that an allegiance to these banners must lend to Auden's poetry an inherent value.

(iii) Louis Macneice

MODERN POETRY, 1938.

The subtitle of this book, 'A Personal Essay', suits the informal, admittedly subjective, discussion of poetry. The opening chapter, 'A Change of Attitude', gives an outline of developments in poetry from Hopkins, with a fair amount of back-looking at the Victorians. The tone and treatment are mostly fair and balanced, but quite definitely, and not surprisingly when one thinks of Macneice the poet, the survey reflects what is said in the Conclusion:

> My own prejudice, therefore, is in favour of poets whose worlds are not too esoteric. I would have a poet able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of the newspapers, capable of pity and laughter, informed in economics, appreciative of women, involved in personal relationships, actively interested in politics, susceptible to physical impressions ... life is not literary, while literature is not, in spite of Plato, essentially second hand. 1

When it comes to Auden's turn - usually linked with Spender - to be talked about, after a discussion of Pound, Eliot and Yeats, he comes off very well. He and other NEW SIGNATURE poets are praised for poetry of statement, of having something to say, of being aware of the Without as much as the Within.

After a brief autobiography Macneice goes on to discuss modern poetry under headings such as Imagery, Rhyme and Rhythm, Diction. Remarks about Auden are frequently supported by personal acquaintance and remembered conversation:

> Auden's admiration for the objective world is founded on that cosmic pride which, as distinct from personal pride, lies at the base of Christianity. (Macneice holds that Christianity should be taken up into Communism). 2

Under Imagery Macneice says this of Auden:

> The younger poets whom I most admire, Auden and Spender, write differently from all these poets - Pound and Eliot, Dylan Thomas, William Empson (who so much differ from each other), because they are more interested in the world of concrete people ...
>
> So Auden and Spender, who live in a concrete world, tend to use images neither as merely algebra nor purely aesthetically for the sake of the image itself. They approach, therefore, the parataxis of the early Chinese poets. They verge sometimes on allegory but, as they are primarily interested in what idealist philosophers used to call the concrete universal, they do not often use particular images merely as counters to generalities. 3

Unfortunately, there is no quotation to support this. More penetrating and with some illustration, is the discussion of dramatic imagery, and the use of the dream technique to break down barriers of time and place. The influence of Eliot at least should have been mentioned here.

Snippets of quotation are offered to support praise for Auden's powers of condensing images and metaphors, though it is admitted that sometimes the lines do not come off.

The chapters on Rhyme and Rhythm and Diction say little about Auden, and nothing adversely critical. In the chapter on Obscurity there is considerable discussion of Auden. For the most part the fault is ascribed to the laziness or prejudice of readers, though POEMS, 1930, is found to be obscure for the simple reason of being sometimes 'slapdash in construction'[4] or full of unco-ordinated ideas. Otherwise this volume is found obscure for the following reasons: the thought is difficult; the rhetorical techniques; lucidity sacrificed 'for the sake of

concentration and pattern'.[4b] The ten lines of 'It was easter as I walked ...', beginning 'Is first baby, warm in mother', are quoted and shown to lose a great deal if the meaning is put in simple prose. The struggle to understand, and the ambiguity, are, in this case, part of the meaning. Macneice sees poetry getting less obscure 'because its subject is less esoteric':[5]

> ..... a scale of values, however uncertain and fluctuating, is implicit in the poetry of Auden and Spender. Their poetry may be expected to become clearer side by side with their philosophy, provided the public itself becomes at home with such philosophy. 6

It is doubtful if there is much truth or sense in this concluding statement of the chapter. The book as a whole is slight, and the sympathy with Auden would only be persuasive to those already feeling as Macneice does. Otherwise the book could be said to be clear, pleasant in disposition, intelligent and sometimes penetrating, and not intended to be more than an offering of comment and opinion.

iv) James Southworth

'Wysten Hugh Auden': SEWANEE REVIEW, XLVI, 1938.

This article is in two sections, the first on the political and leftist aspects of Auden's poetry (very obvious and dull to read now) and the second on Auden's personal condition as a homosexual which Southworth sees as clearly, boldly and honestly expressed in many poems, a point made by no other critic. Southworth is convincing and much of the near-obscurity of some poems is dispelled if one accepts this interpretation. LETTER TO LORD BYRON is seen as a false front to the homosexual's guilt:

> The 'brave and insolent front' is noticeable in LETTERS FROM ICELAND. At times in this volume the poet seems to seek desperately to cover beneath a cloak of studied smartness and sheer bravado a sense of guilt forced upon him by the mores of society. The aspect of his personality here revealed is definitely less pleasant than those aspects revealed in his other volumes. Except as a further indication of Mr Auden's prosodic skill I do not think LETTERS FROM ICELAND will add anything to his stature. Instead of shocking the reader, as I think he hopes to do, he succeeds only in arousing his pity that so much energy has been spent in doing something so little worthy of his talents. The book gives every indication of being nothing more than the fulfilment of a contract with the publishers. But 'Spain', a poem which lifts Mr Auden out of himself, possesses the finest qualities of his genius. 1

v) Cleanth Brooks

MODERN POETRY AND THE TRADITION, 1939 (and THE WELL WROUGHT URN; 1947)

The writer's thesis is that the essential character, value and tradition of modern poetry is its metaphysical wit; by metaphysical he means 'primarily an assimilation of the diverse and discordant',[1] while wit is intellectual agility and boldness. He offers a stimulating argument against Edmund Wilson's AXEL'S CASTLE in which the symbolism in modern poetry is considered to be the dominant characteristic, a characteristic making for escapism and obscurity. Brooks disagrees with Wilson's belief that the early nineteenth century Romantic poets tried to recover what had been lost to English poetry since the Elizabethans with their 'natural language of poetry'.[2] Brooks fails to find an intellectual vigour or such subtlety in the Romantics as one finds in modern poetry. This is his way of breaking Wilson's argument which claimed that modern symbolist poetry can be lumped with the Romantics in the general charge of indefiniteness and escapism. Yeats is quoted as:

> an excellent illustration of the relation of symbolist to metaphysical poetry; for if Yeats's early poetry lies in what Wilson calls the serious-aesthetic tradition of symbolism, his later poetry approaches the conversational ironic ... though with no loss of subtlety, an increased hardness and wit. 3

There follows an appreciation of modernism, the latest form of the tradition in poetry. He discusses the Americans Alan Tate and Crowe Ransom, with their bold - and not easy to understand - efforts at creating a personal spontaneous sense of time, history and myth. The chapter on Frost, Macleish and Auden is preceded by some close textual analysis, showing the writer's obvious enjoyment, and sense of the importance of boldness, relevant unusualness, and imaginative subtlety. Brooks asserts that poetry is, above all, an unequivocal having-something-to-say about vitally important modern issues.

Both Frost and Macleish are related by Brooks to the symbolist-metaphysical tradition. Auden is introduced rather unfavourably as 'the artist working in the service of a cause',[4] followed immediately however with this:

> At his best, his poetry reveals what we have called the structure of inclusion, with a maximum density and firmness and with no glib oversimplications. [5]

Then we are told 'Auden's surest triumphs represent a recovery of the archaic imagery - fells, scarps overhung by kestrels ...'[6] and that 'His dominant contrast is the contrast between this scene and the modern age of ice: foundries with their fires cold, flooded coalmines ...'[7]

Some detailed textual analysis is offered in support of the statement that Auden's 'satire', directed at 'an essential frivolousness of mind',[8] is his 'most successful method'.[9] Special attention is paid to 'Consider this and in our time' in which there is much 'use of sharp contrasts which gives vitality to Auden's verse'.[10] This is followed by a further brief textual analysis to show the method gone wrong and used coarsely.

We are told that Auden is distinguished from other leftist poets of the Thirties by 'his ability to assimilate the discords into a meaningful pattern'[11] which 'has resulted in charges of obscurity - some of them quite justified, many of them unjustified'.[12] The clever ambivalence of Auden's public school themes is noted where a school can represent the nursery of complacence yet could be a place of useful discipline and instruction; or by parody the public school can represent what 'a proper sort of fascism (revolutionary communism?) ought to be.'[13]

The chapter is rounded off with a fairly full analysis of POEM XVI, penetrating and sympathetic, while the concluding paragraph has a note of level-headed humility:

> It is quite idle at this time to try to predict Auden's future career. His best work revolves around one rather narrow theme. Other themes will undoubtedly bring their special problems. What it does seem relevant to insist on here, and especially relevant in connection with the principles argued in this book, is that Auden's best poetry represents the structure which we discussed in the first chapters of this study. 14

Auden's reputation can only benefit from this book, not only because the method of analysis of text supports generalisation, or because the writer tends more to be sympathetic than otherwise, but because Auden is viewed as one of a kind of pioneer in the difficult business of making poetry into something that accords with the complexity of consciousness in the present time:

> It has not been until the twentieth century that the concept of progress has been seriously challenged. With the weakening of that concept, men are becoming ready once more to accept a poetry which will give a view of the human situation as total as that given by tragedy ...
>
> The principles of poetic organisation, developed to their logical conclusion, we have argued, carry the poem over into dress, with the characteristics of tragedy - concreteness, dramatic ambiguity, irony, resolution through struggle - as perhaps their highest expression ... Our sense of a poem as a dramatic context, in general, is slight; it has hardly been nourished by the poetry of the last two hundred years. 15

Clearly what Auden did in the Thirties, and still does, was to 'carry the poem over into drama'. Not only in the different poems, but in glancing down the list of titles in, say, COLLECTED POEMS, 1930-1943, one has the impression of a poet strongly aware of his not being alone in the world with a private, self-nourished vision. We always feel, with Auden, that there are many different kinds of people, many branches of knowledge and experience, which must come within the range of a present-day enlightened person's concern. We feel that people are obliged to modify self-absorption.

Cleanth Brooks's THE WELL WROUGHT URN (1947), apart from anything else, does much to modify the impression that the first book could give, namely, that nothing really worthwhile was written in English between Donne and the moderns. The detailed appreciation of poems by Wordsworth, Keats and others, clarifies what Brooks means by the poetry of inclusion and the poetry of exclusion. Brooks would like to see a more positive, more boldly authoritative critical judgement on individual poems (the same distinction between poems and poetry as made by Graves and Riding) and he sees the possibility of using the distinction between inclusion and exclusion as a criterion:

> But the advantages of this particular criterion are two-fold: (1) we shall be able to set up our hierarchy in terms of the organisations of the poems themselves - not by having to appeal to some outside scale of values; (2) we shall, if this mode of evaluation rests upon what is really a more accurate account of the structure of poetry, be able to correct and improve the presently accepted hierarchy of poems. 16

The qualities that Brooks lays emphasis on as symptoms of inclusive poems, are wit, paradox and irony. Brooks wants to have a fixed set of principles for judging all poetry of any age, with a minimum amount of deferential attention to cultural history and the literary fashion of a

period. As with so many other critics, he has strong feelings about the general chaos of present day standards in the Humanities:

> The Humanities are in their present plight largely because their teachers have more or less ceased to raise normative questions, have refrained from evaluation ... The Humanities have suffered under a variety of attacks which stem perhaps from the very nature of our age and of our civilisation. But they have not been better defended, it seems to me - at least, more effectively defended - because the teachers of the Humanities have tended to comply with the spirit of the age rather than to resist it. If the Humanities are to endure, they must be themselves - and that means, among other things, frankly accepting the burden of making normative judgements. 17

There is only one mention of Auden in this book, but the kind of mention in a book as searching and thorough as this, places Auden among the few major modern poets:

> Now the modern poet has, for better or worse, thrown the weight of the responsibility upon the reader ... the modern poet has not produced a poetry which easily yields manageable abstractions in the way that some of the older poetry seems to do. But this is scarcely a conclusion that is flattering to the antagonists of modern poetry. What does an "older poem" like "Corinna's going a-Maying" say? What does this poem communicate? If we are content with the answer that the poem says that we should enjoy youth before youth fades, and if we are willing to write off everything else as "decoration", then we can properly censure Eliot or Auden or Tate for not making poems so easily tagged. But in that case we are not interested in poetry; we are interested in tags. 18

vi) James G. Southworth

SOWING THE SPRING, 1940

The writer is very sympathetic to Auden's poetry. He sees the mingling of personal and political as its chief characteristic:

> In one poem the political background lends significance to his personal experience; in another the personal experience heightens the efficacy of the political castigations. 1

However, there is little penetrating thought on these lines. The first section of the chapter on Auden contains many references to different poems, and a few brief quotations. But instead of indicating how the two things, political and personal, are interwoven in the texture of the poetry, there is no more than an outline of Auden's political themes, followed in section two by a separate consideration of the personal themes. But it is accurate when Southworth says this to conclude the first section:

> Thus reduced to the bare outlines of the 'thing said' it is obvious that the importance of Mr Auden's message does not lie in any practical programme of reform. The thought results from a sensitive person's impact with a reality which, because of a defective social and educational system, he never dreamed existed. 2

The second section has a much franker discussion of Auden's presumed homosexuality than one finds in any other book; but it certainly is not true that, as Southworth says,

> With an honesty akin to that of Gide's in SI LE GRAIN NE MEURT, Mr Auden has recorded the history of his attempt at reaching a satisfactory emotional adjustment. 3

In a poem like 'It was easter as I walked in the public gardens', there is almost a clear admission of being a homosexual, but not directly anywhere else. If one begins by presuming that this was definitely Auden's condition, then one understands why the references to his 'dear' or 'dearest' or 'My love' are scarcely ever followed by pronouns to denote sex. In a way this is 'dishonest', just as the indirect and unusual approach in THE ORATORS could be said to be a deliberate disguising of the theme of homosexuality which Auden was exploring. Letter to a Wound from THE ORATORS is subtle and touching; one senses behind the half-amused, light tone, the agony of the wound beyond healing and the need to accept.

But it could scarcely be called clear; it is, like much of THE ORATORS, something of a crossword puzzle; in the confusion Auden can watch how the homosexuality behaves or comes off.

It was not until I had read Southworth that I recognized Poem X of LOOK, STRANGER! 'Now on the window-sill I lean' as possibly an admission of the unhappy, defensive position of homosexuals in society and a kind of hymn of praise for the normal and healthy boys in the school where Auden was teaching. Being, as the poem stands, about people more generally sick and ill-adjusted, homosexuality is universalised.

Southworth discusses 'It was Easter as I walked' but it is surely naive of him to say: 'For Mr Auden it (love) is a form of escape from the insecurity of a troubled world'.[4] It would be truer to say that, in this poem, Auden hides his inability to love a woman by saying that there are too many things wrong with the world to allow him to enjoy such a relationship. Whether he realised it or not, Auden often implied criticism of normal lovers for indulging their normal passions. As pointed out in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the ten lines of the poem beginning with 'So, insecure, he loves ...' (quoted in full in Southworth's book)[5] contains a clutter of polysyllabic words to describe love-making and procreation. This style betrays either ignorance or disgust or pretence at sophisticated dismissal.

Auden's changed tone in LOOK, STRANGER! compared to the tone of POEMS, comes, Southworth says, probably rightly, not from an intellectual or moral surrender of his political ideals but from an emotional compromise in accepting his homosexual condition. Lyrical sadness and nostalgia replace the terse 'smartness'[6], the defensively obscure, clinical note. But Southworth does not adequately indicate the universality of the poetry, which lies in the exploration of any personal suffering.

After a summary in section III Southworth goes on to a final section in which he examines 'the tools by which the poet communicates'.[7] There is little to recommend in this method of discussing aspects of poetry in separate compartments. In this section most of Southworth's remarks are either vague or a statement of the obvious; the frequent snippets of quotation are briefly commented on. The conclusion to this chapter has at least one important sentence which might have helped G.S. Fraser not to look solely for ideas and meanings (referred to in the discussion of VISION AND RHETORIC):

> Mr Auden's ideas are not so important as the way in which he expresses them. [8]

In other words, the poems as they stand in their entirety are what matter. Southworth, however, does not himself seem fully to realise this.

vii) Rica Brenner

POETS OF OUR TIME, 1941

In this book of pen-pictures, as much attention is given to Auden as to Eliot and Yeats, and other poets. Biographical details are mixed with convenient quotations to mark the route of a career. The tone of the comments on the poetry is sympathetic. Very few of these comments are at all penetrating, or they have by now been said so many times - different from shown or interpreted - that it would be tiresome to dwell on them here. The writer views Auden as a voice of socialist change. Though written in 1940, this book gives no attention to the many subtle and complex poems written especially after 1934. Quite obviously Brenner read Auden's poetry selectively, trying to make him fit a very dull pattern.

CONCLUDING NOTE TO PART I. 1930-7

(Including a consideration of LETTER TO LORD BYRON, SPAIN and THE ORATORS, and Julian Symons' book, THE THIRTIES)

At the age of thirty in 1937, Auden had completed enough work in poetry, prose, drama and film, to be called, as far as any young modern poet can be, well-known.[1] The sales of his books of verse were greater than any other living British poet's at the time, from the 1,000 copies of POEMS, 1930 to the 4,350 of LOOK STRANGER!. Some indication of his reputation outside of the left-wing intelligensia can be gained from the fact that he was awarded the King's Medal for poetry in 1937, a medal which he accepted, to the surprise of his NEW VERSE and other friends.

These are his works in this period:

(a) Individual poems in journals and two collections, POEMS (including PAID ON BOTH SIDES) and LOOK, STRANGER! published by Faber in London and by Random House in New York.

(b) THE ORATORS, with prose and verse; three dramatic works, THE DANCE OF DEATH, THE DOG BENEATH THE SKIN, THE ASCENT OF F6, published; and performed by The Group Theatre, which Auden helped to found in 1932.

(c) A travel-book, LETTERS FROM ICELAND, 1937, including the long poem, LETTER TO LORD BYRON.

(d) Songs and librettos in collaboration with Benjamin Britten and published by Boosey and Hawkes, 1936, 1937. OUR HUNTING FATHERS performed at the Norfolk and Norwich Biennial Music Festival, September 1936.

(e) Commentary for documentary film NIGHT MAIL, 1936.

(f) Prose works, mainly incorporated later into other works.

(g) Contributions to books or symposiums in book form, such as Mitchison's OUTLINE FOR BOYS AND GIRLS, 1932; OXFORD AND THE GROUPS, edited R. Crossman, 1934; and seven other items.

(h) Edited THE POET'S TONGUE and was about to edit THE OXFORD BOOK OF LIGHT VERSE.

(i) Thirty-six reviews for The Criterion, Scrutiny, The New Statesman, The Daily Herald, The Listener, etc.

In his book THE THIRTIES, Julian Symons shows, among other things, that there was a great disparity between the actual numbers of people who read Auden or the left-wing journals, and the tone or language - hortatory, would-be convinced - used to address these people. Although Symons estimates the number of intelligensia in England in the Thirties at about a million, the number of those who were either readers of poetry or in any way interested in calls to action, was very small. (By intelligensia he means 'both the hard core of genuine artists of all kinds and in all mediums, and the massive soft outer flesh of those with vague artistic aspirations which find no more public expression than a liking for Swedish furniture, membership of a film society, the production of a dozen poems kept in a locked drawer.[2]) Symons calls these the Audience, who have above them an estimated 50,000 with practical ability and energy as well as idealism. But still, only two or three thousand people actually bought* and read poetry.

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* Libraries accounted for part of sales.

To be more widely heard Auden wrote his plays for his own Group Theatre, but according to Symons and others, only the middle class liberals went to the performances. The plays themselves, most writers seem to agree, were at best entertaining and harmless, full of refreshing techniques learnt from Brecht; at their worst they were boring, slow-moving, too full of private jokes, and with inappropriate lapses from a serious kind of theme into feeble farce occurring all too often.

By 1937 nevertheless Auden had managed to find a reputable publisher, to be reviewed, to be asked to review, contribute, edit; he was able to mix with plenty of stimulating company, and for a time, to feel on the side of right. It would be naive to maintain that a young poet could hope to do much better. He was the kind of poet he was because he enjoyed it. He gained very little influence outside left-wing circles because, in spite of the universal nature of much of his poetry, he seemingly chose sides, affecting love of Man the lonely, the unsuccessful, the oppressed, the neurotic, the exploited, and creating an Enemy of the vast majority of people who could be called more or less successful and normal.

It is a matter of opinion which attitude is the better, Yeats's or Auden's. One thing is certain, as I have tried to show, and that is that Auden <u>was</u> a poet, one writing with far greater profundity, personal feeling and a sense of balance, than a left-wing context would require or perhaps even recognise. The stamp of leftism would also prejudice readers of other persuasions from recognising these qualities. For the first group Auden said enough of what they wanted to find, while for the latter there was too much discernible, topical obviousness, which to them precluded a real look for the personal, the depth.

It might be said that Auden was doing a lot of bluffing, unconscious or not. He was urgently - with intelligence and wit - aware of himself, his inadequate and unhappy 'abnormal' self, and simultaneously aware of the outside world, society, non-self, or whatever one chooses to call it, where inadequate, or unjust habits and systems made some, even all, members of that society unhappy. Change society, Auden felt, and you will change its members, and it would cure him with its love and forgiveness either of the actual abnormality or neurosis, or of the guilt and loneliness that social censure brings. Whether this inadequacy is sexual or not, linked to homosexuality or not, is of secondary importance since the condition of unhappiness is made to seem infinitely varied and universal. The real evil is that which creates the feeling of guilt and censure, the proscription of the different and unusual.

The real interest in Auden's poetry of this period lies in the universality of the struggle to effect a compromise between one's own private unhappiness, one's identification with conspicuous unhappiness all about one, and one's helplessness to change either. Huge questions hover constantly. What are the limits of self-projection, identification, escape from self into other? Must one withdraw from an educated conscience about what is going on in the world, in order to become a whole person? How far can one give oneself away in poetry, confess to 'abnormality' or eccentricity? How, above all, does one write poetry which is sufficiently charged with common humanity, the archetypal, the unconscious, in an age that seems to offer techniques and weapons with which intelligence and reason can fight every kind of personal and social unhappiness? How do you handle science and reason when here-and-now there is so much injustice, oppression and neurosis? All the questions are evoked in reading Auden.

Whereas society is subject to legislation or revolution, and so, to reform, a personality with its problems of ego and a single death is not.* Though Auden was very interested in practical measures for increasing human happiness, psycho-therapy especially, it is clear from his poetry that he was unable to reduce the sum of all that human nature is to a dreary jargon of pragmatic faith. Any adherence he had to communistic and psychological theory was intelligent and complex. He early saw the delusion of his partial adherence. The changed tone of LOOK, STRANGER! and the move to America, and the later acceptance of a Christian truth in things, are really stages by which self-delusion, never in any way great, came to an end.

Two quotations from Symons' book will remind one of the morally disturbing period in which Auden was writing; self-delusion becomes either rather fine, or at least excusable.

> The year 1936 was not only the middle of a decade, but also the heart of the Thirties dream. Consider: in this year the Left Book Club was founded, the Spanish Civil War began, the Surrealist Exhibition was held, the Jarrow Crusade took place, the first issue of NEW WRITING appeared. Fascism in Britain became strongly arrogant and obtrusive. The movement towards collective action, towards a Popular Front, was suddenly no longer the quirk of the political Left but a potent force, adhered to by people of all parties and of many beliefs.
>
> There was a political dream, in which Fascism would be checked abroad and at home, and the National Government in Britain thrown out, by a great concerted movement for democratic action supported by all men and women of goodwill. There was an aesthetic dream in which art would be appreciated by the masses, yet produced at a high level of sensibility. The political and aesthetic dream somehow blended together, so that the sectarian Communist was to lie down with the unpolitical aesthete (at no other time in this century could such an artist

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* A personality <u>can</u> change, but only by very gradual, perhaps assisted, evolution. In the main, personality does not change; it adapts its unique nature to conditions that change.

> as Virginia Woolf have written in the DAILY WORKER), the working class Socialist to bed with the middle class Surrealist, and all were to join together in a European movement whose triumph was historically inevitable. It is easy now to see that most of those involved were unprepared to do more than attend a meeting or two and wait for the historically inevitable success to come about, easy to see that they were deceived: yet behind the movement at this time were the most generous impulses of humanity, impulses more valuable by far than the barren knowingness of the Fifties. *It is better to be waiting for Lefty than to be waiting for Godot. 2

The Surrealist movement represents the inner revolution, the possibility of wholly new associations in the mind and a fresh evocation of the unconscious. The continental Surrealists linked the movement to Communism, with the political revolution made easier by a wide-spread popular breakdown of unconscious habits. The Left Book Club, run by Victor Gollancz, was so successful as an organisation that it began to rival the Labour Party's hold over the workers.

The long poem 'Letter to Lord Byron', written in 1936 and published in LETTERS FROM ICELAND, is an easy-going, intimate, colloquial piece of light verse that ranges over many topics and includes a brief autobiography. The verse form is borrowed roughly from Byron's DON JUAN. There is a good deal of the comic and funny, but in the main everything written about is really a serious subject matter. The tone has the advantage of being able to say and include just about anything with consciously atrocious rhyming and juxtapositioning of the supposedly sacred with the vulgar. Nastiness or disapproval is tempered, while admiration and reverence are without egoism, tribute and solemnity. On a deeper level the light and laconic method disguises some serious confession, or makes it seem that the writer has taken everything in his

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* The last sentence is very much a matter of opinion. But I would endorse it.

stride. One has only to read Auden's poems of this time, or think of the times the poet now reviews from his modestly asserted maturity, to realise what it cost to reach these realisations. The eighth last stanza of the poem hits the nail of Auden's dilemma on the head: 'Complex or Poverty; in short The Trap.' The last two lines of the previous ~~verse~~ stanza has led up to this with:

> For no one thinks unless a complex makes him,
> Or till financial ruin overtakes him.

He goes on, in the sixth last stanza, to give the motivation for Byron's poetry, and his travel - the double link with Auden is obvious - as his lameness and insensitive treatment by his parents. Auden had indicated his own abnormality in his earlier poetry, but in this poem which, as he says in Part Four, is a presenting of himself to the public before Isherwood's book comes out (LIONS AND SHADOWS), he more or less evades his personal condition by allying himself with the general and normal:

> We all grow up the same way, more or less;
> Life is not known to give away her presents;
> She only swops. The unself-consciousness
> That children share with animals and peasants
> Sinks in the 'sturm und drang' of adolescence.
> Like other boys I lost my taste for sweets,
> Discovered sunsets, passion, God, and Keats.
>
> England, my England - you have been my tutrix -
> The Mater, on occasions, of the free,
> Or, if you'd rather, Dura Virus Nutrix,
> Whatever happens I am born of Thee;
> And Englishmen, all foreigners agree,
> Taking them by and large, and as a nation,
> All suffer from an Oedipus fixation.
>
> .....
> Mother looks odd today dressed up in peers,
> Slums, aspidistras, shooting-sticks, and queers.

Auden rather tries to get away with everything here. Not only are all men like himself, but England has a place for him anyway. One can sense a too-easy Freudian interpretation of intelligence and the motives of art, but earlier psychological beliefs are made fun of in this reference to Homer Lane's theories of psychosomatic disease:

> .....
> The pure-in-heart is never ill; catarrh
> Would be the yellow streak, the brush of tar;
> Determined to be loving and forgiving,
> I came back home to try and earn my living.

There is psychological insight and complexity in the description of the average man (Part II). The 'ogre, dragon, what you will' is what every kind of person finds in his life, a personally important enemy, pet hate or fear; it is the pivot of one's life and to be without it, to see the possibility of being freed from it, is the really hated thing:

> .....
> Those who would really kill his dream's contentment
> He hates with real implacable resentment.

The ogre is the opposite self, the necessary opposite pole of the ego whose pride cannot exist without the one great competitor, the vital opposition. It is the defender, this ogre, of 'Each dying force of history', the ever-latent redress, balance, natural need, instinctive good sense, that must damage the ego to put it right. The ogre or dragon is also at the disposal, as it were, of 'Banker or landlord, booking-clerk or Pope', and avoidance of it is the basic control of 'law and order' when life makes no other sense.

The second last stanza of Part II, much less personal than the end of the poem, indicates that the enduring hope of better things is something lying in the past, for the living to learn by. To the educated, intelligent man, a worthy, vicariously experienced history and tradition make the

present England bearable. In keeping with the assertion, discussed above, of England having a place for all kinds - that all are pretty much the same anyway - we see Auden in 1936 (in Iceland July-September, book published following year), ready to return home from Iceland with a considerable sense of acceptance, of putting up with things, of finally feeling there was a place for him there. But an 'external' event revived the delusion of finding oneself in a cause. Self-projection was a temptation again.

In July 1936, the Spanish Civil War finally broke out. This war suddenly gave many people with left-wing, or simple humanist inclinations, ideals and theories, a chance for immediate, personal, practical commitment. Auden went across as a stretcher-bearer in January 1937, returned after a short time, and wrote 'Spain' SPAIN. It was sold for a penny a copy in the streets of London, and was regarded as a call to action from the leading English left-wing poet of the time. But how many actually regarded it as poetry, and not just the slant of propaganda that they were looking for?

'Spain' has a sense of long, wide historical perspective combined with an array of human activity, creative and recreational. The repeated 'today the struggle' or 'O send ...', 'O, show ...', 'O, descend' contradict the truth of human experience, which is the near impossibility of making a break with very human and not-at-all guilty preoccupations of daily lives, in the name of an event that ~~has~~ involves no felt, direct and immediate interference with self-preservation. The cry of the poem to make the break, to sieze a moment in History with all one's moral being and actually affect the course of History is enfeebled by the breadth of reference to the variety of human, individual goings-on. The poem is anything but a successful battle-cry; the tone is factual, unhurried, and, as Symons says, any really personal feelings which Auden may have had when he was actually <u>in</u> Spain, are

scrupulously suspended in favour of a balanced argument. Monroe Spears, in THE POETRY OF W.H. AUDEN, quotes from the Introduction to THE POET'S TONGUE which Auden wrote in 1935:

> Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice. 3

Spears goes on to say that this attitude is what made NEW VERSE and Lehmann's NEW WRITING so different from the overtly Communist LEFT REVIEW.

Symons says, and most critics agree, that 'Spain' was Auden's last attempt at a compromise between the artistic and the propagandistic:

> Ahead of him lay the grandeurs and follies of an eccentric individualism, and a determination to re-write his own poetic past, so that, in later versions of 'Spain' the people's army has disappeared and 'the conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder' has become 'the conscious acceptance of guilt in the fact of murder.' 4

For Auden, as for Spender and others of the International Brigade, the Spanish Civil War was a great disillusionment and proof that to try to merge personal dissatisfaction in a greater cause was no answer to that dissatisfaction.

Three verses in the middle of 'Spain' could be read as a very clear indication of Auden's cynicism about the war and volunteering. There is a mockery in these lines which appears to have been missed, at the time, and by later critics:

> And the life, if it answers at all, replies from the heart
> And the eyes and the lungs, from shops and squares of the city:
> 'O no, I am not the Mover,
> Not to-day, not to you. To you I'm the

'Yes-man, the bar-companion, the easily duped:
I am whatever you do; I am your vow to be
Good, your humorous story;
I am your business voice; I am your marriage.

'What's your proposal? To build the Just City? I will.
I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic
Death? Very well, I accept, for
I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain.'

Surely the fact that there is no indication of it being a different person, or kind of person, addressed in the third verse, equates the 'yes-man, the bar-companion, the easily-duped' with the volunteer? Little wonder then that Auden made only small changes to this poem when he was rewriting, as Symons puts it, 'his poetic past'.

Other parts of the poem can be read differently if this sense of mockery is felt. The volunteers are not so much heroic, brave, individual, men making a conscious self-sacrifice in a significant moment of History, as blind creatures passively yielding to the call: 'Have heard and migrated like gulls or the seeds of a flower.' The image of 'clung like burrs' is not so pleasant or flattering, for it suggests blindness and instinct, not moral courage. Volunteers do not sail or journey from overseas, but instead 'They floated over the oceans', somehow mindless and will-less. In keeping with this unflattering interpretation of a volunteer, is the description of Spain:

On that arid square, that fragment nipped off from hot
Africa, soldered so crudely to inventive Europe,
On that tableland scored by rivers,
Our fever's menacing shapes are precise and alive.

If one is inclined to feel all through the poem that the correct sentiments for the occasion are present, one will feel that this verse asks for sympathy for a country that has never really had a chance, that it is a freak, a subject of pathos which demands our commitment. On the other hand,

with mockery and disillusionment in mind, this description can be taken as a rather impatient pen-picture of a country whose clumsy obviousness of historical theme so easily traps 'Our fever's menacing shapes', that is, our personal condition, into finding an apparent identification and resolution, but which is really only a delusion and an escape.

In THE ORATORS, published five years before 'Spain' SPAIN, there is clear evidence that Auden would never be crude and obvious in a propagandistic way. In the first part, 'Address for a Prize-day', there is an account of Dante's three divisions of sinner, namely, those who love themselves excessively, or who love their neighbour excessively; those guilty of defective love of God; and thirdly, those whose love is perverted.

Of the excessive lovers of their neighbours Auden writes:

> Dare-devils of the soul, living dangerously upon their nerves. A rich man taking the fastest train for the worst quarters of eastern cities; a private school-mistress in a provincial town, watching the lights go out in another wing, immensely passionate ... You call them selfish, but no, they care immensely, far too much ... Have you never noticed in them the gradual abdication of central in favour of peripheral control ... Try inviting them down in the holidays to a calm house. You can do most for them in the summer. They need love. 5

In other words Auden would always be likely to look closely at his own and others' personal motives for moral actions or beliefs. Our feelings about society are extensions of personal satisfaction or imbalances. This is not to be contemptuous of or even to lose admiration for so-called moral action and belief; it is to be wary of motives so that moral decisions can be based on something much more profound and lasting than a spontaneous and easily disillusioned impulse of externalisation.

Just as POEMS ended with a kind of prayer that was no obvious left-wing call to action, so THE ORATORS ends with a poem called simply, 'Epilogue'. In it there is an obvious antithesis between the man of action and bold decision, and the man of introspection, learning, doubt. In the first three of the four stanzas the second kind of man addresses the first (reader to rider, farer to fearer and horror to hearer). The poetry is rich and sustained so that one is convinced of the considerable truth in what each stanza asserts through the thinking-doubting man. The three points made are that death in action is still death, the end of everything; secondly that weakness of character will never be cured by action, or physical, external goals; and thirdly that psychosomatic disease from neurosis can never be thrown off by physical flight. The fourth stanza contains the three terse replies of the man of action. Contemptuous dismissal of the weaker man is implied, together with the assertion that it is the weaker man who is wrong when it comes to self-knowledge, health of soul. But this 'meaning' is wholly contained by - perhaps lost in - the folksong tone and rhythm, the power of the first three stanzas, and the age-old ring of the last line 'As he left them there, as he left them there ' which mists over any urgent, brash associations with themes of the Thirties.

END OF PART ONE OF THESIS

PART TWO OF THESIS
1937-1947

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AN INTRODUCTION TO AUDEN'S READING in the period 1937-1941

We are perhaps too near to Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot to debate adequately the question ofintellectualism in poetry. In the next decade or two, or next half-century, prevailing opinion may well be that Pound and Eliot stifled poetry and hypnotised the few people who survived as readers into requiring this intellectualism. The healthy return of metaphysical wit, it may be found, was confused with required learnedness, well-readness, those qualities that were considered indispensable if one wanted to regard oneself as thoroughly conscious of the precise point in the history of culture where one happened to find oneself.

Just as this thesis rests in the principle that a thorough discussion of separate poems is the only justifiable way of dealing with poetry, so too it rests in the belief that a poem ought in itself to absorb and digest inherited knowledge. The poet renders a common heritage of inevitably second-hand matter into a form that is not only individual, recognisably made by a particular poet, but also into a form immediately communicable to the common humanity of those readers of poetry who might still be left outside academic circles.

Auden's early poetry contains very little allusion to specialized forms of knowledge and experience. One need know very little about Marx and Freud to appreciate the poet's involvement with personal and social suffering. In the poems about famous people, Yeats, Henry James, Freud and others, the reader's experience is certainly richer if he has some previous acquaintance with these people's works. When we come to the

years of Auden's conversion to Christianity, there is a rather different problem.

The question is this: does it require a reading of, say, THE DESCENT OF THE DOVE - which Auden read many times and which obviously had a decisive influence on him - to understand a poem of this period in its total Christian context? Does it add to our experience of, say, 'Christmas 1940' (which expresses the need to remember that no faith or conversion is going to mean an escape from the world and its problems), to have read ~~in~~ Charles Williams' book of the History of Christianity with the emphasis on 'coinherence'? If Christ taught and by his example showed that body and soul are one and inseparable, that divine revelation is here and now and can be apprehended by any individual at any time, no matter what the evils of the times may be, then a believing, understanding Christian can look the world squarely in the face, even in such a time as Christmas, 1940. But do we need to have read this book which brought Auden his own belief and understanding, in order to experience the poem as fully as possible?

I would answer, no. It is a splendid book, but another experience. The extract below, for example, is from another creative mind at work. The degree to which its characteristic tone and manipulation of content is hard to find in Auden's poetry in this period, is the degree to which Auden succeeded in making a person of himself out of it, and a poet out of this person:

> The adorned figure of the Emperor (Constantine), throned among the thirty score of prelates (Micaea) ... signifies many things. There the acceptance of time was completely manifested; there a new basis - a metaphysical basis - was ordained for society. The Roman past was rejected; the effort of the Middle Ages was begun. Intellect was accepted; marriage was accepted; ordinary life was accepted. The early vision of St Peter was found to have wider meanings than had been supposed: "what I have cleansed that call not thou common." The nature of the Church had not changed,

> and only fools suppose that it had. It remained reconciliation and sin redeemed; "my Eros is crucified"; "Another is in me". It was declared now by all the magnificence of this world, by the all-but-idol of the episcopate. It had become a Creed, and it remained a Gospel. 1

A few of the poems of these three to four years contain a direct, and inevitably rather laming, mention of those symbols and concepts through which, for the most part, Auden was able to work his way into the living actuality, the concrete here-and-now situation which those symbols and concepts helped him to understand and transcend. 'In Sickness and in Health' refers directly to the 'Absurd'. The great amount of writing that Kierkegaard devoted to this concept ~~are~~ is, as it were, invoked. Similarly, 'In Time of War' has the line 'And be tormented by an Either/Or', a concept about which Kierkegaard wrote with incessant intensity:

> ..... the time has come for work to begin, for every individual must work for himself, each for himself. No longer can the individual, as in former times, turn to the great for help when he grows confused. That is past; he is either lost in the dizziness of unending abstraction or saved for ever in the reality of religion.
> ..... 'the sharp scythe of the leveller makes it possible for everyone individually to leap over the blade - and behold, it is God who waits. Leap, then, into the arms of God.' 2

The concept of this 'leap' crops up directly in a few places in Auden's writing at this time. But all in all, what is remarkable is that Auden's poetry shows so little a direct reliance on someone else's vision, even though he was strongly under the influence of others' thinking. And the more successful poems, or such works as FOR THE TIME BEING or THE SEA AND THE MIRROR, do not need any reading of Kierkegaard, or of Christian philosophy, for the simple message of love and acceptance to come through the poetry. Such is the quality of the poetry that it does not demand any more understanding of Christian dogma than that this dogma exists to make simple happiness possible for individuals, and so, for society at large.

The egoism and will-assertion involved in writing and publishing poetry perplexed Auden at this time, as its material uselessness had done earlier. Auden would already have understood the following from Kierkegaard:

> The lyrical author is only concerned with his production, enjoys the pleasure of producing, often perhaps only after pain and effort: but he has nothing to do with others, he does not write in order that; in order to enlighten men or in order to help them along the right road, in order to bring about something; in short, he does not write in order that. The same is true of every genius. No genius has an in order that: the Apostle has absolutely and paradoxically an in order that.
>
> A religious poet is in a peculiar position ... (he cannot forget that religious pathos does not consist in singing ... but in existing; so that the poetic productivity ... comes to be regarded by the individual himself as something accidental ... 3

A book that had a more lasting influence on Auden than perhaps any other is C.N. Cochrane's CHRISTIANITY AND CLASSICAL CULTURE. It is a long, immensely learned and scholarly work, written with a sure grasp of the facts. It presents a clear overall picture with a never-forgotten sense that it is about people, about basic humanity and the endless trial-and-error efforts of thinkers in all times to determine a happy way for people to live. I for one am grateful that a study of Auden led me to read it. And yet there is the question: how much of Auden's poetry requires further elucidation through this book? It gives a fair and humane and humble interpretation of Classical thinking, and asserts the superiority of the Christian way of life. Auden does this constantly in his poetry, even now (e.g. 'Et in Arcadia Ego' in ABOUT THE HOUSE, 1966) and he often finds a convenient perspective from which to regard the present by relating it to Greek and Roman times (as in 'Memorial for a City'). In the texture of each poem one can feel, say, the following, though it must be assumed that

poetry readers know something about St Augustine's CITY OF GOD:

> In this claim (the power of reason), as Augustine perceived, was concealed the great illusion of Classicism, an illusion common to all the heresies which derived from the classical spirit. This was the supposition that while opinion (roughly equivalent to 'faith') was subjective, reason contained within itself the power to transcend the limitations of mere subjectivity and to apprehend 'objective' truth. Classical reason was thus committed to an ideal of scientific objectivity, as well as to the discovery of a dialectic or technique of transcendence whereby that ideal might be realized ... 4

Another book which Auden read with appreciation is LOVE IN THE WESTERN WORLD by de Rougemont. The terms Eros, Logos and Agape are given special attention. Romantic love, as in Wagner's TRISTAN, or unromantic sexual licence as in Mozart's DON GIOVANNI, are opposed as equally deluding ways of escaping Agape, a symbol of Christian love, the acceptance of body, the redemption of time. The poem 'In Sickness and in Health' is made easier to understand by a reading of this book, and by reading Auden's review of it in THE NATION, 1941, but perhaps this is because the poem does not quite come off.

This brief introduction to Auden's reading is intended to show that, for the most part, one need not have read the books that influenced Auden in this period in order to appreciate the poetry. It has raised the question of what ingredients in poetry can be tolerated that are not transformed into a common, intelligent but non-specialized language that derives from the common-to-all, basic matters of life which cannot but be the ingredients of all good poetry. Auden does not often rely on premade symbols and concepts, or on the mystique of learned allusion. Non-Christians and people with no theological background will find in his poetry those ingredients that make the Christian element unobtrusive.

FOREWORD

The years 1937-8 can be taken as a convenient dividing line in a study of Auden if only because of what he himself says happened to him at the time.

Monroe Spears quotes extensively from Auden's untitled essay in MODERN CANTERBURY PILGRIMS, and gives a clear commentary on the quotations. Spears discusses the different thinkers and writers who influenced Auden in this period, an influence freely admitted by Auden in his reviews of works by such men as Laski, Niebuhr, Cochrane, Rilke, Kierkegaard. Though many of the reviews came after 1937-8, Auden was reading widely in all aspects of Christianity from the time he met Charles Williams in 1938. NEW YEAR LETTER, 1941, gives an account of many of the influences at work on him. One quotation from the untitled essay which Spears also gives, is highly relevant to a sense of development in Auden the man, and this relevance must excuse its being repeated here. The passage comes after Auden has outlined his disillusionment with liberal humanism which had not prevented a World War and Nazism:

> With ... similar questions whispering at the back of my mind, I visited Spain during the Civil War. On arriving in Barcelona, I found as I walked through the city that all the churches were closed and there was not a priest to be seen. To my astonishment, this discovery left me profoundly shocked and disturbed ...
>
> Shortly afterwards, in a publisher's office, I met an Anglican layman, and for the first time in my life felt myself in the presence of personal sanctity ... (Charles Williams)
>
> So, presently, I started to read some theological works, Kierkegaard in particular ... 1

Between January and July, 1938, Auden and Isherwood travelled to China via America. A play about the horrors of war, ON THE FRONTIER, is both

thin and stilted when compared to JOURNEY TO A WAR, published in 1939 when Auden and Isherwood had already made their move to America. The sonnet sequence, IN TIME OF WAR, and the verse commentary, pronounce the end for Auden of even trying to be actively involved in the sufferings of his time. Compassion and helplessness are steeled by a sense of all history, of things never changing, of the inevitable human need to survive others' misfortunes:

> They are and suffer; that is all they do;
> .....
> And lie apart like epochs from each other
> - Truth in their sense is how much they can bear;
> It is not talk like ours, but groans they smother -
> And are remote as plants; we stand elsewhere. (Sonnet XVII)

But though we must survive, Auden says, we feel anger that the human condition makes such demands on us, giving us the capacity for pity but denying a full expression of it in order that our own life can go on. So the human condition as we know it demands a change in the individual who is to survive in a world that will perhaps never change, and certainly not much in one's lifetime. We must, says the last sonnet, recognise that suffering and error are part of the human condition:

> We live in freedom by necessity,
> A mountain people dwelling among mountains. (Sonnet XXVII)

These sonnets are terse and almost overtly assured. They show Auden facing facts and perhaps overstressing factualism in his need not to identify himself with suffering. Though he is compassionate and acutely aware of concrete detailed suffering, destruction and chaos, the sonnets are controlled into a tone of formal withdrawal from real anguish. As in 'Musée des beaux arts', 1939, one senses Auden's own urgent need for the next phase of his development. These sonnets, like many of the poems in ANOTHER TIME, 1940, have a static quality. They say again and again

that this, this that I see or say, is so. It should not be, but it is, and it is tolerable if the 'is' is fully grasped. Freud and Marx, or anything to do with human perfectibility, cannot alter this one single indisputable Now. The subjective experience of one single person's individual anguish cannot but recognise acutely the individual anguish of other beings. But this anguish must find the relative immunity of understanding and meaning. The preparatory stage to this understanding is the withdrawal of any kind of certainty, commitment, goal, reliance on past experience or judgement or knowledge. The Wholly Other, the Unconditional, and all Kierkegaard's existentialism within Christian doctrine, were waiting.

NEW YEAR LETTER, 1941, needs, in this thesis, only passing mention here. It is a clear, self-explanatory, sustained exercise in rhyming couplets. It offers some autobiography, along with a general theme of what individuality, in Kierkegaard terms, means in modern, materialist, machine-run times. In spite of one's admiration for and enjoyment of excellence in this level of poetry, it appeals mainly to the intellect and does not reveal the unconscious ambiguity and complexity of Auden's character. In a way, as 'Letter to Lord Byron' did, it escapes (except for such passages as ll. 1056-1192) the poetic level, the struggle of a soul within a body, say, and offers the level of what Auden would like to think he thinks, of what he would prefer others to know about him in broad daylight.

COLLECTED POETRY (New York, 1945), contains sixteen poems written after NEW YEAR LETTER. They are not given full, detailed analysis in this thesis, but instead, nine of them are discussed briefly in order to indicate how every poetic experience for Auden, in these four years, was a

final belittling, though indirect, of everything in the name of one or other of Kierkegaard's concepts. Very fine as some of these poems are, honest as the personal struggle of a man with an uncertainly grasped, but absolutely embraced, belief, they have a common weakness that derives from the uncertainty.

The three long works in this period, FOR THE TIME BEING with THE SEA AND THE MIRROR, 1944, and THE AGE OF ANXIETY, 1947, are major efforts to place the Christian revelation in a context of the modern world. THE SEA AND THE MIRROR is discussed at considerable length in this thesis, especially Caliban's speech in prose, because it is at the heart of Auden's poetic nature. It is a tour de force of intellect and imagination being made to bow to the truth of individual aloneness, and the search for God. Auden's artistic gift, in the period of his conversion to Christianity, his ability to intrigue and charm and amuse, is forced to heel by his sense that this very gift, and particularly self-satisfaction in this gift, is a barrier to religious perception.

THE AGE OF ANXIETY is omitted from discussion in this thesis. It is not only Auden's last long work, but his final, at times rantingly insistent and perhaps not convinced, assertion that all experience in individuals, and all happenings in history outside Christianity, are, and have been, essentially sterile, wrong in motive, certain paths to unhappiness. NONES, to be discussed in Part III of this thesis, shows the next phase, the easing of the latent dislike and antagonism, the emergence of a mature blending of Christian and poet.

II. IN MEMORY OF W.B. YEATS
(d. Jan. 1939)

I.

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the air-ports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
O all the instruments agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed: he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections;
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom;
A few thousand will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.

O all the instruments agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

2.

You were silly like us: your gifts survived it all;
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself; mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper; it flows south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

Earth, receive an honoured guest;
William Yeats is laid to rest:
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.

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

Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lay its honours at their feet.

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well.

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

I

IN MEMORY OF W.B. YEATS
(d. January, 1939)

NEW REPUBLIC, March 8th, 1939

The first verse begins conventionally in its relating of human death to winter. Short statements about the effect of a winter on human activity with 'The airports almost deserted', prepare us for the rather unforgiving attitude to the blunt ending ~~to~~ of an active, useful life. Perhaps the most telling thing in this verse is the fact that the public statues are 'disfigured' as if winter in nature obscures the efforts of humans to remember even their distinguished dead. Human death conforms physically to winter, but winter is indifferent to the human concern with memory and status.

In the second verse we have natural life continuing, with summer and wild energy unchanged by human individuality or culture. The selected precision of 'wolves' hints at the animality of nature which humans, to be civilized, are compelled to control. By this conscious differentiation they measure their superiority to all that is non-human. Both the value and ephemeral quality of being human and civilised blend in this line with the enduring fertility and beauty of evergreen forests which are not at all at odds with the wolves. The force of 'the peasant river', disregarding human sophistication, is all that is primal and eternal; but so are 'mourning tongues'. Memory and sympathy, keen appreciation, even part-identification, are enduring primal human characteristics. They preserve Yeats for us, but the poem does not euphemise physical extinction. Natural and human, physical and spiritual, are not reconciled.

The third verse is an attempt to feel into the dying of another being, a poet, whose surviving poetry cannot be felt as sufficient consolation for death. One knows, of course, that Yeats made no spiritual surrender, that he protested to the end against age and physical decay. Auden uses 'provinces', 'squares' and 'suburbs' to describe the dying. He moves, as it were, from the periphery of body to the centre of being, mind, then out again out into suburbs of settlement and varied recreation where the cutting off of energy is most conspicuous. Though his body 'revolted', and pain and violence are suggested, the dying is painless and mechanical, a switching off, an emptying, a using up.

Non-human terms like 'provinces' enable the poet to express human physical life and death in clear, yet contrived terms, which indicate the hidden, inexpressible mystery of the dying within four walls of a room. One senses the mysterious way in which concrete reality is only a crude reflection of primal inner needs. The deliberate distancing of the poet from the close-up final mystery is a gesture of both respect and helplessness. The poet is unwilling to attempt to effect a euphemistic, elegiac consolation. The 'empty' and 'silence', the dwelling with indirect immediacy on the dead body, offer little to those who would like some transcendental consolation. The evasion of 'the dark cold day' is only confirmed. The transfer of civilisation from generation to generation, from individuals who create for those who cannot, is suggested in the last line, 'he became his admirers'. But the dying of this man remains a violation both of his own proud will to live and of Auden's admiration.

In the fourth verse the immortality of art is dwelled on. What Yeats was, according to his poems, will change with every reader. What he really was, as defender of his poems, as it were, has gone:

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections;

The fifth verse, with its long, loose lines is casually cutting and cynical. The arts are placed next to the existence of the competitive world of business in which there is little capacity for being morally sensitive. The arts are also considered next to 'the poor', who are victims of the business world of 'beasts'. Neither kind of person is able to understand that what he thinks is not 'freedom'. Each is only a 'cell of himself'. Almost all people in the kind of society that these extremes indicate, will care nothing about Yeats's death, and even those who read poetry will only remember the day vaguely.

The repetition of the conventional elegiac lines at this point indicates that the 'dark cold day' is now not so much because Yeats died, but because society is as it is. It cannot appreciate and immortalise a contributer to civilisation.

Part Two of the poem is Auden's own resigned acceptance that 'poetry makes nothing happen'. A kind of blame for this is attached to an enemy, 'executives', and this strikes us as possibly shallow, depending on what absolute significance we attach to big-business in the present-day world. But even this line has the control and irony of 'tamper', as if, all things considered, it is better that all these executives do not bother with poetry. Poetry can do without them:

it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

This verse stresses the ordinary 'silly' side to Yeats and establishes the fact that genius or talent does not make a poet less human and fallible. The social and reformative uselessness of poetry is put bluntly. Poetry

is the self-exploration of individuals whose experiences, likened to 'Raw towns', are constant adventures on the frontiers of the unknown with its concomitant loneliness.

The imagery of 'valley', 'flows', 'ranches', 'raw towns' links up with the first and second verses of the poem. Poetry becomes like 'the peasant river', existing in its own right, imperturbable, by no means static but not noticeably touching people in their self-enclosed, everyday lives. Yeats is here as a civilizer to the American (ranch, raw) way of life, his death more conspicuously unnoticed probably than in England.

Part Three, in rhyme and rhythm like a nursery rhyme and reminiscent of Blake and Yeats himself of 'Under Ben Bulben', one of his very last poems, is Auden's exhortation to poets to carry on writing no matter how seemingly useless poetry is, even if it is 'In a rapture of distress'. One can see Auden coming more and more to poetry of inner, personal resolution that embraces but is not disturbed by the external world of events, forces, institutions.

There is still that way of looking at things from a height or distance. A concept of Time is seen to synthesise and resolve everything in a way that is 'intolerant' or cruel, if one is going to try to judge all happenings sub specie aeternitatis. Time cannot touch the written word and all writing, good and bad, is forgiven, allowed to exist, even honoured undeservedly. A matching of this view of Time is felt by Auden to be a 'nightmare of the dark' in human affairs, with no logic and justice anywhere. Let those who can, nevertheless, survive as moral individuals, accept the way of things, and construct themselves into isolated units of positive living rather than despairing sensitivity. In spite of an absence of communication between people and between nations the poet must reveal 'rapture of distress', a

kind of enjoyment in the defiance of not caring. The poet is not directly involved because of a transcendent vision that places the present in an enriching context of past and future.

The tone of the third part, with the combination of a rather bitter, at times jaunty acceptance in the words (e.g. ... 'indifferent in a week'), and a conscious simplicity in the structure, indicates a kind of hysteria. The control is by virtue of a contrived attitude and style, a kind of lame reliance on statements of great simplicity about matters too complex to go into any further.

This poem is a kind of hard-bitten or realistic elegy; and it is also Auden's self-confrontation as a poet in the same world as Yeats's. The liberal-humanist courage or defiance, the gesture of faith in art and artists, the acknowledgement of immediate helplessness to change the way of the world, seem to declare their inherent limitations in the last two verses of the poem. If nearly all people on earth have no interest in poetry, how long can a poet go on believing in his own self-exploration of experience, his personal integrity? Where can he see any person freed by poetry from 'the prison of his days'? The simple incantation of the verses indicates no more than a gesture of hope.

Auden's need, as man and poet, for more than a liberal-humanist 'faith', is apparent. This poem asserts a tragic and stoical attitude but only as a possibility, or as an inevitability of the moment. Just as the poem that is discussed next, 'Musée des Beaux Arts', seems to cry out in a deliberately muted way that the stoic-tragic fatalistic attitude to life is insufficient, or intolerable, so does this elegy seem to demand another way of looking at Yeats's own tragic view.

Perhaps this is why there is a note of harshness, even callousness, in the opening ~~stanza~~ lines of the poem (e.g. 'modified in the guts'). Another attitude of faith is felt to be needed to give life a meaning that offers the mortal individual, poet or not, a quality transcending the sole meaning that, for Auden, Yeats's death has. Yeats left behind a splendid legacy of articulation or objectification. His art triumphs over the 'blood and mire'. But Auden, a living poet, is left with the actual problems of being alive as the person he is in the age in which he finds himself. He declares rather bitterly in this poem his regret at not having the kind of faith and wisdom that makes a traditional elegy possible.

XXI. MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully
along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

XXI. MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS

NEW WRITING, Spring, 1939

A picture by Breughel, like pictures of the Flemish school particularly, tends to be, as we would say now, photographic, with the details seeming to defy the overall interrelationship. It offers Auden what, at the time, is his own dominant thinking attitude. According to Breughel there is nothing to say about the picture, like 'The Massacre of the Innocents' or 'Icarus', other than that each person is alone in his self-absorbing self-preservation. Misfortune has often no moral significance, but is only a matter of bad luck for the person concerned, a person who would have no knowledge of, and so concern for, anyone else's misfortune.

What a picture by Breughel does is to falsify to some extent the unconscious and unseen bonds between people. Directly-felt relationships exist for any person, but restricted to a few people, 'ten persons'. Our moral concern, which is really, inevitably, a kind of second-rate concern compared with the heart's direct concern, can only come from wide experience, religion or education. If we were given a Breughel view of a town or country, a God-like view, we would of course learn of things going on which would shock us. But in this connection, and countering Auden's perplexed sense of helplessness, one is reminded of George Eliot's words in Middlemarch:

> If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. 1

This is the perplexing paradox of anyone with moral sensitivity, and the only immediate remedy is to have control, or influence towards this control, of the instruments at the disposal of society for seeing to it that acts of help or prevention are carried out constantly. In this way moral sensitivity, or that perpetual sense of worry and guilt which goes together with helplessness and becomes moral anger, is taken care of. But this kind of Utopia could not cure 'metaphysical distress', a sense of estrangement from the evaluations of success and happiness in a predominantly materialistic society. Acute sensitivity keeps open a very keen eye for any kind of 'suffering',including those curable by social reform. No, as the tone of this poem indicates, one has to curb one's capacity for self-projection and identification, one's spontaneous self-losing pity, and harden one's individuality into an ability to regard the godless world as being outside the scope of one's notion of justice. Thus one accepts also one's own suffering without a sense of injustice.

The Icarus picture shows a number of people doing different and essentially separate things, all enclosed within the neat and definite edges of the frame. There is no suggestion of the transcendental, that is, of anything that can make a general view of the picture lead into a dimension that makes tolerable such a view of life. It is a blatantly objective, visual seizing of that particular moment of physical living, physical self-expression. In fact Breughel could be said to have invested human life with the predominantly animal, with an animal's self-devotion and constant physical self-expression, and with an indifference towards others' mishaps which not even animals have.

The poem holds together because each impression Auden gives of some part of the picture is qualified by a scattering of words which enliven and

yet ultimately invalidate the total effect. So we find 'just walking along', 'did not specially want', 'anyhow in a corner', 'innocent behind', 'quite leisurely', 'not an important failure'. The mood which predominates in Auden's impression is less earthy and heavily insensitive, less peasant-like than Breughel's. The semi-innocence of the ignorant is felt, as well as the gentler, casual lack of harmful intention behind the accidental arrangement of a society that does not positively care for everyone in it. One cannot accuse or exhort, one can only observe, fascinated, with restrained lack of approval.

But set against the kindlier tone, and making the casual acceptance seem like a grimly cynical acceptance through lack of an alternative, is the blunt gravity of the first line and the repetition of 'how' which heavily stresses the continuous, inescapable fact of suffering and unawareness. The assertion about "The Massacre of the Innocents" that 'even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course/ Anyhow in a corner' indicates how even if people live according to their highest ideal, it is only <u>they</u> who value that ideal.

The control of the tension between stating facts as facts and feeling how differently life should be, is very fine. Nothing is overstated; a feeling of compassion balanced by the sense of inevitable injustice remains. The rhyme scheme is most unobtrusive but part of the control. There is a sense that comes after one mulls over this poem, of suppressed hysteria at this bird's eye but godless view. There is almost too great a care on the poet's part not to protest or exhort directly.

Written at a time when Auden was reading and thinking intensely about Christianity, the poem indicates a need to shut the eyes to what suffering can be found if looked for. If looked for in the way Auden was looking -

that is, in his usual way from a height, missing nothing that can be seen but, of course, missing the discrete or invisible truths - suffering can be found going on as the Old Masters showed. The Christian implication of 'the miraculous birth' or 'the dreadful martyrdom', indicates Auden's inability to relate an individual and personal resolution to the continuing suffering of others. The insistence that the Old Masters were never wrong rules out the possibility of a personal coming-to-terms with the ugly facts of life, suffering and helplessness, neglect or social unawareness. This insistence becomes for the poet here an act of deliberate defiance of what he really feels, namely, the impossibility of sustaining a generalised pity for humanity's disintegrated suffering without some form of self-integrating faith and meaning.

A

WRAPPED IN ~~THE~~ YIELDING AIR

Wrapped in a yielding air, beside
The flower's soundless hunger,
Close to the tree's clandestine tide,
Close to the bird's high fever,
Loud in his hope and anger,
Erect about his skeleton,
Stands the expressive lover,
Stands the deliberate man.

Beneath the hot incurious sun,
Past stronger beasts and fairer
He picks his way, a living gun,
With gun and lens and ~~b~~Bible,
A militant enquirer,
The friend, the rash, the enemy,
The essayist, the able,
Able at times to cry.

The frinedless and unhated stone
Lies everywhere about him,
The Brothered-One, the Not-Alone,
The brothered and the hated
Whose family have taught him
To set against the large and dumb,
The timeless and the rooted,
His money and his time.

For mother's fading hopes become
Dull wives to his dull spirits
Soon dulled by nurse's moral thumb,
That dullard fond betrayer,
And, childish, he inherits,
So soon by legal father tricked,
The tall and gorgeous tower,
Gorgeous but locked, but locked.

And ruled by dead men never met,
By pious guess deluded,
Upon the stool of madness set
Or stool of desolation,
Sits murderous and clear-headed;
Enormous beauties round him move,
For grandiose is his vision
And grandiose his love.

Determined on Time's honest shield
The lamb must face the tigress,
Their faithful quarrel never healed
Though, faithless, he consider
His dream of vaguer ages,
Hunter and victim reconciled,
The lion and the adder,
The adder and the child.

Fresh loves betray him, every day
Over his green horizon
A fresh deserter rides away,
And miles away birds mutter
Of ambush and of treason;
To fresh defeats he still must move,
To further griefs and greater,
And the defeat of grief.

WRAPPED IN A YIELDING AIR

This is a character sketch of the kind of person Auden would say has the hardest task of anyone to know himself. The man has few doubts, has great power and means, together with intelligence and socially approved attributes like good looks and a privileged background. He is 'the expressive lover', 'the deliberate man', one who succeeds in most activities, one who consciously pursues his own ends, one who becomes more 'loud', complacent or demanding as his 'success' increases. Such absolutes as air are 'yielding', though they have the dignity which he lacks. By comparison with human 'success', the flower's 'soundless hunger', its will to live, is dignified. The shade of a tree is 'clandestine' since it affords the man shelter and a delusion of approval; 'the bird's high fever' indicates disturbance and contamination of the non-human by the human. Nature and the human in the human make-up must separate if the human is to be admired. The natural elements in this make-up, physical beauty, energy, intelligence, can exist in the service of selfishness or worse, and these elements can confuse a judgement of worth.

The lack of protest or resistance insulates the man in his own self-regard. He is 'wrapped', physically protected on the outside, matched by an inner physical equilibrium of 'skeleton'. The blunt 'Erect about his skeleton' not only makes a complete contrast between the moral implications of the previous lines and sheer physical existence, but throws life and death together, vigorous living (erect) and mortality, in an ironical way. Admirable living, in humans, can be synonymous with action of the aggressive, unconsciously selfish kind.

The second verse implies that this person lacks sufficient of the qualities that make one human, nor can he match animal life:

> Past stronger beasts and fairer
> He picks his way ...

He is dynamic and respectable, 'Able at times to cry' suggests a studied allowance of human feelings. This man has a general competence in his own way that enables him to be both 'enemy' and 'friend', one thing or the other as it suits him, and to wield both 'gun' and 'Bible'. This kind of person comes in contrasting guises, but the dominant thing is determination and ability, all, no doubt unconsciously, devoted to self-gratification.

Again the impotence or indifference of nature is stressed in the 'incurious sun', so that gradually there is built up the sense of the need for people to be alert to this kind of person who, aided by a general acquiescence, is, in his way, master of his destiny. The staccato listing of his attributes makes them into conquests, like medals stuck on or qualifications called out in obsequious admiration.

The third verse is dominated by the inanimate, cleverly conveying the way in which the hard, insensitive man becomes like neutral stone:

> The friendless and unhated stone
> Lies everywhere about him,

A world, concrete and inescapable, is there for this man, not 'yielding', but simply taken indifferently, receiving no projection of friendliness from him, and no antagonism. He is indifferent to people, be they like him or not. He has inherited 'His money and his time' so that he can have no sense of 'The timeless and the rooted', things to revere and be humbled by. His sense of power blinds him, yet he recognises a worthy

opponent and goal in 'the large and dumb' which implies, with appropriate vagueness, anything conspicuously defenceless. This man gives the impression of companionship in his power, hence the spurious tribute in capital letters in the third line. In the concluding lines of the verse this man is unexpectedly described as a victim. His 'family have taught him' to be the kind of person he is.

The fourth verse develops the idea that he is the product of his parents. His mother has failed to make him what she had hoped he would be. The cloying upbringing has left him with the impression of dullness in morality and affection. His material inheritance does not satisfy or signify; it is 'Gorgeous but locked, but locked'; 'dull' is repeated, in different forms, four times. General sensitivity, wit, humour, curiosity, considerateness, have been dulled. There is no possibility of being challenged and shocked into these qualities, for power and possession and the restless goal of increasing both, are inherited. The total effect is, as far as character and individuality are concerned, sterility and unscrupulous potential.

The fifth verse indicates that this man inherits without question the convenient thinking and habits of the past. Not being given to querying and doubting, he is 'murderous and clear-headed', never capable of guilt where self-interest is at stake. This kind of thing in our civilisation is the enthronement 'of madness'. ~~A person occupying the position could~~ Any person occupying a position of power must it seems, find it a 'stool of desolation', so that the compensations are all the more desperate, 'grandiose', megalomanic. The placing of 'love' at the end of the last line neatly rounds off the sense of the man's unconsciousness of his deeper motives and conscious self-approval of his actions or ideals.

The opening lines of the next verse succinctly imply that, to this man's way of believing, life is, and always has been, a case of the survival of the fittest, with the struggles of the weak no more than a recurring law:

> Determined on Time's honest shield
> The lamb must face the tigress,
> Their faithful quarrel never healed

Time is 'honest' and the quarrel is 'faithful' to this man who sees in the past what he wants to see. The past therefore does not let him down and he would find it easy to describe it in these terms. The tone in which resignation to one's lot is echoed as a creed, suggests the spurious tribute to folk-lore and folk-wisdom that such a man as this would be prepared to make.

But this man has a capacity to conceive of a time that might be when the jungle principle will no longer exist. However, the thoughts make him 'faithless' to the self that determines his life; in other words he is still human but has not had a chance to become humane. The concept of faith itself is qualified as that which is convenient to adhere to. In this way 'faith', so redolent of the rather archaic 'virtue', is reduced to self-interest. By implication all the normal adjectives and phrases used to honour men such as this, ~~as~~ are invalidated: loyal, responsible, consistent, devoted.

In the last verse the possibility of accepting this lurking but suppressed or simply unrecognised capacity for kindliness is described in the language of battle, 'betray', 'ambush', 'treason', 'defeats'. All these actions could serve to conquer the fortress of a self that needs destroying. His 'horizon' is 'green', suggesting the possibility,

seemingly far off, of a recreated and refertilised self. The repetition of 'fresh' adds to the sense of a rebirth waiting, while 'fresh defeats' climaxes the insistence that a complete destruction of the old self must precede a rebirth. This man must suffer 'further griefs and greater' until at last he is able to become the real master of himself in 'the defeat of grief'.

The form of this poem suits the sense perfectly. A regular, rather mechanical rhythm and rhyme all but smother in conservatism and habit the shrewd observations, inklings and suggestions. The latent man survives however; so does the active criticism of what he does. But what dominates the poem, as so often with Auden, is the restrained personal feeling, the poet's helplessness to do more than diagnose. The tone is rather knowing yet conveys an authoritative certainty that this man is a danger to our civilization.

The possibility of change (individuation in psychological terms, or salvation in religious terms) is a small one. The poem celebrates the fact that real individual happiness is denied to this kind of person. This fact is the only hope for a world controlled by, or favouring, determinism and the dynamic, as opposed to sensitivity and considerateness.

COLLECTED POETRY

This collection contains sixteen poems, fourteen not published before, and nine songs or lighter pieces, written between 1941 and 1944. They are interspersed with the other poems which are given an arbitrary order according to the first letter of the first line. If these poems had been printed separately the unity of mood and theme would be immediately apparent. They are all relaxed, conversational, unpretentious, often amusing. They are easily comprehensible on the level of a basic grasp of the logic of what is being said. They tend for the most part to be a continuation of the style and purpose of NEW YEAR LETTER, that is, sustained simplicity of statement or questioning about very profound matters, with an easy formality of rhyme and rhythm controlling an informality of tone. The essential difference from the previous poetry is that the ultimate point of reference in each poem is very definitely religious, metaphysical, existential. A new kind of person is required; each essentially lonely individual must see, experience his way to the foundations of a religious life. Auden's way is not so much Christian, as Kierkegaardian and philosophical. In this period of Auden's development he asserts, a little one-sidedly, that the usual experience of life for most people must be seen as a great delusion and barrier to the truth of things in our times.

IN TIME OF WAR

This poem expresses the difficulty of sustaining a faith, a sense of individual salvation or self-knowledge as the ultimate and only meaningful

value in life, when the devastation of war coexists with it and pervades everything. Yet victory means only the restoration of a wrong way of living:

> If we are right to choose our suffering
> And be tormented by an Either-Or,
> The right to fail that is worth fighting for,
> If so, the sweets of victory are rum:

The victory of the man 'tormented' is the really necessary one.

KAIROS AND LOGOS

This is the finest and certainly the longest, most serious in tone, of the sixteen. The Roman Empire in its decline and the present day world are equated. The birth of Christ with its meaning for an Empire that fell, indicates the need in our own time to infuse into the rational and legal fabric of our civilization (Logos) the individual subjective experience of the Word (also Logos) at this particular moment of History (Kairos).

Part II describes the trap of thinking that the Christian revelation, the personal call, is something specially designed for one's single, singly kept contentedness. There is the danger of pride in presumed selection. The person so trapped will not find Christian happiness and will try to create an environment of the kind of satisfaction that was known before the call; and, not satisfied, will despair or give up.

Part III insists on the need to 'be passive to conceive the truth'. One must not try to envisage one's fate, or one's arrival at understanding, because these conditions are unknowable. To try to understand, to assert one's creativity and intelligence, will only leave one with one's own fabrication from which one is always 'exiled':

..... instead of earth
His fatherless creation; instead of truth
The luckiest convention of his eyes:

That saw himself there with an exile's eyes,
Missing his Father, a thing of earth
On whose decision hung the fate of truth.

Part IV, the last part, describes the vacuum of modern life, a vacuum that over the centuries was filled with at least some kind of order and enthusiasm even if not Christian. Auden shows his good sense and worldly humanism in this verse. There is a very sparing, and never direct, mention of Christ. Auden is more concerned with the philosophy of salvation in a context of modern psychology, than with church and ritual and his own essentially personal salvation or rapture:

Where are the kings who routed all confusion,
The bearded gods who shepherded the spaces,
The merchants who poured gold into our lives?
Where the historic routes, the great occasions?
Laurel and language wither into silence;
The nymphs and oracles have fled away.

The next verse says that this kind of longing and asking is proof that 'Our inner regimen has given way' (third verse), for all these worldly happenings prevented the truth of things from being seen or felt. But the contradictory longing, the nostalgia, are surely deeply felt by the poet as well, so rich and full is that verse, so sympathetic the last line. All the more reason to be humble and to profess the difficulty of comprehending the meaning of Christianity, of Christ's birth in historical time:

..... when predestined love
Fell like a daring meteor into time,
The condescension of eternal order. (Part I, verse 5)

An enduring love of life and humanity is felt in the ending of the poem. No cynicism, no narrow morality, no superior righteousness, but the humility of enlightened optimism:

.....
We are the promise of unborn occasions;
Our presence is required by all the spaces. (Second last verse)

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

This poem fuses some very obvious Kierkegaard concepts with some characteristic Auden accounts of the delusions and dangers of Eros. Eros is instinctive self-assertion, or sex fulfilment as an end in itself which, deluding, finds other, more dangerous ends in themselves. Therefore, remembering Tristan and Isolde who 'Prolong frustration till it lasts all night'; or Don Juan who, his career over, fears death and enforces the chastity of guilt and fear; and remembering that the inevitable failure of sex to be wholly soul-satisfying leads to viciousness, we must be careful of our estimates of our loving:

O let none say I Love until aware
What huge resources it will take to nurse
One ruining speck, one tiny hair
That casts a shadow through the universe:

Kierkegaard is present in the poem as a whole, and as an absolute standard in 'an absurd command - Rejoice' (Verse 8) and in 'you and I/ Exist by grace of the Absurd' (Verse 10). The raising of these standards enables Auden to be, very clearly, himself at this stage of his life. Kierkegaard is, in a way, someone borrowed, but someone who has put the problem of living in a manner that simplifies some of the uncertainty in Auden, and enables him to muster all his experience of life up to this time in a clearer, symbolical, but not new or suddenly reconcocted, way. The last five verses reveal the very human and fallible man of flesh accepting the necessity of living out the inevitable human condition, within another Love, divine Love. This will obviate the Tristan and Juan extremes and the political perversions of Eros.

THE MODEL

The religious and humanist Auden are equally balanced in this poem. The unchangeable and irrevocable fact of another's existence is enforced by the sense that this old woman will be herself in any surroundings. She will withdraw the meaning in things, even in a painted portrait, into her own meaning. Whatever she was or did in her life, however she was judged by people, she herself has forgiven, and by forgiving, 'She survived her true condition' and 'became'. The poem says that people are essentially of God, sacred and precious, and there is a way of 'profiting' by this. The poem shows Auden's love of Man through God, rather than Auden's mystical, private sense of God.

MANY HAPPY RETURNS

Some very neat and clear things are said in this poem addressed to a young boy. Once one has enjoyed the first level of comprehension, one is left with some very baffling concepts. Auden hopes that the boy will have a sense of theatre, a sense of living out parts written for us by 'the All-Father'. No person should try to interfere with others, since that is God's business. Ceremonies like birthdays, and the arts, are to be encouraged as they show us playing a game of being gods. In our recognising the play and pretence, we acknowledge our ultimate subservience. The boy is not wished any conventional things, only an ability to discriminate, in an extravagant, flambouyant way, between being true to oneself and conforming slavishly:

Happy Birthday, Johnny,
Live beyond your income,
Travel for enjoyment,
Follow your own nose.

The poem reveals Auden's Christianity as a balance between submission to the human condition with all its wrongs and ills, and assertion of individual self-fulfilment guided by a sense of the 'all-Father'. This balance is real happiness and a worthy goal, no matter what other people are doing or thinking, or how the world is going.

MUNDUS et INFANS

The humour in this poem lies in the affectionate acceptance of a baby's absolute and declared 'selfishness', and the rather pompous intellectual concepts that are worked out about this selfishness. The baby's bawling reminds us of the adult world's civilized modifying of selfishness with good manners, which of course does not change the fact that we do, no matter how discreetly, 'cry over/ Spilt milk' because we do not 'distinguish/ Between hunger and love'.

THE LESSON

Three vivid dreams are described, all ending in frustration. In the first, refuge in wartime is denied the poet and his loved one. They could not understand why they should not deserve to be saved. In the second dream mutual love ends in domination of the loved one by the poet as a petty tyrant. In the third dream there is a celebration of victory, but the poet and his loved one have golden crowns, not paper ones as the other guests have; so they cannot get up and dance with the others. All three dreams seem to say to the poet:

> My will to love you that it cannot be,
> As I think, of such consequence to want
> What anyone is given, if they want?

In other words to become the kind of person who can experience true Christianity in his waking life, the poet must fundamentally reconsider his wants and expectations. It is a poem of exploration of self, humbly uncertain and groping towards the meaning of an already embraced absolute. Or put differently, the Kierkegaard - Christian truths are seen as truths, but to become the ideal is still very difficult.

CHRISTMAS 1940

Auden asserts in this poem that the fact of Christ has effected 'the Great Exchange' on earth; cause and effect are reversed. All people cannot but have a sense of what the real experience of Christianity could be for them, 'that holy centre where/ All time's occasions are refreshed'. The trouble with the world is that what it instinctively aches for after this exchange and reversal, it makes impossible to achieve because of a habit of continuing to live in the world of reason, science and power where only those three things are prized. The only hope of breaking this habit is to give to 'the vision' a 'Roman rigour'. We must expect and accept 'tension' between the taken-for-granted world of 'Our way ... our world, our day, our sin', and the faith. It is the tension between the Either and the Or. To expect the final realisation of Christianity to mean an escape from the world and its problems, is not only wrong, but a barrier to persuasion about Christianity.

A HEALTHY SPOT

Auden's concern is constantly the potential and the actual lives of the educated middle classes. This poem describes how hopelessly inhibited they are, how correct and orderly, and so, how far from understanding say, the Kierkegaardian Absurd, or the 'leap', or the Wholly Other. The safety-valve of 'the smoke-room story' is seen as an unacknowledged manifestation

of the potential exuberance ~~in~~ which accompanies the admission of fallibility. This exuberant ultimate humility is the main element in Auden's vision of a Christian life.

CANZONE

This poem is very clearly to do with 'will'. The word, in different shades of meaning, is repeated many times. The will is active and self-assertive and knows no humility or sense of serving a greater purpose. One feels Auden's own constant temptation and tension in trying to know 'our God of Love'.

The sixteen poems in this Collected Poetry, of which nine have here been briefly discussed, are characterised by a determined negating, or rigorous qualifying, or denying, of the validity of all experience, all intellectual-rational activity, all 'normal' pleasures, urges or will-expressions. They indicate a wholly adverse general judgement of the present-day world and of most historical developments since Christ.

Auden's admission of his own fallibility, his struggle to understand, his quiet, worldly sophistication of tone and style, all help to restore the imbalance between a rejection of so much that is, or has been, all happenings and hopes of nations and individuals, and an assertion of what should and could have been. But the seeming imbalance remains for any reader not of an Auden or Kierkegaard persuasion, anyone not deeply involved in Christian philosophy. Possibly this is because Auden does not write of religious ecstasy, or any private, religious mood, by which the sense of God could be persuasively communicated. Instead, the religious pivot of belief is the completed fact of Auden's conversion to

Kierkegaard without all the rambling anguish that Kierkegaard puts into his own persuasive writing. Auden has, as it were, advanced a stage further than Kierkegaard. He is interested in a way of effecting a City of God, a community of common believers, a world whose common nature makes war and hatred impossible. This cannot be in his lifetime, but there is the consolation of being able to love people anyway and to understand why there is so much hatred and violence about which, here and now, the Christian can do nothing. The Christian must not have an overwhelming sense of bitterness or helplessness.

The volume as a whole has been analysed by Warren Beach in THE MAKING OF THE AUDEN CANON, and this book has been analysed in Spears' book on Auden, and is discussed in this thesis, pp. ~~407~~ 315-322. Suffice it to say here that many alterations, mostly very small, were made to the earlier form of the published poems to bring them in line with a religious rather than a psychological or political obsession. Can this be taken to prove the superficiality of the poems, their lack of organic cohesion which ought not to be able to stand a switch in the poet's allegiance? There cannot but be some truth in this. But for the most part the changes do not alter the poems much, do not falsify their original motivation, because Auden's poetry always concerned itself with the poet's struggle for self-understanding, the struggle with a moral sense of others' suffering, the struggle to be positive about his own sufferings.

This struggle used whatever enlightenment was going, whatever came the poet's way. Marx, Freud, Groddeck, Homer Lane as well as T.S. Eliot, Yeats, Rilke and others, all became embroiled in the personal struggle. Only in the few weak poems or in the obvious flaws in the good poems, was the achievement of any other writer discernible as borrowed material for

simple solutions. The transfer of allegiance, interest, respect or whatever, to Kierkegaard or Charles Williams, does not alter the struggle or its characteristic tone that is ultimately positive and optimistic, even when didactic, admonitory and descriptive of a world gone wrong.

To repeat and sum up, the imbalance or lack in these poems of the years of Auden's proclaimed Christianity is the persistent need to relate - some might say relegate - all Auden's experiences, the day-to-day happenings and friendships and feelings to something which is nowhere to be found, seen, felt in those experiences. The answer to everything is rather remote, a philosophical concept. The absolute is not sufficiently embodied in, or detailed and fused with, the everyday things of life. The actual sweetness and tranquillity, the simple worship of life in the here-and-now in a knowledge of God, which Christianity, Auden knows, makes possible, is not yet Auden's. The repeated invalidation of experience as the unconverted are presumed to know it, betrays Auden's temptation to hurry into incompletely worked out assumptions. The womb of the easy way out, that Auden is always fighting, in everything and anything, is always lurking, even in poetry. But the dominant tone of these poems, with all their faults, is the struggle, and the vigour of a fine intelligence at grips with difficult material worthy of it.

CHAPTER 10

FOR THE TIME BEING, 1945

Special attention is given in this chapter to The Sea and the Mirror, with Caliban's long prose address to his audience.

CHAPTER 12

For the Time Being, 1945

This volume takes its title from the second of the two works it contains. The first work is THE SEA AND THE MIRROR, called also "A Commentary on The Tempest". It is Auden's very searching examination of the limitations and deluding nature of art, and a bold assertion that each person's religious experience is the one and only supreme experience. While art has its value and is to be encouraged, it lacks, for a convinced Christian, unless that art is of a clear Christian persuasion, the power to thrust the person looking into the mirror of art towards ~~into~~ the Wholly Other, the Unconditional.

Having delivered an exhaustive warning about art, and having shown that only Christian art can come really close to the individual life of, in this instance, the members of the audience of a play; having also tried to introduce some healthy irreverence for the name of Shakespeare, fashionable in popular or academic or 'salon' snob-intellectual circles, Auden goes on to offer a piece of overtly Christianity-motived art, FOR THE TIME BEING.

FOR THE TIME BEING, a Christmas oratorio, is discussed at considerable length by both Hoggart and Spears, as is THE SEA AND THE MIRROR. This thesis is concerned with further detailed discussion of the latter work because far more than is the case with the former, the full, fallible (or sinning) personality of Auden is experienced. What dominates the Oratorio, and the poems written at this time, is the evocation of so many facets of daily life-experience, or world-events and trends, which are

then persistently deprived of meaning or warmth by their proximity, without allegiance, to the banners of the Word, the Way, the Unconditional.

Precisely because the 'leap' into Christianity can only take place when the infinite delusions (to a Christian) of the Will patently fail to satisfy, must a failure to satisfy be seen as all-pervading. Nothing can be allowed to get away with things, as it were, though Auden is never heavy-handed about this. He is always lurking with wit and the humility of compassion and the sense of his own fallibility. Yet the fact remains that though our world, like the Roman Empire of the Oratorio, is falling apart through inner schisms of psyche, the concept of the Unconditional, the One, of Logos and Eros, the Word become Flesh, is not in itself a subject for poetry; only the struggle to believe or understand is.

These concepts are presented in Auden's poetry as completed or understood absolutes (understood in the non-rational sense of knowing that they are beyond reason) and tend to remain as concepts and not as living experiences; the living experience of the poetry is the struggle to negate or see as hollow, all known experience. A positive concept of the Unknown is, for the poet, nowhere apparent in its workings except in its effect on him of needing to communicate, and convert. The Oratorio and the poems of this period are full of the loneliness of the eccentric, of the sensed Absurd, in the world as it is. The poetry is a way of keeping in touch with the world, and often it is not at all difficult for the lonely Auden to be like others, to talk with wit and irony about things most people know. His eccentricity makes his Christianity palatable to any reader of poetry.

THE SEA AND THE MIRROR

Auden calls this A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest. Each of the characters speaks of the lesson learned from the experience of being involved in the play. Now that the play is over their lives must go on without the order and harmony the play lent them. The play provides a symbolic framework, that is to say, most people reading Auden will have some knowledge of the kind of person these characters are and of the plot in which they were involved, before the common human lot, the uniqueness, the god-needing deludedness of each character, is evoked. Ariel and Caliban are, of course, not characters but human nature in its two inseparable halves. Shakespeare's theme of the facile opposition of the spiritually ideal and the physically loathsome is an obvious example of the danger of art. This division is, of course, Prospero's, but the subtlety of Shakespeare's handling of Prospero's delusion will escape many in the audience.

Auden feels the need to let Caliban hit back, to discomfort the audience, to break the satisfying sense of wholeness and harmony, of convenient emphasis and rejection and so of ordering, that the performance has given them. Otherwise they will leave the theatre and go on with their deluded lives, unchanged.

Auden lets each of Shakespeare's characters step out of the play as it ends, lets them speak as people going on in a world that is not art, a world for which members of the audience must leave the theatre and the hour or two of artistically induced feelings. This is the 'reality' each one has to face.

We are wet with sympathy now;
Thanks for the evening; but how
Shall we satisfy when we meet,
Between Shall-I and I-will,
The lion's mouth whose hunger
No metaphors can fill?

These are the words of the Stage Manager to the Critics. In the last stanza of his address we have the distilled wisdom of three Shakespeare plays, THE TEMPEST, LEAR, and HAMLET. Each play has to do with an ultimate realisation about the deluding, seeming reality of the appearance of things. The action of the plays derives from the urge to participate in this appearance. The suggestion is therefore made right at the beginning of THE SEA AND THE MIRROR that a mood of reconciliation and acceptance is possible for every person, and that it must be like the final lesson, the end experience of an individual character in the plays:

..... this world of fact we love
Is unsubstantial stuff:
All the rest is silence
On the other side of the wall;
And the silence ripeness,
And the ripeness all.

CHAPTER I

This contains Prospero's farewell to Ariel. It is in leisurely free verse; the lines of statement are long and colloquial. The necessary condition of age is accepted without bitterness yet with a completely unbefuddled awareness of the grim things to come, not so much from age, as from the general misguidedness and total inadequacy of people among whom Prospero must live. He has renounced his magic:

Now, Ariel, I am that I am, your late and lonely master,
Who knows now what magic is; - the power to enchant
That comes from disillusion.

Prospero therefore admits that he has been unable to accept life as it should be accepted. Only by accepting in oneself and controlling that which Ariel embodies, impulse, imagination, natural inclination, amoral unselfconsciousness, can one come to terms with life:

> For all things
> In your company, can be themselves:

Magic, if we consider Prospero off stage, was an escape into a fantasy of presumed power, a child's dreaming, a placing of the self in a scheme such as one finds in a work of art, in which the relationships are facilitated or falsified so that the 'disillusion' is forgotten. In reality, of course, 'disillusion' is perpetuated.

The first of Prospero's three-stanza songs, poems of sharp emphasis and concentrated bite, relates Ariel to the mirror of art, and to Nature:

> 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:

In our reaction to a great work of art we have a test of our sense of what is 'true'. Prospero wishes to face reality now, but doubts his capacity to embrace it without the immunising shield of everyday busy-ness and talking about what one is not afraid to know:

> Inform my hot heart straight away
> Its treasure loves another
> But turn to neutral topics then,
> Such as pictures in this room,
> Religion or the Weather;

The last stanza mentions Rome and the 'heathen foe', and means that underneath the appearance of refinement and strength, whether in Empire or work of art, lies the unacknowledged 'dragon', the feared truth that art enables one to ward off.

In his fantasy Prospero divides spirit and flesh, idea and basic instinct. Ariel and Caliban are controlled, Ariel with spoiling love, Caliban with stern paternalism. Now that the fantasy is over, Prospero can say:

> Today I am free and no longer need your freedom:
> You, I suppose, will be off now to look for likely victims;
> .....
> Are all your tricks a test? If so, I hope you find, next time,
> Someone in whom you cannot spot the weakness
> Through which you will corrupt him with your charm.
> Mine you did.

This 'weakness' was a tendency to intellectualise, that is, to empower the mind independently and, in the name of order and 'decency', to ignore or repress the baser urges. So now, although Prospero can still feel affection for Ariel, the existence of Caliban bothers him; it is Caliban whom he will have to embrace in the reality ahead:

> But Caliban remains my impervious disgrace.
> We did it, Ariel, between us; you found on me a wish
> For absolute devotion; result - his wreck .....

The nature of the experiences which the different characters had through Prospero's machinations can now be described in psychoanalytical terms:

> The extravagant children/ ..... have, I think, been soundly hunted
> By their own devils into their human selves.

Prospero's attitude to the love of Ferdinand and Miranda is that of an old man who does not find recreation in his own memories of young love. While the freshness and innocence of this love plays a big part in THE TEMPEST in balancing the themes, here a thought is given to the future with its possibilities of marital boredom. Can these characters, in a play that holds them in order and in an exquisite present, have learned, or are they likely ever to learn enough of ultimate wisdom, such as 'ripeness is all', to stand them in good stead later on?

The second of Prospero's three songs is completely cynical. In the first ~~verse~~ stanza we are induced to use the Ariel in us, or transcendent imagination and capacity for fantasy, to create a world of chaotic self-gratification in a gay spirit of abandonment which sounds, but is not, healthily outward-going and generous:

> While sad young dogs and stomach-aches
> Love no one but themselves.

In the second ~~verse~~ stanza of this song there is a topsy-turvy world with each more 'normal' relationship healthily inverted. We sense the inextricable bonds between self and other, even if this is no more than a craving for one's opposite, either to force oneself on to that opposite or to absorb it. In other words, any self-other relationship is both instinctive, individually interpreted, and amoral. But the third ~~verse~~ stanza begins with the cynical line: 'Wind up, though, on a moral note'. This sounds the note of modern living, the consciousness of conventions, the accepted hypocrisy and conniving just below the surface.

Prospero goes on to say that wielding magic, which is also living one's life primarily as a creative artist, is like being drunk or in a dream. Facing the world now is like being 'cold sober', with nothing accomplished, no wishes realised. Art and magic have impoverished actuality, yet Prospero is glad that he is going to be an ordinary old man 'Just like other old men, with eyes that water/ Easily in the wind ...'. It will be an act of will and faith to live as he knows he ought: ' ... Can I learn to suffer/ Without saying something ironic or funny/ On suffering?' As he speaks Ariel becomes impatient and Prospero realises that for Ariel old age, the physical human reality with its fear of death, does not exist. Ariel is disembodied spirit, severed completely from

Caliban and incapable of appreciating human anguish. The final goodbye indicates clearly how uncertain and irresolute Prospero really is about renouncing his magic or art, in spite of the words of acceptance he has used:

> ..... O Ariel, Ariel,
> How I shall miss you. Enjoy your element. Good bye.

The final song calls on Ariel to continue to do what he has always been doing whether in Prospero's power or not, making gentle 'this rough world', inducing human beings to take the worst of life with a light heart. Ariel's is a life of limited usefulness in making people whole.

CHAPTER 2

This chapter contains the addresses to Prospero by all the other characters except Caliban. For the most part Auden uses a verse-form to suit the particular personality.

ANTONIO is first. The ~~three-line stanzas with the first and third lines rhyming~~ terza rima delivery convey[5] the superficial intellectualism of a person defending his pride in his presumed self-determination. The statements are clear and logical and the visual observation is acude. Antonio begins by mocking the neat, pat way the play has ended. The immediate effect on the other characters is to make it seem 'as if we/ Could take life as easily now as tales/ Write ever after: ...' But he dismisses the action of the play with the superficial reductio ad absurdum typical of the cynic:

> ..... given a few
> Incomplete objects and a nice warm day,
> What a lot a little music can do.

He taunts Prospero about the renunciation of magic and asserts that as long as he, Antonio, refuses to acknowledge that any inner change has taken place, Prospero will never be able to resist the temptation of taking to magic again in order to satisfy his need to feel that all around him are in his 'circle'. Antonio's weakness of character lies in the delight he takes in being different, as if his life of deliberate egoism and presumed individuality is generated only by the pride he feels in remaining in opposition. His new reality, after the play, is based on the very limited assumption that Prospero is important enough to defy.

STEPHANO's speech is a complicated way of declaring his love for his 'belly', his acceptance of sensual gratification as a substitute for coming to know himself. He is aware of his cowardice and of the ultimate inadequacy of drink:

> Though in the long run satisfied,
> The will of one by being two
> At every moment is denied;

What Stephano needs, and at different times seizes on, is an excuse for his condition. Whatever it is, it is a 'grief'; being specific does not matter much because: 'A lost thing looks for a lost name.'

GONZALO speaks in short lines with a rhyme-pattern that swings the lines along with almost mechanical monotony. This is appropriate in the clear-minded but helpless realisations of 'Decayed Gonzalo'. He regrets his life of meditation and verbal comment, and his denial of that joy and spontaneity which create 'Jigs of self-deliverance'. He did not accept the Absurd, the needlessness of looking for sense. He feels that the action of the play has given 'His subjective passion back/ To a meditative man' and is sure that 'All have been restored to health'. In both he is

deluded. We know what the others have said. The tone of his words belies the restoration of 'passion'. He sees consolation possible in 'reminiscence', which is a reliving of forgotten passion, ~~and~~ in which the non-intellectual understanding of 'mortality' will be found.

ADRIAN and FRANCISCO virtually dismiss themselves as being at all interesting as people whether they happen to be locked in themselves or sensing a new freedom.

ALONSO's speech is unnecessarily long. What he has to say is neither new nor particularly interesting. It is a warning, in the form of a letter written to Ferdinand, to be aware of the dangers and delusions of kingship:

> Only your darkness can tell you what
> A prince's ornate mirror dare not,

The important thing is not to rely on appearance, even if it be that of order, loyalty, affection and peace. There is no natural and trustworthy bond between crown and subjects nor must this bond be the prime concern of life; that must be self-knowledge. The king must go into himself, his 'darkness', and rely on intuition, if he hopes to be a just ~~K~~king.

> The Way of Justice is a tightrope
> Where no prince is safe for one instant
> Unless he trust his embarrassment,

If misfortune comes or he loses the crown, it must be accepted as a way to self-knowledge.

The MASTER and BOATSWAIN speak or sing a bawdy sailor's song of free and easy loving and careless unconcern; but it betrays a human longing of which they are unaware. Their reckless and heartless attitude is a defence against the realisation that another kind of love is what they want.

To SEBASTIAN it is now as if he has been dreaming, just as for Prospero it was. The memory of guilt is vague and intangible. The second and third lines of Sebastian's ~~speech~~ gesting contain a concentration of paradox:

> My rioters all disappear, my dream
> Where Prudence flirted with a naked sword,
> Securely vicious, crumbles; it is day;

'Prudence' is careful, conscious intention behind an act of self-advancement at others' cost; 'flirted' suggests lack of intention to go the whole way, a suggestion that combines an uncertain but rooted morality, and an uncertain and rootless need for self-assertion. 'Securely vicious' is meanly defensive, without even the dynamism of openly asserted disregard for others. These lines reveal a Sebastian who is prepared to think the worst of himself. This is no easy learning of a lesson, which is why 'I am Sebastian, wicked still', able to face himself because 'my proof/ Of mercy is that I wake without a crown'. To have succeeded would have meant a godless, senseless world where self-realisation is impossible.

The second verse asks the unanswerable question how we slip so easily from the innocence of childhood with its dreamlike nature, into the loneliness of adulthood which has a dreamlike unreality. The danger of any self-assertion seems like an extension of childhood fantasy, held in check by 'proof', a formal, inexorable law deriving from long experience. Advantage and usefulness make the sword an instrument, which will no longer 'play'.

In the third verse Sebastian attributes his evil temptation to lack of 'proof' that he ought to have felt otherwise. Paradoxically (when it is remembered that only with proof can the sword be used), he took the sword, and believed himself honest.

I should not love because I had no proof,
Yet all my honesty assumed a sword;

He was deceived into self-justification because of the vital energy which the deception gave him: 'To think his death I thought myself alive'.

The fourth verse is difficult to understand. While the theme of 'proof' and 'sword' is continued, there is vagueness and ambiguity in 'The lie of Nothing' which does not make the compression in the last three lines any easier. One interpretation of 'Nothing' could be the nihilism and amorality of 'our children's day', the innocence of ignorance and undeveloped ego. This 'Nothing' is a 'lie' if allowed to continue into adulthood, and can create false 'proof' that everything is possible, with the 'sword' still at 'play'. The examples are from Sebastian's life. His mistaken belief/was that he was entitled to the crown, so much so that 'the ancient crown/ Envies the childish head'; that is, the crown longs for his head which is 'childish' not 'childlike' now that the wish is seen in retrospect. The other example of proof is 'a dream/ Wrong only while its victim is alive'. The meaning is perplexing but seems to be that only after an act of self-will is carried out is the 'dream', the self-absorption, happy or right, Such an act, in Sebastian's case, breaks the dream. This interpretation leads to the next verse in which Sebastian praises life whose meaning is given in error, challenge, failure:

I smile because I tremble, glad today
To be ashamed, not anxious, not a dream.

The last verse is an expression of the kind of knowledge which requires no 'proof', but is something felt. It is satisfying and, doing away with ambition and regret, makes life into a perpetual present:

Just Now is what it might be every day,
Right Here is absolute and needs no crown,

Sebastian has created a philosophy out of his experience and 'defeat':

> It is defeat gives proof we are alive:
> The sword we suffer is the guarded crown.

This last line neatly brings together this philosophy and images from THE TEMPEST. The delusion of worldly ambition is transformed into an inner realisation that 'ripeness is all', 'guarded' from easy access, requiring deception and defeat to make us worthy of it.

These speeches, and others not discussed here, all emphasise the separateness of actuality and art. The play may seem to the audience to have rounded off things very neatly. The instinctive desire for harmony, justice and good-heartedness will have been satisfied. No one will dispute the value of this satisfaction. What the audience must remember, and what these speeches will, uncomfortably, remind them of, is that their own lives will never, if so satisfied through art, be part of a greater harmony and resolution. Their individual, separate lives will continue after the performance, little changed. The harmony and resolution can only come to their lives by their own active confrontation with and honest analysis of themselves. The individual characters in THE TEMPEST, seen here after the play, have to come to terms with life individually. The individual members of the audience, like the characters, will have either to continue to be themselves with self-excuse and the enduring habit of personality that persists to cover glimmerings of realisation; or they will look towards possible new selves with a sense of the difficulty ahead.

Each of the characters that address Prospero concludes with a single line that, in tone and form, is a refrain, with sense-variation kept to a minimum. The variations in character of each of the speakers are held together by a unity of essential ego-rootedness. The key lines in each of the characters' final words to Prospero are:

ANTONIO: My will is all my own.

(The other characters all offer their estimates of themselves as something entirely different from Antonio's pride in being 'alone'; they all estimate him by his own words.)

FERDINAND: My person is my own.

(With this 'person' Ferdinand is humbly pleased, as it enables him to know happiness through love for Miranda. He is aware that a greater love, 'another tenderness', governs this love, and that sexual love and this tenderness cannot be separated, must be known to mingle in the love-bond. But there is a limitation of ultimate perception in his final words.)

STEPHANO: My nature is my own.

GONZALO: My language is my own.

ADRIAN and FRANCISCO: My audience is my own.

ALONSO: My empire is my own.

MASTER and BOATSWAIN: My compass is my own.

SEBASTIAN: My conscience is my own.

TRINCULO: My humour is my own.

MIRANDA: My magic is my own.

The irony of this Chapter II then, is that reality, life as all of us experience it, has no framework, no discernible harmony, no guaranteed boundaries that contain the significant relationships in which we find ourselves. No momentary harmony can have significance for an individual

in the perpetual continuing of things. These characters of THE TEMPEST have been offered, and some have understood, the key to that degree of self-awareness which can lead to the true religious life. As yet, no matter how hopeful things seem for some of them, or how sympathetically they are treated, they are unable to say that nothing is one's own, finally, or realise what they are lacking, that is, ~~our~~ some understanding of final meaning. The play, THE TEMPEST, must be seen to continue, as Auden has made it do, with each character alone, needing to learn the meaning of religious aloneness.

The next chapter of the work is surely the most brilliantly persuasive argument ever directed at modern intellectual-liberal-humanism, in favour of religious humility, and so, 'happiness'. Caliban asserts that side of life which, if not accepted, admitted and entertained, and if consistently escaped via art and a code of improvement or respectability, leaves a person perpetually unbalanced, ~~dissatisfied~~. Because it comes ~~Coming~~ as a great climax or epilogue after the speeches of the other characters, one is tempted to conclude that what Caliban has to say indicates what those characters all ultimately fail in. That the address seems intended for the audience, and not the characters, is not a contradiction.

CHAPTER III

Caliban's first statement is sixteen lines long, and one sentence. As Hoggart says, one is immediately reminded of Henry James's later style and the irony is that Henry James refined or hid the Caliban elements in his writing. One is reminded also of another kind of 'refinement', namely, German philosophical writing which is sometimes aggressively difficult to understand in that the clauses and abstract phrases are strung together with heavy logic, with every possible qualification and

supporting observation included. The sense of personal aggression in Caliban's outpouring - a personal side largely absent from philosophical writing or Henry James's work - comes from his uncompromising urgency of conviction.

Caliban, who embodies so much that is often ignored and rejected in art and living, outdoes a Henry James or a Kant, subsuming them and their techniques in an assertion of the need to recognise the body, its own needs, suffering and delight. This body should never be forgotten in the Ariel world of elegance, respectability, and art. By overt omission of the body, that which is charming and modish and genteel becomes intolerant and repressive, hypocritical and deluding.

Caliban begins with a bombardment of words and phrases in whole torrents only reluctantly separated from each other by punctuation. The opening lines are:

> If now, having dismissed your hired impersonators with verdicts ~~tangling~~ ranging from the laudatory orchid to the disgusted and disgusting egg, you ask and, of course, notwithstanding the conscious fact of his irrevocable absence, you instinctively do ask for our so good, so great, so dead author to stand before the finally lowered curtain and take his shyly responsible bow for this, his latest, ripest production ...

and so on. Caliban says that the ultimate unanswered question about the play is himself.

He then presumes to know what the audience is thinking. The play cannot but leave the audience dissatisfied. But, Caliban says, no work of art need answer questions and the reason is that all works of art taken together, and moved among in their great variety, are sufficiently absorbing and entertaining to keep our minds occupied, our souls engrossed. We have no time to ask ultimate philosophical questions concerning the reality of our own lives.

The metaphor illustrating this ability of art to preclude us from our own reality, is that of a fashionable salon run by the 'Our native Muse'; 'she invites, dear generous-hearted creature that she is, just tout la monde to drop in at any time' where one will find 'every shade of the social and moral palette'. What you will not find here, though sometimes very nearly, is the 'forbidden incoherence' of the self confronting itself. The art form always triumphs to give what is ultimately the delusion of harmony in human life.

Anyone who spends some time at such a salon, that is, allowing himself to experience the variety of literature and art, will learn a great deal, but will not be shaken into a self-revelation by,

> some stranger vision of the large loud liberty violently rocking yet never, he is persuaded, finally upsetting the jolly crowded boat.

The guest will be surprised by the intimacy at such a gathering. Pomp and reputation are forgotten, once he sees through the formal solemnity. Caliban asks if there could possibly be any experience which the arts do not give us. The answer is 'Yes, there could be, yes, alas, indeed yes, O there is ...'. The existence of Caliban himself is exactly that experience, and the tone now is of mock-considerateness for the fashionable lady of the salon, for there are very definite limits to her tolerance, her open-house attitude. We immediately have an inkling of immense repression and hypocrisy. All the descriptions of the lady Muse and her salon have been most favourable up to this point, with stress on kindness, tolerance, humour. But Caliban she will not tolerate

> 'not because there are any limits to her sympathy but precisely because there are none. Just because of all she is and all she means to be, she cannot conceivably tolerate in her presence the represented principle of not sympathising, not associating, not amusing, the only child of her Awful Enemy ... who does not rule but defiantly is the unrectored chaos.'

The person of the Muse becomes one who has not accepted the earthy, cruder things of life, and she is seen as a virgin, proud of her chastity, horrified at the possibility of a Caliban making 'a pass at her virgin self'. Her world 'is governed by the sanely decent general law' of restraint, politeness, charming evasion. But, Caliban says, echoing the audience, no one wants the salon circle to be any different. All people ask is - like the attitude of the poor in past ages towards their privileged rich - that they be permitted to gape and peep and be awed. They have no wish to be intimate with the guests at the salon. They prefer them to remain in an enchanted unreal world, 'the perfectly tidiable case of disorder'.

The contrast between the unity and harmony of a work of art and the kind of unity for actual people in society, is presented in a reasonable way. The echo of the audience is that they require 'several private regions (which) must together comprise one public whole'. But the kind of 'whole' is falsely held together, and Auden allows the people to condemn themselves unwittingly by making them plead for their everyday activities, their routines, 'our local idioms of triumphs and mishap', 'transubstantiation of the larger pinker bun'. They are made to seem petty people with only a semblance of larger vision or sense of the 'whole'.

The people, however, cannot but enlist our sympathy when they plead for recognition of the existence of chance and luck in their lives, which is not found in art. They have attended the performance of the play as 'survivors'. Sheer bad luck has killed many and made many into the hard workers for the few who benefit. For these 'survivors' 'Time' is 'a

prim magistrate whose court never adjourns', inflicting constant punishment without comprehensible reason. By surviving, then, one deserves art, one deserves comfort, temporary sense and uplift.

Caliban addresses Shakespeare, always echoing the audience, on the lines that art is 'a mirror held up to nature'. Though the phrase is 'misleading' it is

> indicative at least of one aspect of the relation between the real and the imagined, their mutual reversal of value, for isn't the essential artistic strangeness ... just this: that on the far side of the mirror the general will to compose, to form at all costs a felicitous pattern, becomes the necessary cause of any particular effort to live or act or love or triumph or vary, instead of being as, in so far as it emerges at all, it is on this side, their accidental effect?

The mirror of art therefore does not reflect, it transforms, but it is a mirror in that the materials must come from reflection. Caliban asks Shakespeare about the materials: 'Does Ariel - to nominate the spirit of reflection in your terms - call for manifestation?' The answer supplied by Caliban is that if Ariel does call for manifestation then all minor sins and wrongs must be confessed; if Ariel does not, then life is a chaos of disguise. In reality both conditions exist, and both help towards 'universal reconciliation and peace'. Caliban now turns on Shakespeare: 'How then, we continue to wonder, knowing all this, could you act as if you did not realize that the split into distinct opposites what Caliban and Ariel represent is a *simultaneous violation of both worlds'. The question is asked as if Shakespeare did not realise that 'the magical musical condition', the ideal happiness for man, lies in positive opposition to this division in human nature.

Caliban now feels justified in advancing the view that Shakespeare had consciously made this division from a 'profounder motive', precisely in

order to insult our sensibilities which tend to be trimmed according to the established patterns of art. In other words the existence of Caliban as a 'distorted parody' is designed to bring us nearer the reality of a 'bohemian standardless abyss', the 'forbidden incoherence'. At the end of THE TEMPEST, while all other characters are finally considered and finished with, Caliban is not mentioned. Could it be, Caliban asks, still echoing the audience, that Caliban is so lost in the reality of life after the play, that he is no character, but all people? And perhaps Ariel has been 'let loose' in Caliban's world:

> For if the intrusion of the real has disconcerted and incommoded the poetic, that is a mere bagatelle compared to the damage which the poetic would inflict if it ever succeeded in intruding upon the real.

Caliban demands rhetorically to know where Ariel is, and now Caliban is himself, not an echo of the audience. First, he addresses the would-be artist who has come to the play to study technique. This person has felt the call of Ariel, that spontaneous need to free the spirit through art; so he attends to the details of life around him, the 'familiar, whose duty it is to sustain your infinite conceptual appetite with vivid concrete experiences'. The person becomes a successful writer, with acute powers of observation and judgment, and matures into one whose creative fever subsides. At that moment begins self doubt, and dissatisfaction increases until the writer tries to renounce his trade, and finds he cannot get rid of the Ariel inside him. This is the finally inescapable confrontation of the self 'who is not a dream amenable to magic but the all too solid flesh you must acknowledge as your own'. Now the writer is confronting the Caliban in him. The hypocrisy of the past is very hard for the artist to accept, for the public accpetance of his works of art gave approval to the fact that the Caliban elements are 'completely lacking in that poise and calm and all forgiving ... on every page of your published inventions'. Caliban

tells the artist why he has come to write like this. He was treated like the neglected child of a society mother who leaves his education to servants and boarding schools, but with the hypocritical assertion by the mother of being 'absolutely devoted to her child'. In other words the bothersome or disgusting things of life when considered as such, are ignored; and compared to the kind of personification of these things in Caliban 'even ill-treatment would have been less unkind'; love and war are equated in their passionate involvement in life, either of which is better than neutral negativism.

Caliban now speaks to the artist who is confronted late in life with his Caliban. If the artist had given vent to his impulses and experienced life as an involved person and not as a relative observer he would now have come to terms with the lusts and wild impulses which had always been carefully controlled. The writing is all semi-humorous, full of unexpected concrete examples of things being asserted intellectually and analytically. The humour is particularly pertinent in the paragraph in which Caliban proclaims his neglectful writer a companion for life whether either of them likes it or not:

> ..... and if I have had, as I consider, a good deal to put up with from you, I must own that, after all, I am not just the person I would have chosen for a life companion myself.

In this way the balance is struck for, listening to Caliban pouring out his flood of controlled aggressiveness, we may feel that the things he stands for are too obviously unrespectable; but this passage nicely suggests that these things cannot be tolerated in blatant form, and that the neurotic revolt against a respectable past, leading to extremes in the expression of lust and wildness, though in some people inevitable, is to be deplored. The point is then made that there is always hope:

> so the only chance, which in any case is slim enough ... lies in both our learning ... to forgive and forget the past, and to keep our respective hopes for the future, within moderate, very moderate limits.

The language here is simple, man to man, devoid of the dash and glitter of much of Caliban's speech, and becomes emphatic by contrast. All that preceded it was the necessary flood to hold, by disconcerting, the attention of whoever is being admonished. This person has no chance to slip in a word. Caliban numbs him by sheer speed and the brilliant selection of the concrete and familiar; the extended metaphors are so breathlessly sustained that the final conclusions are made acceptable by the trick of momentary peace and simplicity; or perhaps, as it becomes at first reading, moments of complete clarity.

Caliban now turns to the audience 'on behalf of Ariel and myself'. He calls the audience 'assorted, consorted specimens of the general popular type, the major flock who have trotted trustingly hither ...' This is contemptuous and condescending, justified here, if not in terms of brotherly love, then in terms of the undeniable fact that most people would neither understand nor find acceptable what Caliban is saying, no matter how rich and varied each individual's life is within the established social patterns.

Caliban tells these people that their coming to the play was a first step in the 'journey of life'. Childhood is behind them and by coming to the play they have exposed themselves to the realisation that Caliban exists as well as Ariel. The constant use of the capital H in His, when referring to Ariel, acts subtly in suggesting the false deification that Ariel receives from most people, just as its use earlier for Caliban as the unwanted guest of the salon of popular literature, lends an inverted divinity to him; absolute hatred and loathing of something, complete avoidance, suggests a very great, hidden importance.

A metaphor on the theme of journey, railways, station and halts, with the rush and bustle for washrooms, ticket offices, waiting rooms, is used to illustrate the way life is for most people. It is a movement with momentary stops - decisions, adventures, love and betrayal - and a constant nearing of Nowhere. The theatre and the play are such an arrival for the audience in front of Caliban, who asserts: 'where it is still possible for me to posit the suggestion that you go no farther'. The attractions of travel are in the small but pleasurable certainties and defined actions, with the presumed goal as the final and certain action; thus 'you will never feel more secure than you do now in your knowledge that you have your ticket, your passport is in order,'. Caliban suggests that the great station ought to be sufficiently interesting to them to make them stay, but if they continue their journey, they will find Caliban and Ariel in a foreign place, conveniently separate. The delusion of separateness will then be particularly irresistible for it is implicit in the wider escapism of travel and nostalgia. What the people will really be asking for on their travels is the guide to etiolated memories of childhood or overlusty longings for wasted impulses. The writing here is particularly vivid; it becomes a deeply-felt yearning for something lost, expressed with restraint, not at all with Caliban's contempt for such a feeling:

> Pity me, Captain, pity a poor old stranded sea-salt whom an unlucky voyage has wrecked on the desolate mahogany coast of this bar with nothing left him but his big moustache ... let me see that harbour once again ... white and wonderful beings undressed on the sand-dunes; sunset glittered on the plate-glass windows of the Marine Biological Station; far off on the extreme horizon a whale spouted. Look, Uncle, look. They have broken my glasses and I have lost my silver whistle. Pick me up, Uncle, let little Johnny ride away on your massive shoulders to recover his green kingdom, where the steam-rollers are as friendly as the farm dogs ... Black currant bushes hide the ruined opera house where badgers are said to breed in great numbers; an old horse-tramway winds away westward ... to a large good-natured waterwheel .....

Is this meant to be touching, or funny and scathing? Is it meant to be in tune with the call of the womb, the mocking 'O Cupid, Cupid, howls the whole dim chorus, take us home'? Perhaps unintentionally Auden allowed his nostalgia and sense of loss to subdue the conscious intention, which is critical and analytical in a sharp but positive way. In the same way Auden earlier makes us feel the pleasure of being in the salon of literature, with its grace, variety and exclusiveness. The criticism is all the more telling.

Caliban says he can cure this yearning in one way only. If he is to stop the journey of perpetual unfulfilment, he must do as he thinks right. He will 'instantly transport' the people to a moon-type landscape,

> desolation in which every object is extraordinarily still and sharp ... Here, where the possessive note is utterly silent and all events are tautological repetitions and no decisions will ever alter the secular stagnation, at long last you are, as you have asked to be, the only subject ... your existence is indeed free at last to choose its own meaning, that is, to plunge headlong into despair ...

Caliban now speaks to those in the audience who are 'important persons at the top of the ladder' and who will appeal to Ariel for help. They have influence and have effected improvements, but Caliban believes they are really sick of imperfect humanity and long for a transcendent 'blessed realm', 'the permanently stationary, completely self-sufficient, absolutely reasonable One.' If Ariel is appealed to to create this state of being he will lead people into a Hell of the inescapable things to which Mankind is subject, and the overall purposelessness and lack of direction in their lives will be hammered home. Where, asks Caliban, can we look for sense?: 'Religion and culture seem to be represented by a catholic belief that something is lacking which must be found, but as to what that something is'

is each one's personal need and drift, without the all-important control and transcendence of 'the Heaven of the Really General Case'. There are traps in the search - consciously undertaken or otherwise - for the self. One trap is the clearly-defined identity each one has through being a citizen with a passport, birth certificate, bank; but who can tell what lies behind this impersonal information about oneself or about others, or about the society which contains such citizens defined in those ways? The heart is also a trap not to be trusted, for its deepest motives are mysterious and, if understood, may not be as pleasant as its impulses may make them seem. 'Everything, in short, suggests Mind', but here too there is so much confusion and contradiction, particularly because of 'the strain of its communicative anxiety'. What is left is the 'relief' of 'an ever giddier collective gallop' until a goal of final despair is reached, 'for only there in its cry of agony can your existence find at last an unequivocal meaning'.

Caliban goes on to say that he has little hope of being taken seriously; so powerful is the instinct to preserve a self which is comforting in the immediate present that 'the open eye and attentive ear will always interpret any sight and any sound to their advantage'.

The problem of 'the dedicated dramatist' who wants to show up the delusions of human nature, is that

> The more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly can he indicate the truth from which it is estranged, the brighter his revelation of the truth in its order, its justice, its joy, the fainter shows his picture of your actual condition in all its drabness and sham ...

Now comes a committed definition of 'the artistic gift' which is

> to make you unforgettably conscious of the ungarnished offended gap between what you so unquestionably are and what you are commanded without any question to become.

The task of the artist is to make it seem that 'the gap is in itself a bridge' and to ensure that the things learned will stick, 'catch on, a madness of which you can only be cured by some shock quite outside his control'.

We are strongly reminded in the following phrase that Caliban's speech is a parody of Henry James's later manner:

> Our unfortunate dramatist, therefore, is placed in the unseemly predicament of having to give ... all his time to the task of 'doing' life.

Henry James often wrote of 'doing'. But Caliban, or Auden, feels the need 'to hope that some unfortunate mishap will intervene to ruin his effect'. Auden says, as James says, that the artist must be highly conscious of his 'doing' life, but whereas James insists on a supreme Jamesian control throughout his novels, Auden hopes that somewhere, in a way that is beyond the consciousness, the treatment and the 'expectation aroused' (which can only be each person's expectation of 'advantage'), will effect the actual 'connection' between art and life.

The rest of Caliban's address will not be looked at closely here. The delusions and temptations of any artist are examined. Will not the artist tend to live so fully in his creations that he neglects humility before God? [cancelled → The theatre, Caliban tells the audience, is like a railway station where people come to buy tickets and enjoy the expectation of travel. Wherever they go, Caliban says, they will meet Ariel and himself, conveniently separate. Escape from self is guaranteed.]

So, Caliban asks at last, what help is there? Is it within a thing called religion, or in culture, or in Mind? It could possibly be, Caliban says, or in anything where our attention is finally fixed on the Wholly Other. Art can be important in giving glimpses of this. But it comes out of each person's aloneness with

everything, the massacres, the whippings, the lies, the twaddle ... our shame, our fear, our incorrigible staginess, all wish and no resolve, are still, and more intensely than ever, all we have: only now it is not in spite of them but with them that we are blessed by that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf ... so that all our meanings are reversed and it is precisely in its negative image of Judgment that we can positively envisage Mercy; it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected work which is not ours.

CHAPTER 11

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(i) Francis Scarfe

AUDEN AND AFTER, 1942

Pages 10 to 34 of this book are on Auden and he is mentioned frequently in other chapters. The book presents a chapter each on modern writers whom the writer considers to represent some or other school or movement or emphasis. It reflects the change in the writer's conception of poetry from his early feeling that a poet had necessarily, in such a time as the years between the wars, to be one thing or the other, more cerebral and clinical or more emotional and personal, Left or Right, and so on. The synthesis, as suggested by Eliot and Pound, needed clarifying and reaffirming, and in this book Auden is praised for what he did in the Thirties. He is defended at a time when the writer feels 'attempts are being made to wipe Auden off the map of poetry',[1] and the main emphasis of praise is this:

> The synthesis of Eliot and Pound was a cultural one: Auden has had the courage to face some unpleasant facts and attempt a social synthesis. Emerging from such a period, his synthesis could be nothing but odd, and a future generation is bound to regard it as rather pathetic. But he got round his problem (as Blake did) by an unusual capacity for myth-making and sheer disregard for reputation. 2

The writer goes on to write on 'Auden's Psychology', 'Auden's Politics' and then his style. There is very little textual analysis or even illustration to support much adverse criticism. The most interesting and valuable thing done is to point out that in the poem 'Spain', lengthily quoted and fairly fully commented on, there is 'an extremely ingenious application of psychology to a political problem'.[3] Spain can only be saved by individuals looking inward to examine their conscience; Spain is the conscience of an age.* Scarfe has a good answer to the question put

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* A different interpretation is given in this thesis: pI23 ff

twenty years later by John Mander in his THE WRITER AND COMMITMENT, when the latter asks why Auden need supply so many geographical details in the poem 'Spain'.[4] It is because Auden wants to vivify what is 'precise and alive' through our inner relationship to a country.

After more or less dismissing the plays, praising LOOK, STRANGER! and referring to NEW YEAR LETTER, the writer expresses the belief that the move to America could only harm Auden. The section on 'The Style which is no Style' suggests, with no illustration and comment, that Auden in America reflects too many obvious influences, and that he can change from one style to another in the same poem without any advantage. The concluding paragraphs go back to the theme of praise for his wide interests and sympathies, as well as his writing 'close to common speech'.[5]

This book is too superficial to have done Auden much good or harm. It is a good example of a book on a poet by a man who has paid little close, prolonged and patient attention to actual poems. He has almost nothing penetrating to say to support either the praise or the adverse remarks about his chosen poet.

(ii) D.S. Savage

THE PERSONAL PRINCIPLE, 1944.

One could hardly expect any detailed attention to individual poems, or a consideration both scholarly and imaginative of any one poet, in a book whose preface begins:

> If the theme of this book could be expressed in one word, that word would be Wholeness or Integrity. I am not concerned here with criticism as an exercise performed, within certain conventionally-prescribed limitations, upon a 'subject' called 'Literature'. I am using criticism as the most convenient, for the moment, of many possible approaches to the issues which confront the sentient mind in our time. 1

The first chapter contains some rather familiar pronouncements; no doubt they sounded less stale at the time the book appeared:

> The modern artist cannot take his values from contemporary society, because that society lacks all coherent standards and values. 2

> Every human value has its source, first of all, in the heart, mind or soul of some particular individual, where it is unique, particular, and free. 3

> We think of the writing of poetry, for example, as an intensely individual activity. So it is; and yet at the same time it is completely communal. 4

The writer draws a distinction between two forces potentially at variance with each other, namely, culture and civilization. Culture is 'the flowering of the aristocratic principle of life'[5] and civilization 'the democratic principle, the principle of the herd'.[6]

At different times in history, Savage says, the one or the other is dominant or there is something like a homogeneous condition with private and public life more or less identical. The thesis of the book is that never has there been a time (such as like) the present for such a complete severance of public and private. Romanticism in poetry indicates public

life, or civilization, in the ascendancy. Romanticism at its worst, without vitality, is when a Tennyson takes on public values or a Swinburne deliberately goes against them without anything else to say.

Savage then goes on to endorse what Leavis had said in MASS CIVILIZATION AND MINORITY CULTURE, that what 'Literature' means for most educated people is not considered as such by trained readers and universities:

> Since 1918 the division into private and public literature has become almost absolute. We may assert with complete confidence that since that date all the genuinely significant writers are to be found within the influential radius of this minority of creative spirits who no longer share, or make any pretence of sharing, the values of society at large. 7

The writer is adamant about what the artist, or any serious thinking person should do. He seems to feel that any attempt at a synthesis ought now to be avoided and that 'we' should

> take our stand uncompromisingly on the inner values of personality, and demand the subordination of the exterior structure to the centrality of the individual human person. 8

Nowadays, Savage goes on to say, there is no defined class as an artist's audience, but that scattered throughout all groups is an audience 'foreshadowing (of) the classless society of the future.'[9] The hope and prospect of this makes Savage denounce the idea of deliberately carrying culture to the working class; rather, Savage says, must the working class be made into a classless community so that they can then come to the arts.

This brings him to attack Edmund Wilson's AXEL'S CASTLE. It is surely not doing justice to Wilson to accuse him of a clear, anti-culture, pro-civilization attitude, as defined by Savage:

> Yet the puritan social conscience of the American author influences him to attempt to harness his culture-heroes to the chariot of civilization ... Mr Wilson, on balance, comes out on the side of society as against the artist, on the side of civilization against culture. 10

What Wilson advocated was that artists should - since no one else was doing so or seemed likely to - make the attempt to be their universal selves within a modern context, and not at all to pander to the herd or become revolutionary. Savage's 'on balance' above is not sufficient to subtilise the crudity of dichotomy the two things, culture and civilisation, when applied to Wilson.

Savage concludes the opening, general section of his book with an analysis of the new freedom which is art's in this century. He adds an item to Coleridge's 'three silent revolutions in England which were, firstly, when the professions fell off from the Church; secondly, when literature fell off from the professions; and, thirdly, when the press fell off from literature'.[11] Savage adds: 'A latterday Coleridge might have something further to say ... when the mass-newspaper fell off from the press.'[12] Savage sees no sense in going back to Christian Orthodoxy though Christianity can be 'positively recreated within the lives of individuals in terms of personal experience.'[13] Eventually, Savage says, in a future, recreated, organic society, art will so have enriched itself with the new freedom open to it, that the reintegration of society will yield 'a higher unity'[14] compared with anything before.

The chapter on Auden is the sixth of Part 2 and comes after a consideration of Yeats, Eliot, Hart Crane, Harold Munro and D.H. Lawrence. The method is the usual one, namely, to give paragraph after paragraph of general consideration, touching on characteristics, technique, development of ideas, and so on. When there is a quotation, it is made to support, in favour or otherwise, what the general remarks have been; but there is very little demonstration of why this or that passage is good or bad.

Each of the poets is considered as simply not good enough for Savage's ideal of the poet of integration, and Munro comes off best. Adverse remarks by far outnumber the items of praise. Clearly Savage cannot read a poem without a constant testing of it against his no doubt important general thinking about the age of social disintegration.

The chapter on Auden is entitled 'The Strange Case of W.H. Auden'. He is condemned from the start:

> In the nineteen-thirties English Literature witnesses a new phenomenon in the shape of a school of writers and poets who, discontented with the isolation of literature from social values and standards, attempted a reconciliation of poetry with society. At the bottom of their attitude was a retreat from the values of personality and the personal experience ... 15

One would expect from a person who has tried to show in the earlier part of the book that 'reconciliation' is at least the ultimate goal and hope, a more tolerant attitude. He could surely have said, instead of 'retreat' with the suggestion of cowardice and escape, either 'subordination' or 'active, conscious involvement of personality in the forces and movements of the times'. There are a few remarks in praise of Auden, such as this:

> POEMS, his first and best volume of verse, is also his most individual work ... a genuinely poetic vision: a freshness of perception and a coherent attitude out of which a real and convincing world begins to take form. The language is tough and sinewy 16

Although there is almost no praise for anything in any of the other works by Auden up to the time the book was written, the remarks on POEMS make it inconsistent for Savage to conclude his chapter on Auden like this:

> After hardly more than a decade of activity he has already become a period-piece, his works as out of date as last month's newspapers. 17

Savage had quite a lot to say about POEMS, and quotes copiously but without detailed comment on the quotations. He tries to trace a common theme in the poems, and quite rightly but without much originality, sees the psychopathological element as stronger than the seeming political one, and sees Auden as a protesting but continuing member of the middle class. The point is repeated three times that Auden does not write from personal experience:

> It is clear that with Auden we are not dealing with a strongly personal poet ... Throughout his work he is concerned to express a vision of society. 18

This kind of remark is the real weakness of Savage's case against Auden. It is surely only too obvious that to have become a poet worthy of even adverse criticism, his poetry, if it <u>is</u> poetry, could not have been created out of anything <u>but</u> personality. If it is <u>not</u> poetry, then Savage should say so and show it. Antagonism; class- and self-criticism; awareness, however nebulous, of others' needs, can only come from an individual confrontation with 'a vision of society'. It is nonsense to say as Savage does:

> Auden's concern throughout is never with his personal experience, but, leaving his own individuality on one side, he attempts to deal immediately with the larger life <u>outside</u> the individual. 19

There can never be such a severance except perhaps partially in a sociological and scientific analysis of society. Savage ignores the point that for a certain kind of person the most important thing, happy-making or otherwise, lies in that which is going on around him and which affects him directly or indirectly, and over which he has little or no control. This can be, as in Auden's case, a personal anguish rooted in the intensely personal things that create an uneasy conscience or a sense of projection on to, or identification with, the unfortunates of society.

In discussing THE ORATORS Savage maintains - and rightly - that Auden was attempting to create a group of united dissidents within middle-class ranks. But it is too easy merely to state that all that was achieved poetically was obscure parochial solidarity. Savage also says the following, wildly overstating a partial truth:

> As in THE DANCE OF DEATH, the puerility of Auden's interpretations of life is brought out with appalling clarity ... ludicrously over-simplified ... All Auden's work, founded on distrust of personality and the personal experience, is an attempted escape from personality into a real, objective social world, which in truth has no existence. 20

Savage sees all the other works following THE ORATORS as a decline resulting from the original disintegration in a man - Auden - who tries to separate personal from social. LOOK, STRANGER! is regarded as of an 'unreal and vapid public world in which the particular is in every respect overshadowed by the blurred outlines of the general.'[21] The two poems he quotes from and dismisses are 'Here on the cropped grass ...'* and 'Now from my window-sill ...' Though by no means without faults, they do not warrant such sweeping dismissal as 'a mourning which has no depth or power.'[22]

The very act of writing the poem 'Spain' (also the travels to Iceland, China and Spain) is seen by Savage as Auden's final surrender of his first position as attacker of the class he belongs to.

> The conflict within bourgeois society has been externalized. There is no longer any ground or need for internal criticism. The struggle has been conveniently transferred to the Spanish battlefield ... In such a manner as this Auden is enabled not only to reconcile himself to the society of which he is a member and accept its values but to fuse together the disparate components of his split vision. The psychological and political are now seen to be two aspects of the one reality. 23

This seems too stupidly short-sighted to be called unfair. It ignores

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* Analysed in detail in this thesis, p 71 ff

the fact that the Spanish Civil War, as it were, did the shouting for the Leftists of the Thirties who could not make themselves heard in the continuing complacency of the privileged classes of England. It said what Auden and others had been saying all along, that a conflict would come because haves neglected have-nots. By identifying themselves with Spain and writing about the conflict, the Leftists could draw the attention of the English more forcibly to what was a similar and endangering situation in their own country. To say that Auden ever accepted the values of the middle classes is simply nonsense. That he stopped threatening and satirising and exhorting in his poetry is not the same as accepting. The change was from partial resignation to a recognition that poetry is largely ineffectual in its own time and that it could be only little more than a means towards personal resolution of conflict. In the Conclusion to Part One of this thesis it is suggested that Auden was in two minds about any sort of declaration of support for Spain.

Savage also says the following:

> In this manner, political happenings in the outer world are utilized for the projection of the 'social' individual's private fantasy. Irresponsibility could hardly reach an absurder, more reckless level - in the name of social responsibility. 24

Auden did not 'utilize'; but surely all people project themselves into 'external' events? In some form or other our reaction to these events is our own colouring of the so-called facts and forces. To realise that 'the psychological and political are ... two aspects of the same vision' seems to me, as it seems to Scarfe, a valuable thing. The degree of synthesis in the poet can only be seen in the poetry, and it is here that a detailed examination of text should be indispensable for any serious criticism. Savage has, of course, already apologised in the beginning of the book for

his method. The need for a method in dealing with poetry becomes very obvious.

Being so concerned with personal integration Savage sees the method of having three main divisions of the poems in ANOTHER TIME as proof of 'inner dividedness'.[25] NEW YEAR LETTER 'shows Auden's final abdication as a poet.'[26] The chapter concludes with the smug words already quoted, 'as out of date as last month's newspapers'. Apart from an Appendix (in which Savage disagrees with the emphasis in the title of the debate between C.S. Lewis and Tillyard, THE PERSONAL HERESY)*, these words of contempt for Auden end the book.

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* Discussed p I3 ff

(iii) Randall Jarrell

Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden's Ideology, PARTISAN REVIEW, 1945

This article highlights some important questions about literary criticism. Can one not ask, within reason, for a certain kind of critical tone? While each critic's individual style is welcome there is a certain tone that implies the critic's contempt for his subject with which he plays a cat-and-mouse game, enjoying himself at the expense of a chosen victim. Jarrell writes in this tone. His style is racy, clever, entertaining if one has no concern for the victim. He says many penetrating things - though always sweepingly - while his comparisons and analogies show him to be well-read and topical. He appears to know a good deal about psychology and sociology. The following passage is an example of Jarrell's intelligence and vitality at the service of his dislike:

> There is only 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. Here everything that is important happens in the Realm of Grace. The fundamental structural picture underlying the poems is that of waiting humbly for Grace; man's ultimate accomplishment is sitting still. 1

The phrase 'hard to resist' is patronising while the underlined words reveal either disbelief in the validity and efficacy of the Christian attitude or else complete lack of understanding. The emphasis becomes cheap, like reducing what a football match means to some people to the absurdity of two hours sweat for the sake of a little ball. All that a person goes through in order to reach what Auden was trying to reach, is dismissed in the exaggerated and superficial description of a man sitting idle.

The second question about literary criticism which this article highlights is this: what is the use of devoting oneself to a study of a poet's ideology rather than his poetry? A poet is seldom an original thinker in ideas, politics, psychology etc., etc. If he is influenced by thinkers in these fields, the question is what sort of poetry was the poet writing at the time. To separate his ideas from his poetry is to analyse something that must inevitably be either second-hand or not profound. The least a critic should do is consider the ideas <u>through</u> the poetry. It seems that Jarrell read far more prose articles by Auden than poetry; certainly he never once pays attention to a single poem. This skimming over of what is supposed to be a poet's career 'permits' all kinds of licence. The poet is never once allowed to speak for himself, defend himself in his best expression, his poems.

A third question arises from this article: how much knowledge ought a critic to assume his readers have of his subject? Jarrell seems to assume that his reader can keep in mind and have fresh first-hand knowledge of most of the poems in each volume or at each stage of Auden's career. While one feels the insight and truth of the following quotation, surely a line or two of quotation at the very least is essential to authenticate what he says?

> These early poems effect a strange assimilation of machinery and the industrial world into a traditional, rural, almost feudal world ... The weight and concentration of the poems fall upon <u>things</u> (and those great things, animals and people), in their tough, laconic, un-get-pastable plainness; they have kept the stolid and dangerous inertia of the objects of sagas - the sword that snaps, the man looking at his lopped off leg and saying, 'That was a good stroke'. They gain an uncommon plausibility from the terse understated matter-of-factness of their treatment, the insistence ... upon the <u>thingness</u> of the words themselves. Things are vaguely tabooish, totemistic, animistic - everything is full of <u>mana</u>, especially the machines, rusting tutelary deities of the countryside in which everything occurs; if Jung had read the early Auden he would have decided that rusting machines in the country are Archetypal Images of the Racial Unconscious. 2

What is the point of the words in parenthesis above? One can feel the truth of the 'thingness', but an illustration is needed to support 'tabooish' etc. It is also an unanswered question in literary criticism just how much extraneous knowledge that a critic may have, can be usefully, or courteously introduced. Not only is the concept of Jung's mana not often come across outside his textbooks, but the extension of the feeling in Auden's poetry of 'thingness' into 'the Racial Unconscious' smacks rather strongly of one who has been immersed in Jung and is now reading Auden. The inferences come too easily, and the poems are ignored.

What Jarrell has to say in Part II of the article is often interesting and perceptive, but the note of somewhat amused contempt keeps cropping up. In this section he outlines the

> permanent casual core of Auden's ideology; it is structural and basic in his nature - compared to it most other things are skin or hair, the mere bloom of rouge. In Auden's work the elements of anxiety, guilt, isolation, sexuality and authority make up a true Gestalt, a connected and meaningful whole; but the necessities of analysis force the analyst to sketch them one by one, as they appear in the successive stages of Auden's development. 3

This raises yet another point in poetry-criticism; why should a critic feel compelled to adopt this method of analysis? Either one ignores the poems as poems, as Jarrell does, or one dissects them artificially. One uses them as material to be forced into moulds and compartments of the critic's own making. The sense of 'a connected and meaningful whole' which, if taken in the right way, could give a favourable impression of Auden's oeuvre, is immediately vitiated by the method of analysis. Perhaps the very fact of taking the trouble to analyse a poet's work can be taken as proof that the critic thinks him well-worth the trouble. Jarrell actually concedes once, but once only, that Auden wrote

poems that were not, as it were, things for Jarrell's use:

> Some of his most beautiful poems express the terrifying and pathetic isolation of the growing organism, unwillingly alone from the moment it is thrust from the womb. 4

However, in spite of Jarrell's obviously taking the trouble to use his knowledge of psychology to pursue the elements of Auden's 'casual core', one senses downright disrespect on the part of the analyst towards his patient. The following is from the discussion of Auden's sense of moral guilt:

> It is we who are responsible, either by commission or - more generally - by omission, for everything from killing-off the Tasmanians to burning the books at Alexandria. (You didn't do it? Then you should have stopped them from doing it. You never heard of it? Ignorant as well as evil, eh? You weren't born? You're guilty, I tell you - guilty.) 5

Apart from the cheap tone, where are the poems in which Auden is as crude as this, browbeating his readers? Jarrell does not bother to say.

The article was written soon after the war had ended and clearly Jarrell finds most distasteful the view that a man can save his soul by committing himself to nothing. He discusses a statement by Auden in a review of Grimm's Tales in which Auden gives vent to his dislike of American societies like 'the Association of Positivist Parents'. This association would not agree with Auden that the Tales are the best education one can get (self-knowledge and unco-operativeness in society are seen by Jarrell as incompatible). Jarrell says:

> Such a sentence ... was written ... within the months that held the mass-executions in the German camps, the fire-raids, Warsaw and Dresden and Manila; within the months that were preparing the bombs for Hiroshima and Nagasaki ... 10

Jarrell might here, at the end of the article, have reminded his readers that there was a time when Auden was felt by many critics to be too obviously committed and topical as a poet. Auden at least visited Spain and China during their wars; he had warned only too often that a catastrophe such as the Second World War was coming. Clearly his peace of mind could not be found in what had proved to be ineffectual gestures of involvement in affairs of the world. But this kind of involvement was always expressed in Auden's poetry as a complex, individually psychological thing. In just this way, complex and individual or existential, Auden embraces Christian passivity.

John Wain has said this on critics and criticism:

> It is perhaps right for academic people to be conservative in their tastes; society gives them the role of guardians of tradition ... but there can be no excuse for their habit of spitting at almost every major contemporary poet ... A sad example, (sad because it is distasteful to have to remember anything to the discredit of a good and learned man) is to be found on p.73 of Gavin Bone's Anglo-Saxon Poetry (Oxford 1943) ... Bone is dealing with rival theories of translations, and he mentions the anti-Gilbert Murray view expressed by 'an American critic, Mr T.S. Eliot.' Now this sort of thing is silly impertinence; the insult lies in (i) assuming that Eliot needs identifying at all; (ii) calling him a critic, as if he were the author of some half-forgotten essay and nothing else; (iii) calling him an American, which in the context is a gibe - it means 'an outsider from a commercial civilization who doesn't understand people like Gilbert Murray and myself'. 7

I think that Jarrell's tone ought to be condemned in the same way. It is too often the nasty tone of unscrupulous aggression in the competitive world of criticism in which creative writers form the vulnerable prey or entire battlefields. I think Wain's 'sad' could be used as well, for Jarrell is obviously both lively and perceptive. By comparison, Monroe Spears is pedestrian; but then, Spears does not create in criticism, he interprets and classifies. Yet, although Spears shows too much respect for all that Auden wrote, his humility and lack of penetration compare favourably with Jarrell's flashes of insight and mockery.

(iv) Julian Symons

The Double Man, FOCUS 2, 1946

This article was written as a reply to 'the very positive insensitiveness and bewilderment of liberal and donnish critics about this long philosophical poem', namely, FOR THE TIME BEING. Symons says little that need be discussed here, for it has since been said by Hoggart, Spears and others. Towards the end of the article Symons says:

> The philosophic idea on which FOR THE TIME BEING is based, and which is present in almost all Auden's later work, is that there is an essential dichotomy in the nature of man. Prospero, for instance, is the 'personified type of the creative'; but take away the transforming magic of art, and he is an average sensual man. Auden writes of Prospero with sympathy; but he writes of Antonio, Prospero's opposite, with equal sympathy. It is obviously his belief that it is the duty of the creative artist to understand, rather than to feel partisan preference ... It is important for Auden, too, that these dichotomies shall never be resolved ... 1

Symons goes on to what is for him a serious defect in this particular work of Auden's, reflecting a defect in Auden's character. This is the flippancy which makes Auden try to negate the value of philosophy and art. The work remains, Symons asserts, to be ranked among 'the impressive failures of literature',[2] such as ESSAY ON MAN or IN MEMORIAM, and its critical reception to be proof of the 'depth to which literary criticism has sunk in our time.'[3]

(v) Benjamin Gilbert Brooks

The Poetry of W.H. Auden: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND AFTER, CXLI, 1947

The writer begins by speaking of a 'great writer's duty' to explore his 'gifts' in relation to his times and its people. Auden, he says, had been doing this for seventeen years and one major justification for forgiving him his weaknesses is this:

> The fact is that he has written always out of the immediate background of his own experience, and though what he says may be baffling, what he is talking about is not. 1

Brooks goes on to find most excusable the obscurity, the private references, the experimental forms of verse, the flitting of an intelligent reading man among the current writings of his day 'seeking amid the numbing chaos of the age some new path or other which offered at least the prospect of an outlet.'[2] Brooks looks on the merit side of the method and result of putting things together in poetry as if the references were 'clipped out of pieces of paper'.[3] The poetry was 'surprisingly living and vivid in the current air.'[4]

Brooks traces briefly Auden's changing attitudes up to the most recent work, FOR THE TIME BEING, and mentions that other critics might 'make learned play'[5] with the changes and the alterations to earlier poems in COLLECTED POETRY to suit a more recent attitude. Brooks clearly sees that the actual quality of a poem as it stands is what counts, no matter what the attitude, idea, or alterations. He is sympathetic to the theme of holding up to question the validity of a work of art. He says:

> The work of art has for so long, especially since Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, been regarded as a valid record of experience, one on which one's reactions to life itself may well be based ...[6]

He refers to the way in which the present day prefers to discount Shakespeare's or Chaucer's expressed doubts about their art. He mentions in particular the epilogue to THE TEMPEST which formed the basis of THE SEA AND THE MIRROR. Brooks goes on to a favourable account of the theme and the poetic variety of this work; of Caliban's speech, he says:

> The destruction of the artist by the very success of his art is analysed in pages of amazing prose. Through years of assiduous labour, he has managed to store up endless knacks for producing the impression of reality which he requires. Then suddenly his art becomes a monster whom he cannot get rid of: Ariel becomes Caliban. Here indeed Mr Auden touches on the main theme of the whole book: it is the duty of the writer to wrestle with his imagination and overcome it. Instead of chasing always an illusory subject, he should chase real life, in his case his despised imaginative power ('which is most weak') but which is the one reality it is his job to explore. 7

In his discussion of FOR THE TIME BEING// Brooks is equally full of praise, both for the elucidation of the theme of Kierkegaard's Absurd, and for the poetry. As in earlier parts of this article, extracts of poetry are given and must speak for themselves after a brief word of praise or analysis, such as 'the most astounding imagery',[8] 'the most powerful section ...'[9] He sees the section, 'The Flight Into Egypt', as bringing the two parts of the book together. This flight takes place in the desert of uncertainty, where one can only manage feeble attempts to explain the Absurd, 'the non-sense of life'.[10] Just as the characters of THE TEMPEST must now manage for themselves, having emerged from an illusion of order and justice, so must Mary and Joseph recognise that Egypt, the imagined refuge, will have to be differently wanting but wanting nonetheless if their reality is to be faced.

The limitation of this article is that the writer makes no attempt to demonstrate the quality of the poetry that is the vehicle for the themes of which he quite clearly approves. Brooks values the self-examination and self-exploration of the man so greatly that the 'gift of poetry' by

which he establishes a self and by which he achieves a kind of relationship with society, tends to be sheltered from adverse criticism or persuasive praise.

CONCLUDING NOTE TO PART TWO OF THESIS
1937-1947

Auden was well-known in academic and literary circles in America when he arrived there. He found no difficulty in making himself heard in these circles and in October 1939, he was appointed tutor to the American Writers League Writers School Faculty. In this and other short spells of teaching, he held lively seminars in which he combined the formally academic with the subjective search for understanding. A glance at Callen's checklist, or Spears' list of Auden's writing activity in this period, indicates how prolific a writer and critic Auden was. He had articles and essays published by a variety of American journals, and contributed numerous reviews. He continued to collaborate with Benjamin Britten and wrote a radio play; a choral operetta, 'Paul Bunyan'; songs, in addition to the Oratorio, FOR THE TIME BEING. He continued to edit editions of poetry and translations, both in England and America. In 1946 he became an American citizen, in which year he also worked with Berthold Brecht to adapt Webster's DUCHESS OF MALFI.

In this period the first serious critical attention was given to Auden. In each of the books discussed in this thesis Auden is given a place near the handful of major writers, but not quite with them. Though Savage or Scarfe might make adverse remarks about Auden's poetry, nevertheless, by giving him considerable attention alongside the handful, they accord status to him. But even the best of the critics, the most penetrating and authoritative, Cleanth Brooks, discussed in Part One, does not devote much sustained attention to Auden; he recognises him as important, but in passing.

The transition to a Kierkegaard-Christian attitude to life, from the liberal-humanist one, meant, in Auden's poetry, getting people to recognise their own earthbound, error-ridden, imperfectible selves. Liberal-humanism implies a faith by which one's essential being depends on a belief in some degree of perfectibility. By 1936-37, quite clearly, and uncertainly before that (as in poems in LOOK, STRANGER! which had been published two or three years before 1936), Auden had lost faith in liberal-humanism. His sense of purpose no longer depended on the belief that either he or the world in general could change for the better, for the happier.

The former optimism and verve that hope and new insight gave to his struggle with his neurosis and ~~he~~ his moral sensitivity, was first replaced by a lonely awareness of the few people who were doing, or had done, something that might reinforce a liberal-humanist faith. He was saddened by the deaths in his time of such people as Yeats, Freud, Toller, and he was humble about great writers, who, with all their limitations, added something to the small sum of human enlightenment and self-knowledge. In 1941 he wrote 'At the Grave of Henry James.' Humble, admiring, tender as the address to James is, it is nevertheless a belittling of all writers and artists, like Auden himself. Writers and artists, who are usually liberal-humanist but also, ultimately, egoists, find it difficult to have a sense of a God who is not Art, religion that is not self-expression.

Auden's poem indicates what was happening to him at this time. He is still humane, intelligent and enlightened, he still possesses the artistic gift and the need to express himself. He is still his unchanged, earth-bound, lonely self. The world has got much worse, with its third major war within five years. Auden has a great personal need to give up a belief in the betterment of himself and the world, and to give up the burden of

trying to understand logically. This is not to renounce caring about the world. Just as in the early Thirties he wished to change as a person, and needed society to change also, now Auden wishes to justify the new need and attitude, which exists simultaneously with more than admiration for what a person can become through Christianity.

The example of Charles Williams and the persuasiveness of Kierkegaard or Reinold Niebuhr, made him see the world about him with the same Auden eyes, with the same wit, interest, humour, sense of paradox, and with continuing humanist despair and disgust. But now at least he has the feeling that his essential being, his real integrity and identity, were not fundamentally embroiled. The poetry of these years therefore ~~he~~ is very similar in tone and style to the earlier poetry and this in itself indicates how far from a complete, mystical inner revolution Auden was. One enjoys so much of each of the poems in this pericd that the mention, or sometimes intrusion, of the Wholly Other, or the like, does not detract much from the enjoyment. It only makes one feel that the old, healthy incorporating of new kinds of human enlightenment into one man's personal struggle to come to terms with his own and others' suffering, is still going on.

The insistence on the utter final difference between Art and Religion is not completely convincing. The attempted rejection of the Auden self as it had come to be up to this time, in favour of what one might call a Wholly New Auden, is not easy, is, in fact, impossible. After 1947, as will be seen in analyses of poems from NONES (1952), the guiltless acceptance of what one inevitably is, matures into a guiltless acceptance of being a poet and not a theologian or a preacher, even though one is very much a creature of God living in Caesar's City.

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1948-1960

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IN PRAISE OF LIMESTONE

If it form the one landscape that we the inconstant ones
Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly
Because it dissolves in water. Mark these rounded slopes
With their surface fragrance of thyme and beneath
A secret system of caves and conduits; hear these springs
That spurt out everywhere with a chuckle
Each filling a private pool for its fish and carving
Its own little ravine whose cliffs entertain
The butterfly and the lizard; examine this region
Of short distances and definite places:
What could be more like Mother or a fitter background
For her son, for the nude young male who lounges
Against a rock displaying his dildo, never doubting
That for all his faults he is loved, whose works are but
Extensions of his power to charm? From weathered outcrop
To hill-top temple, from appearing waters to
Conspicuous fountains, from a wild to a formal vineyard,
Are ingenious but short steps that a child's wish
To receive more attention than his brothers, whether
By pleasing or teasing, can easily take.

Watch, then, the band of rivals as they climb up and down
Their steep stone gennels in twos and threes, sometimes
Arm in arm, but never, thank God, in step; or engaged
On the shady side of a square at midday in
Voluble discourse, knowing each other too well to think
There are any important secrets, unable
To conceive a god whose temper-tantrums are moral
And not to be pacified by a clever line
Or a good lay: for, accustomed to a stone that responds,
They have never had to veil their faces in awe
Of a crater whose blazing fury could not be fixed;
Adjusted to the local needs of valleys
Where everything can be touched or reached by walking,
Their eyes have never looked into infinite space
Through the lattice-work of a nomad's comb; born lucky,
Their legs have never encountered the fungi
And insects of the jungle, the monstrous forms and lives
With which we have nothing, we like to hope, in common.
So, when one of them goes to the bad, the way his mind works
Remains comprehensible: to become a pimp
Or deal in fake jewellery or ruin a fine tenor voice
For effect that brings down the house could happen to all
But the best and the worst of us ...

That is why, I suppose,
The best and worst never stayed here long but sought
Immoderate soils where the beauty was not so external,
The light less public and the meaning of life
Something more than a mad camp. 'Come!.' cried the granite wastes,
'How evasive is your humour, how accidental
Your kindest kiss, how permanent is death.' (Saints-to-be

Slipped away sighing.) 'Come!' purred the clays and gravels
'On our plains there is room for armies to drill; rivers
Wait to be tamed and slaves to construct you a tomb
In the grand manner: soft as the earth is mankind and both
Need to be altered.' (Intendant Caesars rose and
Left, slamming the door.) 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.'

They were right, my dear, all those voices were right
And still are; this land is not the sweet home that it looks,
Nor its peace the historical calm of a site
Where something was settled once and for all: A backward
And delapidated province, connected
To the big busy world by a tunnel, with a certain
Seedy appeal, is that all it is now? Not quite:
It has a worldly duty which in spite of itself
It does not neglect, but calls into question
All the Great Powers assume; it disturbs our rights. The poet,
Admired for his earnest habit of calling
The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle, is made uneasy
By these solid statues which so obviously doubt
His antimythological myth; and these gamins,
Pursuing the scientist down the tiled colonnade
With such lively offers, rebuke his concern for Nature's
Remotest aspects: I, too, am reproached, for what
And how much you know. Not to lose time, not to get caught,
Not to be left behind, not, please! to resemble
The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water
Or stone whose conduct can be predicted, these
Are our Common Prayer, whose greatest comfort is music
Which can be made anywhere, is invisible,
And does not smell. In so far as we have to look forward
To death as a fact, no doubt we are right: But if
Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead,
These modifications of matter into
Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains,
Made solely for pleasure, make a further point:
The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,
Having nothing to hide. Dear, I know nothing of
Either, but 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 landscape.

IN PRAISE OF LIMESTONE
(Horizon, July, 1948)

This poem shows a waning of direct, highly-aware preoccupation with a specifically Kierkegaardian interpretation of Christianity. The lonely, individual 'leap', tending in this poem to be linked to a renunciation of the material and sensuous world, is seen as 'older, colder'.

The religious person - and Auden confesses to being not sure what this or anything else is - encorporates the warm, sociable, 'voluble', essentially static person who feels safe, loved and still within the womb; and the restless, assertive, wilful kind of person. This wilful kind, in doing anything, be it in the name of progress and reform, or through conquest and the manipulation of people, or in making a work of art, creates a lost womb by trying to make the world as he wants it to be. He creates safety in power, exclusive affection and admiration through art, or cultivates wilful asceticism by which to command, without loopholes and temptations, divine approval.

Auden finally ~~comes out on the side of~~ enshrines 'a limestone landscape', the perfect, gentle, commonly beneficial activity which is described in the first ten lines of the poem. People cannot actually be the landscape, a womb of unthinking service and belonging. They can, however, be primitive, tribal, warm, satisfied in their limited individuality, though to an Auden, or a Caesar kind of temperament, they are naive, just not sufficiently conscious. Yet they have more of what all other kinds of people need or yearn for, than any other kind of person.

The poem begins with the assumption that human beings are 'consistently homesick'. Our lives are ruled by the need to belong, the wish not to be, as we are, 'inconstant'. Paradoxically, the only aspects of the non-human world which attract us by their constancy, are those which are humanised by a touch of the transient. The limestone landscape is described as intimate, self-contained, affectionate; the springs 'chuckle' and each performs a task that delights; privacy, secrecy are here, but also silent association and mutual approval. The people who live here have an all-confessing, gossipy kind of life, because, 'accustomed to a stone that responds', their sense of belonging is taken care of. The need for response is the unspoken urge to serve, and be looked after by, a Mother. All the 'voluble discourse' expresses this as public individualism, a common demonstration of belonging, through the Mother, of each to all. Thus an ultimate god to them is mother-like, and the defensive individualism that comes from seeing only a vicious, indifferent-to-humanity Creation, is impossible.

The sexual connection between Mother and son is suggested by 'nude young male' and 'displaying his dildo'. Affectionate intimacy knows no public disguise, but to the more sophisticated and highly-conscious observer, this relationship is obscene, perhaps not so much for the sexual reasons as in the vaunting of the unconscious, naive vanity of one whose life is no more than an easy sustaining of the mother-tie. 'Extensions of his power to charm', being preceded by 'but', indicates that constructiveness and a clearer sense of individuality are only an unwilling effort, an interim stage between doubt of the mother-tie, brought about by a sense of rivalry, and reassurance. Within the place 'Of short distances and definite places', with its tribal, social intimacy, the challenge to the mother-tie will not be great. There will not be much variety or development in the modifications

made to a natural environment which responds to people as much as they wish it to.

Neither in their landscape nor in their souls will the people experience awe, fear, loneliness; every act, including criminal acts, will be contained by the social, the average, the belonging. The second paragraph of the poem neatly captures the deeper meaning of individuality in the phrase 'band of rivals'. On one level they are rivals, individual enough not to be 'in step', but essentially they are a 'band' without 'important secrets'.

Those who might have been different have left the place. They are 'The best and worst', who conquered the need to belong to this kind of Mother of the familiar and comfortable; or they are those who failed to sustain this need. To these, no longer feeling their relationship to the secure, average and comfortable, the place was 'a mad camp'. Like the poet, they came to notice the naive vanity, the 'voluble discourse', the eternal serving of, and yielding to, the Mother.

The phrase 'and the meaning of life/ Something more than a mad camp' implies that only that which is an inner, personal realisation, or that which is a worship of things beyond the community, can satisfy the more exceptional people. Doubts about life itself exist only for these people; for the others, unified and public, death does not exist. The self-expression or restlessness of those who are 'the best and the worst' is received by the new landscape to which they go. They, like those left behind, externalise themselves, and different physical surroundings attract or can accommodate their different temperaments. The stoics are attracted to the inflexible aspect of granite. The restless, who are compelled to express themselves conspicuously in some direct way, either for the general good or not, go to 'yielding clays and gravels'.

Clearly, in this kind of region, there is a dangerous seductiveness. 'Purred' is the tone of complacent foresight that the territory will offer the opportunity for all kinds of constructive effort; but 'construct', a word with flattering and favourable associations, implies that each person has his own word to describe self-satisfying motives. This is Western Europe, with a history of power gained over nature and a history of conquest over people by individuals of the Caesar kind.

The 'really reckless' are attracted to the sea. Their recklessness - the description savours of an honour conferred - appears to lie in risking the consequences of a life of contemplation and renunciation. The break with 'love' is a refuting of the kind of love that determines life in the limestone country with its perpetual self-centred effort to retain the perfect harmony of unconscious belonging. There seems to be no other kind of love, no other worthy, energising goal or interim activity towards that goal. The 'really reckless' with their chill of complete self-absorption in contemplation and their freedom in world-rejection, contrast strongly with the earlier warmth of 'voluble discourse'. These are the two extremes of possible human existence; but the tentatively approached ideal lies between the limestone people and the clay and gravel people. The latter, who are restlessly pulled between these extremes, conquer, reform, discover, only to create their own God or Mother to compensate for a lost, unhappily remembered, womb.

The last part of the poem begins with the admission that by certain standards - of western materialism with its technical efficiency and dynamic purposelessness - the limestone country must be condemned. The 'sweet home' and 'historic calm' must give way in our estimation to 'dilapidated' and 'seedy'. But the poet is nevertheless compelled to assert the

negative usefulness of the place. It challenges the very principles by which the Great Powers are what they are.

The antiquity of the landscape disturbs the poet's preoccupation with self-mythifying, a preoccupation which makes him self-consciously clever and irreverent:

> Admired for his earnest habit of calling
> The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle ...

An original creation is commemorated by the limestone 'statues', bringing to the poet a sense of humility. The scientist finds that the uninhibited children insist on his attention so that he is compelled to be interested in the disorderly, vigorous present rather than in an academically sought pattern. The ~~writer~~ poet makes the personal admission that he is inescapably born into the competitive and 'progressive' way of life. Much as he feels affection for the 'secret system of caves and conduits' and the springs with their private pools, he cannot really change from one who hates

> ..... to resemble
> The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water
> Or stone whose conduct can be predicted ...

Music is the comforter of his way of life. The physical, the competitive, the demanding aspects of life are not present in listening to music; but the prim harshness of 'And does not smell' indirectly suggests the ultimate unhealthiness of this need for music as a comfort. The line casually goes on to crystallise the possible religious justification for the non-individualistic, uncompetitive life. If death ends everything, which seems implicit in Western Man's 'Common Prayer', then there is no reason not to strive for the most of everything, goods, reputation, power. If, however, there is ultimate forgiveness or an after-life, then the limestone country has yet another value; it reminds us that

The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,
Have nothing to hide ...

Those who comprise the other way of life, the unblessed, the individual and restless, are conscious of 'regard' and direct their individualism to a placating of opinion according to the standards upheld in a materialistic society's 'Common Prayer'. Privacy is no more than the socially enforced silencing of the 'voluble discourse' and is, for each individual who thrives in the secrecy, a similar kind of self-congratulation and self-assurance. This is the womb of competitive and self-judged success, usually sustained by the silent and hiding front of the possessions held as symbols of this success, this approval, this belonging, this kind of god.

The poet has made an effort to think in terms of the ideal, 'a faultless love', or in terms of the intangible, 'the life to come'. During the effort the poet's psyche comes to rest within the limestone landscape. In a way that is beyond thinking about, this landscape induces a feeling of ultimate fulfilment. The question is whether the place contains for the poet an unconscious fusion of the two worlds - Caesar's and the 'band of rivals' - or whether the place appeals to his spontaneous better self in defiance of the other self that is born to change and 'progress'. Whichever is the case, he concludes the poem without any reference to the actual inhabitants of the 'limestone landscape'.

To return to the first verse. Is there a quality about the limestone, the water, the channels, the pools, the butterflies and the lizards, in their interrelationship, on to which the starved or perverted instincts of human nature project a recognition of the good life? Some preliminary discussion is necessary before answering this question.

The first ten lines of the poem are the only ones which reveal direct pleasure and approval of an activity, a motivation, and an organisation. In general the rest of the poem is not a series of thoughts and feelings which grow immediately and conspicuously out of something preceding. Thoughts and observations and suggestions certainly succeed one another but the organic nature of the poetry lies in the overall tone of lax assurance, a natural reticence of confident intellectualism. This tone carries Auden's sophisticated tolerance of the possibility of a serious reconsideration of his habits and judgements. Such things as the following have a telling total effect: 'never, thank God, in step,'; 'we like to hope'; 'I suppose'; 'not quite'; 'not, please! to resemble'; 'no doubt we are right'.

Part of the tone is derived from the length of the sentences that run loosely from line to line, lines in themselves long. One has the feeling that each thing said is contained by an ultimately accepting, easy-going expanse of intellect and association, rather than by a sharper and more critically penetrating and more urgent concern. This very tone enables the poem to absorb without effort the different kinds of expression such as the deliberately text-book jargon of 'Adjusted to the local needs'; or the personal shrug of the previously quoted phrases and epithets; or the generalised clichés like 'the meaning of life', 'both need to be altered'; or the amusing, rather slick exaggerations and dismissals of 'Saints-to-be' and 'Intendant Caesars'.

Each shift of attention and emphasis merges easily, but each is carried along separately nonetheless, so that it is not surprising when the poet makes the formal admission that he cannot really, in himself, experience a synthesis of the two ways of life, the two alternatives in choice between seemingly unrelated ways of life.

The suggestion of ways in which the limestone country serves a purpose, is a tolerant concession from one who prefers the one side but recognises something in the other which he urgently needs. For all its faults he is happier to continue to accede to the 'Common Prayer'. He bluntly states the two respective justifications for the two ways of life; each is a theoretical possibility, given in dull clichés; neither way of life seems acceptable, and neither justification can be proved to be the right one, certainly not in theoretical argument. But, to restate the question above, can the 'limestone landscape', described at the beginning of the poem, show us why it should seem superior to both ways of life, to both sets of people and their values?

It is a living landscape. The limestone can be seen to age and change slowly; the water moves and gives life to the slopes; the springs 'chuckle' in their satisfaction at being alive while the work of filling pools in a steady, orderly way, does not affect their spontaneity. Their creativity is continuous, their devotion is simple and tender and the effects of this are like a chain reaction of affectionate service: spring, pool, ravine, cliff, plants, creatures:

> ..... whose cliffs entertain
> The butterfly and the lizard .....

The intimacy of this place, put abstractly in 'Of short distances and definite places', is organic, creative, co-operative, considerate, yet full too of privacy and mystery. The innate individualism of the poet's accustomed way of life converts these qualities into relatively sacred values compared to the 'voluble discourse' and 'public light'.

The mention of humanity, after this description in the first ten lines, comes as an intrusion; 'dildo' accentuates, though with jocularity, the

poet's distaste. The actual landscape, worthier than that for which it is a 'background', is all that 'Mother' means to the poet. It is the 'faultless love' he tries sometimes 'to imagine'. It is something he can remember experiencing; nothing else deserves the name of love.

Nevertheless, the poet can find sufficient of the 'mother' in the world of his upbringing to leave the ideal of the limestone country as a not-too-remote heaven. One belongs to, one is intimately acquainted with, the secrets of modern materialism. One shares in the 'Common Prayer', in spite of its overall lack of purpose. At least it provides a familiar 'background' of a kind. It provides adventure of the mind - sometimes beneficial, sometimes harmful - as a natural, compensating product of restlessness. There is always medicinal art. In the tone of the poem, the modern world does, without anyone quite approving. That it is inadequate is proved by the yearning for the perfect life.

To see the concept of after-life and the forgiveness of sins as no more than a womb of heaven, a compensation for the violation of the warmth of the womb which birth and upbringing mean, is to have a strongly Kierkegaardian enthusiasm for the Absurd modified by psychological insight, a scientific common-sense which Auden does not really enjoy, but which he always had. If his previous theological enthusiasm is now sensed as being no more than another of the semi-delusions in the search for the womb, he must, as he does in this poem, admit his worldliness, his undefined yearning, his appreciative sense of the variety of people and their experiences. He cannot now decry modernism, assert, preach or presume to have made the 'leap' and have succeeded in conquering real involvement in the world, ~~in~~ which is Caesar's City.

MEMORIAL FOR THE CITY

In the self-same point that our soul is made sensual, in the self-same point is the City of God ordained to him from without beginning.

JULIANA OF NORWICH

I.

The eyes of the crow and the eye of the camera open
Onto Homer's world, not ours. First and last
They magnify earth, the abiding
Mother of gods and men; if they notice either
It is only in passing: gods behave, men die,
Both feel in their own small way, but She
does nothing and does not care,
She alone is seriously there.

The crow on the crematorium chimney
And the camera roving the battle
Record a space where time has no place.
On the right a village is burning, in a market-town to the left
The soldiers fire, the mayor bursts into tears,
The captives are led away, while far in the distance
A tanker sinks into a dedolant sea.
That is the way things happen; for ever and ever
Plum-blossom falls on the dead, the roar of the waterfall covers
The cries of the whipped and the sighs of the lovers
And the hard bright light composes
A meaningless moment into an eternal fact
Which a whistling messenger disappears with into a defile:
One enjoys glory, one endures shame;
He may, she must. There is no one to blame.
The steady eyes of the crow and the camera's candid eye
See as honestly as they know how, but they lie.
The crime of life is not time. Even now, in this night
Among the ruins of the Post-Vergilian City
Where our past is a chaos of graves and the barbed-wire stretches ahead
Into our future till it is lost to sight,
Our grief is not Greek: As we bury our dead
We know without knowing there is reason for what we bear,
That our hurt is a desertion, that we are to pity
Neither ourselves nor our city;
Whoever the searchlights catch, whatever the loudspeakers blare,
We are not to despair.

II.

Alone in a room Pope Gregory whispered his name
    While the Emperor shone on a centreless world
From wherever he happened to be; the New City rose
    Upon their opposition, the yes and no
Of a rival allegiance; the sword, the local lord
    Were not all; there was home and Rome;
Fear of the stranger was lost on the way to the shrine.

The facts, the acts of the City bore a double meaning:
    Limbs became hymns; embraces expressed in jest
A more permanent tie; infidel faces replaced
    The family foe in the choleric's nightmare;
The children of water parodied in their postures
    The infinite patience of heaven;
Those born under Saturn felt the gloom of the day of doom.

Scribes and innkeepers prospered; suspicious tribes combined
    To rescue Jerusalem from a dull god,
And disciplined logicians fought to recover thought
    From the eccentricities of the private brain
For the Sane City; framed in her windows, orchards, ports,
    Wild beasts, deep rivers and dry rocks
Lay nursed on the smile of a merciful Madonna.

In a sandy province Luther denounced as obscene
    The machine that so smoothly forgave and saved
If paid; he announced to the Sinful City a grinning gap
    No rite could cross, he abased her before the Grace:
Henceforth division was also to be her condition;
    Her conclusions were to include doubt,
Her loves were to bear with her fear; insecure, she endured.

Saints tamed, poets acclaimed the raging herod of the will;
    The groundlings wept as on a secular stage
The grand and the bad went to ruin in thundering verse;
    Sundered by reason and treason the City
Found invisible ground for concord in measured sound,
    While wood and stone learned the shameless
Games of man, to flatter, to show off, be pompous, to romp.

Nature was put to the question in the Prince's name;
    She confessed, what he wished to hear, that she had no soul;
Between his scaffold and her coldness the restrained style,
    The ironic smile became the worldly and devout,
Civility a city grown rich: in his own snob way
    The unarmed gentleman did his job
As a judge to her children, as a father to her forests.

In a national capital Mirabeau and his set
    Attacked mystery; the packed galleries roared
And history marched to the drums of a clear idea,
    The aim of the Rational City, quick to admire,
Quick to tire: she used up Napoleon and threw him away;
    Her pallid affected heroes
Began their hectic quest for the prelapsarian man.

The deserts were dangerous, the waters rough, their clothes
    Absurd but, changing their Beatrices often,
Sleeping little, they pushed on, raised the flag of the Word
    Upon lawless spots denied or forgotten
By the fear or the pride of the Glittering City;
    Guided by hated parental shades,
They invaded and harrowed the hell of her natural self.

Chimeras mauled them, they wasted away with the spleen,
Suicide picked them off; sunk off Cape Consumption,
Lost on the Tosspot Seas, wrecked on the Gibbering Isles
Or trapped in the ice of despair at the Soul's Pole,
They died, unfinished, alone; but now the forbidden,
The hidden, the wild outside were known:
Faithful without faith, they died for the Conscious City.

III.

Across the square,
Between the burnt-out Law Courts and Police Headquarters,
Past the Cathedral far too damaged to repair,
Around the Grand Hotel patched up to hold reporters,
Near huts of some Emergency Committee ,
The barbed wire runs through the abolished City.

Across the plains,
Between two hills, two villages, two trees, two friends,
The barbed wire runs which neither argues nor explains
But where it likes a place, a path, a railroad ends,
The humour, the cuisine, the rites, the taste,
The pattern of the City, are erased.

Across our sleep
The barbed wire also runs: It trips us so we fall
And white ships sail without us through the others weep,
It makes our sorry fig-leaf at the Sneerers' Ball,
It ties the smiler to the double bed,
It keeps on growing from the witch's head.

Behind the wire
Which is behind the mirror, our Image is the same
Awake or dreaming: It has no image to admire,
No age, no sex, no memory, no creed, no name,
It can be counted, multiplied, employed
In any place, at any time destroyed.

Is it our friend?
No; that is our hope; that we weep and It does not grieve,
That for It the wire and the ruins are not the end:
This is the flesh we are but never would believe,
The flesh we die but it is death to pity;
This is Adam waiting for His City.

Let Our Weakness speak

IV.

Without me Adam would have falled irrevocably with Lucifer; he would never have been able to cry O felix culpa.
It was I who suggested his theft to Prometheus; my frailty cost Adonis his life.
I heard Orpheus sing; I was not quite as moved as they say.
I was not taken in by the sheep's-eyes of Narcissus; I was angry with Psyche when she struck a light.

I was in Hector's confidence; so far as it went.
Had he listened to me Oedipus would never have left Corinth; I cast no vote at the trial of Orestes,
I fell asleep when Diotima spoke of love; I was not responsible for the monsters which tempted St Anthony.
To me the Saviour permitted His Fifth Word from the cross; to be a stumbling-block to the stoics.
I was the unwelcome third at the meetings of Tristan with Isolda; they tried to poison me.
I rode with Galahad on his Quest for the San Graal; without understanding I kept his vow.
I was the just impediment to the marriage of Faustus with Helen; I know a ghost when I see one.
With Hamlet I had no patience; but I forgave Don Quixote all for his admission in the cart.
I was the missing entry in Don Giovanni's list; for which he could never account.
I assisted Figaro the Barber in all his intrigues; when Prince Tamino arrived at wisdom I too obtained my reward.
I was innocent of the sin of the Ancient Mariner; time after time I warned Captain Ahab to accept happiness.
As for Metropolis, that too-great city; her delusions are not mine.
Her speeches impress me little, her statistics less; to all who dwell on the public side of her mirrors resentments and no peace.
At the place of my passion her photographers are gathered together; but I shall rise again to hear her judged.

MEMORIAL FOR THE CITY
(HORIZON, November 1949)

In this poem we have History glanced over with a Christian believer's sense of meaning. It begins with the far-seeing and non-human eye of the 'crow' and 'the camera open', like Auden's 'hawk' and 'Helmeted airman'. What they see is Homer's world where the lives of ordinary people are at the disposal of capricious gods, man-made gods who personify man's fatalism and helplessness. But, existing separately from both the human urge to understand, and the expressions of this urge, is 'She', unchanging physical existence with its own needs and ways. The capital S and the feminine gender imply the great Mother, the womb, the inescapable, life-long hold on human nature that the human capacity or will to understand has to contend with.

The second part of the first section is similar to MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS in which simultaneous actions, deliberately observed, seem wholly unrelated and without a pattern of justice. However, whereas the Breughel picture is allowed to confirm this, here we are told that the crow and the camera 'See as honestly as they know how, but they lie'. Here in what is presumably an ancient capital city - Berlin probably - after the war, historical time and epic meaning are destroyed:

> Our grief is not Greek: As we bury our dead
> We know without knowing there is reason for what we bear,
> That our hurt is a desertion, that we are to pity
> Neither ourselves nor our city;

In other words Auden no longer allows himself, as he did in MUSÉE, to experience the suffering in the world as an inevitable thing, proof of an absence of God. One must withdraw from all the items and separate

instances of the general human failure to be just or happy, and know that in oneself is the answer, be it in one's lifetime ineffectual, to all injustice. This is the internalising, god-sensing attitude. The earlier sense of chaos comes from a deliberately detached attitude. The chaos was untransformed because of Auden's unwillingness to acknowledge the limited capacity of any fallible human being for knowing the complete story behind observed eruptions into mere surface vision. The fact that 'we know without knowing' suggests for the survivor of the chaos an abiding faith in a greater purpose.

Part II is an historical coverage of the period from feudal times, when church and state were inseparable rivals, to the present. Long ago

> The facts, the acts of the City bore a double meaning:
> Limbs became hymns; embraces expressed in jest
> A more permanent tie;

The tone in which the different phases of the centuries are hurried over suggests an absence of ultimate, particular importance, certainly an absence of awe and reverence in everything mentioned. The very fact that anything happened at all seems amazing against the jaunty or matter-of-fact tone which indicates the possibility that, for the poet, nothing much else need ever happen again. Each statement is bold, terse and almost mocking:

> Scribes and innkeepers prospered; suspicious tribes combined
> To rescue Jerusalem from a dull god,
> And disciplined logicians fought to recover thought ...

While each age and certain incidents are touched on with the freshness of non-respectful shrewdness, there is the tedium of overdone compression in this second section:

> In a national capital Mirabeau and his set
> Attacked mystery; / ... the Rational City, quick to admire,
> Quick to tire: she used up Napoleon and threw him away;
> Her pallid affected heroes
> Began their hectic search for the prelapsarian man.

What grows tiresome is the retrospective analysis, the extracting of some gist or final pungent image with bone-dry clarity, and the casual discarding of so much which produced this gist. This rather slick discarding or constant unwillingness to be retrospectively involved, comes close to intellectual arrogance. When a certain part of the brain or one's talented but limited perception is pleased at the success of a certain kind of deduction, the experience of pleasure closes the whole analysing person to further perception:

> The deserts were dangerous, the waters rough, their clothes
> Absurd but, changing their Beatrices often,
> Sleeping little, they pushed on .....

The devitalising of the experience here comes from the crude transforming of Dante's kind of passion into a common factor for all endeavour. The manner is more contemptuous than not. The effort to write with restraint and conversational ease, when in fact the latent profundity of the matter would demand another tone altogether, creates these moments of shallowness. In a similar way the coverage of historical periods, which requires some sort of poetic liveliness, is not sufficiently backed up by the 'cleverness' of the psychological categorising behind it:

> They pushed on,
> ..... - raised the flat of the Word
> Upon lawless spots denied or forgotten
> By the fear or the pride of the Glittering City;
> Guided by hated parental shades,
> They invaded and harrowed the hell of her natural self.

The next verse brings to a conclusion the survey from feudal times to the Renaissance and the voyages of discovery which created 'the Conscious City' and began the modern age of restless outward-going of the soul. The adverse remarks made about Part II indicate Auden's return to an old temptation (as in 'Here on the cropped grass') to rush through vast

periods of History in such a way as to 'explain' the present in terms of History's faults and failings. The effect of such a frenzied concentration of all mankind's stupidity and misguidedness is to make it seem that the poet's point of view, his capacity to observe and judge, is the only view he would tolerate.

This is a fault. The reader is not convinced, and is even amused, when the intention was to impress him. The reason why the arrogance and mockery almost come off, almost merge with the fine achievement of the rest of this poem, is that the tone of sterility and bitterness under the 'brilliance' is understandable in one who visits a war-shattered place. The places entice an intelligent, knowledgeable, sensitive adult to be angry, to blame. In this case the poet blames human nature and its past endeavour. He himself has recently acquired a faith, a religious conviction that is alien to the times, far more lonely-making, in a way, than his earlier conviction about social reform when there were many people similarly convinced. In a way he vents his bitterness on the history of irreligion which has made of a present-day holder of real Christian beliefs, an exception.

Part III takes us back to the old abolished 'City' whose historical associations and reminders are still discernible. The effect on the mind and 'Across our sleep' is of dislocation and lunacy:

> It ties the smiler to the double bed,
> It keeps on growing from the witch's head.

This is put more abstractly in the next verse:

> Behind the wire
> Which is behind the mirror, our Image is the same
> Awake or dreaming: It has no image to admire,
> No age, no sex, no memory, no creed, no name,
> It can be counted, multiplied, employed
> In any place, at any time destroyed.

What this means is that although we have, and depend on, sense-reciprocity with our concrete environment, that is not what really counts; 'our Image' is not the way we see ourselves in the 'mirror' or social living. When this mirror reveals only social cohesion and roots of an historical tradition, and within that cohesion the ultimate of individual self-worth and meaning, then we are no more than the objects of the concrete world which 'can be counted, multiplied, employed' and 'destroyed'.

The last verse fuses the Image and 'It'. 'It' is impervious, unchanging, beyond appeal or emotion. This is 'our hope', our hold on the permanent, our conquest of the temporal dangers to our true identity. This is our sense of God, our conquest of historical time.

> This is the flesh we are but never would believe,
> The flesh we die but it is death to pity;
> This is Adam waiting for His City.

And so, in our deepest sleeves, though concerned and saddened, we must not allow the destruction of the familiar world to destroy our sense of that which endures in us and in all times.

Part IV is prefaced by the words 'Let Our Weakness speak'. This 'I' is a man of our time, possessed of no special gifts, lacking delusions rather than disillusioned, full of common-sense and with some courage. He places himself in some famous historical or legendary situation as an intimate observer or actual participator, and asks himself how he reacts. One gets the impression of a rather 'decent', moral, and by no means dull person, but for whom a sense of proportion tends at all times to be better than excessive passion or zeal. History and legend are peopled with unaverage figures, archetypally expressive and without the limitations of common-sense. Some famous figures are brought in this poem to the

level of the everyday with such phrases as those underlined below:

> I heard Orpheus sing; I was not quite as moved as they say.
> I was not taken in by the sheep's-eyes of Narcissus; I was angry with Psyche when she struck a light.
> I was in Hector's confidence; so far as it went.

Some of the legendary people are, however, supported: Prometheus who, by suffering for his will-to-power, enduced the capacity for self-knowledge; Don Quixote for his final 'admission'; Figaro for deliberately upsetting conventionally predetermined behaviour. In some legendary and historical situations the person, 'Our Weakness', does not assist in an act of inhumanity (the trial of Orestes), nor does he condone lust (Don Giovanni).

At the crucifixion - unobtrusively coming in the middle of all these scenes - 'Our Weakness' learns the strength to be more than a stoic, that is, to see sense and know hope.

Unswervingly and spontaneously then, 'Our Weakness' reacts to any situation with a sense of proportion, common sense, inclination to justice. One is weak, certainly, in the wordly sense of success and achievement, dash and the exceptional. What chiefly characterises one is absence of will and ego, and at the same time awareness of all people with whom one is directly involved. There is no general, asserted idealism. It is inevitable as civilized people, that is, as inheritors of Greece, Rome, the Catholic Church, the Reformation and scientific humanism, that we should live in a City. There is the City of God and the City of Caesar, or the 'Metropolis' as it tends to become. Only in an inner fusion of the two, through a knowledge of 'It', through Christianity, can we make sense of the split.

'Our Weakness' concludes by condemning the 'Metropolis, that too-great city'. But the final two lines are like a traditional Christian prayer or Psalm, a quiet, passive transcending ('her' is 'Metropolis'):

> At the place of my passion her photographers are gathered
> together; but I shall rise again to hear her judged.

In spite of a recurrence of some flaws characteristic of Auden, this is a splendid poem, thoroughly existential in its full-blooded, fallible, human confrontation with the detailed complexity of a post-war world. The poem is humbly ordered by a down-to-earth and simple (even when highly intelligent and knowledgeable) reduction of present-day and past experience to the scope and size of any person's capacity for hope and faith.

AIR PORT

Let out where two fears intersect, a point selected
Jointly by general staffs and engineers,
In a wet land, facing rough oceans, never invaded
By Caesars or a cartesian doubt, I stand,
Pale, half asleep, inhaling its new fresh air that smells
So strongly of soil and grass, of toil and gender,
But not for long: a professional friend is at hand
Who smiling leads us indoors; we follow in file,

Obeying that fond peremptory tone reserved for those
Nervously sick and children one cannot trust
Who might be tempted by ponds or learn some disgusting
Trick from a ragamuffin. Through modern panes
I admire a limestone hill I have no permission to climb
And the pearly clouds of a sunset that seems
Oddly early to me: maybe an ambitious lad stares back,
Dreaming of elsewhere and our godlike freedom.

Somewhere are places where we have really been, dear spaces
Of our deeds and faces, scenes we remember
As unchanging because there we changed, where shops have names,
Dogs bark in the dark at a stranger's footfall
And crops grow ripe and cattle fatten under the kind
Protection of a godling or goddessling
Whose affection has been assigned them, to heed their needs and
Plead in heaven the special case of their place.

Somewhere, too, unique for each, his frontier dividing
Past from future, reached and crossed without warning:
That bridge where an ageing destroyer takes his last salute,
In his rear all rivals fawning, in cages
Or dead, ahead a field of wrath; and that narrow pass where,
Late from a sullen childhood, a fresh creator
Yields, glowing, to a boyish rapture, wild gothic peaks above him,
Below, Italian sunshine, Italian flesh.

But here we are nowhere, unrelated to day or our mother
Earth in love or in hate; our occupation
Leaves no trace on this place or each other who do not
Meet in its mere enclosure but are exposed
As object for speculation, aggressive creatures
On their way to their prey but now quite docile,
Told to wait and controlled by a voice that from time to time calls
some class of souls to foregather at the gate.

It calls me again to our plane and soon we are floating above
A possessed congested surface, a world: down there
Motives and natural processes are stirred by spring
And wrongs and graves grow greenly; slaves in quarries
Against their wills feel the will to live renewed by the song
Of a loose bird, a maculate city is spared
Through the prayers of illiterate saints and an ancient
Feud re-opens with the debacle of a river.

AIR PORT

The airport in this poem induces in Auden a passive but highly sensitive mood, making of him a subordinated recorder of sharp impressions. The place is a focal point in which many themes of the modern world come together and offer themselves for scrutiny. The themes do not fuse or resolve themselves, but, for a brief period in the observer's life, as at a football-match in a crowded stadium, or in a city square or an art-gallery, there is a sudden laying bare of the essential ingredients of life.

The poet believes that our lives are permanently split in three between a time of perfect, tribal intimacy and warmth; the sudden irreversible break; and the period after the break from the womb-like perfection. For each person the physical world is charged with a special meaning in the first and second of these stages. But the third stage is like the airport - one passes through, intent, 'aggressive', too busy to notice. One may be widely aware of the goings-on in the world beyond the range of one's 'prey', but only as an amoral agglomoration of chance, accident, good or bad luck. The only survival of the earlier intimacy and warmth is 'some class of souls', the chance, brief gatherings of people such as on a plane flight.

The airport, smoothly organised to deal with millions of people, is impersonal and uncaring about the units of humanity it serves. It is a place where people can be aware of the lull in the unconscious, 'aggressive' continuity of their lives, and, like prisoners glimpsing freedom through bars, people can sense another way of life altogether, one that is not 'aggressive' and constantly forward-moving.

cannot come into any relationship because of the nature of an airport. One cannot leave it without permission; so the 'Limestone hill' is tempting and out of reach, and the sunset seems unreal with 'pearly clouds'. The speed of airflight belittles the profundity of traditionally praised archetypal manifestations like dawn, sunset, or just day and night. The poet ironically imagines a local inhabitant staring at the passengers in the airport as if they possessed 'Godlike freedom'.

In the third verse the poet contrasts settled living with this airport:

> Somewhere are places where we have really been, dear spaces
> Of our deeds and faces, scenes we remember
> As unchanging because there we changed ...

The airport quite obviously tantalizes the human yearning to cast roots and to have an inner life which can only flourish when the outer is so familiar, stable and intimate that its externality is scarcely noticed. Nevertheless this verse tails off into a tone affectionately playful, which indicates a sophisticated mind unable really to believe in this earthly paradise:

> And crops grow ripe and cattle fatten under the kind
> Protection of a godling or goddessling
> Whose affection has been assigned them, to heed their needs and
> Plead in heaven the special case of their place.

Auden simply cannot quite approve of the non-conscious existence of complete immobility and ancient, safe tradition, with the complacent lazy-making - and to an outsider, naive - assumption of 'the special case'. The inhabitants, their cattle and the gods, have an inextricably common identity. There is an inconsistency of tone between 'dear spaces' and 'assigned', that is, between nostalgic affection and sophisticated scoffing. The poem's tension lies within this inconsistency, within the range of

Auden's temperament which knows womb-longing, or nostalgia to be again rooted and less-conscious, and the delight of ultimately detached, individual intelligence.

In the fourth verse we have the sudden, decisive, individually important experience. Though it is a movement forward in necessary self-realisation after the break from the womb, it is also the beginning of aggression and will. The individual is creator or destroyer, or both, when he is without a religious sense to control egoism and amorality:

> Somewhere, too, unique for each, his frontier dividing
> Past from future, reached and crossed without warning:
> That bridge where an ageing destroyer takes his last salute,
> In his rear all rivals .....

Distinct pathos is felt for the 'ageing destroyer'. The formal permission granted to it to take 'his last salute' is violently contrasted with the suppressed rapacity of successors who may have had to wait too long for their turn. He who is about to be succeeded and replaced is himself a killer, whose activity and significance was in 'a field of wrath'. What happens to human moral sensitivity when one feels the pathos of 'ageing' and 'last salute'? Perhaps it is a moment when something in us is 'reached and crossed without warning', a respect for anyone's unconscious life-expression, whatever its form, a sudden, unjudging identification with another's self-delusion. This is what happens when the people at the airport with the poet take off and feel the bond of temporary common purpose.

The fifth verse reminds us that at the airport 'we are nowhere, unrelated to day or our mother/ Earth in love or hate'. Instead, one is 'exposed/ As object for speculation', and though there is no direct mention of whose speculation it is, the 'object' is described as deceptively docile,

temporarily prevented from getting 'On their way to their prey'. The airport therefore becomes a clogging valve of a civilization of hurry and competition, yet also an accidentally possible respite or place of different awareness.

The voice of the loudspeaker seems to give some unity to the 'aggressive creatures' when it 'calls/ Some class of souls to foregather at the gate'. It is as though, feeling this 'class', each person, whether he knows it or not, acknowledges the existence of a soul. The harsh judgement of 'aggressive' is thus modified. The last verse refers to 'we' in the plane, as if the poet and the others, now felt as a unity, are by an inner transcending, temporarily freed from 'A possessed congested surface' over which they are mechanically 'floating'. The 'we' seems friendly and real, while 'floating' and 'surface' emphasise superficiality and unnatural detachment. What is said about 'down there' is sweeping, general, amoral, with the happiness of individuals a matter of luck and accident.

> Motives and natural processes are stirred by spring
> And wrongs and graves grow greenly; slaves in quarries
> Against their wills feel the will to live renewed by the song
> Of a loose bird, a maculate city is spared
> Through the prayers of illiterate saints and an ancient
> Feud re-opens with the debacle of a river.

There is no explaining or blaming in these lines. Instead we have an acceptance of an inevitable condition. The ingredients of this condition are human suffering, non-human vitality in nature, and human idealism and spirituality. These are simply parts of one unco-ordinated thing. The river is as much to blame for the international argument as the people.

The poem as a whole is in a passive monotone. The language is easy and casual and there are many statements without anything but the smallest

emphasis. Things just are, things just happen, even in 'dear spaces' where we give of ourselves or where something is experienced like a milestone in our lives. This is the mood induced by the airport, a monotone of suspended action, action intended eventually for all kinds of ends. The passivity comes of one's being at the mercy of a schedule and an impersonal organisation, and yet also, temporarily at the mercy of a part of the self that is seldom exercised. This part comes to life unexpectedly, bothers the more 'aggressive' self without being able to alter anything.

The long sentences which comprise each verse, with only semi-colons or commas from time to time, suggest a mind observing and remembering without much commitment, with little energy for any strong moral emphasis. This is off-set by the gentler, subtler half-feelings and half-thoughts which are permitted to come and go simply because there is nothing against which to be 'aggressive'. This variety of thinking and feeling puts 'texture' into the monotone so that the poem is anything but monotonous in the boring sense. The lines in which there is a sudden change, with commas checking the flow and appropriately suggesting impulse and enthusiasm, come in the fourth verse:

> ..... a fresh creator
> Yields, glowing, to a boyish rapture, wild gothic peaks above him,
> Below, Italian sunshine, Italian flesh.

Being isolated, these lines suggest the vivid memory of such an experience for the poet, one which recurs when, as at the airport, the lack of enthusiasm and commitment in his life is more than usually felt. The opposition of 'gothic peaks' to 'sunshine' and 'flesh', an opposition between inner and outer experience, the medieval body and soul, became once, for a moment, a perfect harmony. The poem as a whole suggests a helpless inertia

in the face of materialism, and loneliness among the people of 'possessed congested space'. There is the consolation of being highly conscious of one's condition and of other people having, as it were, a latent 'soul' susceptible to the occasional, accidental moment in which another kind of perception is possible.

At the airport the dislocation of, or interruption in, one's life, evokes latent awareness. The need to unite with unknown people in the impersonal and yet not unfriendly organisation of the airport-control touches something in one which is an experience not unlike that between 'peak' and 'flesh', a sense of bond with non-self. It humbles the will; one 'yields', and there is a momentary 'glowing'. The poet feels towards the other passengers as he did towards the destroyer. He loves and forgives and cannot sustain moral judgement.

The last verse is an enclosing, a shutting out. The passengers can still feel the bond, and the different places to which they are going as 'aggressive creatures' are as yet far-off, felt only as scenes of inevitable inequality and amoral chaos. The aeroplane's physical enclosing and the common purpose of the moment is the enclosing of each one's mind with the morally-insulating and soul-warming effect of immediate here-and-now unity within world meaninglessness.

The bond of 'some class of souls' does not extend beyond the immediate present. It is like the 'kindness to ten people',* and even has the effect of assisting in the general aggression of modernity, for the group must seem to each member to be composed of the other 'aggressive creatures', each dimly approving of the others. What is implied, even asserted, by its

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* 'Out on the lawn ...', LOOK, STRANGER!

very absence, is that this kind of life precludes one from the moral individuality of being rooted in an experience of self-and-others, out of which comes concern that 'wrongs and graves grow greenly'.

What Auden has achieved almost too well in this poem is the degree of identification with the presumed 'aggressive creatures'. This all but prevents his criticising them. Whatever criticism there is, is of 'we', so that we experience Auden's humility, his confessed worldliness, and the implied difficulty of sustaining an individual, unique, morally critical faculty in a confusing, highly-complex, restless world.

'Nones', the title poem of this volume, is discussed in this thesis in the next chapter, for Auden included it in THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES as well, and explained that it really belongs there. But it must be said that this poem establishes more clearly than any others of the volume NONES, Auden's deep preoccupation with the crucifixion. This is a different preoccupation from the earlier one with Kierkegaard-Christian philosophy, and concludes the part-reaction against Kierkegaard from about 1947 to 1954, when the last of the poems in THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES were written.

CHAPTER 13

THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES (1955)

Analyses of:

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THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
His artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude.
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, waiting for a sign.

Out of the air a voice without a face
Proved by statistics that some cause was just
In tones as dry and level as the place:
No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;
Column by column in a cloud of dust
They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.

She looked over his shoulder
For ritual pieties,
White flower-garlanded heifers,
Libation and sacrifice,
But there on the shining metal
Where the altar should have been,
She saw by his flickering forge-light
Quite another scene.

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot
Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)
And sentries sweated for the day was hot:
A crowd of ordinary decent folk
Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke
As three pale figures were led forth and bound
To three posts driven upright in the ground.

THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES

(POETRY, October 1952)

Thetis, mother of Achilles, watches the metal-worker, Hephaestos, fashioning a shield for Achilles. Achilles is, according to THE ILIAD, 'reforming', becoming his true self again. His period of sulking is over. Instead of fighting he had given his arms to his friend Patroclus, and Patroclus has been killed. Achilles is no longer 'human', subject to love for man or woman, or heartache. His is the mood of arid revenge, with no interest in normal, individual, honourable, calm combat with a Hector.

This is the pattern of world affairs when its militarism loses its humanity and cultural significance. In the contrast between what Thetis expects and what she finds, we have the contrast between the Homeric age of legend and our own reality. The impression of the first is given us in art, by Homer, for our imagination to colour. The facts of militarism, conquest and condoned brutality are an unquestioned part of the culture of those times. However, the brutality is softened in our associations with all the ideals ancient Greece stood for, 'well-governed cities', 'ritual pieties', 'athletes at their games', music and dancing which the shield of THE ILIAD depicts.

Our own age, on the other hand, is overwhelmed by power politics, totalitarianism, depersonalized injustice. The scenes that appear on the shield in Auden's poem prophesy to the horrified Thetis that the things she had taken for granted, such as the honour and greatness of her soldier son, and, so, militarism as a normal way of life, would eventually destroy

Greek culture. Western European culture, inheriting Greece, would leave the world as 'A plain without a feature', without 'pieties', gentleness, 'sweet limbs'.

A plain or desert normally symbolises for Auden the death of the human spirit. It is most explicitly put in the second verse. It is as if the plains have come into existence as a result of 'A million eyes, a million boots in line', that is, through the sheer numbers of those who do not think or feel. The 'voice without a face' in the third verse is the remote bureaucratic control in any land that assists in keeping life 'dry and level'. At the end of this verse the self-destructive way of life is caught in the stale phrase of 'brought ... to grief'; acceding as they do to mass existence and its latent brutality, these millions cannot be imagined as human, cannot be pitied.

After the fourth verse with its reminder of Homer's world, we have the two verses that describe an execution. We are told nothing of right and wrong, or who the executioners and victims are. It could be in any period, Homer's or ours, though in the absence of Homeric individual combats, it seems nearer ours. It would be naive to suppose that Auden was making a nostalgic comparison between the two periods, seeing that soon after the making of the shield in THE ILIAD, Achilles butchers mercilessly.

These two verses express a mood similar to that of MUSÉE DES BEAUX ARTS except that here it is a sense of helplessness at man's cruelty to man, whereas in the earlier poem it is a sense of the nature of social life itself that makes justice a matter of luck, and suffering a matter of individual bad luck. But actual helplessness to change matters dominates both poems, and is Auden's most characteristic tone.

The first of these two verses is a deliberate, factual reporting. All that Auden has ever said about the danger, the latent barbarism, of being content with 'ordinary decent folk', is brought home. The crowd's impassivity is matched by the mechanical inevitability of the preparations. The linking of 'As three pale figures' with 'To three posts driven', in successive lines of unfeeling observation, leads into the next, the sixth, verse, where the victims have been dehumanised by torture.

This verse expresses better than anything else Auden has written, I think, his life-long identification with the lonely, the failures, the helpless. It expresses his sense of powerful forces, institutions, mass prejudice and ignorance, all of which cause or condone individual suffering. The first two lines of this verse convey the poet's weary recognition of what has been, for the most part, throughout history, the 'reality':

> The mass and majesty of this world, all
> That carries weight and always weighs the same
> Lay in the hands of others; they were small .....

'The mass and majesty' links power, size, majority acceptance, with the concomitant awe, self-love, protective pomp which 'mass' will have for those who identify themselves with it. The combination of power and mass-condoned self-approval make impossible any inroads of sensitivity. The long fourth and fifth lines of this sixth verse, with the succession of heavy stresses, together with the wearily intoned statement of fact, express the sensed impossibility of ever changing the nature of mass-barbarism, as long as people lack individuality and sensitivity.

This feeling is followed by a reminder that life within the 'mass and majesty' can, for the fortunates, provide relaxation and creativity. However, the violence inherent in Homeric culture has come to predominate

in our 'mass and majesty'. Children are both victims and executioners, expecting and giving no mercy.

In the last verse the brutality and ephemeral glory of a mother's son are brought home to Thetis:

..... the strong
Iron-hearted man-slaying Achilles
Who would not live long.

What an Achilles now is, what he is now permitted by the culture of his time to be, is felt as a violation of all that motherhood stands for. To remain within the womb of culture is to remain mothered. But Achilles, without Thetis knowing it, has broken with her and with the culture. This culture, unwittingly, has encouraged the kind of behaviour which Achilles is soon to reveal, his blind, bloodthirsty individualism. For, by our revering the heroic, exceptional, godlike figures, or heroic gods, the way is left open for our own aggressive, unmothered individualism.

Our world, this poem says, suffers now because we have inherited over all the centuries a respect for the wrong kind of individualism, a respect for conspicuous, outstanding assertion of will, in everything from militarism and capitalism to socialism and certain kinds of philosophy and art. One needs, of course, to break from the womb of culture - that is, from static acquiescence in a comfortable pattern of belief and behaviour - in order to come to self-knowledge. By implication from this poem, this self-knowledge must confer a non-aggressive humility and morality, and again, by implication, this can only come from the higher culture of religion.

This poem takes its force, its splendid persuasiveness, from the skilful merging of past and present worlds, and of legend and power politics. The regular form of the verses with their leisurely, little-varied rhythm,

declares fact and actuality in the face of the disturbed, violated reaction the reader feels at the horrors that humanity can experience. The strength and authority of the statements about this experience, the reader feels, indicate a source of faith that must exist to make this kind of perspective on humanity possible.

PLAINS

FOR WENDELL JOHNSON

I can imagine quite easily ending up
In a decaying port on a desolate coast,
Gadging drinks from the unwary, a quarrelsome,
Disreputable old man; I can picture
A second childhood in a valley, scribbling
Reams of edifying and unreadable verse;
But I cannot see a plain without a shudder;
'O God, please, please, don't ever make me live there!'

It's horrible to think what peaks come down to,
That pecking rain and squelching glacier defeat
Tall pomps of stone where goddesses lay sleeping,
Dreaming of being woken by some chisel's kiss,
That what those blind brutes leave when they are through is nothing
But a mere substance, a clay that meekly takes
The potter's cuff, a gravel that as concrete
Will unsex any space which it encloses.

And think of growing where all elsewheres are equal!
So long as there's a hill-ridge somewhere the dreamer
Can place his land of marvels; in poor valleys
Orphans can head downstream to seek a million:
Here nothing points; to choose between Art and Science
An embryo genius would have to spin a stick.
What could these farms do if set loose but drift like clouds,
What goal of unrest is there but the Navy?

Romance? Not in this weather. Ovid's charmer
Who leads the quadrilles in Arcady, boy-lord
Of hearts who can call their Yes and No their own,
Would, madcap that he is, soon die of cold or sunstroke:
These lives are in firmer hands; that old grim She
Who makes the blind dates for the hatless genera
Creates their country matters. (Woe to the child-bed,
Woe to the strawberries if She's in Her moods!)

And on these attend, greedy as fowl and harsher
Than any climate, Caesar with all his They.
If a tax-collector disappear in the hills,
If, now and then, a keeper is shot in the forest,
No thunder follows, but where roads run level,
How swift to the point of protest strides the Crown.
It hangs, it flogs, it fines, it goes. There is drink.
There are wives to beat. But Zeus is with the strong.

Born as a rule in some small place (an island,
Quite often, where a smart lad can spot the bluff
Whence cannon would put the harbour at his mercy),
Though it is here they chamber with Clio. At this brook
The Christian cross-bow stopped the Heathen scimitar;
Here is a windmill whence an emperor saw
His right wing crumple; across these cabbage fields
A pretender's Light Horse made their final charge.

If I were a plainsman I should hate us all,
From the mechanic rioting for a cheap loaf
To the fastidious palate, hate the painter
Who steals my wrinkles for his Twelve Apostles,
Hate the priest who cannot even make it shower.
What could I smile at as I trudged behind my harrow
But bloodshot images of rivers screaming,
Marbles in panic, and Don't-Care made to care?

As it is, though, I know them personally
Only as a landscape common to two nightmares:
Across them, spotted by spiders from afar,
I have tried to run, knowing there was no hiding and no help;
On them, in brilliant moonlight, I have lost my way
And stood without a shadow at the dead centre
Of an abominable desolation,
Like Tarquin ravished by his post-coital sadness.

Which goes to show I've reason to be frightened
Not of plains, of course, but of me. I should like
- Who wouldn't? - to shoot beautifully and be obeyed,
(I should also like to own a cave with two exits);
I wish I weren't so silly. Though I can't pretend
To think these flats poetic, it's as well at times
To be reminded that nothing is lovely,
Not even in poetry, which is not the case.

PLAINS

(ATLANTIC, November, 1954)

This poem, and the following one discussed, are from BUCOLICS. In each of the seven poems in the sequence Auden examines his reactions to a different kind of geographical setting.

Plains seem to the poet to be the defeat of an original possibility of evoking the human spirit. The annihilation of highlands, and so of visual interests and contrast, leaves nothing that can inspire to awe or artistic effort as can 'Tall pomps of stone where goddesses lay sleeping/ Dreaming of being woken by some chisel's kiss'. Plains are yielding and spineless, susceptible to use by wrong human motives. They contain 'a gravel that as concrete/ Will unsex any space which it encloses' so that they cannot but remind the poet of the primal damage done to human nature in cities.

The poet feels that inhabitants of plains, having no landmarks on which to fix their thought and feeling, can know only a vague yearning for an activity far away, 'the Navy'. Little possibility exists on the plains for becoming an interesting, or sophisticated, or creative individual.

In the fourth verse the extremes of heat and cold suggest that subtlety and 'Romance' are impossible. Ovid's love themes, delicately 'unnatural', appealing to sophisticated, conscious people, are placed in favourable contrast to 'She', the primal, untransformed sex-urge with its 'blind dates' and 'country matters' for the people of the plains.

In the fifth verse the vulnerableness of the plains is compared to the refuge and secrecy of the hills. 'Caesar', the state, is in complete control, missing nothing. 'They' is the average man's vague conception of people in control of his life, something to be referred to in convenient blame or naive, awed respect and security. The men have drink and 'wives to beat' as their refuge from real responsibility and authority. 'But Zeus is with the strong', that is, the state's power has all the mystery of the gods. Worship of this state, this power, prevents any other sense of the transcendental.

Throughout history, until quite recently, plains were used for battle almost by mutual agreement between opposing armies. The leaders who came to fight were usually born 'in some small place' where a sense of historical happenings in the martial sense was easier for young boys to gain. This implies that people of the plains are frequently outside the conscious, shaping currents and themes of history but have to pay the price for being powerless and slow-witted.

The seventh verse therefore asserts: 'If I were a plainsman I should hate us all!' What he 'should hate' is all that is associated with restless dissatisfaction, assertion or aggression, the need to express an ego not rooted to the earth without a 'Goal of unrest'. It includes expression in art, in the battles of history, in the movements of the proletariat, and in religious subtleties:

> What could I smile at as I trudged behind my harrow
> But bloodshot images of rivers screaming,
> Marbles in panic, and Don't-Care made to care?

The last phrase suggests that those with religious, totalitarian or any other ~~disturbed~~ 'goal of unrest', inflict themselves on well-meaning, other-ignoring men of the land.

But the poet has already put himself on the side of the non-earthbound, the 'us' which the plainsmen 'should hate'. The poem began with the dry: 'O God, please, please, don't ever make me live there!' Auden has had the experience of feeling almost non-human in these regions, robbed of initiative, identity and sexuality, as in a nightmare:

> ..... in brilliant moonlight, I have lost my way
> And stood without a shadow at the dead centre
> Of an abominable desolation,
> Like Tarquin ravished by his post-coital sadness.

The last phrase 'post-coital sadness', associated with 'Tarquin' and 'ravished', makes one think of an enormous sensual appetite satisfied but with the soul unrelated to the appeasement so that the soul feels raped. The moonlit landscape is a sterile, unsatisfying embrace of earth ~~of~~ and spirit, dark and light, achieving no fertilising, all to no purpose within any humanly-felt scheme of things.

Auden is always quick to examine his reactions. He reminds us in the last verse that he knows he has judged plains subjectively:

> Which goes to show I've reason to be frightened
> Not of plains, of course, but of me. I should like
> - Who wouldn't? - to shoot beautifully and be obeyed,

He is afraid of his own lack of power over his impulses and imaginings. He requires the other kinds of landscape, with features of some definite and varied sort, to fix on to and so prevent the stark confrontation with archetypal self. He introduces the cruder kinds of power which we often associate with the word 'power', over weapons and other people, as ways of ravishing ourselves into complete disillusionment. But the absence of any real power over personal drifts of sensation, which he experiences on a plain, compels the poet to assert the need to be reminded that 'nothing is lovely'. In this context 'lovely' implies an easy and casually absolute

judgement made with a kind of egoism. While everyone does this kind of thing, it is important to realise that we are, in fact, incapable of the final judgements which we often and harmlessly make.

The final devaluing of poetry as being ultimately no more than just another of life's unlovely activities, is like a cancelling line suddenly scratched across all we have been reading, feeling and thinking, all we have been giving our patience and whole beings to. The shock, even insult, is intended, no doubt, to remind us that there is something superior to the rather stale 'lovely' in life. This is the sense of the self in an ideal relationship to the world when there is no longer any 'reason to be frightened/ Not of plains, of course, but of me'. So drastic a negation as 'nothing is lovely' can only mean that ultimately this word 'lovely', applied to our normal perceptions, falls far short of the loveliness of another, wholly different experience.

Christianity is not explicit in the poem, but a sense of the transcendental is strong by inference as the only way of synthesising Earth and Spirit, sex and soul. The poem is full of the richness and variety of life. It is testimony to Auden's love of life, his sheer interest in it. What the plains succeed in telling him is that the interest, exuberance, fun, need to be kept in perspective by a rather tardy religious sense.

To live in places where there are mountains or bays by which to be held from inertia and the earth-bound, is to live with(in) constant possibilities of self-delusion about the psyche's real nature and need. But not to live in such a place is, the poem says, to be without the possibility of the soul's becoming in any way free of earth and body. By implication then, life with all its delusions is thoroughly worthwhile, compared to a

primitive peasant sort of existence, for through delusion the soul learns. A soul inert, one with earth and body, means lurking madness to anyone who has experienced the release of soul, the break with 'that old grim She'.

No, one cannot return to the womb, to the time before individuality. One must break into individuality with all its deluding possibilities of expression, with all its fascination, its 'Art and Science', its history and varieties of religious endeavour of 'The Christian cross-bow' or 'Heathen scimitar'. Only in this kind of culture or civilization is the concept of happiness, of fulfilment, of the soul's satisfaction, worth bothering about.

The paradox here is that Auden's earlier emphasis on a Kierkegaard-Christian life contained an insistent, at times ranting and unconvincing, invalidation of all the ways in which people express their human nature. Now the emphasis is on the interest value of, the gratitude for, these expressions of life. They are still of an ultimately dubious nature, but the alternative, of people concentrating on an inner religious experience, bodes a kind of existence that is, finally, inert, soul and body one, completed, like a plain where no mountain or bay could delude, and so, teach.

Auden has not changed his religious beliefs. He has simply sensed that what he calls religious faith is rather like a return to the womb from which, thank God, he has been broken. He is now humbler about the world around him, with all its faults of aggression and will to assert. For would not, if people changed radically, the world be something of a plain? Would it not be without 'some chisel's kiss', 'Ovid's charmer', 'the dreamer', and his 'land of marvels', and without the whimsy of 'I should like - who

wouldn't? - to shoot beautifully and be obeyed'? No wonder, then, the imagining of the other kind of world gives the poet 'reason to be frightened'.

Auden now 'accepts' the here-and-now world. This is the only world for his lifetime in it. He understands it, resolves it for himself, through Christianity; but he has to love it, or nothing. Indications of this love, not new to him but re-asserted, are in this poem's wit, cheerfulness, confession of fallibility or even failure, sophisticated enjoyment of paradox and ambiguity in human affairs.

Each verse of this poem, with its long lines, is packed with variety; each verse has at least one episode, and one action of the dramatic kind. Verses v and vii have three such episodes, told with splendid economy. The rhythm of the poem changes constantly, and the tone hovers between the very personal, whimsical note of the poet at one's shoulder as in verses i and ix, and the formal, analytical statement. Such idiosyncrasy as 'woe to' and 'It's horrible to think of' jostle with a wide range of allusion: Ovid, Caesar, Art, Science, and so on.

The poem succeeds so completely because it <u>is</u> what it <u>means</u>. It is testimony to human nature's capacity to transcend matters of basic survival, of sexuality or loneliness, by being alert, enthusiastic, knowledgeable, enjoying one's imaginative powers with humility and a sense of fun. This is Auden's way of being religious.

MOUNTAINS

FOR HEDWIG PETZOLD

I know a retired dentist who only paints mountains
But the Masters seldom care
That much, who sketch them in beyond a holy face
Or a highly dangerous chair;
While a normal eye perceives them as a wall
Between worse and better, like a child, scolded in France,
Who wishes he were crying on the Italian side of the Alps:
Caesar does not rejoice when high ground
Makes a darker map,
Nor does Madam. Why should they? A serious being
Cries out for a gap.

And it is curious how often in steep places
You meet someone short who frowns,
A type you catch beheading daisies with a stick:
Small crooks flourish in big towns,
But perfect monsters - remember Dracula -
Are bred on crags in castles; those unsmiling parties,
Clumping off at dawn in the gear of their mystery
For points up, are a bit alarming;
They have the balance, nerve,
And habit of the Spiritual, but what God
Does their Order serve?

A civil man is a citizen. Am I
To see in the Lake District, then,
Another bourgeois invention like the piano?
Well, I won't. How can I, when
I wish I stood now on a platform at Penrith,
Zurich, or any junction at which you leave the express
For a local that swerves off soon into a cutting? Soon
Tunnels begin, red farms disappear,
Hedges turn to walls,
Cows become sheep, you smell peat or pinewood, you hear
Your first waterfalls,

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And what looked like a wall turns out to be a world
With measurements of its own
And a style of gossip. To manage the Flesh,
When angels of ice and stone
Stand over her day and night who make it so plain
They detest any kind of growth, does not encourage
Euphemisms for the effort: here wayside crucifixes
Bear witness to a physical outrage,
And serenades too
Stick to bare fact; 'O my girl has a goitre,
I've a hole in my shoe!'

Dour. Still, a fine refuge. That boy behind his goats
Has the round skull of a clan
That fled with bronze before a tougher metal.
And that quiet old gentleman
With a cheap room at the Black Eagle used to own
Three papers but is not received in Society now:
These farms can always see a panting government coming;
I'm nordic myself, but even so
I'd much rather stay
Where the nearest person who could have me hung is
Some ridges away.

To be sitting in privacy, like a cat
On the warm roof of a loft,
Where the high-spirited son of some gloomy tarn
Comes sprinting down through a green croft,
Bright with flowers laid out in exquisite splodges
Like a Chinese poem, while, near enough, a real darling
Is cooking a delicious lunch, would keep me happy for
What? Five minutes? For an uncatlike
Creature who has gone wrong,
Five minutes on even the nicest mountain
Is awfully long.

MOUNTAINS

(Faber, 1954)

We first have the impression of 'a retired dentist' who paints, and since it is only mountains that he paints one sees an amateur, rather naive, struggling with the easier subjects. Possibly there is a resemblance between mountains and teeth, so that the dentist is unconsciously expressing a life-long preoccupation, or obsession, now a partial resolution. The attitude, the poem says, of any 'serious being' to mountains is different. He would want the 'gap', the way through a present situation or reality into something presumed to be more satisfying. Mountains otherwise are 'a wall/ Between worse and better'. They delude one into believing in possibilities of better things simply because those things are elsewhere.

Since the 'serious being' is exemplified by a military conqueror and a 'Madam', a self-important tourist probably, the word 'serious' is ironic, meaning no more than self-willed. The image of a child being childlike in relation to the territories Caesar conquered by crossing the Alps, relegates militarism to the childish. The dentist then, comes off well.

In the second verse we are told about 'steep places'. No one can be satisfied or healthy-minded on them. We are reminded of Dracula's castle and obviously of all the many fairy-tales and legends in which steep mountains figure as sinister and oppressive. Climbers 'Clumping off at dawn in the gear of their mystery' are 'unsmiling'; their occupation seems a 'habit of the Spiritual', that is, a deliberately ascetic, and so, escapist, even perverted search for the spiritual goal.

The single climber by himself is an unsuccessful escapist, 'A type you catch beheading daisies with a stick', one whose humanity is not to be trusted. These people are not searching for the 'gap'. They accept the existence of mountains, but only as a challenge. Climbers seem unhappily committed to a misguided impulse. By attacking and defeating an obstacle external to themselves they find a satisfaction that seems more self-worship than God-worship. The sense of transcendence is deluding. Those who stay permanently on slopes are suspended between, as it were, heaven and earth, with, like Dracula, a code of ethics all their own.

In the third verse the poet, thinking about the Lake District, dreads the dullness of life where the utmost of spiritual possibility is expressed in a piano, 'Another bourgeois invention', respectable art. He wishes he were on a branch-railway in the mountains somewhere, with a 'cutting' ahead and a different landscape beyond. In such a place one realises that mountains are but 'a world/ With measurements of its own', not a barrier at all. One is conscious of an archetypal abstraction becoming particular and close. One is aware of the split between body and soul in people up in the mountains and aware of the always-latent capacity in oneself to exist in such a split condition.

Mountain dwellers feel the looming presence of mountains as 'angels of ice and stone', that is, as something almost supernatural and sensuously unresponsive, not in harmony with human feelings which deal in flux and change. Thoughts and expressions up here are blunt and direct, acknowledging without 'Euphemism' or spirituality the struggle 'To manage the Flesh'. In this place the Spirit in man seems numbed and the crucifixes suggest 'physical outrage' rather than spiritual salvation. Regional love-lyrics seem rooted in concrete, mundane immediacy:

And serenades too
Stick to bare fact; 'O my girl has a goitre,
I've a hole in my shoe!'

In the fifth verse mountains are the traditional hide-outs and refuge for defeated cultures and civilizations. No great advance in these two things can come from mountain-dwellers because of the subduing and numbing, half-satisfying presence of the 'angels', and because the inhabitants of mountains are conquered people with a tradition of preferring security to any effort that entails risk. The 'quiet old gentleman' can bear his failure here. Others prefer the sense of perspective, the distance away from the forces that are generated elsewhere.

The last verse expresses boredom at the prospect of perpetual security, self-preservation, ease and langour. The cat 'On the warm roof of a loft' and the 'real darling' who 'Is cooking a delicious lunch' give a picture of sensuously induced complacency in which words no more distinguished than these satisfy the narrow limits of experience. The poet calls himself 'uncatlike' and 'gone wrong'. He cannot relax or accept soporific moods. He cannot stand mountains, 'even the nicest'. The very word 'nicest', with 'real darling', 'delicious', and 'exquisite splodges' are offered as lazily sufficient to describe sensuous complacency which can only cultivate characterless prettiness.

Something else lurks in the description of a small waterfall as 'the high-spirited son of some gloomy tarn'. The hint of another vitality, another kind of perception involving a sense of regeneration and youth, is contained in the line. But it leads into nothing more than a registering in the mind of a comparison with 'A Chinese poem'. In this way the mind is inhibited from any perception deeper than that of

satisfaction with surface things pleasing to the personality reared on prettiness and safety. Dramas of the spirit are perpetually numbed by the 'angels'.

One cannot, however, help realising that regeneration for humans, the producing of a 'high-spirited son', depends on 'a real darling'. That these elements are absent in the poet's life is shown, I think, in his humble admission that he 'has gone wrong'. It is this overall modification or complete recognition of a personal attitude towards his subject, involving irony and aggression and disgust very often, that keeps Auden's poems humanly close to the reader. At the same time the poetical product of that irony and aggression is so full of wit, breadth of reference, unusual shifts of tone and attention, that the limits of one personality are compensated for and become universal. We recognise in him our own 'gone wrong', our and probably others' weakness and fallibility behind comfort, defence, security, idealism, intense self-cultivation, or behind aggressiveness, whether military or in such activity as mountaineering.

It is not clear in this poem where the poet could belong, and with what kind of people. The group of poems (BUCOLICS), of which this is one, indicates a liking for lakes, streams and wind, and a real aversion only to plains. In PLAINS there is a gratitude for such variations (psychic nourishment) as mountains. Yet in MOUNTAINS the mountains are the antithesis of the better way of life that plains inevitably point to. In mountains one can experience an escape from the plains, but also a grim pride in preserving this escape. Here too then, individuality is out of the question, but it is more interesting and more disappointing than on the plains (though not as frightening). True individualism, through individuation and self-knowledge, is at least possible in the mountains.

Only with some kind of individualism can the poet feel at all at home, even if it is among people whose expressed individuality is not subject to an ultimate humility. BUCOLICS offers no place known to the poet, only imagined versions of some known places. Heaven is via heaven on earth, as it were, but is always an ideal, a personal yearning, no more, for a place where transcendental experience is most likely to be evoked and nurtured.

Heaven, this series of poems says, is unique for each person, and can only be imagined, and then only in terms of actual experience of the world. The imagining of the perfect place is dominated by the non-human geographical detail and character. The happy, ideal arrangement of lake, mountain and wood is the perfect Mother, the protector with long apron strings, who will unify the partial or relative individualism of her brood. This ideal arrangement to suit human nature's insistence on establishing a womb of belonging when nothing offers itself, is nowhere to be found. But the imagining of it, and the kind of place that 'comes' then, indicates that all actuality, all activity, is a desperate or at least a serious business, since it is an attempt to find the love one needs to find. The deluding nature of our imagining is intimately and constantly involved with what ultimately matters most to all people, the search for a haven for inevitable individuality.

HORAE CANONICAE

This series of poems, more than anything else, should convince readers that Auden steadily matured as a poet after his conversion to Christianity. All the best Auden qualities are in these poems. In addition to the greater clarity, ease ahd control, there is an immediately felt sensuous gravity.

Each of the hours of the church-day offers something to the poet about life in relation to the crucifixion. I shall discuss the seven poems rather briefly, and then consider NONES (which first appeared in the book of that title) in detail after the complete survey.

PRIME expresses the essential and original yearning to be born, before knowledge of the world makes the yearning ironical. In adulthood each waking up in the morning is an affirmation of the holiness of life. This precedes the slowness to respond to the necessity to take 'my historical share of care/ For a lying self-made city'.

In this moment of waking the poet feels the concrete certainty and sheer physical thereness of the world. No demands are made on him; his will has nothing to assert, nor is there any mental wrangling about values and morality:

> ..... for the will has still to claim
> This adjacent arm as my own,
> The memory to name me, resume
> Its routine of praise and blame
> And smiling to me is this instant while
> Still the day is intact, and I
> The Adam sinless in our beginning,
> Adam still previous to any act.

The third paragraph begins 'I draw breath ...'. This is the irresistible urge to be active, to be individually competing. The body becomes 'my accomplice now'. Conscious of being alive, conscious of 'owing a death', the poet senses his part in history:

..... and my name
Stands for my historical share of care
For a lying self-made city,
Afraid of our living task, the dying
Which the coming day will ask.

Since the poet is in a fishing-village, 'city' means all the elsewhere, soulless activity of Man in the present-day. It is 'self-made', so can neither be born, nor can it die. It is both soulless and inorganic, and can only be eradicated by Man. And yet, being alive and human, one is impelled to live in it. All one's dislike or moral disapproval are feeble things compared to the need, the 'wish/ No matter what, to be wise/ To be different, to die and the cost'.

TERCE expresses the inevitable, lonely sense of doubt and need for self-preservation that we have as we confront the day. Inevitably we will do harm. We have 'our victim', just as, with bad luck, we can be the victim. The sheer inexorable way of things, the set pattern of social behaviour and individual secrecy, makes it useless to hope for justice. The crucifixion could not but have takenplace. The poet's anguish is that whatever he says no one will really know or care about it, nor will anyone about anyone else's puzzlement about right and wrong:

..... we are left,
Each to his secret cult, now each of us
Prays to an image of his image of himself;

SEXT. Civilization and culture were made by outstanding individuals who identified themselves with what they could do well. The three sections of the poem end with great, understated, ironical impact. Each time that one is made to feel admiration for great men, and made to feel the superiority of what life is now over what it was in the past, we are reminded that civilization made the crucifixion possible. Christ's crucifixion and all the other instances of injustice up to our time are integral parts of our civilization. We are thus reminded that it has been a civilization sustained by power. It has been an establishment of the talented, the forceful, the successful, all of whom tend to be indifferent to those who are not like themselves. On the other hand those without power tend to be a 'crowd', equally indifferent to others' suffering and to the crucifixion.

NONES. The crucifixion is an act of brutality in any age. Two kinds of people are responsible: the mob which stares, disperses and forgets; and the organisers, more individual and aware, who use the mob, but who, being also more susceptible to pity and guilt, cannot easily forget. The latter are capable of conscious amazement at themselves and see something brutal in the human make-up, a capacity for cruelty that begins in early childhood. They are conscious of how they can pretend otherwise, how the mind conveniently excuses the emotions. In dreams we became unrecognizable to our conscious self. In passivity the sensitive people might recover the bodily equilibrium which their killing of another body violated. The ability to realise that this killing was an act of partial self-crucifixion is the key to a higher humanity and is the here-and-now justification for forgiveness, and for Christianity.

VESPERS. (A series of statements and contrasts in prose).

The immediacy of each person's problem about love and brotherhood is carefully analysed. It is twilight when 'all must wear their own faces'. One evening on a walk the poet passes a man he instinctively recognizes as his opposite, having all the qualities he dislikes. The poet has the capacity to think further than his feelings. He wonders if his admitted self-projection, and the self-projection of the other, is a kind of reminder of one's failings which were and are responsible for the crucifixion. The poet admits to being nostalgic and immoral; he loves music and old, well-made things; he is passive and powerless. He sees the other as self-willed, self-righteous, reforming, fanatically concerned to help others, potentially ruthless if thwarted, full of suppressed, unhealthily sublimated hate. So opposite are the two men that only a sense of Christ's 'cement of blood' could possibly achieve their brotherhood. The poet clearly says he rather likes his imperfect self and that he loathes the other man and condemns him. But here is the ultimate test of a faith and the dogma of that faith. 'Brotherhood' must mean just that in cases of extreme, individual antipathy.

The form of VESPERS, the stanza-like snippets of thought about the seemingly unbridgeable gap between Auden's idea of an Eden, and that of another person's, suits the exploratory nature of the poem. It enhances the feeling that one can come no nearer in a cool, semi-rational estimate of one's relationship to another person for whom one has no favourable feeling, than a placing of the brief facts about oneself adjacent to a brief estimate of the other. It is humble, experimental, struggling to understand, fighting against the clichés that could easily arrive to justify the instinctive reaction of hate.

There is no hope of a compromise, 'no treaty is negotiable'. Each man, on passing the other, silently recognises his opponent and in his attitude asserts his dislike. The poet wonders if the meeting was really willed by each

> to remind the other (do both, at bottom, desire truth?)
> of that half of their secret which he would most like to
> forget,
>
> forcing us both, for a fraction of a second, to remember
> our victim (but for him I could forget the blood, but for
> me he could forget the innocence)
>
> on whose immolation .....
> ..... our dear old
> bag of democracy, are alike founded:

He concludes with the calm conviction of a Christian who cannot see any value in secular civilization without a 'cement of blood' which 'must be human, (it) must be innocent'.

Both Auden and his 'enemy' seem to sense the need to pass close to each other. Though they say nothing, they both seem to admit to a need for communion.

COMPLINE. It is night and the poet can remember only trivial, unpleasant things of the day. There is a feeling towards the stars, the mystery of things. He is grateful for the cleansing effect they have on him, remote and non-human as they are. Just as morning brought the mood of holiness before the body's and the day's activity, so the poet now waits for a mood of rounding-off and understanding. He does not get it. He can only acknowledge that there is more to know than he can ever know. He can only accept the temporary stopping of things:

..... blessing them both
For the sweetness of their cassations,
Accept our separations.

He can only hand himself over to dreams. There is the hope of a restoration in them to 'the rhythm/ Past measure or comprehending'. This may 'propitiate/ What happens from noon till three', the things in our daily lives which we are guilty of.

We are reminded four times of the crucifixion and the poet's baffled inability to know what really happened 'from noon till three'. It is the central event of his life but it brings very little essential joy to his days. The prayer in the last verse is tentative, and the imagining of 'the youngest day' is an orthodox-enough version of the Day of Judgement except that it will be a time of explanation and understanding, not of acceptance into Heaven or condemning to Hell. The affectionate pity for the kind of people the poet identifies himself with is felt in the earthy simplicity of the following lines which precede the formal gravity of the last eight, the prayer:

libera
Me, libera C (dear C)
And all poor s-o-b's who never
Do anything properly .....

LAUDS. In his book on Auden Monroe Spears discusses the masterly handling of the technique of this lyric; he refers to 'the medieval tone' and the form of the medieval Spanish cossante, which Auden uses.

As with the other Horae, the form is appropriate to the sense. The present-day world does not figure. The cycle of day and night, of innocent sleep into meaningful communal work and communal worship, seems

like the Heaven on Earth that Auden would like to experience. The refrain 'In solitude, for company' reminds us that the worshipping and the working in this idyll were individually satisfying and liberating, and communally so as well.

These poems constitute a highly original and profoundly searching attempt to express the meaning of Christianity, the difficulty of being both human and humane. The orthodox dogma must be accepted and made unassailable to give the feeble, uncertain, and potentially brutal individual the chance of relating his life to something higher. The poet clearly expresses little joy, ordinary or religious. He is humble and weak but nevertheless finds it most worthwhile to be alive. In his poetry he is able to fuse his aristocratic intelligence with a democratic identification of himself with the powerless, the not-very-successful, ordinary people of the world. He fuses too, a sense of Christian dogma and ritual with a sense of his falling short. Christianity offers the unshakeable strength ~~against one~~ that implies forgiveness for his human weaknesses of nostalgia and 'fornications of fancy'. I think one can sense that without poetry-making the different divisions in his life and character would be intolerable. He makes his own prayers, his own very individual attempt to come to terms with the meaning of a very vivid, intimate apperception of the crucifixion.

I now go on to a detailed appreciation of NONES.

NOTES

What we know to be not possible,
Though time after time foretold
By wild hermits, by shaman and sybil
Gibbering in their trances,
Or revealed to a child in some chance rhyme
Like *will* and *kill*, comes to pass
Before we realise it: we are surprised
At the ease and speed of our deed
And uneasy: It is barely three,
Mid-afternoon, yet the blood
Of our sacrifice is already
Dry on the grass; we are not prepared
For silence so sudden and so soon;
The day is too hot, too bright, too still,
Too ever, the dead remains too nothing.
What shall we do till nightfall?

The wind has dropped and we have lost our public.
The faceless many who always
Collect when any world is to be wrecked,
Blown up. burnt down, cracked open,
Felled, sawn in two, hacked through, torn apart,
Have all melted away: not one
Of those who in the shade of walls and trees
Lie sprawled now, calmly sleeping,
Harmless as sheep, can remember why
He shouted or what about
So loudly in the sunshine this morning;
All if challenged would reply
- 'It was a monster with one red eye,
A crowd that saw him die, not I' -
The hangman has gone to wash, the soldiers to eat:
We are left alone with our feat.

The Madonna with the green woodpecker,
The Madonna of the fig-tree,
The Madonna beside the yellow dam,
Turn their kind faces from us
And our projects under construction,
Look only in one direction,
Fix their gaze on our completed work:
Pile-driver, concrete mixer,
Crane and pick-axe wait to be used again,
But how can we repeat this?
Outliving our act, we stand where we are,
As disregarded as some
Discarded artifact of our own,
Like torn gloves, rusted kettles,
Abandoned branch-lines, worn lop-sided
Grindstones buried in nettles.

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This mutilated flesh, our victim,
Explains too nakedly, too well,
The spell of the asparagus garden,
The aim of our chalk-pit game; stamps,
Bird's eggs are not the same, behind the wonder
Of tow-paths and sunken lanes,
Behind the rapture on the spiral stair,
We shall always now be aware
Of the deed into which they lead, under
The mock chase and mock capture,
The racing and tussling and splashing,
The panting and the laughter,
Be listening for the cry and stillness
To follow after: wherever
The sun shines, brooks run, books are written,
There will also be this death.

Soon cool tramontana will stir the leaves,
The shops will re-open at four,
The empty blue bus in the empty pink square
Fill up and depart: we have time
To misrepresent, excuse, deny,
Mythify, use this event
While, under a hotel bed, in prison,
Down wrong turnings, its meaning
Waits for our lives: sooner than we would choose
Bread will melt, water will burn,
And the great quell begin, Abaddon
Set up his triple gallows
At our seven gates, fat Belial make
Our wives waltz naked; meanwhile
It would be best to go home, if we have a home,
In any case good to rest.

I
What our dreaming wills may seem to escape
This dead calm, wander instead
On knife-edges, on black and white squares,
Across moss, baize, velvet, boards,
Over cracks and hillocks, in mazes
Of string and penitent cones,
Down granite ramps and damp passages,
Through gates that will not relatch
And doors marked Private, pursued by Moors
And watched by latent robbers,
To hostile villages at the heads of fjords,
To dark chateaux where wind sobs
In the pine-trees and telephones ring,
Inviting trouble, to a room,
Lit by one weak bulb, where our Double sits
Writing and does not look up.

That, while we are thus away, our own wronged flesh
May work undisturbed, restoring
The order we try to destroy, the rhythm
We spoil out of spite: valves close
And open exactly, glands secrete,
Vessels contract and expand
At the right moment, essential fluids
Flow to renew exhausted cells,
Not knowing quite what has happened, but awed
By death like all the creatures
Now watching this spot, like the hawk looking down
Without blinking, the smug hens
Passing close by in their pecking order,
The bug whose view is balked by grass,
Or the deer who shyly from afar
Peer through chinks in the forest.

NONES

Nones is the ninth hour in the Church day and the equivalent of three o'clock in the afternoon, the time of the crucifixion. In this poem the crucifixion is made into any brutal, senseless act by the 'enlightened', using a mob, anywhere, at any time. The journey to forgiveness and self-restoration is one of long, passive, will-less waiting.

We are told in the first few lines of the poem that the forces of the unconscious, expressed by those not usually considered 'normal', or felt without comprehension by children, make anything possible.

The first and second verses of the poem involve everybody in an event as 'not possible' as this murder. It becomes an event in any age that could have been foreseen and is in fact predicted by those with an awareness of the deluding orderliness of public affairs. This even

> ..... comes to pass
> Before we realise it: we are surprised
> At the ease and speed of our deed
> And uneasy:

The first verse brings out the feeling of bewilderment. The 'not possible' is after all suddenly more than possible. One senses the layers of orderliness in the human mind, the instinctive acceptance of things no matter what, within reason, the conditions are. One is amazed at one's ultimate capacity to act against this order. Yet how quickly the past flows over the event. The familiar external world and the unchanging non-human elements of this familiar world are overwhelmingly there, unmoving, orderly, inevitably muting or mocking sudden eruptions

in human affairs:

(continuing from the above quotation)

It is barely three,
    Mid afternoon, yet the blood
Of our sacrifice is already
    Dry on the grass; we are not prepared
For silence so sudden and so soon;
    The day is too hot, too bright, too still,
Too ever, the dead remains too nothing.

The repetition of 'so' and 'too', culminating in 'Too ever', stresses the complete severance of the abnormal from the normal, the utter inability of a person to relate the two realities and to comprehend the meaning of a dead body for which he or she is responsible.

The perpetrators, who are the more intelligent organisers, as opposed to the mob of 'sheep', cannot but feel they have acted against nature. The day itself seems so unharmed, so unchanged; the purely human part of the atrocity is isolated; the victim seems to accuse. The personal 'convictions' of the perpetrators have temporarily evaporated. Those convictions seem to have had 'blood' and 'sacrifice' as their goal rather than an ideal which now ought to have been sustaining, with the murder no more than a necessary step towards this ideal.

The horror of this kind of deed with its active, planning perpetrators supported by a suitably roused mob, is suggested in 'the faceless many' who now behave as if nothing has happened. They 'Lie sprawled now, calmly sleeping,/ Harmless as sheep'. The perpetrators need the mob's approval now more than before, and it simply is not there: 'We are left alone with our feat'. The disgusted, contemptuous description of what draws crowds, 'Blown up, burnt down' etc., and the pathetic 'not I', lead into the bitter irony of 'our feat'.

The third verse deals with the perplexity of anyone engaged in some creative activity who tries, because he has to, to emulate past achievements. But if the creation has been whole-hearted and identified with, then the completion of the task, whether murder for an ideal or the construction of a dam, leaves the human agents as derelict as their materials. 'Outliving our act', they can only be used by others and cannot recreate themselves in an act of either construction or destruction.

The three Madonnas with 'their kind faces' represent final judgement from a non-worldly plane. They are detached, uninvolved, able only to give their attention to what is complete and free of the human involvement of struggle, mess, mistakes. Each Madonna is in a setting of rich, colourful fertility. The prepositions 'with', 'of' and 'beside' place the Madonnas in a tranquil and blending relationship. They contrast in the extreme with the violence to nature implicit in 'Pile-driver' etc., and indicate why both man and his implements can seem like 'some/ Discarded artifact'. It is because there is no bond of sympathy and gentleness between assertive motives and the object of the motives. By implication, the Christian attitude of passive acquiescence is seen as the better, less-deluding and less-harmful way to live.

The fourth verse expresses the rather grim wisdom of one who has participated in an act that was once 'not possible'. Suddenly childhood 'innocence' and playful fun are seen as early expressions of blood-lust;

> We shall always now be aware
> Of the deed into which they lead, under
> The mock chase and mock capture .....
> Be listening for the cry and stillness
> To follow after:

The 'cry and stillness' is followed by a general, everyday going-on. The forces of order and habit, enduring institutions, of colours and time-

tables, cover the event that was 'not possible' and allow the people to feel eventually that nothing deeply significant has happened. Soon the orderly way of things will create in the imagination other events that are 'not possible'. The delusion will continue, hiding the latent, lurking passions in men, their capacity for cruelty and crowd-madness. The soul, in its sleeping or absent self-awareness and unconscious frustration, is almost deliberately denied what it yearns for, namely, a sense of identity with the transcendant. This particular eruption of the soul's perversion is outside consciousness, time or morality. Having been lanced, the soul subsides and calm permits the orderly, conscious life to reciprocate with reassuring perceptions:

> Soon cool tramontana will stir the leaves,
> The shops will re-open at four,
> The empty blue bus in the empty pink square
> Fill up and depart:

The mind can, all too soon, deal with the event, the 'not possible', for it can 'misrepresent, excuse, deny/ Mythify'. It need not admit the event as a symptom of a deep and general human delusion that reason, order, habit and safety actually prove the impossibility of the following even happening:

> Bread will melt, water will burn,
> And the great quell begin; Abaddon
> Set up his triple gallows
> At our seven gates, fat Belial make
> Our wives waltz naked; .....

The sixth verse suggests how in dreams our unconscious reminds us of its real bent and of the disparity between day-to-day habit-living and the undercurrent in each one's life. However, the dream-adventure of the soul ends in the unchanging wakeful ego, with the shock of coming

..... to a room,
Lit by one weak bulb, where our Double sits
Writing and does not look up.

The shock is the rather despairing certainty of a wild goose chase, a cycle of adventure arriving back at oneself none the wiser. The above lines give the impression of an ascetic, profound devotion to an inner experience. It is sacrilegious to try to make the self heed another voice which is nevertheless a part of the self. We recognise how extremely difficult it is for people to change.

The last verse maintains that this dual, split life is better than the 'dead calm' for, while the soul is engaged in dream-adventure, no matter what the end,

..... our own wronged flesh
May work undisturbed, restoring
The order we try to destroy .....

Nature in each one of the more perceptive perpetrators of the murder, to which we now return, has been violated. The bodily, instinctive blood-bond in people can only be restored by self-forgetfulness and patience:

..... valves close
And open exactly, glands secrete,
Vessels contract and expand
At the right moment, essential fluids
Flow to renew exhausted cells,
Not knowing quite what has happened, but awed
By death .....

One remembers the first verse where the soul's shock is the immediate self-violation:

..... It is barely three,
Mid afternoon, yet the blood
Of our sacrifice is already
Dry on the grass;

The murder, the physical violence and slaughter of a perfectly organised body with its miracle of rhythm, is transferred to the more sensitive perpetrators. The destruction of one body's life destroys the rhythm and poise in the souls and bodies of the perpetrators. If the body and soul could be kept separate there would be a restoring of the soul, but the inextricable bond is felt in the sudden confronting of 'our Double' which 'does not look up'. We sense the inability rather than the discourteous or inhospitable refusal of the soul to be separated from the body. Here the same-seeming self, the 'Double', is seated, physically passive and mentally engaged. The ego is predominant and unable to acknowledge the arrival of the soul after its freely expressed reality in dreams.

The soul cannot be understood as separate from the body. This is why the murder strikes us as so eternally unforgiveable, why the hens, alive and obviously passing the corpse, seem too 'smug' in their lack of comprehension. And so the poem ends with non-human life, the bug, the deer and the hawk all observing without sensitive comprehension in their non-soul completeness. They do, in their physical beings, sense death. They are 'awed', but at that their experience stops.

The murder remains unforgiveable. Yet the order and habit of things, the and everyday safeness of 'shops will re-open at four', is part of the body's rhythm, of its non-human or non-soul semi-mechanical perfection. The souls of the mob, whose members 'Lie sprawled now, calmly sleeping', seem already restored to the body's rhythm and the everyday habits of social living, so that the finer possibility in human nature is not theirs. The leading perpetrators, conscious of the total shock and dislocation

caused by their deed, conscious of their uneasy guilt and uncertainty, contemptuous of the mob they roused to fire their own scheming, are humanly sensitive to this finer possibility. Their sensitivity, related to Christian teachings of mercy and forgiveness, is tantalizingly put next to our sense of the unforgiveable.

The innocence of childhood and the sleeping mob, now 'Harmless as sheep', are linked in our understanding of the unconsciousness of latent passion. The body at peace and habits of routine-life in society can also have this deluding appearance of innocence which may well be dangerous ignorance. This appearance induces sentimental longings for what is non-adult, a womb- or death-wish of herd-identification. The pain of being humanly conscious, responsible and free, is the alternative, which is a self-crucifixion in order to keep pain from others.

This is an especially fine poem. It combines the qualities that distinguish 'Plains' on the one hand, and 'Shield of Achilles' on the other. There is the compression in each verse of a variety of interesting things, and yet each verse is strictly controlled. The poem achieves an emphasis of helplessness and inevitability in matters about which the reader can least tolerate such an emphasis. In this way the beliefs which would make such matters impossible are hugely, irresistibly, implied.

CHAPTER 14

HOMAGE TO CLIO - 1960

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HOMAGE TO CLIO

Our hill has made its submission and the green
Swept on into the north: around me,
From morning to night, flowers duel incessantly,
Color against color, in combats

Which they all win, and at any hour from some point else
May come another tribal outcry
Of a new generation of birds who chirp
Not for effect but because chirping

Is the thing to do. More lives that I perceive
Are aware of mine this May morning
As I sit reading a book, sharper senses
Keep watch on an inedible patch

Of unsatisfactory smell, unsafe as
So many areas are: to observation
My book is dead, and by observations they live
In space, as unaware of silence

As Provocative Aphrodite or her twin,
Virago Artemis, the Tall Sisters
Whose subjects they are. That is why, in their Dual Realm,
Banalities can be beautiful,

Why nothing is too big or too small or the wrong
Color, and the roar of an earthquake
Rearranging the whispers of streams a loud sound
Not a din: but we, at haphazard

And unseasonably, are brought face to face
By ones, Clio, with your silence. After that
Nothing is easy. We may dream as we wish
Of phallic pillar or navel-stone

With twelve nymphs twirling about it, but pictures
Are no help: your silence already is there
Between us and any magical centre
Where things are taken in hand. Besides,

Are we so sorry? Woken at sun-up to hear
A cock pronouncing himself himself
Though all his sons had been castrated and eaten,
I was glad I could be unhappy: if

I don't know how I shall manage, at least I know
The beast-with-two-backs may be a species
Evenly distributed but Mum and Dad
Were not two other people. To visit

The grave of a friend, to make an ugly scene,
To count the loves one has grown out of,
Is not nice, but to chirp like a tearless bird,
As though no one dies in particular

2726

And gossip were never true, unthinkable:
    If it were, forgiveness would be no use,
One-eye-for-one would be just and the innocent
    Would not have to suffer. Artemis,

Aphrodite, are Major Powers and all wise
    Castellans will mind their p's and q's,
But it is you, who never have spoken up,
    Madonna of silences, to whom we turn

When we have lost control, your eyes, Clio, into which
    We look for recognition after
We have been found out. How shall I describe you? They
    Can be represented in granite

(One guesses at once from the perfect buttocks,
    The flawless mouth too grand to have corners,
Whom the colossus must be), but what icon
    Have the arts for you, who look like any

Girl one has not noticed and show no special
    Affinity with a beast? I have seen
Your photo, I think, in the papers, nursing
    A baby or mourning a corpse: each time

You had nothing to say and did not, one could see,
    Observe where you were, Muse of the unique
Historical fact, defending with silence
    Some world of your beholding, a silence

No explosion can conquer but a lover's Yes
    Has been known to fill. So few of the Big
Ever listen: that is why you have a great host
    Of superfluous screams to care for and

Why, up and down like the Duke of Cumberland,
    Or round and round like the Laxey Wheel,
The Short, The Bald, The Pious, The Stammerer went,
    As the children of Artemis go,

Not yours. Lives that obey you move like music,
    Becoming now what they only can be once,
Making of silence decisive sound: it sounds
    Easy, but one must find the time. Clio,

Muse of Time, but for whose merciful silence
    Only the first step would count and that
Would always be murder, whose kindness never
    Is taken in, forgive our noises

And teach us our recollections: to throw away
    The tiniest fault of someone we love
Is out of the question, says Aphrodite,
    Who should know, yet one has known people

Who have done just that. Approachable as you seem,
    I dare not ask you if you bless the poets,
For you do not look as if you ever read them
    Nor can I see a reason why you should.

HOMAGE TO CLIO

(Encounter, November, 1955)

In Auden's work of the Thirties we often have a feeling that the poetry is subordinate to the themes because they are urgent and more important than poetry itself. In his later work Auden often reminds us that simply being a kind of person, having the living experience, is more important than reading or writing poetry. He refuses to let poetry have a right or existence in itself, any kind of sacredness. In this poem Clio, muse of History, is addressed:

..... Approachable as you seem,
I dare not ask you if you bless the poets,
For you do not look as if you ever read them
Nor can I see a reason why you should.

The poem asserts the worthwhileness of being alive and human, no matter how perplexing it is or how puzzling History is. To be conscious, aware, unique in concrete particulars, is so greatly superior to being no more than a part of the life and energy and struggle of natural life:

..... around me,
From morning to night, flowers duel incessantly
Color against color, in combats

Which they all win .....

There is no longing for the anaesthetic of a nature-relationship:

..... to visit/
The grave of a friend, to make an ugly scene,
To count the loves one has grown out of,
Is not nice, but to chirp like a tearless bird,
As though no one dies in particular ...../
..... unthinkable

Clio, also called 'Muse of Time', seems to those who 'have lost control' to be a source of wisdom. There is the human tendency to think of all things that have happened to Man on earth as personified, embodied in an image, but the poet finds it difficult to do this. He addresses Clio:

> ..... but what icon
> Have the arts for you, who look like any
> Girl one has not noticed and show no special
> Affinity with a beast? I have seen
> Your photo, I think, in the papers, nursing
> A baby or mourning a corpse:

In these lines the poet expresses the view that Mankind has been carelessly and amorally looked after in history. There is also 'a great host/ Of superfluous screams to care for', as if Clio can only just manage to permit Man to survive. History is felt to be mysterious and unfathomable, except that occasionally its 'silence' 'Has been known to fill' with an affirmation of love. The fact that this love is what is needed, and not the actions of the 'Big' who never heed Clio, points to a vision of history permeated with the gentle and the individually nourishing. All else is aberration from the way of love. To feel a relationship with this kind of Clio means personal, inner harmony for the devotee:

> ..... Lives that obey you move like music,
> Becoming now what they only can be once,
> Making of silence decisive sound:

The point is made that to do this is difficult. The poet is glad of Clio's 'merciful silence', and in the third-last verse the casual meditative tone gives shock-emphasis to the suggestion of how easy it is to be 'Big', to be wild and amorally assertive as 'the children of Artemis':

Muse of Time, but for whose merciful silence
Only the first step would count and that
Would always be murder, whose kindness never
Is taken in, forgive our noises

And teach us our recollections:

Then at the end comes the poet's acceptance of the position of poets throughout the ages, which seems largely to be one of neglect. From this one gathers that the love and gentleness which exist for Man to be in harmony with, do not necessarily have to come from the arts, although the arts cannot but be an intrinsic part of this ultimate harmony. Poets, artists in general and all art, are in need of a community which Clio has never provided, but at least - and this is the homage - at least there has been a history, a survival, in which there has been the possibility of art.

Auden feels himself to be alive, grateful, and not ultimately critical of all that has been in history and in his own life. The poet actually senses at this time of year, May, Spring, with renewed life all around, his own renewed need to know how much more life is than the Dual Realm of Aphrodite and Artemis. In this Realm one finds the primal, general energy of reproduction and its celebration with ~~with~~ what one might call licentiousness. The sensuous loveliness of Spring or Aphrodite assault, as it were, one's individual particularity, one's conscience, one's religious sense.

Thinking about history, about Clio, offers the consolation that the two goddesses, Artemis and Aphrodite, are as blind and insensitive, virtually as inhuman, as the abstraction of political 'Major Powers'. We are part of them, but something more valuable than natural loveliness and general reproduction is seen in the poet's Clio. His Clio is not general history, successions of events, but Clio a person, 'Muse of the unique/

Historical fact' of each person. The repetition of the word 'silence', with 'merciful' and 'kindness', ~~are~~ indicates the capacity and gift in each person to be able to come to terms with life. This is what supersedes Aphrodite, animalism, the meaninglessness of history.

REFLECTIONS IN A FOREST

Within a shadowland of trees
Whose lives are so uprightly led
In nude august communities,
To move about seems underbred.

And common any taste for words;
When, thoughtlessly, they took to song,
Whatever one may think of birds,
The example that they set was wrong.

In keeping still, in staying slow,
For posture and for social ease,
How much these living statues owe
Their scent-and-color languages.

For who can quarrel without terms
For Not or Never, who can raise
Objections when what one affirms
Is necessarily the case?

But trees are trees, an elm or oak
Already both outside and in,
And cannot, therefore, counsel folk
Who have their unity to win.

Turn all tree-signals into speech,
And what comes out is a command:
'Keep running if you want to reach
The point of knowing where you stand'.

A truth at which one should arrive
Forbids immediate utterance,
And tongues to speak it must contrive
To tell two different lies at once.

My chance of growing would be slim,
Were I with wooden honesty
To show my hand or heart to Him
Who will, if I should lose, be Me.

Our race would not have gotten far
Had we not learned to bluff it out
And look more certain than we are
Of what our motion is about;

Nor need one be a cop to find
Undressing before others rude:
The most ascetic of our kind
Look naked in the buff, not nude.

REFLECTIONS IN A FOREST

(The Listener, July 23, 1959.)

This is a neat, very smoothly controlled poem, expressing complex ideas in an ultra-simple, almost over-sophisticated way. The theme is that people do not let themselves go, do not show their 'hand or heart', and that this is inevitable:

> Our race would not have gotten far
> Had we not learned to bluff it out
> And look more certain than we are
> Of what our motion is about;

A forest seems a place of 'nude august communities' in which all has been achieved. A forest blends complete dignity with complete self-expression and revelation, social and individual. This tantalizes the poet. If only humanity could have a unity such as the trees have. But the very completeness of their unity ('But trees are trees ... both outside and in') makes it impossible for them to offer any real suggestion of help to man other than perhaps the rather useless abstraction:

> Keep running if you want to reach
> The point of knowing where you stand.

The poet feels also the frustration that

> A truth at which one should arrive
> Forbids immediate utterance,
> And tongues to speak it must contrive
> To tell two different lies at once.

This says that words fail where the experience has not yet been; one thinks of T.S. Eliot's THE FOUR QUARTETS. Truth to Auden as to Eliot is an inner experience not immediately to do with words. Even after the experience it can only be expressed by telling a lie about what one had

been before - which is no longer possible - and a lie, inevitably, about what one is now. Nor is this the same as what one may later be or experience as truth. In the eighth verse this getting towards truth is called 'growing' and self-revelation or submission to 'Him' (Christ) would be 'wooden honesty'. The word 'wooden', meaning dull, heavy, spiritless, thus destroys the effect of 'nude august' in the first verse. The danger of religious self-revelation and exposure is that it may be a form of misguided egoism, 'Me'. This is what makes a person's public undressing vulgar exposure, 'naked', not 'nude'.

An arrival at religious conviction must imply an incorporating of the individual in an 'august community'. It is an impossible ideal, but tantalizingly suggested as possible by the forest which is like a human society's 'bluff' of respectable serenity and cohesion. But, the poem says, one must pay tribute to this 'bluff' in Caesar's City, no matter how many reservations we may have. This is an aspect of Christian humility. Obviously, however, the only commendable tribute must combine a sense of gratitude for what <u>is</u> with an acute sensitivity to what might be. Being religious has to mean a conscious duality of service.

The poem is tolerant, amused, accepting in tone. There is a sense of unhurried play, with a technical command and intellectual potential seemingly far in excess of the demands of the matter and meaning. Urgency and concern appear to have given way to charming slightness, a fireside gentleness. And this tone permeates a number of the poems in this volume, and most of the poems in ABOUT THE HOUSE.

<u>But</u>, one is left with an intangible depth, an ultimate seriousness about individual privacy and destiny. One feels the unsaid things, and

the quality of this unsaid is exhibited in the said. Art can go just so far. So much art tries its hardest to be life. It has 'realism' and the exposing of the most intense private experiences of the sensuous kind. Auden's art is always in deference to life. It declares its lesser status, and this deference is conveyed with highly conscious grace and skill. This is why one often feels the mockery or irony within the expertise.

HANDS

We don't need a face in the picture to know
That palms downwards, thumbs a little out,
    Have a paternal status,
    With blessing to bestow
On some filial or penitent head
    - Their signal is obvious -

Nor a tradesman's calendar to recognise
A gift season when palms look skyward
    And ten serried fingers curl,
    Eager to grasp the size,
Texture and weight of a lollipop,
    Tobacco-pouch or pearl;

And abroad where nothing is called by its real name,
Thanks to a flexible wrist and digits,
    We command a rhetoric
    Which makes us glad we came:
Hands will reckon, beckon, demonstrate
    Why we are angry or where sick.

Without them, what should we talk of anyway?
They built the gear and worldly fabric
    Which to us mean Home, will repair
    A torn jacket or play
A difficult sonata right through
    While the mind is elsewhere.

Strange, then, that these busybodies should have no
Feel for the quality of an absence,
    Should never twitch in regret
    For dear dead So-and-So
Or the Fall of the Roman Empire,
    Never itch to play Hamlet.

For peace, pardon, true love and finer weather
Trinitarian, Arian, Gnostic lips
    Pray to a Deus Absconditus,
    But, folded together,
All hands do homage to the god of hands,
    Tangible Terminus.

Lines on a face betoken a mounting care
For the ifs and buts of Time, a growing grief
    At lost opportunity,
    But lines on a hand declare,
Day after wasted day; - 'I am just what I am,
    There is no one else like Me.'

No wonder poor hunted fugitives are afeard
Of every footfall and shadow:
     What help are ten aliases,
     Forged papers, a fake beard,
If hands are too good or bad to cheat
     Even their enemies?

Eyes can often be taken in, hands never:
At once, whether gripped in a greeting
     Or lightly pressed in a waltz,
     One hand knows another
And spite of vows or rage or heartbreak,
     Blurts out: - 'This hand is false!'

We many find a verse, a letter, as we sort,
We refuse to believe ('No!' heart swears,
     'I never wrote such rubbish!'),
     Would deny the words in court,
Were handwriting, like a memory,
     A fact we could unwish.

HANDS

Just as the body or the unconscious cannot be cheated out of being what it always is, no matter what the person or the personality, so hands share a language of truth. The verbal language can make corrupt use of the hands' truth, as in cheapening advertising:

> Nor a tradesman's calendar to recognise
> A gift season when palms look skyward
> And ten serried fingers curl,
> Eager to grasp the size,
> Texture and weight of a lollipop,
> Tobacco-pouch or pearl;

Since hands have made whatever has been made in the world one must respect them and this physical world of objects 'Which to us mean Home'. Nevertheless the poet finds it curious that hands have no expression of feeling 'for the quality of an absence'. In the sixth verse the paradox is beautifully done:

> For peace, pardon, true love and finer weather
> Trinitarian, Arian, Gnostic lips
> Pray to a Deus Absconditus,
> But, folded together,
> All hands do homage to the god of hands,
> Tangible Terminus.

Our minds reach after the intangible, an absent divine. Our hands always pray, as it were, to the Roman god of boundaries, a finality, a physical certainty, a concrete present. We hold on to what we have, even while temporarily surrendering the will and the ego.

The inadequacy of the physical world and man-made enterprises is suggested by the universal need for religion. In prayers, when the fallible imagination creates a sense ofthe past and of an original

perfection perhaps, the hands express the temporary recognition of God as a here-and-now completion, a life suspended, the surrender of 'these busybodies'.

In the next, the seventh, verse, 'Lines on a face betoken a mounting care' but those on hands merely 'I am just what I am,/ There is no one else like Me.' A face shows the suffering spirit, the struggle of an uncertain ego, but hands are the intact, blind slaves of the ego. Yet hands are safe from human deception, as eyes are not, and in the last verse we sense the stubborn permanency of handwritten things which seem to prove what the heart no longer wishes to believe. This is brutal honesty, dogma, perhaps 'betrayal' of sensitivity, but proof of a permanent rootedness of all things in the concrete, man-made world.

There is a persistent urge through this world towards discrete truth and spiritual happiness, using, but often used by, hands. Hands in this poem symbolise all that inevitably <u>is</u> and <u>has been</u> at any particular moment in man's time on earth.

Again one senses Auden's deep and ultimate surrender, in a Christian sense, of the more aggressive or even assertive side of the ego. The Christian resignation goes together with an acute sensitivity to the facts of human life, an earth-bound love of life and people. Eros is contained by Agape; Logos, limited but inevitable and essential, helps the relationship, and in this poem Logos becomes the product of the need for Eros to be contained in Agape.

ON INSTALLING AN AMERICAN KITCHEN IN LOWER AUSTRIA

Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral
For MARGARET GARDINER

Should the shade of Plato
Visit me, anxious to know
How anthropos is, I could say to him; 'Well,
We can read to ourselves, our use
Of holy numbers would shock you, and a poet
May lement - Where is Telford
Whose bridged canals are still a Shropshire glory,
Where Muir who on a Douglas spruce
Rode out a storm and called an earthquake noble,
Where Mr Vynyian Board,
Thanks to whose life-long fuss the hunted whale now suffers
A quicker death? - without being
Called an idiot, though none of them bore arms or
Made a public splash', then 'Look!'
I would point, for a dig at Athens, 'Here
Is the place where we cook'.

Though built last May in Austria,
Do-it-yourself America
Prophetically blue-printed this
Palace kitchen for kingdoms
Where royalty would be incognito, for an age when
Courtesy would think: 'From your voice
And the back of your neck I know we shall get on
But cannot tell from your thumbs
Who is to give the orders!?' The right note is harder
To hear than in the Age of Poise
When She talked shamelessly to her maid and sang
Noble lies with Him, but struck
It can be still in New Cnossos where if I am
Banned by a shrug it is my fault,
Not Father's, as it is my taste whom
I put below the salt.

The prehistoric hearth-stone,
Round as a birthday-button
And sacred to Granny, is as old
Stuff as the bowel-loosening
Nasal war-cry, but this all-electric room
Where ghosts would feel uneasy,
← A witch at a loss, is numinous and again
The centre of a dwelling
Not, as lately as it was, an abhorrent dungeon
Where the warm unlaundered meiny
Belched their comic prose and from a dream of which
Chaste Milady awoke blushing.
House-proud, deploring labor, extolling work,
These engines politely insist
That banausics can be liberals,
A cook a pure artist

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Who moves everyman
At a deeper level than
Mozart, for the subject of the verb
To-hunger is never a name:
Dear Adam and Eve had different bottoms,
But the neotene who marches
Upright and can subtract reveals a belly
Like the serpent's with the same
Vulnerable look. Jew, Gentile or pigmy,
He must get his calories
Before he can consider her profile or
His own, attack you or play chess,
And take ~~where~~ what there is however hard to get down:
Then surely those in whose creed
God is edible may call a fine
Omelette a Christian deed.

The sin of Gluttony
Is ranked among the Deadly
Seven, but in murder mysteries
One can be sure the gourmet
Didn't do it: children, brave warriors out of a job,
Can weigh pound's more than they should
And one can dislike having to kiss them yet,
Compared with the thin-lipped, they
Are seldom detestable. Some waiter grieves
For the worst dead bore to be a good
Trencherman, and no wonder chefs mature into
Choleric types, doomed to observe
Beauty peck at a master-dish, their one reward
To behold the mutually hostile
Mouth and eyes of a sinner married
At the first bite by a smile.

The houses of our City
Are real enough but they lie
Haphazardly scattered over the earth,
And her vagabond forum
Is any space where two of us happen to meet
Who can spot a citizen
Without papers. So, too, can her foes. Where the
Power lies remains to be seen,
The Force, though, is clearly with them: perhaps only
By falling can She become
Her own vision, but we have sworn under four eyes
To keep Her up - all we ask for,
Should the night come when comets blaze and meres break,
Is a good dinner, that we
May march in high fettle, left foot first,
To hold her Thermopylae.

ON INSTALLING AN AMERICAN KITCHEN IN LOWER AUSTRIA

Erst kommt das Fressen, dan kommt die Moral

(NEW YORKER, March 7, 1959)

This was written thirty years or more after the poems that were printed in POEMS 1930. It is full of the bold, the cheeky, the irreverent, the unexpected, as the earlier poems were. It is richly mature, fully at ease, a piece of brilliant conversation by one conscious of enjoying that brilliance, but neither affected nor at all superficial, nor in any way obscure. The control of the half and quarter rhymes and assonances is extremely subtle and unobtrusive. The last four lines or so of each verse effect a most unusual, telling personality-synthesis. In each, Plato is married to Gluttony, the two extremes of the split between body and soul.

The last few lines of the second last verse introduce the theme of guilt, contrasting sin, puritanism and living death with the warmth of a relaxed, possibly amoral acceptance of the body and its needs:

..... and no wonder chefs mature into
Choleric types, doomed to observe
Beauty peck at a master-dish, their one reward
To behold the mutually hostile
Mouth and eyes of a sinner married
At the first bite by a smile.

In the last stanza 'our City', that is, our civilisation, is almost entirely of Caesar. The 'vagabond forum' is where Christians can, if they accidentally meet, recognise each other. They know that their civilization is controlled by 'The Force' - that is, politics and economics - but they know where the ultimate 'Power' lies, that is, the spiritual

destiny of mankind, or the way to happiness here and now. Provided a Christian accepts the duality of human nature - Plato and Gluttony as the extremes - he will be able to survive and in some small way defend the Faith.

> ..... all we ask for,
> Should the night come when comets blaze and meres break,
> Is a good dinner, that we
> May march in high fettle, left foot first,
> To hold her Thermopylae.

The banality, the deliberate homeliness of 'good dinner', counters any possible self-glorification in 'Thermopylae'. Within the extremes of Plato and Gluttony we have therefore the happy balance between the serious and unquestioned and a down-to-earth sense of fun. In verse two 'the Age of Poise', that is, the centuries of European aristocratic culture and elegance - the age of Mozart - is related to its hypocrisy, but also to its outlets for 'human fallibility: '..... She talked shamelessly to her maid'. Compared to this period, present times lack standards by which to recognise and understand integrity and common humanity.

In our Western Europe, whose values are still largely based on 'a dig at Athens' (first stanza) and which is really a 'New Cnossus', one can, and must, only be oneself. All other kinds of being deserve to be 'Banned by a shrug', for they will be the general neutralising of individuality by a civilization that can still, in its permissiveness, recognise individual integrity through which, ironically, Christianity could grow and overwhelm.

Two other things which must be brought together within the extremes of Plato and Gluttony are// the modern and practical with the old and vicariously numinous or romantic. To cook well must be seen as creative; to fill a stomach must be seen as not just necessary, but as a recognition

of the body and all its demands and pleasure. The appeased body, as the 'Erst kommt ...' line says, can then lead to the higher things of life, higher, but rooted in the lower. The fourth verse ends:

Then surely those in whose creed
God is edible may call a fine
Omelette a Christian deed.

The appreciation of Auden's poetry for this thesis ends here, and it is perhaps fitting that this poem should effect that ending. How wrong to try to label types of poetry. This one might be called Light Verse and be deprived of its great seriousness, its great humanity. Certainly Auden had a kind of audience in mind. This poem was printed in THE NEW YORKER, and was probably over the heads of most readers. It contains, however, in each verse, enough that is simple and direct, concrete and clear, for amusement to be immediately felt. But there is no pandering, no sparing. The themes that have preoccupied Auden since 1940-41 are all there with an almost deceptive ease and control.

This analysis brings to a conclusion for this thesis Auden's Christian development and its existentialism. It is now not as in the Kierkegaard period an assertion of Christianity against what every minute of every day/most people was assumed to be, that is, experience invalidated by the poet's preoccupation with The Wholly Other and The Unconditional. The Christianity now is a more mellow and humble acceptance of all that life is, a willingness to enjoy a great deal, an absence of guilt or outward-going urgency. Auden is now a thoroughly 'human', integrated Christian, very content to be alive, actually rejoicing in the Absurd. His ironical sense in unimpaired, his awareness of the wrong ways of the world is unchanged. As much as ever he expected to be, as much as he feels it possible to be, he is at peace.

In the conclusion to the thesis there will be a consideration of Auden's development as a poet in the period being studied. Poetry does not come from peace. The partial peace which Auden found means possibly a decline in his poetry. In this last poem the very boldness of the title, the very ease and ripeness of the poetry, reflecting a rich enjoyment of life, indicate perhaps the inevitability of the decline. But only just, like a fruit that one knows cannot improve itself by further ripening, but which may stay in its condition for some time yet.

CHAPTER 15

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(I) Frank Kermode

The theme of Auden's poetry, RIVISTA DI LETTERATURE MODERNE, 1948

This is quite a lengthy article (14 pages of small print), but because the writer intends to make a comprehensive survey of Auden's writing, it tends to be a superficial, though sympathetic, introduction. It gives considerable justification of Auden's seeming obscurity. It is of some value to find a critic stating this about a poet stamped as socialistic, topical or intellectual:

> Throughout his career Auden has written poetry of intense self-scrutiny, certain that his was a test-case, powerful in his technical ability, ... When we have discounted the purely accidental and varying causes of superficial obscurity we come up against the major problem of this poet's work, which is obliged to be difficult ..... the decay of this civilisation ..... is an aspect ..... of the collapse of love and the human spirit. 1

(II) Joseph Warren Beach

The poems of Auden and the prose diathesis, VIRGINIA QUARTERLY REVIEW, XXV, 1949

Beach writes with power, intelligence and clarity. He is very different from the many 'coverage' types of critic or reviewer who have had Auden as their subject. His adverse criticisms are telling, often convincing; a note here and there of the sarcastic and sardonic is contained within the most penetrating comment. All the more reason, then, that he should be discussed.

Two considerations are immediately obvious here. Firstly, Beach is much more remonstrating than otherwise (the balance is better in his book*) and the favourable weighting comes to the reader indirectly. The reader cannot but feel that Auden must be a worthwhile poet for such a good critic to bother with. Beach seems to imply that Auden can 'take' such stern yet enlightened comment. Secondly, one cannot but feel that though Beach may actually enjoy some literature, nevertheless as a critic he sets out to make a telling evaluation - or devaluation - and is not concerned with helping to pick up the pieces. What he does in this article, whether consciously or not, and provided anyone were to take his article as definitive or at all conclusive, is to demolish Auden as a poet. If Beach does in fact consider that much that Auden wrote is good and free from flaws, or that his merits outweigh his faults, he does not indicate this.

Because, Beach says, Auden's themes are mainly didactic or moralising or passively descriptive of states of mind, rather than dramatic, the prose element in the poetry is all to conspicuous:

> And in so far as he neglects the "dramatic" mode, Auden is thrown back on verbal ingenuity as a chief means of giving a higher-than-prose pitch to his discourses ... Auden is an accomplished manipulator of verse forms, and his poems always have for the eye a specious air of stanzaic regularity. 1

Auden loves the wisecrack, says Beach, but so do the Marx Brothers, and 'we have a certain reluctance to see the Marx Brothers take over the field of imaginative art'.[2] This sort of demure donnishness is surely cheap and glib.

Beach goes on to describe the period after the early, enthusiastic

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*See p.365

and vigorous poetry, as one when Auden crammed himself full of every possible kind of reading. Inevitably the facts from this cramming must crop up untransformed in the poetry and spoil it. The poem on Freud is now given quite close attention:

> (after eleven lines of quotation) That is Auden speaking of Freud. He is a wise and thoughtful man talking quietly - oh, so quietly - about a wise and thoughtful man. He is talking of a man of transcendent genius; he is himself a man of penetrating insights. He doesn't want to trade on the genius of his subject nor on his reputation as a poet ..... He wants to be casual and familiar; to deal with an important subject on the plane of common things; to impress his reader with understatement; to make him feel as if he were engaged in a fireside chat; and to insinuate the great truths as if they were the great chance discoveries of conversation over a stein of beer.
>
> There are a few flashes of vivid imagination .....[3]

The reader is half-surprised by the tailing off into sarcasm of what began, or could have seemed to begin, as objective comment. The 'oh, so quietly' was intended to say all, really. What is rather baffling is that Beach now goes on to state with unfavourable emphasis things which began, again, by seeming either objectively serious, or ultimately admiring:

> This is a constant feature of Auden's verse from 1940 on. It is as if the terrible significance of what was going on in the world had driven the poet underground for better sheltering the tragic earnest of his thoughts 4

Beach's discussion of the principle of writing in the idiom of ordinary speech, from Wordsworth to Yeats, Frost and Eliot, concludes with a snippet from the opening lines of THE WASTE LAND. Beach says:

> Well! for this kind of thing one must have an exceptionally fine ear. One must have the capacity for keeping silent, for listening ..... And Auden is better at talking than at listening. No one can say that "he isn't clever at all." He is clever as only a modern Britisher can be - a Ronald Firbank, a Saki, an Aldous Huxley. 4

This is allowed to speak for itself. Precisely what is Beach's tone? If it is rather nasty, then it is again muddling when in the next few paragraphs Beach seems to try to restore the gentler, even favourable tone, such as saying that Auden, with his language of science, gave poetry a shot in the arm.[5]

THE AGE OF ANXIETY is considered by Beach to be 'an impressive rendering of the average sensual man adrift in a tragic world .....'[6] The actual attention Beach gives to the work concerns only the faults, the flippancy, the burlesque, the 'Freudian slips and double meanings',[7] and so on, all of which come within the scope of Beach's thesis about the non-poetry in Auden's poetry. One cannot but agree with his individual criticisms, but by the time he has finished one scarcely remembers that, according to Beach himself in the first mention of the work, THE AGE OF ANXIETY is worth considering at all.

The article ends with the assertion that Auden has 'lost his balance and missed his aim'.[8] One can also question the smug donnishness of this: 'he has not demonstrated the possession of an infallible touchstone of taste.'[9] Auden would say, of course, that he has never tried to display any kind of infallibility, and would not like to think that he had created a work of art that supersedes the awareness in it of a fallible man writing. About the last sentence of the article he would only say that one does not write for poets of any sort: 'For poets of lesser endowments he might well prove a dangerous model.'[10]

As often happens with critics, Beach uses his very real ability to concentrate on faults rather than merits, and betrays his enjoyment of catching his prey.

(III) Geoffrey Grigson

POETRY OF THE PRESENT: An anthology of the Thirties and after, 1949

There are no poems by Eliot or Yeats in this selection. More of Auden's poems are printed than of any other poet represented. In the introduction a distinction is made between poets who first and foremost love 'hanging around words and listening to what they say'[1] and those who write poetry because they want to say something important. This is Auden's own distinction, and the quotation above is Auden's phrase, quoted by Grigson. Too many of Auden's contemporaries, Grigson says, loved in the wrong order, and disappeared as poets. Grigson all but equates Macneice with Auden in his influence on contemporaries:

> Eliot, in my view, has been a stimulant, poetically and critically, a horse and plough driving discreetly but ruthlessly over the bones of the dead, and making them minister again to poetic life, rather than a viable, formal, verbal, musical cultivator of poetry among his juniors. What Byron said of Wordsworth as a founder of a school can be repeated of Eliot. He has been the poetical father (who is responsible for his children?) of intellectual starvelings in a restricted back area. Macneice and Auden pulled up the fences of the area. They have made available, freshening it up, a much wider countryside of the mind and senses. 2

Grigson goes on to the unfortunate consequences of Auden's influence, for which he cannot really be blamed. Auden 'encouraged' inferior political elements in the poetry of inferior poets. Poets like Dylan Thomas and George Barker are considered not to have progressed out of the first necessary love of words, and out of the rich evocative possibilities of surrealistic poetry, into what became for Auden 'a more radical love of God and his neighbour'.[3] Grigson quotes from his own statement about poetry, made as the war began and his NEW VERSE came to an end:

> We know enough now, at any rate to be sure, or to feel sure, that this scientific and commonsense view of poetry is the only possible one by which reason is not abused. We know that if a poem (or a mind) is more than the sum of its details and constituents, that extra something is explicable in material terms. 4

He quoted in 1939, and quotes again in this Introduction, Macneice's requirements of a poet (quoted in full in this thesis, p. 104).

> I would have a poet, able-bodied, fond of talking, a reader of newspapers etc. 5

The poetry of war and the years after the war seems to Grigson to be against this 'commonsense', and a regrettable return of 'mystifyings or commonplaces moribundly imaged and dressed. One war killed a sham the other revived it .....'[6]

This Introduction, written simply, bluntly and confidently, was the strongest assertion of Auden's greatness up to that time.

(IV) Francis Scarfe

W.H. AUDEN, 1949

This is a short book of sixty-nine pages in large type, and is a sympathetic survey of Auden's poems and longer works from 1930 to THE AGE OF ANXIETY. Its scope cannot but make it generalised and its weakness is that it is more of a tribute, and an invitation to the reader to agree with the things said, than a demonstration of how the poetry works. Scarfe's enthusiasm, though not blinding him to faults, leads him to make judgements and assertions supported only by short quotations which are expected to explain themselves. For example:

> And in the poems of Auden's which fail, the failure is most often due to such lapses of taste as this. But sometimes it is highly successful:
>
> (two verses from LOOK, STRANGER! poem II)
>
> LOOK, STRANGER! is full of such bright flashes:
>
> (four lines from poem IX)
>
> But perhaps the best poem in the collection is THE SIX BEGGARED CRIPPLES, a completely successful satirical poem in which a strong irrational element is harnessed to bitter and penetrating social commentary, beginning:
>
> (five lines of poem XXIV).[1]

A statement as bold as the following needs a good deal of supporting demonstration:

> SPAIN is without doubt the central poem in Auden's work, towards which all his previous efforts at "socialising" poetry had been directed. It alone was sufficient to establish Auden as a poet of European stature. 2

There follow four and a half pages about this poem, with many of the verses quoted, but saying nothing to convince anyone who may feel that it is only another typical composition of the Thirites. There is no original critical penetration, so that the following kind of thing sounds lazy and flat:

> The composition of this poem is in itself a triumph. It is musically composed and the development might be described as symphonic. The balance of the various aspects of the theme is perfect. The intensity of feeling and high seriousness of the theme and its treatment are well maintained 3

Scarfe does not have much to say about the longer works except for THE SEA AND THE MIRROR which he praises and explains as a Christian-existentialist attempt to indicate how much more than the work of art there is in life, so that Shakespeare's TEMPEST ought to be regarded as

ultimately unsatisfying. But Scarfe gives only a commentary on the theme of Auden's work, without attention to the poetry, though the commentary is lucid and accurate:

> Both art and nature are incomplete, though creating each other, and their essential difference lies in the one's love of order creating a pattern of life, whereas the other tends unconsciously to a massive pattern merely as a result of numerous existences being lived. The co-presence of Ariel, the "spirit of reflection" and of Caliban, the gross human substances of life, in one play, is in effect a heresy, the violation of both art, where Caliban does not conform to pattern, and life, where Ariel is an affront to an organic society. 4

THE AGE OF ANXIETY is seen as a failure with some good passages of poetry, but again the quoted passages are expected to explain their own merit. The book concludes with a pertinent point about critics who have little good to say of Auden:

> Those, however, who are always longing to know "where Auden stands", miss the drama of his work, which is precisely its restless evolution, its refusal to adhere to a formula. His marxism never convinced Marxists; his psychology was always incomplete and wayward; his Existentialism is only partial, and still tinged with reminiscences of Marx and Freud. His Christianity is still too tinged with satire to amount to meek acceptance. What is interesting, however, is the gathering synthesis of all these elements. 5

(V) Storm Jameson

THE WRITER'S SITUATION and other essays, 1950

The title essay of this book written soon after the Second World War, expresses with passion that writers should face only the very big problems of their times. The issues that faced people between the wars, Fascism or Democracy, Tyranny or Liberal Humanism, seem to Jameson to have been

relatively simple compared with the post-war, anguished question of continued survival in any form for the human race. It had been possible for six million Jews to be exterminated; and the atom bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima:

> For the first time, humanity can, if it feels like it, behave like a man so tired of life that he commits suicide; it can put a bullet through its silly wicked head and finish. At this moment in history, a writer who concerns himself with anything less than the destiny of man on the earth is amusing himself. 1

Jameson visited Warsaw in 1945. The lasting and hope-giving impression left on her was of a people with spirit undaunted as they sruvived in the ruins of war. Of all writers Jameson has the greatest praise for Malraux, with considerable respect for Sartre. Her plea is to the English-speaking world to speak out.

The essay on Auden, The Poet of Angst, written in 1947 and published first in THE GATE, is a reasoned argument that Auden's 'withdrawal' to America meant the deterioration of his poetry and a moral betrayal of his tradition. Jameson reminds her reader of the impact and 'incomparable excitement of discovering a new poet'[2] in PAID ON BOTH SIDES, the first of Auden's publications. She then discusses FOR THE TIME BEING and THE AGE OF ANXIETY and expresses her persistent disappointment with the poetry. For Jameson it is the faults or lapses that indicate 'most about the depths below the surface'[3] of a poem. She quotes passages where 'the surface gives way to the lightest pressure'.[4] The effect, she maintains, is to remind the reader that the brilliance of the poetry elsewhere is no more than the work of 'a verbal prestidigitator'.[5] The question is then asked if this is not to be expected when a man cuts himself off from the nourishment of his own country.

As with so many critics, Jameson's own conception of what poetry ought to be makes it very difficult for her to be fair to a poet whose theme and intention seem to be so opposed to her own. The merits, half-recognised, are unlikely to appeal to her basic lack of enthusiasm, while the weaknesses are seized as a justification for this lack of enthusiasm.

The series of essays was written just before and just after the war by an impassioned humanist pleading with writers to get to grips with man-made horrors and world-wide danger. For all Jameson's gentleness of tone and seeming willingness to understand another's point of view, she is narrowly personal and unsympathetic. Sympathy for the poetry of a man struggling with the Christian and Kierkegaardian concept of individual salvation and who, in proportion to the possible realisation of this, had a kind of indifference to the world of injustice and horror, is not to be expected from an active literary fighter for change.

(VI) R.A. Scott-James

FIFTY YEARS OF ENGLISH LITERATURE, 1900-1950, 1951

The usual names of the Thirties are bunched together. Auden is given three pages of attention. Inevitably there is only space for opinion, and this favourable.

(VIX) Charles Donahue

Auden on romanticism, THOUGHT XXVI, 1951

This is a review of THE ENCHAFÉD FLOOD, and it indicates a very deep and sympathetic consideration of the book. The writer shows how the humanist Auden has continued to exist along with the Christian one. The stern rejection of traditional romanticism is not the vital thing it was to the early Auden. Romanticism of unrehearsed impulses even if 'escapist' and egotistical, contains that which is missing from the lives, souls, of those who are our 'Managers'. (The volume NONES, 1951, is especially praised in this review). These managers in the past 'lacked humor, which is a fleshly thing'.[1] Their efforts to build the City were always in danger of becoming tyrannous. But even those who are not Caesars and Managers can all too easily become stoics, hostile to the body and platonically aloof from the human complexities of civilized living. Donahue emphasises that the three kinds of attitude, romantic, utopian, platonic, are in Auden's poetry all opposed to the Word made Flesh, where fallibility, humor, humility and, ironically, romantic yearning, lie.

(VIII) Robert Roth

The sophistication of W.H. Auden: A sketch in Longinian method. MODERN PHILOLOGY, XLVIII, 1951

This is an especially good, persuasively written interpretation of Auden's kind of greatness. Because it combines much supporting evidence with generalised and bold assertions, it is the kind of article to provoke or stimulate argument.

The opening of the article is strong:

> Among contemporary poets whose power to draw and hold the emotions of a twentieth-century audience to a unity, as it were, with their own recalls the Longinian 'sublimity', the eminent position of W.H. Auden is unquestionable. 1 (sic)

What the writer sets out to do is to demonstrate that the modern age, as all 'modern' ages must do, has given rise to the possibility of a new kind of expression in the poetry of a poet who is sufficiently 'great of soul'. He seems, broadly speaking, two kinds of modernity:

> ..... where the first tends consciously to sum up in itself the past of human or artistic experience, the second tends to focus its energies on the observation or creation of new kinds of experience; that, where the first needs to demonstrate some sort of conscious rising above or incrementing the sum of the past, the second is content to lose itself in the pursuit of the new - so that, lastly, where the first is sophisticated (with energies ranging in intensity and orientation from a negative of weariness or boredom to a positive of satire or cynicism), the second tends to be enthusiastic 2

Auden is classed in the first group. Other illustrations of this kind of rough division in modernity are offered: in music, and in the novel where Lawrence, in group two, is the opposite of Aldous Huxley, in group one.

Roth now goes on to a fairly full treatment of three of Auden's poems to show how they reveal this sophistication and how they reflect a transcendence over earlier writings on the same themes.

'Musée des Beaux Arts' is discussed first. It has the theme of the disparateness of man and nature and man and man; but whereas Spender, Hardy and Conrad in the late nineteenth century were involved in this theme with strong feelings, Auden was

> a sophisticated man of the twentieth-century, for whom it would then be unbecoming or, by the principle of diminishing intensity, impossible to show the same degree of excitement before it. 3

In other words Auden had absorbed his cultural heritage which included Spencer's 'enthusiastic acceptance',[4] Hardy's 'bitterness'[5] or Conrad's 'tragic resolution'.[6] When he is reminded by a picture in an art gallery that this is his own view, Auden can simply record the universal fact of this disparateness.

In the same way the poem 'Lay, your sleeping head, my dear' is considered to be the kind of love-lyric most acceptable to the modern world. Enthusiasm about fidelity and permanence, or elevation of the sex-drive and fulfilment above any other instinct, are out. Wider issues press too demandingly on the individual and his pleasures.

'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' is shown by Roth to be written almost in conscious contradiction of the elegiac tradition. All hyperbolic possibilities are 'carefully qualified'.[7] All objects are seen 'in terms peculiar to themselves'[8] rather than having any magical connection with the death of Yeats: 'And snow disfigured the public statues.' Roth asserts that 'the death is placed in a larger-than-personal world'[9] which is just as important to the poet as the death of his fellow-poet.

The poem has no conventional suggestion of immortality, either of soul or of poetry. Part III, with its 'antique jingling tetrameter in rhymed couplets, as if to temper with self-mockery the seriousness of what he has to say',[10] offers the hope that poetry, Yeats's poetry, can, after all, be of some use in helping people to accept the grimness of individual and social life:

> This is hard comfort to offer an age in need of comfort. Yet the striking truth of the matter is that, in its very hardness, it must strike us, as contemporaries of Auden, as the truest and noblest sentiment which it is possible or becoming in a man of our age to hold ... we are swept, by the nobility of his address to an object which we feel he has evaluated truly, up into a moment of unreserved acquiescence - which is precisely the sublime. 11

In Part II of this article Roth relates the importance of an artist's 'personal inclination'[12] towards those things in his time called 'spirit of an age'.[13] The influence of Freud on Lawrence and T.S. Eliot is mentioned as an example of a common culture producing out of differing personalities different art forms. In lesser figures, in our post-Freudian times as in post-Elizabethan times, a sophisticated assumption about the reading or play-going public can mean a debasement of the art form, a repetition and a heightened sensationalism. Only the rare, true artist with greatness of soul to match his sophistication, says Roth, can be a modern artist.

My appreciation of this article is ~~given~~ indicated in Chapter One of this (and elsewhere in) thesis.* Here it need only be said that though one may shrink from phrases like 'the truest and noblest sentiments', this is one of the very few original and penetrating considerations of Auden.

(IX) (Part One) Monroe Spears

Late Auden: The Satirist as Lunatic Clergyman, THE SEWANEE REVIEW. Number 1, 1951

Spears feels that Auden is essentially a satirist and that he constantly looked for masks behind which to speak. He never thought of art as magic, but rather as a mirror in which people became conscious of what actuality is.

> Since, to write his kind of poetry, Auden desperately needs to attain lightness through attitudes he can share with a possible audience, and needs common standards to serve as norms, frames of reference, for his satire, his whole career may be described as a search for beliefs, both for himself and as "metaphors for poetry". 1

Spears goes on to speak of the consistency in Auden's attitudes behind the changes in ideas or allegiance and mentions that Randall Jarrell attacked Auden's poetry on grounds of basic inconsistency.

Part I of the article is concerned with Auden's existentialism, Kierkegaardian in nature. This existentialism is, in simplest terms, a full recognition of subjectivity and individuality in a relationship with God and the absolute of eternity and death. Spears gives an outline of what Auden wrote in prose introductions and other essays about man's loneliness leading, for Auden, to Christianity:

> For the Christian, therefore, there is no perfect form of society; the best is that in which at any historical moment love for one's neighbour can best express itself. 2

In part II the very generalised comments continue. Auden's main target has been unawareness and complacency in those people who are powerful and successful. The discussion of LETTER TO A WOUND and Caliban's address to his audience in THE SEA AND THE MIRROR is fairly full. Here Spears indicates how the indirect prose method and the mask of the poet make for serious speaking in a light and highly sophisticated tone. Another indirect, masked method is the use of older poetic forms:

> ..... For example, the recurrent Christmas and New Year poems, and obviously the "Song for St Cecilia's Day" and "New Year Letter". Sometimes the form is loosely mock-heroic, when the noble form of more secure ages is contrasted with modern confusion ..... In his satirical lyrics, Auden characteristically strives to attain lightness through adopting the persona of an earlier poet. The most obvious example is the Letter to Lord Byron 3

Other masks mentioned by Spears are those in imitation of the styles of Burns and Blake; then there is the mask which incongruity of situation offers, such as in THE AGE OF ANXIETY with its heroic myths of Quest and Salvation set in a Third Avenue Bar.

This article is similar in method and intention to Spears' later book on Auden. It has the book's merits and limitations. On the merit side it is clear, with things falling into neat categories of classification, each supported by a passing mention of different poems. On the other hand, there is scarcely any suggestion or feeling that the article is about a poet and his poems. To refer to what Auden wrote in prose about his beliefs, and then to accept that Auden's poems written at that time conformed to these beliefs, is an unconvincing method. The poems need to be fully considered as entities which may or may not bear out some prose remarks.

One only has to disagree with Auden, after an intuitive enjoyment of his poetry, that, as Auden said, art is not magic, to realise that a man writing out his beliefs in prose is not the same as a man writing a poem. Obviously there is a relationship but Spears needed at least to balance the attention to Auden's prose with some close attention to poems. After reading this article one might believe that Spears thinks that Auden is above all a satirist. This is wholly inaccurate and belittling. Satire is impersonal in content and highly personal in motivation, and allows the satirist to avoid anything like a whole or direct commitment. This article could not have done much to convince those it was intended to persuade:

> The New Critics generally ..... tend to think him too much committed to ideas, too didactic and impure; he is the poet of Reason rather than the Coleridgean Imagination. The old charge of writing from the wits instead of from the soul is sometimes revived against him 4

Monroe Spears (Part Two)

The Dominant Symbols of Auden's Poetry, SEWANEE REVIEW, Number 3, 1951

While one cannot but realise that Spears takes a lot of trouble to make his points as thoroughly as possible in the limited space of a magazine article, there is a superficiality, and a monotony, because the poems are not treated as poems and are all but forgotten except as sources of reference to support a point being made. In a way Spears apologises for this:

> Although my intention is primarily exegetical rather than evaluative, I think that a proper understanding of the symbols disposes of much unfavourable criticism of Auden's poetry .....[1]

What he does is to take the symbols one at a time (War, the Quest, Paysage Moralise, Psychosomatic Disease, Eros-Agape-Logos, and the City)[2] or symbol-clusters, to trace their occurrence in Auden's career, and to relate these occurrances to changes in Auden's thinking and beliefs.

The following quotation from part I in which the war symbol is discussed will serve as an illustration of the superficiality of Spears' method, and also of the difficulty one experiences in reading his notated comments:

> A frequent corollary symbol is that of the Border, the Frontier between two hostile states. In this territory the soldier is singled out for an individual doom, called upon to risk or sacrfice himself (e.g. "The Secret Agent", CP,p.29; 1928; "Missing",CP,p.43,1930); or the comfortable bourgeois is suddenly confronted by the responsibility of choice, the surfaces of his civilized world parting to reveal conflict in which he must take sides (e.g. "The Witnesses", CP, p.185; 1933). 3

To take Spears seriously one must consult the poems he refers to in order to check the presence of the symbol, but one will find that one becomes involved in a reading or yet another re-reading of the poem, finding the symbol perhaps of only passing interest. What Spears should surely have done was offer a study of a few poems in which the same symbol occurs, so that one feels involved in a poem and able to feel the symbol as an integral part of it. The method Spears uses is rather like that used by some hypothetical person who catalogues in chronological order all references to blood in Yeats's poetry.

Another of Spears' techniques that makes it at times boring to read him, is his brief summarising of contents of poems. We have this in his treatment of the sonnet sequence, THE QUEST, from NEW YEAR LETTER.[4] Too much reference and too many snippets of quotation, together with, often, only a single statement to place the poem in question within the general context of Quest, all have the effect of reducing the poems to some dull, over-conscious expression. The complexity of 'meaning' in a single poem cannot for very long be passed over otherwise what one is reading is a critic's not very original observations.

This is especially the case when Spears deals with Auden's transition from an Eros - through a Logos - to an Agape-emphasis in his beliefs and poetry. Page 407 is very difficult to read, formidable at a glance. In the succeeding pages, whatever sense we may be left with that poetry is under discussion, gets lost in lengthy accounts of what Auden said about Christianity in prose articles or reviews, or how he was influenced by different writers, such as de Rougemont and Cochrane. Auden becomes a religious philosopher, not a poet.

Because so much twentieth century poetry has been difficult, critics have frequently discussed aspects of a poet's work, such as influences, and have tried to understand by going to prose-texts of the poet's articles, letters or autobiography. But unless the critics come back to the poems themselves frequently and in detail, their articles or books are of interest as something other than they intended them to be; they are not about poetry, but are rather like academic departments of poetry. Their supposed basic allegiance to poetry is forgotten.

Spears was trying to answer 'much unfavourable criticism'.[5] He answers very much in the manner of a painstaking and scrupulous scholar, and for this he must be given credit. It remains open to question what influence he has had on those who expect from a critic a combination of scholarship with the vigorous expression of personal conviction.

(X) Richard Hoggart

AUDEN - An Introductory Essay, 1951

A glance at the contents pages of this book is sufficient to show that Hoggart's method is the traditional one of critics, namely, a subdivided consideration of aspects of a total body of work. This means frequent but fragmentary quotation; and frequent comparison of one aspect of one poem with the same aspect of another. It means in Hoggart's case a constant alertness for fragments of repetition or similarity in lapses of taste and control.

The first chapter, First Impressions, is divided into sections called 'Fertility and Wit', 'Early Obstacles', 'Self-awareness and Perception'. The second chapter has three subdivisions of aspects, and it is these two chapters that are the least satisfactory. There are many stimulating and perceptive things said, but the impression on the reader is disconcerting. In the section of Chapter Two on 'Setting and Stance', we find the following:

> His natural scenery is volcanic or glacial, the land of the Icelandic sagas and of much Anglo-Saxon verse .....
>
> Such regions are not usually backgrounds to human activity but symbols, translations of abstract ideas. His shorter metaphors are very often drawn from climate and environment, thus:
>
> "village of the heart";
> "map of desolation";
> "birth of a natural climate and of love";
> "noons of dryness";
> "our climate of silence and doubt";
> "The provinces of his body revolted,
> The squares of his mind were empty."[1]

This kind of thing has both the merit of unifying the body of Auden's work as well as the clarity and stimulus of generalisation. The price paid is the suggestion that a poem can be clinically dissected and bits extracted to demonstrate a generalisation. Although no adverse criticism is intended here by Hoggart, it seems to me a method that is intrinsically dangerous, especially, of course, when a critic tries to condemn. Each of these bits works in a different way in its poem. This kind of comment does no more than say that this or that is to be found in Auden's poetry; it says nothing about the poems. When this kind of thing is done to illustrate Auden's weaknesses, the unsoundness of the method is more obvious. In the extracts below Hoggart seems to forget that all poets can be recognised in poem after poem:

> The same slick reliance on great facility is to be seen in the poems in memory of Yeats, Toller and Freud ..... And there is the overworking of certain favourite movements, such as the triple epithets or nouns:
>
> "The friend, the rash, the enemy",
> "The enchanted, the world, the sad"

(Hoggart quotes three other lines, and a further three to illustrate 'the pat ending'[2]).

In part 5, 'Commentaries', of the chapter on Technique, there are four fairly detailed analyses of four poems printed in their entirety. After reading them the thought comes: what is all the rest of the book for? What it really achieves is to be fragmentarily stimulating and informative; but what of the main thing that it is supposedly for, namely, an appreciation of the value of poetry in individual poems considered as the wholes they cannot but be?

The chapters on the longer works written after Auden went to live in America, are much more useful. There is no jumping from one work to another. But the final judgement on Auden seems more to reflect the rather superficial critical method than to draw together impressions of deeply mulled-over poetry:

> He may be neither profound nor prophetic, but he is an intelligent, sensitive, fluent and generous man of his day.[3]

When Hoggart goes on to describe the particular difficulties of a 'man of his day', one cannot help feeling that he should have given more attention to the possibility that poetic greatness may be very different in different periods. He could have given us some indication - apart from an assumed agreement that his and the reader's intuitions are the same - of what poetry ought always to be:

> Auden is at one of the frontiers of this anxiety-torn world; he is one of those who play out in themselves, with unusual and revealing clarity, struggles to which, whether we recognise it or not, we are all committed. 4

In Hoggart's assessment of Auden in the series WRITERS AND THEIR WORK, No.93, it is clear that he has his idea of what major poetry is:

> We cannot claim that Auden is now a major artist or seems likely to become one. He lacks too many important dimensions. Centrally, he is a brilliantly and sometimes profoundly evocative explorer of the kind of experience that is intelligently and publicly shared rather than private or intimate, that draws on a common concern rather than on a deeply personal emotion.
>
> Yet within these limits how far Auden has gone in coming to terms with himself 5

Hoggart ought surely here to have had much more to say about 'a common concern rather than (on) a deeply personal emotion'. In all Auden's poems that are not obviously crude and external there <u>is</u> a depth of emotion but not often of the direct, obviously personal kind. When one considers what John Bayley in THE ROMANTIC SURVIVAL detects as the emotion behind a very external-seeming poem such as 'Go there if you can and see the land you once were proud to own', or if one considers that subtle restraint which Barbara Hardy refers to (both critics discussed elsewhere* in this thesis), one can sense the need for a few criteria in present-day critical methods.

If the so-called external world with its objects, its people, its great men and its ideas or new knowledge, is reacted to and converted into an arrangement of words and phrases - even if the result is considered no more than minor period-poetry - then there must be emotion behind it. This is not forgetting Hoggart's 'rather'. But what is 'deeply personal'? It is something that is scarcely ever directly given in good poetry. The feeling of sterility, personal sterility, is felt <u>underneath</u> THE WASTE LAND. The feeling of deep <u>personal</u> disgust and regret is felt <u>through</u> say,

---

* J. Bayley, p.324 especially.
B. Hardy, p 345 f

Yeats's 'Circus Animals' Desertion', 'Second Coming' and other poems. In the same way the emotion of desperately wanting to understand and resolve is felt in Auden's terse, sometimes obscure and tortuous early poems.

Auden's 'deeply personal emotion' lies in the urgent need to counter the feeling of helplessness he has in a world of suffering. He urgently needs to be able to accept the break with the middle-class ethos of his upbringing and he needs to resist the compulsion of a neurosis. His earlier sense of an ultimate state of universal love, synonymous with universal cure, makes it inevitable that Auden's poetry reflect much that is of 'a common concern'.

Hoggart's book is called AN INTRODUCTION. This is possibly considered to be a good enough reason for cursory remarks; but if the book were read by someone who expected of an introduction a stimulus and guide, that someone would feel that he was reading about, or was going to avoid, the second-rate.

(XI) Hayden Carruth

Understanding Auden, THE NATION, 1951[1]

This is a review of Hoggart's book AUDEN: AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY. Most of it is taken up with Carruth's impressions of Auden's poetry. The shorter poems are preferred to the longer works. The difficulty a critic has to face with Auden, Carruth says, lies in the bewildering virtuosity that gets out of hand. Carruth finds that Hoggart's book deals admirably with the faults, while expressing a warm admiration as well. Like

Hoggart's book, this review, without having the conscious intention of doing so, damns with faint praise; most of the attention is given to faults rather than merits, which, presumably, must speak for themselves.

(XIII) Babette Deutsch

POETRY IN OUR TIME, 1952

This book contains a survey of poetry in English from Hardy to Auden. Considerable attention is given to those poets generally recognised as major - Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Hopkins, Tate, Crowe Ransom - and to many who, according to the length and nature of the author's comment on them, are in her eyes less important. Among the latter are Robert Graves, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas. Auden, in the first group, as one of the younger established poets, is not sympathetically treated. His moral seriousness, his concern for the modern world, are, for Babette Deutsch, his real claims to greatness. His command of one's respect and one's willingness to overlook the faults and caprices of his actual poems, lie in this moral concern.

The final chapter of the book is called Science and Poetry and it is in this chapter that most of the attention to Auden is given, though he has been frequently referred to in earlier chapters for purposes of comparison. One finds the writer saying the following as the chapter approaches its end, a chapter that serves as a bold, balanced yet rhapsodic conclusion to the book:

> There is a kinship between poetry and religion that has led some critics to transfer the quarrel between religion and science to a quarrel between science and poetry. Poetry cannot cure cancer ... But it can provide a fusion of relaxation and excitement without the penalties attaching to either. To a greater degree than the other arts, it can reveal the conditions of living. This should help us to amend them 1

Of Auden's elegy for Yeats this writer says:

> The poet tries, on the one hand, to realise an unusually comprehensive experience more intensely. On the other hand, he tries to realise an unusually intense, if sometimes trivial, experience more comprehensively. This is to add to our knowledge, which is the procedure of science; this is also to deepen our understanding, which has been the effort of religion. Is it impossible that in the poem these two old enemies may be, even briefly, reconciled? 2

Babette Deutsch writes as a poet and enthusiast for poetry so that, almost without exception in this book, her criticism is elucidation, a kind of enthusiastic introduction to these poets of our time who have been doing much difficult and worthwhile work. There is in her writing both a generous catholicism of taste and appreciation, and an absence of original penetration. She writes intelligently enough to encourage others to read the poets she considers. Little wonder that the dust-cover of the book has tributes from some of the poets considered in the book. Auden's opinion is:

> POETRY IN OUR TIME is an excellent job in judgement, insight and presentation.

(XIII) G.S. Fraser

THE MODERN WRITER AND HIS WORLD, 1953

This book is intended as a comprehensive background to modern literature. In the section ~~of~~ on poetry there is a consideration of the influence of the French writers, of the 1890's especially; and of Hardy, Kipling, Hopkins and Owen as representing the best things done in English before THE WASTE LAND. By the time Section 3, 'Poetry of the Thirties', brings the reader to Auden, the reader is conscious of the variety of

The rest of the references to or comments on Auden are what one rather expects in a book of this sort that is intended as a survey and popular introduction. The obvious things are said about Marx, Freud, the leftist magazines, the grouping of leftist poets, and finally, that the poetry of the Thirties, with Auden outstanding of the left-wing poets, remains poetry because there is so much 'permanent ordering of words'.[3] No deeper attempt at assessment is made; the general treatment is sympathetic.

The most remarkable thing about this book, as far as a study of Auden is concerned, is that there is no mention of Auden as a poet of the post 1939 period. Fraser wrote the book, as he says in the preface, in 1950, to serve as a useful guide to Japanese students. The book, quite understandably, was sold in England and America as well. Auden, to the casual reader or undergraduate, would seem to have been swallowed up by America. Along with many of the other writers of the Thirties who did in fact stop writing poetry of merit or at all, Auden would seem to have been a poet of a past decade, not of the present.

(XIV) Stephen Spender

THE CREATIVE ELEMENT, 1953

This book is a reconsideration of the view expressed by Spender in THE DESTRUCTIVE ELEMENT (1935). In the earlier book he analysed various modern writers to establish the belief that the motive behind most modern writing is 'a destructive principle'[1] and that all writers who were 'at all concerned with the moral decline of modern society'[2] felt that the political

way led to better things. The artist could find 'a renewal of creativeness through ..... siding with those forces in society which could save it from destruction.'[3]

THE CREATIVE ELEMENT is an attempt to see each writer in the modern situation with his or her individual vision. This vision is creative by being consciously isolated from society, and by its assertion of an individual vision within the context of a society, no matter how imperfect the society.

Since only a handful of writers is discussed at any length, one can assume that Spender feels Auden to be worthy of considering alongside Rilke, Rimbaud, Yeats, Eliot and others. Inevitably, in a book of this nature, there is little attempt to deal with poetry as poetry. Instead it deals with poetry as an expression of the particular predicament for poets as people in the age of the Slump, Fascism, the Spanish Civil War. Auden's poem SPAIN is discussed at some length, and is considered to be the last poem in which Auden clearly sides with a possible new Marxist age to come:

> SPAIN reveals the great difficulties of writing a poem which supports the attitude of one side in a contemporary struggle. The poet is forced to put his imagination at the service of interpretations of the struggle which, being in fact the ideas of propagandists, are external to his own feeling. 4

With Auden's move to America and his more Christian preoccupation Spender sees an end to the more interesting Auden. He sees little merit in the deliberate preaching of the limited role of the artist. In the section on 'The New Orthodoxies' (Marxist, Religious, Academic or 'conformity with the pervading presence of authority')[5] there is no attention given to Auden's religious concern. No attention is given to

Auden in the concluding expression of the view that politics ought to be both Christian and Marxist, with poets involved in politics in this dual way. We are left with an earlier indictment of poets who escape possible prostitution by turning to dogma in order to 'put an inner house of the soul in order'[6]. Spender, paradoxically, recognises an improvement in Auden's poetry after the conversion:

> His development was immensely aided by a maturer creed which purged his conception of love of the crudity of his earlier work in which it was equated with uninhibited living and political change. 7

But Spender poses the question: how can a poet bear to serve, no matter how reluctantly, the False City in which he finds himself? Spender wants to work for a Just City, but Auden, as he so clearly says in 'Vespers' (SHIELD OF ACHILLES), does not.

So the book reveals an opposition in basic attitude to life between a critic and his subject. Not only Spender, but other critics as well, have felt this good enough reason not to read the later Auden seriously.

(XV) Joseph Warren Beach

THE MAKING OF THE AUDEN CANON, 1957

It is not likely that people who are not already convinced of the worthwhileness of studying Auden, will read this book. The author confesses that it may well be tedious and in his preface, 'Preliminary Statement of Aims', says:

> I have tried in my presentation to lighten the burden of factuality so far as is consistent with thoroughness and precision. But even so it may at times tax the patience of readers eager to reach broad critical conclusions. And accordingly, for my general conclusions, such as they are, the reader is referred particularly to Chapters 18 to 20. 1

The purpose of the book is to examine possible reasons why Auden in preparing the 1945 COLLECTED POETRY, and the 1950 COLLECTED SHORTER POEMS, should have made certain alterations, excisions and complete omissions. Though Beach is adversely critical of many instances of Auden's judgement, the attitude and remarks of the writer are generally intelligent and perceptive. There is the clear assumption that Auden had been a very good poet and that the mature Auden, though entitled to do what he did in preparing the Collections, nevertheless, deprived or even cheated readers of these Collections.

The really pertinent and stimulating remarks about the various poems and plays are to be found more in the earlier detailed chapters than in the ones Beach refers to. In Chapter 2, The Peculiarities of Auden's Method, we have an outline of the very real difference between reading poems as they originally were in a volume or within the context of a play, and reading them lumped together with little order except that of alphabetic succession. Mystifying ambiguity is involved when, say, "pagan irony follows directly on the sober depth of religious feeling in "September 1, 1939", and breathes the same air with such unexceptionally pious pieces as "Kairos and Logos", "Christmas 1940",' .....[2]

In this same chapter, still only outlining peculiarities, Beach touches on the ambiguity of the word 'love' which, over the years, meant different things to Auden. It is a pity that Beach, even at this early stage in the book, does not illustrate this with some more detailed reference to actual poems or actual ambiguity. Though he returns to the theme in Chapter 9, the discussion is still general. In Chapter 2, after indicating the influence of the teachings of Gerald Heard on Auden, Beach says:

> In the poet Auden this higher consciousness bears the name of Love, and makes one think a little for all the world, of Emerson's Oversoul. In his early poem originally entitled "A Communist to Others", Auden bids his "comrades" have faith in a "love outside our own election" that everywhere "holds us in unseen connection".
>
> ..... this appeal to the active love of brothers to bring about a just social order is very different from Marx explaining in dialectic terms that it is the inevitable historic destiny of the working class to give the coup de grace to a decadent bourgeoisie ... It is this "higher consciousness" that made Auden a maverick within the ranks of socialism as he was, a black sheep among the flocks of academe. 3

Beach makes an interesting point about the many alterations to poems which involve the word 'love', alterations which change the emphasis from the Marxian, or more overtly, of Eros, to that of the Christian Agape 'where, I suppose, an absolute selflessness is the ideal consummation'.[4] The real point is surely that the satisfying effect of the changes and the relative ease with which the changes could be made, clearly show that Auden always had a unifying personal urgency even when a strong 'external' or borrowed political or psychological ideology seems to permeate a poem.

The changes are in the naming of what is for Ransom in ASCENT OF F6 an Ethical Absolute. The changes in the Collected versions are, as Beach says, often effected by as little as the altering to capitals of a small l or y in 'love' and 'you'.[5] Those instances of inconsistency which Beach indicates in the toning up of a more Marxist to a more Christian poem are rare because the strong moral concern with suffering and injustice, and the tendency to exhort, are based on an enduring and dominating private condition and temperament.

POEM XXIX of POEMS 1930 and 1933, 'Consider this and in our time', was omitted from the 1945 Collection but included in COLLECTED SHORTER POEMS with eight lines omitted. These are the first eight lines of the last part, where specific mention is made of the corrupt bourgeoisie,

*

financiers, dons and clerics. I have considered the poem in detail in the original form.* The effect of the omission is to make the enemy of a better world into 'Seekers after happiness', people who, unaware of other issues to which their happiness is ultimately linked, follow what can only be called blind wishes and impulses. The improvement from the omission is mainly twofold; firstly, the removal of the facile general blame on all members of the three institutions; and secondly, the clearer universalising of 'convolutions of your simple wish', that is, complex selfishness. Beach says of the re-admission of the poem into the canon:

> However extravagant and confused the terms in which the youthful psychologist expressed himself, the mature poet may have found much of essential truth in this poem as a whole. And apart from this particular passage, there is nothing unmistakeably Marxian in its text. But the association not merely of the financier, but even the university scholar and the clergyman, with sexual irregularity and the soft life must have seemed to him in later years an outrage to decency and a violation of the rules of fair play. What he could save he did, but this he could only do by cutting out the diseased tissue. 6

I doubt the appropriateness of 'outrage to decency'; the lines probably struck the later Auden as naive.

Another of the poems which have been discussed in this thesis in detail and which Auden censored considerably, is No.XVI in the 1930 and 1933 editions of POEMS, 'It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens', called '1929' in the 1945 and 1950 Collected editions. Sixteen lines of part 4 of the poem in the 1930 edition were never retained up to 1950, when two of them were restored. The lines obviously impress Beach and he does not really approve of Auden's later discretion:

> Nothing in our literature can compare with the vividness of Auden's characterisation of lusty youth struggling with the moral problem of sexual impulse. 7

* p 22 ff

He quotes some of the vivid images. Beach also finds the excisions from 'Voltaire at Ferney' regrettable; suggestions of Eros in Voltaire's life are scrapped.

Special attention is given to 'At the Grave of Henry James' which Beach considers as the turning point of Auden's conversion from humanism to Christianity. A gesture of understanding and acceptance of the omission of four stanzas in the Collected edition does not hide Beach's appreciation of the personality-revealing self-expression in these stanzas. About the stanza in which Auden refers to a Henry James short story, THE BEAST IN THE JUNGLE, in which a bachelor realises too late that his fear had always been the fear of women, Beach says:

> And I think it reasonable to suppose that the unfortunate "bachelor mind" referred to in the discarded stanza somehow links together in Auden's thinking the three names of Marcher and James and himself, and that it is also linked by association with the affaire fatale of marriage referred to in the stanza shortly after this which was not discarded. 8

After further examination of discarded stanzas Beach admits:

> The reader is always curious about the most imtimate thoughts and feelings of a poet. But the poet's obligation is solely to the integrity of his poetical conception. 9

The next chapter deals with whole poems eliminated in 1945, and then restored with alterations in 1950. One of these is No. XVII of POEMS, 'Here on the cropped grass of a narrow ridge I stand'. The lines omitted in 1950 are what 'the bones of war' said, and are the least distinguished in the poem. Beach thinks 'August for the people', which is 'The Malverns'of the 1950 Collection, was left out in 1945 because it was a too-overconfident prophesy of what actually ahppened to 'the dangerous flood/ Of history'.[10]

In trying to explain why certain passages from the plays were reprinted as separate poems, Beach makes illuminating remarks about the plays themselves. Thus, in the chapter on THE ORATORS, he does a lot to explain the obscurity and ambiguity of the theme by examining Ode V. Beach apologises for so lengthy a treatment of a single poem.[11] Yet these are among the most satisfying and thorough pages in the book. After approving of the poem he makes what is really a point relevant to any passage from a longer work offered as a separate entity:

> As it is read in its earlier setting there are too many ironic implications and associated attitudes, and all closely bound together in an organic whole, making up a consistent ideological pattern, and one which could hardly have been congenial to the poet of 1945. If it is taken in the sense indicated in the last paragraph,* too much of the original intention must be tacitly dropped out of account to leave the poem what it was and give it the force and significance it had when it was conceived and written in the first flush of reckless creativity ... The words are the same, but I have an uneasy feeling that in their sum they do not carry the same meaning. 12

The general verdict on the nine poems and pieces retained from THE ORATORS is that they 'illustrate the surprising adjustability of Auden's work written from one point of view of a given ideology to the requirements of a quite different ideology involving a quite different point of view.'[13] The reason given for this is the persistence in all Auden's work of constant themes, such as of the heroic quest or the secret resistance of men banded together and being kept fit to resist becoming what they are fighting against, the diseased, corrupt and mad:

> Some of these themes are a trifle romantic ... But on the whole the moral tone, though unconventional, was eminently sound, and the work could be readily assimilated to the body of later writing inspired by more correct formulations of truth. 14

There is no need to deal with other chapters and works discussed. I have tried to indicate Beach's tone and perception which, if anyone not

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* doctrinaire extremes.

partial to Auden's poetry were ever to read his book, would have an influence that is stimulating and convincing. But if the same reader were to confine himself to the last three chapters, he would feel very much as he would when reading many other books or a SCRUTINY article, namely, that after all why even bother with the second-rate.

Chapter 19, the summary, contains nothing that is not more-or-less statistical and general. It includes an account of what are called by Beach four stages of transition in Auden's beliefs and attitudes up to the embracing of Christianity. Chapter 20 almost becomes a charge against Auden of having no integrity. The word is carefully explained as being nearer in meaning to 'integrality' than to anything like honesty. Beach tries to be balanced and sympathetic:

> For our time, like any other, like Donne's or Tennyson's, has been notable for the variety and complexity of its intellectual cross currents and conflicting emotional attitudes ... But ..... what we prize in literary art is not confusion but richness in representation.
>
> In a work of art, as in a man, we are best satisfied when we are confidently aware of a wholeness, or integrality .....
>
> In the case of Auden, it is our doubt on this point that makes us hesitant to class him with writers in whom we have this sense of wholeness or integrity. 15

Comparison of Auden follows with many 'names' considered by Beach to be writers at present in indisputable positions of literary eminence. But with poets like Keats, Browning, Spender, Wallace Stevens used for different kinds of comparison, one senses something of obsessive concern in Beach with integrality which is a constancy of theme and emphasis throughout a poet's body of work. In the earlier chapters of the book there is a more sympathetic understanding of what Auden was doing in his poetry, namely, confronting squarely those large, controversial issues of

his time that seemed either the cause or result of personal and social corruption. Beach finds it necessary to defend himself against charges of either heresy against academic standards, or enthusiasm - and he is enthusiastic in the earlier chapters - for what in his life-time might be settled for as second-rate. It is in the last chapter particularly that one feels the need for a detailed analysis of some of the poems whose actual, individual value is put in question by the suggestion that the alterations are the result of no more than a passing phase.

The whole question of externality and topicality, and of a poet's allegiance to outstanding minds who wrote influentially, is involved in Beach's book, as it was in his article.* It is hoped that this thesis will have indicated by a close attention to poems that the term 'diathesis' in the article, meaning a permanent condition in an organic body that makes infection possible, is an unhappy one for describing the characteristic of Auden's poetry whereby intellect enlists whatever it needs in the service of a struggling psyche. Similarly the term 'canon', suggesting a permanent, quasi-legal and sanctified condition, is an inappropriate one for applying to a study of Auden who was so definitely opposed to such elevation of the arts. The consideration of John Bayley's book, which follows, comes at a convenient moment to balance the kind of emphasis in Beach's article.

(XVI) John Bayley

THE ROMANTIC SURVIVAL, 1957

The writer's theme, broadly speaking, is that a good deal of modern poetry, often seen as obscure, intellectual, full of undigested elements,

is much more in the Romantic tradition than is realised; that is to say, the modern scene is, though not obviously or even intentionally, subjectively reflected. Those who assert that Auden is an intellectual poet communicating ideas, would scarcely agree with this:

> We have already noticed his regard for the novelist's art, ... obvious affinities of local colour with Scott's novels (particularly OLD MORTALITY), or with Stevenson. It may seem artless to assert so homely an analogue in the case of a poet as intellectually well-connected and as sensitive to the fashions of modern thought as Auden has always shown himself to be, but it is precisely such simple forebears - rather than Groddeck or Malinowski - whose obscure strength can be felt in him. He owes more to Scott and Hardy than to Kierkegaard, and the tradition in which his writing is unconsciously founded is not an intellectual one. 1

Part I of the book says little that was not said by Edmund Wilson in AXEL'S CASTLE.* Bayley is all in favour of poetry that shows awareness of things outside the poet's private introspection. He remarks on the limitations of Symbolism. He sees Eliot as a poet who placed old and new, romantic and classic, grand and grubby, concrete and abstract, side by side, violently, hoping for a fusion that never took place. Bayley sees two things as having the most influence on modern poetry: the 'discovery' of the Metaphysicals and the introduction of Literature as a university discipline. The latter is seen as one reason for acute critical self-consciousness in poets, and for the damaging tendency in critical writing to be cerebral:

> And for poetry the solution must lie in a partial return to the critical premises of romanticism, in the whole-hearted submission to a poetic experience before we analyse it. Certainly we should not undervalue the advantages to be gained from the close and careful reading of a poem, and from the examination of its difficulties and its component effects. But such a reading should be a secondary process and should modify our more instinctive reaction to the life of the poem, not determine it. 2

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* discussed p II ff

Yeats, Auden and Dylan Thomas are then discussed at considerable length in separate sections of the book. These three poets Bayley considers

> the greatest and most interesting exponents of a new sort of romantic revival. In their poetry the romantic horizons have expanded again, the original vitality and breadth of the movement have been restored. 3

Bayley's method is most satisfactory. There is a good deal of quotation with penetrating comments on the text, and an appreciation of the general effect, the tone, music and so on.

No other critic of Auden has been able to see that in a poem like 'Get there if you can .....', with its very obvious social and intellectual commentary, there is a very subjective overall effect:

> The gusto and sense of enjoyment here is extraordinary. As in Yeats, violence and calamity are on the way: the signs of their coming - industrial chaos, bourgeois artiness and escapism, cramped and wasted lives - are graphically described ... He shares with Yeats an enjoyment of the situation and of the possibilities of making it stylish. The picture of desolation gives the reader a thrill of gratified excitement: he seems to be sharing in a vicarious Schadenfreude ..... Everything is hopeless and the country is going to the dogs, but to think this, while staring out at the rain, is somehow no inconsiderable pleasure. 4

Bayley stresses the disguised nostalgia in much of Auden's poetry, and compares his depiction of the modern scene with Eliot's 'controlled, fatigued, but "engaged" outlook of the middle-aged man'.[5] He sees Auden as adolescent, having appealing childlike qualities mingled with a careless knowledge of the world:

> An apparently denunciatory poem about industry and politics in fact makes its impact in very much the same way as one of Yeats's Crazy Jane poems, and it makes it by a use - how conscious a use one cannot say - of the attitudes and images of adolescence; for in an age of ideology and mechanisation only the child remains unmechanised and human. 6

Bayley sees that one of the reasons for frequent misreadings of Auden's poetry is Auden's own insistence, in critical writings and in such a work as THE SEA AND THE MIRROR, that there is a clear distinction between a poet as poet, and a poet as a social, religious and responsible being. Because of this mistrust, Bayley feels, we find so much of Auden's best writing as if

> The situations that appear and recur in his poems with such vividness are of the kind which we can imagine occurring to the poet as he closes his eyes for a liberating instant between two minutes of actual living. 7

Bayley compares Auden's more consciously infantile approach to poetry to that of Tennyson's, something which Auden recognises. The difference is in Auden's insistence on poetry as a game to be played with acute, belittling self-consciousness. This, Bayley maintains, has been a disadvantage in that the reader of his poetry becomes self-conscious also:

> It means we find it almost impossible to take him seriously. We can laugh at or with him; admire his technical brilliance and the virtuosity of his language ... His clinical attitude prohibits the nebulous, the profundity which moves us but which we cannot quite grasp. 8

Eliot's self-consciousness is deliberately sincere:

> This is perhaps why we can take Eliot seriously even when he is being his most exasperatingly deprecating and self-conscious, whereas the Auden irony and urbanity we follow gladly for their own sake and can only be persuaded of their final seriousness by external means, i.e. by the subject matter - refugees, war, etc. 9

This kind of comment, though fresh and original, is vague and general and needs more support and illustration than it gets. The theme in Auden's life, which can be summed up in one of Auden's favourite quotations from Kierkegaard that 'One must get out of the poetical into the existential', could be a separate study in itself. The split was

apparent from the beginning, surely. It is easy to sense in POEMS how Auden wants to reach out and affect people in this world, and it was soon apparent to him that poetry would always be a rather private affair of himself coming to terms with what his conscience made of the world. The man and the poet are, much of the time, distinct.

To say that 'subject matter' comprises Auden's real seriousness is to ignore the seriousness as an overall religious and ironical attitude to the subject. Bayley maintains that in Auden's poetry there is sometimes 'a positive buoyancy' (about) 'the most ragged and "viscious" aspects and experiences of life'.[10] He quotes from THE AGE OF ANXIETY:

> In a vacant lot
> We built a bonfire and burned alive
> Some stolen tyres. How strong and good one
> Felt at first, how fagged coming home through
> The urban evening. Heavy like us
> Sank the gas-tanks - it was supper time.
> In hot houses helpless babies and
> Telephones gabbled untidy cries,
> And on embankments black with burnt grass
> Shambling freight-trains were shunted away
> Past crimson clouds. 11

Of this extract Bayley says:

> The brilliancy of description ends there ..... and gives the reader the unpursuing satisfaction of contemplating a formal triumph. 12

This is the new romanticism of Bayley's thesis. The magic is there, whether, as it were, Auden approves of it or not. Bayley seems here again not to realise that the seriousness or greatness of this poetry does not derive from the subject matter. The quest for salvation is the 'subject'. The poet remembers a time when absorption in a satisfying childhood experience petered out in a sense of the weight and worry of the adult world. In this extract of poetry, subject matter and tone are one whole seriousness.

Bayley offers a very pertinent comment about Auden's critics who look for elements in his poetry like 'borrowed materials (in it, and for its) nominal preoccupations.'[13] Richard Hoggart's generalised comments about Auden's wishes and beliefs for society are quoted, but, Bayley asserts, 'how little relationship they bear to the reality of the verse.'[14]

> Attacks on Auden are invariably based on his irresponsibility, his unfounded pretensions to intellectual power and weight, and his enjoyment of the private joke or absurdity for its own sake, etc., and all these strictures lose their force if his poetry is read for what it is, and not for what his critics - misled by the poet's ambiguous attitude - have supposed it is attempting to be. 15

There follows the Collected version of 'Consider this .....' with four pages of comment. Bayley admires many of the things in it, seeing with pleasure images escaping from the ideas. He notes the tendency of the imagery to become abstraction but not sufficiently enough to neutralise 'a genuine metaphysical richness'.[16]

My analysis of the poem 'It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens' will have indicated that I disagree with Bayley's feeling that it is too deliberately ugly and clumsy. There is a scholastic lapse in Bayley's referring to Auden's poem 'Culture', in Collected versions, as exemplifying a later period in his career when Auden tries to versify a point of view with a humanist or Christian gloss. This poem is from the early work THE DOG BENEATH THE SKIN. To criticise it on the grounds that the idea becomes clogged in the 'irrelevant images'[17] is to disregard the fact that as a chorus ofthe play it is at least an effective link between scenes.

Bayley compares Yeats's greater organic flow to Auden's often unsuccessful attempts to unify experience in his poems. But the volume NONES is seen as the beginning of the solution of the problem of

mastering 'that easy expository style which is often attributed to him.'[18] There is adequate quotation and relevant comment from page 167 to 185 so that whatever is said carries weight, whether one agrees or not. Auden is seen as more sober and more mature in his later verse than in his earlier. This is rarely asserted by critics.

Instead of allowing the ideas and characters in THE AGE OF ANXIETY to take precedence over the poetry, as is the case in Spears' or Hoggart's criticisms, Bayley stresses the many excellent passages of poetry. He sees it as a romantic work in that the private dream-worlds of each character find expression; especially Rosetta's dream-world yields nostalgic tenderness. But Bayley is also sympathetic to the structure of the play, which is 'deliberately and ludicrously inconclusive'.[19] It is, he says, true to life in that in a time of dislocation, social fragmentation, and individual helplessness to deal with events and forces that affect people, a real kind of contact between people is possible for brief interludes, with nothing changing very much afterwards. Here I nevertheless disagree; I think those who criticise the structure and story as being contrived, at times ludicrous, are at least partially justified; but the poetry can be appreciated separately.

Bayley concludes, linking Auden to Betjemen:

> The subject matter of their poetry approaches that of the modern novel - social apparatus, solitude and the expedients for evading it, the vivid perceptions and totems of childhood, and details and personality of places and people - but it never loses the unique advantage which romantic poetry has: its ability to turn whatever it touches into mystery and charm. 20

Bayley would probably agree if one said that what he wants in the criticism of poetry is greater attention to individual poems, less with the intention of separating the inseparable fusion of elements, than of

yielding to the poetry without prejudice. Prejudice is very apparent when critics concentrate on 'meaning', ideas, aspects, etc. That it is poetry, and as such ultimately beyond analysis, ought to be recognised first.

(XVII) A. Alvarez

THE SHAPING SPIRIT, 1958

This book of essays on different modern poets contains one chapter of twenty pages on Auden. Quite clearly Alvarez intended offering a final estimate and overall consideration of Auden. Yet he pays attention only to the poems of the Thirties, and mentions briefly THE SEA AND THE MIRROR.

Nothing that had not been said many times before is offered: Auden is topical, journalistic, an organiser of clichés; he is clever and slick but never deep:

> At the centre of Auden's work ..... I can find only a kind of nervous blankness. His best work is ..... peripheral, a poetry of technique, brilliant critical insights and ingenuity. He revived all the traditional means and accommodated them to a resolutely contemporary language. In this way he caught once and for all the tone of a particular time ..... and the moment has passed. 1

So Auden is written off by a then very young present-day poet and critic, without so much as a mention of the many good poems - better than anything of the Thirties - written after 1940.

Alvarez complains that Auden never wrote 'a good personal poem'[2] and that he always looked for an impersonal reference point or pivot, or a mask. But Alvarez himself seems to realise that it is frequently only

a seeming impersonality and comment that we find in Auden's poems. After a fairly thorough analysis of 'Consider' with plenty of quotation, he says:

> My own impression is that it has little to do with the social detail. What is being aired is one single man's terror or guilt and retribution, not that of a whole society. 3

Precisely; in other words, it is a personal poem. If it were not it could not be a poem at all. The lines and phrases which Alvarez selects as good could simply not have been. What bothers Alvarez in the poem's sense is the connection between social reform and mental illness:

> For what the dissatisfied, the warped and the diseased have to do with the purgation of society is by no means clear. Certainly no political leader would own them 4

I have discussed 'Consider' in detail.* Suffice it to say here that the connection is this: the abnormal people would be only too willing to embrace an excuse for destroying a society since they instinctively resent society's seeming normality. Auden was not alone in believing that a society of the self-centred and unloving is largely to blame for both conspicuous and unrecognised abnormality. But Auden does not say that these people will be reformers; they will, he says, be destroyers. It is every person's moral duty to recognise life's greatest abnormality which is self-preoccupation. Officially declared madness is a deluding exorcism of everyone's personal, private madness.

Another remark about 'Consider' seems to me to be naive:

> I can't understand how Auden manages to take the international set so seriously. They are self-seeking, superficial, and possibly, at best, cunning. But "dangerous"? Even from the party line they were mere riff-raff to be swept away. Yet somehow the poet has made them a personal menace. 5

Surely, all too often, people of this kind have a great deal of power, not necessarily conspicuous, but which, because of their ignorance and selfishness, can so easily side with such things as the Fascist or Nazi inhumanity? A second reply to Alvarez' remark is that Auden always felt his emotional allegiance to the upper middle-class into which he was born, and that the very rich and privileged were an extension of this emotional involvement. What was a 'personal menace' was that these people represented one extreme pole, with the working-classes, the unemployed and emotional cripples another extreme pole between which Auden hovered, unable to identify himself. The first was an easy, obvious enemy, the second an easy, obvious friend, outsider, underdog.

Auden's temperament, his intelligence and wide knowledge, his wit and good sense which balanced his loneliness, broke down these too-easy categories in most of his poems of the Thirties. Closely detailed observation of the privileged suggests fascination with what his moral sense abhorred, like a lingering regret for something deliberately left behind. On the other hand the vaguer references to the unfortunates of life suggest lack of emotional intimacy with, or warmth towards, what his moral sense at the time suggested as being the people with whom he ought to feel companionship. However, as pointed out in some of the poems discussed in this thesis, these people actually repelled him by their seeming dirtiness and dullness and seemingly all-too-acquiescent humdrum lives.

Alvarez approves of Auden's light verse in which, he says, there is no intention to be personal:

> And in light verse the first requirements are that its effect be immediate and its direction straightforward. The details do not have to lead towards any profound insight, and have only to be striking and lively. 6

Alvarez goes on to praise qualities of 'briskness and efficiency'[7] and he makes the point made by many critics, or implied, that Auden can handle any form of poetry 'at well-nigh a moment's notice'.[8] The lasting impression from all this is that Auden ought never to have bothered to write seriously, that he was a journalist and ought to have stuck to the form that suits journalism. By stressing the fact that Auden liked to write for some occasion - someone's death, or birthday, or to celebrate Auden's realisation of some long-dead or living person's genius - Alvarez tries to insist that Auden is a topical, news-conscious reporter.

Auden is given credit for having worthwhile ideas around which to compose a poem and there is generous enough recognition of

> his technical inventiveness, his striking but scrappy ideas, his great range of reading, his wit and, above all, his superb command of language. 9

But all this is praise for the journalist who should have stuck to the limited scope of verse as opposed to poetry. Alvarez finds Auden's poetry of the Thirties hopelessly outdated because

> what actually happened after 1939 was so much more appalling than anyone imagined that all talk of nerves, injustice and retribution now appears trivial. 10

This seems to me to be very short-sighted. If one goes to the poetry of Auden in the Thirties there is so much that is not, or is only mildly, political. Often the political is put into a complex relationship with the human psyche so that the poetry is not of the Thirties but of any time of unrest for a lonely, perceptive and helpless person. To feel that the horrors which follow a warning are so great as to make the warnings sound trivial seems to me to be a personal blindness on Alvarez' part. Elsewhere I have referred to his own post-war

traumatic experience at Auschwitz;* the obvious reply Auden might offer is that this blindness makes a warning all the more significant.

This article on Auden strikes me as being full of adverse prejudice, presumptuous in its would-be definitive tone, and most unbalanced in being concentrated so largely on Auden of the Thirties.

(XVIII) David Daiches

THE PRESENT AGE, Introductions to English Literature, 1958

This volume is certainly no more than a brief outline of fiction, poetry and drama since 1920. Obviously a reputable critic is asked by the publishers to put his authority behind a few brief remarks about the many writers. Daiches therefore does not have to say anything very new or penetrating about Auden, nor does he; but at least he is sympathetic, without being uncritical. He does not think that Auden lived up to his early promise. Of the earlier poetry he says:

> But Auden had the vitality, the sheer poetic exuberance to be able to impose his own authentic accent on all he touched. His bewildering use of imagery drawn from English, public school life, his ambivalent metaphors ... his private jokes and sudden clowning - all these were often bewildering; but they looked like the beginnings of a significant new poetic style. 1

The later poetry, according to Daiches, is only significant in certain poems, 'those grave and quiet lyrics where he projected a simple emotional situation but keeping the thought geared to the emotion by the shape of the verse'.[2] Daiches mentions a few of the poems he means, but it is only too clear that this generalising without support leads to

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* Chapter One, p.4b

remarks as useless as the above. What does he mean by 'the shape of the verse'? Is it that all these poems are feelings arranged in lines for the sake of shape?

Daiches is quite enthusiastic about the plays, praising them for having been, in their time, bold, clever, amusing, and an attempt to bring art and the public closer. But again, the various plays are dealt with so briefly that there is little said that is convincing.

This kind of introductory book no doubt serves some purpose. In the case of Auden it is at least harmless, which cannot be said for the Penguin series.

(XIX) G.S. Fraser

VISION AND RHETORIC, 1959

Three chapters of this book are on Auden, comprising pp. 149-178; each chapter is on a 'period', early, middle and later. The first has considerable praise for THE ORATORS and for its impact on 'the consciences of intelligent young men in a bad time.'[1] The method of approach to this work is reasonable, personal, as opposed to formally academic:

> So, if I were asked now what I thought THE ORATORS is 'about', I should say something like this. It is about romantic male solidarity ..... [2]

There is a perceptive analysis of the Fascist tendencies in the work, and a patient mention of some of the obscurities. But this chapter has little to offer to suggest that THE ORATORS contains actual poetry.

The second chapter lists many faults, supported by brief quotations, but there is precious little appreciative criticism of the poetry to support a statement such as:

> That everything is seen from the outside, and as new, and as having to be explained (that is, as having to be set against a wider background, which is assumed, so that there may be explanations) is one reason, perhaps for certain faults of taste and feeling ..... [3]

Fraser is perturbed by Auden's unconscious snobbery and contempt for the poor, the workers, but spoils his case by the childish exaggeration of Auden's disgust with mass-sameness:

> The individualism which Auden seems to be advocating here is rather like that which, along so many English streets, jostles together with fake-Tudor or neo-lavatorial pub, the commercial Renaissance bank ..... [4]

This is followed by praise for Auden's technical inventiveness and mastery, but with criticism of 'that tendency towards an impressive vagueness'.[5] This vagueness is illustrated with a discussion of the presumed meaninglessness of the line 'My dear one is mine as mirrors are lonely'. Thus after no actual sympathetic attention to a poem or a longish extract from a poem, the chapter moves into a discussion of Auden's thinking and his conversion to Christian orthodoxy. There is no attention to the poetry of this period which gave us THE SEA AND THE MIRROR. Instead there is a mention of the predicament of a Prospero or Christ, a Hitler or would-be converter of others into obedient believers. The answer for Auden is the Kierkegaardian faith in the Absurd, the 'leap in the dark'. This is briefly attacked as dangerously mind-shutting. The chapter concludes with the judgement, rather pompous and cheaply sly since it is assumed out of the blue that Middleton Murry is superficial:

> He is a much greater man than his ideas; as a poet, a major voice, as a thinker, about on the level of Mr Middleton Murry.[6]

The third chapter opens:

> Of all the poets whom I have dealt with in this volume, I feel that I have treated Mr Auden least fairly ... I am now beginning to see that to argue whether his ideas were right or wrong has as little to do with the strict function of a critic of poetry as treating, for instance, Dryden's RELIGIO LAICI or Tennyson's IN MEMORIAM as pamphlets about natural religion. 7

Precisely. But why does Fraser allow the previous chapters to stand in this book which is a collection of articles written over a period of time? It surely would have been better, more honest, to have scrapped or rewritten them.

This third chapter goes on to dangle before the reader the possibility of 'major status'. Hoggart's hesitancy is mentioned as well as Fraser's own 'few of us have been wholly happy about the way his poetry has been going'.[8] Then he says NONES and SHIELD OF ACHILLES 'deserve both a warmer welcome and a more respectful consideration.'[9] But what follows is mostly generalising, sometimes false, or commentary on actual ideas. There is little close, detailed attention to the poetry. For example, two remarks:

> Mr Auden, of course, has always been a generalizer. He has never been interested either in his own experience, or the experience of other people, for its own sake; 10

and

> To read a volume like NONES is, in fact, to recognise once again that Mr Auden is more adroit - almost unscrupulously adroit, perhaps - than anyone else now writing verse; 11

Neither of these statements is in any way adequately supported. This is, no doubt, an inevitable defect in brief, single articles on a poet's whole output, but it is irritating, and harmful, when it concludes with the chary, 'But one's admiration for Auden, from first to last, remains mingled with doubts.'[12]

(XX) Philip Larkin

What's Become of Wystan?, THE SPECTATOR, 1960

This is a three-column estimate of Auden's career and standing up to HOMAGE TO CLIO, the appearance of which prompted this kind of review. It writes off the Auden of the period after 1940, and assumes much:

> The appearance of his latest collection, HOMAGE TO CLIO, marks the end of the third decade of Auden's poetic life and does not alter the fact that almost all we value is still confined to its first ten years. 1

Larkin's main thesis is that up to 1940, Auden was vital because he identified himself with his times: but that after the move to America his life and poetry are very largely confined to reading and derivative writing.

One cannot but wonder what, if anything, an established poet thinks of the kind of thing Larkin says here:

> ..... while although in FOR THE TIME BEING ..... Auden works hard to reinvigorate the Christian myth as a poetic subject, he is too often chilly ... or silly ... As for THE AGE OF ANXIETY in 1948, I never finished it, and have never met anyone who has. 2

Larkin's final point, if it can be called that, is that 'Auden, never a pompous poet, has now become an unserious one.'[3]

(XXI) R.G. Cox

THE PELICAN GUIDE TO ENGLISH LITERATURE, The Modern Age, 1961

One cannot help wondering why R.G. Cox, who reviewed for SCRUTINY, should have been asked to write for this book which could possibly be 'popular' and widely, if superficially, influential. What is to be gained from an article, fifteen pages long - a generous enough allocation for such a book - which cannot but make the less-specialised reader, either in literature or in the works of Auden, wonder why Auden should be considered at all?

There are tributes to the early Auden:

> Auden's first volume ..... made an immediate impact. Here was unquestionably a new talent, the voice of an individual sensibility alive in its own time and capable of vigorous expression. 1

Mention is made of merits and faults, and there are a few quotations to support both. The impression remains sympathetic and up to page 380 the chapter could do no harm. But one regrets that something in the way of detailed analysis of the merits is not offered to balance the adverse criticism, mainly general and sketchily supported, which predominates in the rest of the chapter.

Occasionally there is a willingness to be fair, such as in the praise for 'September 1st, 1939'. The reader is invited to 'follow up'[2] the mention of six other poems that seem to the writer to be fairly satisfactory. There are further references to poems that seem to the writer to be worthy of mention, to be 'More effective use of landscape'[3] or having 'considerable directness and force.'[4] The tone of praise, in

between the strictures, is always reluctant, which is why greater attention to the merit so briefly passed over would surely have been a fairer method of approach.

This kind of article or chapter in a book such as this is surely too common, too easily authoritative-seeming and irresponsible. Virtually nothing of any depth is said and yet the concluding pronouncements are always there as if the writer has given adequate discussion:

> He can always be relied on to be more interesting, lively, provocative, wide-ranging, psychologically penetrating, technically skilful, and ingenious than most of his contemporaries ..... But he has never gathered up and concentrated all his powers in a major achievement 5

The 'more' and 'most' are surely lazy and evasive, a wrong kind of gesture of fairness by a reviewer who so clearly does not like the work he reviews.

(XXII) John Mander

THE WRITER AND COMMITMENT, 1961

The writer believes that Auden has written some good poems but that they do not add up to an oeuvre. This appears to be for Mander a serious defect, but apart from indicating that oeuvre means a unity of tone throughout a poetic career, he does not give sufficient grounds for demanding that a major poet's work should comprise an oeuvre:

> Some of the poems in ANOTHER TIME (1940), and in more recent volumes, are among the best individual poems he has written. But these poems are only good, I think, individually: the volumes as a whole remain merely the sum of their parts. Only LOOK, STRANGER! has this higher unity and coherence; only there is Auden fully committed. 1

Being committed means for Mander almost the same as being personal. LOOK, STRANGER! represents a personal admission of being in a predicament, of being conscious of suffering but also of being thoroughly middle-class and helpless. This, to Mander, is committing oneself, coming out into the open. How different is Savage's* reaction to this volume:

> ..... this volume, compared with POEMS, shows an increase of clarity with a diminution of poetic intensity ... Having forfeited his critical position in relation to bourgeois society, Auden no longer sees life in terms of conflict, and as a satirist he has been disarmed by this fact. 2

Clearly these two critics look for different things in poetry. I side with Mander here. Mander finds POEMS largely unsatisfactory because he is able to ask frequently in all the poems: who, why, what does this mean? He finds Auden evasive, uncommitted, in spite of being a Marxist and Freudian. To say, as Mander does, that these two emphases cancel each other out and neutralise the poems[3] is to be blind to the complexity of life which Auden recognised. For Auden the political and the individual psyche can never be considered separately.

Mander discusses three critics of Auden, Beach, Orwell, and Alvarez in THE SHAPING SPIRIT. I think Mander puts too much emphasis on the adverse remarks Beach makes about Auden. Mander sees the ease with which Auden altered some of his poems to suit a new philosophy as proof of lack of commitment, that is, evasive impersonality. The point about a poet's ouevre is made but it could surely be argued that, to repeat what I have said in ~~the Introduction~~ Chapter One, what unifies Auden's poems is the awareness of suffering and injustice, and concern not to be helplessly bitter. The evolution of a Marx-Freud emphasis into a Christian one can be natural because all three teachings are directed to human happiness and optimism.

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* ~~See~~ pI94 ff

Orwell's remarks are mainly personal. He called the poets of the Thirties who, unlike himself, did not fight in the Spanish War, 'nancy-poets' (ROAD TO WIGAN PIER). Mander quite rightly stresses that this need not make any difference to our judgement of a poet, but what he sees is lack of real, personal commitment to the cause of Spain. He considers 'Spain' the least committed of poems and hence an unsuccessful poem. He analyses it in some detail with every intention of annihilating it; after quoting the first two verses, he says:

> Six stanzas are devoted, in this strain, to the careful evocation and enumeration of Yesterday. But why six? The answer, no doubt, is that six stanzas about Yesterday are needed at the beginning of the poem to balance six stanzas at the end of the poem about Tomorrow. But it is evident that the number is arbitrary: why not eight to balance eight, or ten to balance ten? And not only the number, the content too is arbitrary: why counting-frames and cromlechs rather than pyramids and gunpowder? ..... the truth is, one thing will do as well as another, and nothing is required to be where it is. 4

All this is surely nonsense; gunpowder and pyramids are stale; why shouldn't a poet consciously organise a poem into a certain number of ~~verses~~ stanzas? Why do poets adopt the sonnet form and compel themselves to keep within its limits? About the ~~verse~~ stanza that begins 'On that arid square ...' Mander's remarks are inept;[5] I have referred to this in my discussion of Scarfe's reaction to the poem.*

Alvarez, as already indicated, dismisses Auden as a journalist, no thinker, one who never wrote a personal poem. Mander quotes this quip from THE SHAPING SPIRIT: 'Auden says what he has to say without much difficulty, and then, of course, he never has anything difficult to say.'[6] Mander is most impressed by Alvarez' book, finding in it 'a definitive assessment'[7] and likely, once and for all, to keep Auden from the rank of major poet.

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* pp.pI92 f

The title of this chapter on Auden is 'Must we burn Auden?' Mander, though finding opinion of Auden very low, thinks not. But he makes little case for the defence. His thesis is based on the difference between personal commitment in a poem and impersonal fabrication of verses. If he had looked carefully at some of the poems in POEMS with a willingness to yield his predilections about poetry, he would have needed to explain the qualities which many critics praised as being at least promising, namely, verve, vigour, pungency. These are personal qualities; the so-called externalisation of self into the object-world can be done in many ways, with pessimism, pleasure, nostalgia; but, in whatever way, if there is rhythm and tone and arrangement it is a person doing it. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that John Bayley's remarks discussed (in an) earlier chapter of this thesis* about a very external-seeming poem, 'Get there if you can ...', which he reads as a shameless expression of schadenfreude, is one answer to the kind of charge Mander makes and dwells on.

Like so many other critics, Mander approaches writers with his own theme, his pet conviction. One doubts if he was prepared to read poems as if they might possibly have a value, a strength or subtlety, not in his range of interest.

(XXIII) Stephen Spender

THE STRUGGLE OF THE MODERN, 1963

This book which considers the 'modern' movement to be over, contains a brief but very bold mention of Auden. The book tends to be an attempt

*p324

to suggest that the predicament of the artist in the present time should not be exaggerated. It reminds us that the artist has always been pretty much of an isolated individual and outsider. But a big difference in the present time ought to be recognised: (quoted also in Chapter One* of this thesis).

> We accept the idea that there is an almost autonomous outside world of science, inventions, power, evolving and revolving according to laws of economics, etc., which has become unimaginable within the individual consciousness. This was not so for Shakespeare or Milton. Their imaginations roamed over the whole world, and over the forces that controlled the history of their time. Here, surely, there is a real difference between past and present. 1

There follows a discussion of the inextricable character of the public and private lives for each person, so that a poet ought to combine the two in his poetry. THE WASTE LAND and Auden's 'Spain' are given as examples in poetry of the dominating presence of the public world. The danger today is that poetry might seem to most people to be an affair of students and professors 'who have achieved their maturity at the price of refusing to have dealings with the world.'[2] The point is made that in the past 'There was no idea that the world of art was somehow the opposite of the world of historic action.'[3]

Later in the book we have this:

> The modern movement began by being the struggle of imaginative man to hold within his own mind a picture of the whole world which was modern. Looking at it like this, I would say that the use of anthropology and mythology in THE WASTE LAND, of psycho-analysis and Marxism in the early poetry of Auden, marked the turning point of the movement in literature. After this literature ceases to attempt to use modern instruments of analysis to imagine the world. It turns back, uses analysis for the purpose of understanding only past literature. The creative movement becomes a movement in criticism, and starts to live off its own capital, the tradition. Writers cease to be moderns and become poet-critics, critic-poets, and contemporaries. 4

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* p. 2.

After condemning the nostalgia and exclusiveness of the Leavis school of thinking, and after praising the sympathetic, hopeful, here-and-now involvement of Hoggart's USES OF LITERACY, we have the final summing up:

> For this reason (to ignore the universal threat) against the achivements of the modern movement, the sociological novel, the political play, poems of personal relations and decisions, or of animals and nature, however solid their achievements, seem too evidently the results of limitations consciously imposed to shut out realisations which can scarcely be denied on the less conscious levels from which the greatest work springs. Perhaps (this) ..... is inevitable today. But the works of the modern movement stand behind us not only by reason of their being so much more ambitious but because they wrestle with the universal predicament that is still our world. 5

As I have already said, there is little consideration of poetry as poetry in this book. However, the expression of sympathy for a poet who tries, in spite of all sorts of flaws and flops, to be both public and private in the present time, can only be constructive.

To believe that minds can be and ought to be cured and that societies can be and ought to be put right, is, for Spender, obviously a simplifying and unifying moral basis on which to exist as a private individual. It does not matter if youthful exuberance and the reform-spirit have to give way to the acceptance of the fact that one must first be true to oneself within society. Needless to say, Spender believes, as Auden does, and as perhaps most seriously-thinking people consciously do, that by being true to oneself as a mature person it is impossible not to feel involved in the affairs of others in the world. Maturity implies a balance between the needs of one's individual personal fulfilment and the needs of others, a sense of one's universality and the universality of any other person's particular predicament.

(XXIV) Monroe Spears

THE POETRY OF W.H. AUDEN, 1963

Like Hoggart's book this one is both useful and stimulating and is indispensable in research on Auden. It is crammed with facts and information about Auden the man and the poet. But it has a major limitation; there is no full-length analysis and appreciation of any poems. There are countless quotations, references and sketchy interpretations, brief gists of many poems, often clear and sometimes penetrating, and many indications of influence in the poet's development. But the estimate of the book in THE REVIEW, 11-12, the number devoted to the Thirties, is only too true:

> The energy here devoted is, however, scholarly rather than critical. The material is too wieldy for articulate flow ..... Spears informs and describes, recounts plots, sketches out neat developments of ideas, and so on, but the interpretive spark is missing. 1

The reviewer, John Fuller, began by saying that opinion on Auden differs very widely, with the Scrutineers at one extreme of denigration, and Spears at the other extreme of assumption 'that Auden has arrived, and that it is merely a question of piously charting the route he took.'[2] The review concludes with what could be called a directive to this thesis:

> As I have suggested, what is really needed now is a highly selective, detailed, persuasively defensive work on the best of Auden's poetry. 3

In this same issue of THE REVIEW, there is an article by Barbara Hardy, 'The Reticence of W.H. Auden', offering a detailed appreciation of one poem, 'From the very first coming down ...'. With this as a central demonstration of what she is really getting at, the comments on other poems, brief as they are, make sense and seem authenticated by the

full analysis. It seems to me that it could serve as a model for an adequate method of talking about a poet's work as a whole.

If Spears' book had contained some close, deep analysis of a few poems, I think it would have been of much greater influence in our time when there seems to be doubt in many critics' minds whether what Auden writes is, in fact, poetry at all.

Spears' book is nonetheless most valuable. It is a humble, just and generous attempt to let Auden's poetry interpret itself, with assistance from Auden's own critical writing. It is a clear, meticulous and comprehensive foundation for further study of Auden. The brevity of this comment on the book is not intended to seem disparaging; my debt of gratitude to Spears is indicated in the number of times I refer to him in this thesis.

A CHANGE OF AIR

Corns, 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 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.

Although its chaffinches, maybe, have learned
The dialect of another river basin,
A fault transformed the local building stone,
It has a priest, a postmistress, an usher,
Its children know they are not to beg from strangers.

With in its average elsewhereishness
Your name is as a mirror answers, yourself
How you behave in shops, the tips you give:
It sides with neither, being outside both,
But welcomes both with healing disregard.

Nor, when you both return here (for you will)
Where luck and instinct originally brought you,
Will it salute your reconciliation
With farewell rites, or populate your absence
With reverent and irreverent anecdote.

No study of your public reappearance
Will show, as judgment on a cure demands,
A sudden change in love, ideas, or diet:
Your sojourn Elsewhere will remain a wordless
Hiatus in your voluble biography.

Fanatic scholarship at most may prove
That you resigned from some Committee, unearth
A letter from the Grand Duke to his cousin,
Remarking, among more important gossip,
That you seem less amusing than you were.

(XXV) George P. Elliott, Karl Shapiro, Stephen Spender

Symposium on W.H. Auden's 'A Change of Air', THE KENYON REVIEW, Winter 1964

If anyone with ignorant contempt for literature and literary criticism required convenient proof to justify this contempt, he could usefully go to this symposium. If he were a scientist he would be unable to understand how others can take the game of criticism seriously, for what is only too obviously lacking is some basic foundation of principles on which the individuality of the critic can work.

Elliott spends most of his essay in saying how difficult and mysterious the poem is. His question of the designation of 'you' and 'it' strikes one as inept, but here one is up against personal intuition and one cannot argue against Elliott's finding difficulty where oneself does not. Without demonstrating by quotation and close analysis, he spends a whole page talking about 'The difficulty native to speculative verse' and generalising about the rhythm and movement of the poem as not contributing to this difficulty and mystery. He decides to compare the poem with 'Consider this and in our time' in order to show the later poem's superiority. So, as expected, the early poem is dealt with very roughly. The point is made that the person addressed in both poems is the same general 'you' of Auden's early exhortation. As Auden says in his reply, and as seems obvious to me, 'you' in the later poem is anyone who happens to read the poem, with no class or other specifications. By page 195 Elliott begins to see this, but concludes lamely that the poem is still very mysterious:

> ..... and I think it unmannerly of an exegete to try to define the secret of a poem much more explicitly than its creator has felt called upon to do - especially when the poem itself is a sort of exegesis of a part of the mysterious world. 1

Some hypothetical opponent of literature and literary criticism is justified in asking Elliott what his job is supposed to be if it is not 'to try to define the secret of a poem', with 'to try' implying humility before the poem itself.

Shapiro's essay begins like this:

> Nobody in his right mind is going to horse around with an Auden poem - even a blackboard poem like this one, written with one hand tied behind him. 2

This typifies Shapiro's style, seemingly lively and individual, learned and at ease. But he says so little about the poem itself, and makes the big blunder of taking 'you', 'name' and 'fame' to be Auden's talking about himself instead of about whoever is reading the poem. The style soon palls, like some synthetic cleverness to hide lack of appreciation. This, for example:

> Baudelaire was a great furniture salesman and the twentieth century is still buying and selling his effects ..... He was also the pseudo-traveller or travel agent.
>
> The travel agent never goes anywhere and is apparently happy sighing through the brochures. This voyage of Baudelaire's which he never took - never intended to take - is one of the great topics of modern poetic conversation. But B after all was on a short tether; A is not ... Auden has the ambience of a fish and is a regular Vasco da Gama. The voyage of B has long since 3

This would presumably be called in Shapiro's circles an entertaining, friendly way of talking about poetry. Analogy can be very illuminating. But does not the style confuse things, and does not the familiar A and B strike a note of false ease in handling the subject, becoming glib? The essay is all general, a pottering with interpretation.

In the middle of the pottering we have this: 'This is a very balanced poem that pivots in the middle.'[4] Shapiro feels no obligation to demonstrate this. The essay clearly shows a kind of literary-critic who chats about poets and poetry, entertainingly no doubt for those who regard this as the best approach to literature, but who does not seem to know how to read a poem.

Spender writes in what one supposes is the accepted style of British critics, clear and logical, and rather dull when it is conveying nothing of great interest or penetration.

Spender begins his essay by seeing 'A Change of Air' as 'Almost a paraphrase of the early Auden.'[5] He is thinking of the sense of staying outside things, of being between two choices and taking neither. He spends a lot of time on criticising the fact that the poem could so easily have been arranged in a prose form. As Auden said in his reply, this is an old charge:

> ..... 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 <u>how</u> 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 made 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 ..... [6]

Spender finds that the grammar makes for unnecessary mystification, especially, as for Elliott, the use of 'its'. Auden answers this convincingly. What is tiresome and possibly unfair or specious in Spender's essay is the amount of attention there is to faults, the very little attention to virtues, and the final paragraph which is supposed to balance things:

> Having registered these objections, I nonetheless feel that this is a charming poem, a kind of poetic wet-blanket applied to self-dramatizing emotional changes 7

In Auden's reply one can sense his regret that none of the critics understood or liked the poem, or liked the things in it which Auden felt were worthy of being liked, especially his use of English and his wit:

> In my experience, wit requires a combination of imagination, moral courage, and unhappiness. 8

It seems that all three critics simply did not feel the clear, hard seriousness of the poem under the quality of wit as defined by Auden. They seem all to dwell on the seeming difficulties or presumed faults. All three ~~or~~ are noticeably non-committal; they have no method of approach but wander instead through generalisations about possible meaning. All three would have the reader believe that they consider the poem worth discussing, but that worth is scarcely touched on. The hard work of sympathetically inclined, even painstaking, appreciation, is not to be found.

If a critic finds it impossible to be sympathetic - that is to say, open to the possibilities of finding good things - then a similar method of analysis should be used to show why he is not; or otherwise he should not bother with the poem. Personal dislike and prejudice are better left in the single head of the critic, for, in print, to the unwary, they can be damagingly influential.

(XXVX) John G. Blair

THE POETIC ART OF W.H. AUDEN, 1965

Blair's opening statement of his Introduction endorses one of the aims of the present thesis, namely, that in the confusion about method and intention in talking about poetry, it seems indispensable that a critic examine closely at least some actual poems of the poet in question, before going on to generalisations about the poetry.

> The major failing of Auden criticism to date results from a refusal to look at the art of his poetry as distinguished from the ideas it expresses or implies. 1

Blair divides existing criticism into three groups. Firstly, the one which sees Auden as ending his own poetic career by the move to America. Secondly, the one which sees the Christian themes as acting against a potential maturing of the early promise. And thirdly, 'the self-consciously Christian commentators who welcome Auden to the fold but ignore his earlier work.'[2]

Blair praises Monroe Spears' method and attitude which, in THE POETRY OF W.H. AUDEN, provide the raw material of critical study. Blair's own intention is to point out Auden's 'fundamental aesthetic attitudes and practices that have guided his poetry to date.'[3] Blair will be looking for unity, continuity and consistency, rather than change, experiment, intellectual or other kinds of allegiance and interest. In this way he wishes to show the superficiality in the critical method of dwelling on aspects of particular poems in particular periods of Auden's career.

Auden's own claim to consistency is cited. What Blair begins with in finding terms for Auden's characteristic 'mode', is the description of Auden as moralist, much more concerned with the impact of a poem on the reader's critical self-awareness, than in revealing his own personality. This mode, Blair calls, with hesitation, anti-Romantic. The purpose of Blair's book is to study Auden's own expressed critical theory and to point out the techniques that Auden employs to get through to an audience, from drama to light verse, opera to allegorical epics. Whatever the technique Auden employed, according to Blair, and admitted by Auden at different times, the primary concern was to discipline or even disguise a natural bent towards personal expression:*

> The anti-Romantic starkness of expression is the more startling because so many of the themes of these early poems reveal attitudes traditionally associated with Romanticism. There is nostalgia for childhood, yearning for a trust in the unconscious and the flesh after D.H. Lawrence and Blake, and a considerable measure of trust in the perfectibility of man. This incongruity of theme and poetic expression illustrates the complexity of Auden's growth. Not until near 1940 did his themes become as consistently anti-Romantic as his mode of presenting them. In fact, starting from the initial impact of Eliot, Auden's progressively greater anti-Romanticism may well reflect a more or less conscious revolt against Romantic impulses he found within himself. 4

Blair refers to THE ENCHAFÉD FLOOD as evidence of Auden's full awareness of the tendencies he deliberately rejects.

In the chapter 'The Poetics of Parable' Blair traces the development of Auden's conscious intentions in writing poetry. Numerous quotations are given of Auden's reported sayings and of his writings. The one thing that is constant, according to Blair, is the didacticism; that is, Auden was concerned about the effect of his poetry on readers in leading them to new self-knowledge through a clearer consciousness of the nature of life.

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*cf. John Bayley's thesis, p322 ff

A poem is primarily, therefore, a parable.* The poet is an actor, wearing a mask to suit the occasion. His didacticism, whether leaning on Marx and Freud, whether in humanist praise of men who made art out of suffering, whether Christian in ultimate reference, is the characteristic tone of all his poetry. This didacticism, Blair maintains, does not include ways of dealing with the shock of new insight into the reader's personality. This absence and very sparing mention of Auden's own sources of insight are what preserve the conspicuous unity of Auden's work as a whole. The predominant motive and tone are the intention to make an impact on some moral issue, not the references or the remedies. Furthermore, Blair says:

> His anti-Romanticism should also be evident. He is committed to the poem not primarily as a means to self-expression, with the audience, as it were, overhearing, but to the poem as a performance for the sake of impact on that audience. 5

Blair now goes on to discuss the various forms of the parable by which Auden can reach different kinds of reader. The title of Chapter III is 'Allegory' and this term, Blair maintains, covers everything Auden does, like the abstracting of idealized opposites in order to effect some reconciliation; this Blair calls also 'schematization':

> Auden's schematic habit of imagination leads very easily to the practice of allegory. The schematic approach abstracts from any subject exaggerated and simplified entities that are easily grasped by the intellect. When the subject is the nature of a human being, the schematic imagination leads directly to the separation and allegorization of human faculties or emotions. If the subject is human society, differing human philosophies or attitudes are more likely to constitute the poles of the scheme. 6

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* This emphasis I do not agree with. It omits the confessional, need-to-speak element.

Blair goes on to Auden's 'crucial characteristic',[7] 'an organised conceptual understanding of the unseen.'[8] This, as it were, explains or justifies his use of existing intellectual frameworks, Freudian, Kierkegaardian and others. Blair comments on the inevitable intellectualism of an allegorist and deliberate anti-Romantic, and on the overlapping of symbol and allegory, and quotes Auden himself as saying that a modern poet must necessarily ask a lot of his reader. A poem, to Auden, is designed to provoke self-examination; it moves from particularity to the general, and leaves the reader to inject, as it were, the personal confrontation into the poem. The power of the poem will depend on the freshness of the images chosen to embellish the allegory. Blair gives a very interesting analysis of the Airman's words in THE ORATORS; the schematic opposition is between the clock[1], the woods[2], the vat[3], representing respectively, will-restraint[1], sensation-body[2], and the arts[3].

> Intellect, will, and sensation are now brought close together and focused around art; the young man has discovered his own integrated view of the country. This poem encapsulates Auden's allegory. As in traditional allegory, the images are clearly more than simple features of a physical landscape. Their core theme of personal integration is easily available to the interpreter. The specific application of the theme, however, is left to the reader's self-reflection. He may choose to accept the authority of some context external to the poem as I have done here for the sake of illustration; otherwise, lacking a community of belief, the reader has no frame of reference for specific interpretation except his isolated private self. 9

Auden's use of a vantage point for an overall view is a corollary of anti-Romanticism and schematizing. Objectivity in presenting opposed abstractions is ensured by total alertness and distance.

Blair refers also to Auden's use of rhetoric, with techniques such as the omission of articles, capitalization, and especially personification.

There is also the method of listing so that one is prevented from having a limited or particular association, but a covering or general one instead. Extended metaphor is another allegorizing technique; especially for Auden, influenced by Rilke, that of the landscape, such as 'In praise of Limestone'. The occasional poem provides another allegorizing means of expressing universal matters. No personal feelings are intended in say, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats'; the death, the occasion, provides a focal point for the view that language has universal significance even if the men who make it are dispensable.

Blair concludes this chapter on Allegory:

> Auden ..... hopes that an understanding of the general and abstract can serve as one step towards a renewed feeling for and contact with other individuals in the world. Men feel isolated from each other partly because they fail to recognise overarching general truths to which all men are subject. Metaphorically speaking, we are all in a circus tent called the human situation. Recognising truths about our common humanness can make us more responsive to the individuals sitting around us and to the performer in the ring, whose name might be Yeats, or even Auden ..... This process, as so often with Auden, is highly indirect, but it does propose a reasonable poetic means for coping with the modern sense of isolated subjectivity. 10

The next chapter, 'Dramatic Indirections', is concerned mainly to show how Auden's dramatic characters are, in the main, like the plays as a whole, flat, symbolic, allegorical. The fifth chapter, 'Verbal Playing', goes into the question of the 'serious insistence on unseriousness'[11] in Auden's poetry, to quote Stephen Spender. There is always the element of luck in saying what actuality is. The relationship of a poem to actuality is so tricky that this must always be remembered. To remember is to accept with humility that truth can only be approached, not captured or elevated to an absolute and enduring condition:

This chapter concludes:

> To Auden the attempt to write freely and naturally in a poem, as Romantic theories of art would have him do, is the most certain way to avoid true self-discovery or self-revelation. He finds both poet and reader all too willing to suspend their disbelief in the poetic world of verbal magic. Only the luck of playing in form and technique can possibly trick either reader or writer into discovering new insight in a poem. 12

The chapter 'Opera: The Rake's Progress', is summed up:

> He has been able to develop an allegorized moral fable that is dramatically effective while utilizing his skill with the sung ballad and lyric. Opera also provides a form in which over-life-sized characters and unrealistic tableau plots are entirely appropriate and in which states of mind endowed with emotional immediacy through song are more relevant than strongly individualized characters. In addition, the highly artificial nature of operatic convention can emphasize the distinction between life and art. 13

The final chapter of Blair's book, 'Critical Conclusions', makes the point that unless a reader is prepared 'to accept Auden's characteristic mode as legitimate for a poetry',[14] he is likely to be disappointed and to prejudge according to what will most likely be a Romantic leaning in his expectations. This raises the question of what, in acceptance or otherwise of Auden's 'mode', the individual poems do to the reader, and whether there is any way of judging as major or minor, valuable and less valuable, the impact of a Yeats or Hopkins poem, to name but two of the major modern poets in categories of highly personal (Hopkins) and impersonal-symbolical (the later Yeats).

Blair's book does not offer a close, detailed analysis of an Auden poem, but relies rather too much on the validity of the unsupported assertion that a poetry which aims to disturb the reader by placing that reader's persona in a confrontation with a general and abstracted issue, is valuable because of the particular and urgent needs of the modern world:

> Whatever the final impact of Auden's poetry, he has established an admirable model for literature in at least one respect. Despite the difficulties inherent in our amorphous culture, he has insisted on the necessity of re-establishing contact with the world outside one's own subjectivity. His success in bringing his private vision into contact with the public world has demonstrated that poetry need not abandon even such a world as we live in. 15

This kind of statement leaves out of account the fact that Eliot and Yeats, and in America Alan Tate and Crowe Ransom and Robert Frost, for example, are more widely appreciated than Auden, and have, therefore, had more 'success' than Auden in getting across to the restricted poetry reading public. This statement tends also to throw in an assumption that has not been prepared for, and which is very complex,namely, that a poet ought to be, or even can confidently be, concerned to make an impact on an audience. So much poetry of the past and present succeeds today - as much as poetry can succeed nowadays - that is not of the Auden kind.

This is a fresh, even bold, book. It is a useful one for concluding the consideration in this thesis of Auden's critics. It makes many points directly relevant to the aim and emphasis of this thesis, and has therefore been freely quoted.

It must be said, however, that Blair's aim of getting through to the basic, underlying techniques in Auden's poetry throughout his career means a considerable sacrifice of the actual poetry to the general and abstract. A few intervals of rest in the overall aim of the book, in the nature of some detailed analysis, would have been a big gain, and would have balanced the strain to the reader of having poems used freely and sketchily as references for Blair's intention.

Such intervals of rest would allow the poet to be, relatively speaking, himself for a while, and not just the subject of study. The poetry would then contain the study, instead of serving an academic study. In this way, too, the valuable points made in that study would have a greater impact and a more searching test of truth.

I am indebted to Blair for his study. He is the kind of critic who demonstrates in his work his service to poetry, perhaps his indispensability. Nevertheless, it must be said here that the very quality of Blair's achievement makes all the more regrettable what, in terms of the aim of this thesis, is missing or unbalanced.

CONCLUSION TO THE THESIS

The experience of reading a poem settles in the stomach and heart and in whatever term one uses for 'soul'. No matter how much statement, assertion, topical allusion or knowledgeableness there may be in a poem, the experience of reading the poem - if it is one - concludes as a feeling, and continues after the reading as a single effect, a note, tone - there are finally no words for this - of heart and 'soul'.

Education, awareness of a world wider than the immediate; an interest in theories of coping with it; a delight in argument or discussion; all these one could more or less call matters of the head, to do with opportunity, inborn intelligence, the particular problems and catastrophes in one's lifetime. Just how all these matters of the head interact with heart and soul is what poetry is all about. Auden, more than any other modern poet, has shown what must surely be the experience of any person, namely, that a seemingly disconcerting mass and muddle of knowledge, world events, scientific progress and spiritual despair, can only - but, thank God can, - be understood, made sense of and transcended, in each person in a particular way.

The need for this kind of simplified world-awareness - sifted 'externality' - concerned Auden throughout his poetic career. The first and most important realisation for anyone, Auden was saying, though not always consciously, is that knowledge, world events, having principles or being confronted by radio, television or newspaper with countless instances of 'injustice', all occur, as it were, in individuals. Every individual's

basic, all-encompassing need and urge, fought for or maintained, is to belong, to be loved, to return to the womb, to be unthinking, safe, and at peace. To be broken into individuality is necessary, but to canalise that individuality into something like moral awareness, humanist regard for others, or a Christian faith, is what Western Man has forgotten and desperately needs.

Only by acknowledging the paradox of the need to break from the womb and the need to make a partial return to a kind of peace-loving, warm-hearted womb of this world, can one hope to modify the restless, other-ignoring ways in which people go about making their own gods, wombs of belonging, cocoons of safety. These ways are the ways of worldly 'success', in status or wealth or fame; or simply in the exclusion of the unusual or uncomfortable from safe, daily routines; or in the succumbing to herd-blindness and herd-warmth of crowds; or in the introverted fantasy-life of the mentally ill; or in alcohol, erotic adventure, cruelty.

Being a certain kind of person, with, say, religious understanding, loving people through a sense of god, is more important than art or poetry, writing or reading it. This perplexed Auden, made him apologise from time to time. It made him express regret that poetry is so ineffectual in a troubled world, or that it can be so deluding, liable to come between a reader or spectator and the religious experience. But, of course, Auden always had the comfort of feeling that he was presenting his experience of the world in such a way as to disturb the reader into possibilities of humanity-loving, god-knowing.

This is different from being either propagandist or preacher who transmits to others pre-made formulae in the hope that they will take root in others' individuality. It is true, though, that in the early Auden and in the first years of the conversion to Christianity, Auden sometimes lapsed into preaching. But in the period of Auden's full maturity as man and poet, from the age of forty, his Christianity, which some critics probably expected to go on sounding rather like Simeon in FOR THE TIME BEING, is a rich, here-and-now experience, with dogma and 'preaching' completely integrated in the unchangeable fallibility of this living present.

Most of the criticism, favourable and adverse, that Auden's poetry received over the years, is of the generalising, surveying kind. The articles devoted to one aspect of the poetry, and which are more detailed (Monroe Spears, Randall Jarrell, Robert Roth, John Bayley etc.) are better, but suffer from the fault of their intention, namely, to concentrate on that aspect to the virtual exclusion of all the other things that go to make up poetry. When the chosen aspect invites penetration and is dealt with sympathetically, as Roth's is, one wishes the critic had written in much greater detail, or written further articles.

Auden suffered from convenient and glib labelling: the Marx-Freudian; the deserter of leftism; the deserter of England and Europe; the man who could be Kierkegaardian as easily and superficially as he could be Freudian, or who could withdraw from the world and its problems as easily as he could once preach revolution. His topicality is called journalism, his Christianity escapism, his early promise was a confidence trick, his revisions of poems show concern for his public image; his verbal ingenuity and mastery of technique are anything from brilliant to refreshing <u>but</u>, definitely <u>but</u>, he is not a major poet. This is the

tedious picture of uncertainty, prejudice, polite and unadventurous academic 'correctness' and carefulness in most modern literary criticism.

This thesis asserts that a detailed study of even one Auden poem would have made nonsense of most of the things said about the poetry of W.H. Auden, to sound for a moment the solemn academic note that can so easily hide or excuse the possible personal littleness and parasitism of a critic. One thing that is most likely going to prevent Auden from getting the recognition he deserves is the kind of feeling-vision he presents to the poetry-reading public. This public is predominantly composed of embittered or despairing or nostalgic humanists, of would-be reformers without even a Marxist faith, or of people interested in 'personal integrity', liking poetry that is intensely subjective and scrupulously honest even if devoid of a weltanschauung or any sort of self-transcendence. Auden's 'serious unseriousness' (Spender's phrase), his accepted and integrated sense of Kierkegaard's Absurd, is taken for defeat rather than victory. The wit, mockery, the game and the fun of poetry are not academically serious enough because the people concerned with teaching and studying poetry find it difficult to move 'out of the poetical into the existential'. Academics tend to see in the study of poetry one of those wombs of belonging that Auden's poetry, if taken seriously, cannot but disturb.

This thesis has asserted the first importance of the analysis of poems, and the superficiality, the sheer bluff of a discussion of a poet's poetry, when this discussion is only casually linked to the poet's poems. This thesis has also asserted that in any analysis of a poem there should

be only a moderate need to refer to a poet's prose writings, his biographical details, his reading. The fruits of patient mulling over poems,that is, the analyses, ought not to require much in the way of research into allusions, into the historical and literary origins of things in a poem, into the poet's thinking and living 'outside' the offered experience of the poem. This kind of research might seem more 'academic' than mulling from one who has given himself the time, and has had the training, to read poetry very much more patiently and carefully than the 'average intelligent person'. But the offering of this kind of 'criticism' does not strike the 'person' as esoteric devotion, research for the sake of research, secondhand formalising and categorising of a poet and his poetry.

If academic circles are unable to see this distinction then, in the language of Auden's playing down of the arts in favour of the nature of the actual existence they tend to distort, academic circles are in danger of protracting indefinitely the delusion that poetry is primarily something which lends itself to intellectual discipline, formal examination, endless research, all of which are remote from the 'average intelligent person's' life and reading. In this way modern poets will find it difficult to get the only available recognition open to them at present. Poetry scarcely exists outside these academic circles of teachers, students, and the trained graduates in literature who have studied and been examined and considered to have said the acceptable things.

Auden is a great poet, and especially important to the present climate of thinking and feeling in Western Europe because by half-being, and fully 'reflecting', all the things that bedevil our times, he shows what ultimate

simplicity is possible in chaos. He reveals how sanity and self-preservation can go with moral concern and loathing of what man can do to man, how intelligence and education can go with extreme humility; how love of the arts and graces of life can go with a sense of something ultimate and all-belittling; how, above all, there is a way of reconciling one's unique suffering - the unchangeable private condition - with public unconcern, with others' worldly 'success' and its conditions for being called normal.

One transcends with Auden one's human disposition to envy or dislike. The kind of equanimity that can be achieved is of opposites reconciled. All poetry is this reconciliation, even if the ultimate reference is not to Word, Flesh, Kairos, Agape, Eros, those concepts and symbols that become absorbed in Auden's daily living and writing, his transcended here-and-now.

Most of us can do very little about the world and the age in which we find ourselves. While betterment is largely in the hands of politicians and scientists, the average man needs a way of controlling his susceptibility to those easily interchangeable half-emotions which our education, or the relics of religious upbringing, or the mass-communicated assault of problems from near and far, demand of us: pity, anger, hate, self-congratulation, or ready-condemnation of others.

Auden first offered Christianity as something understood through its philosophers. In his best poetry, after 1947, he offered his immersion in the world as we all know it, and his transcendence; but not his escape or withdrawal. It was not a drastic change from the young Auden. Now there is sophistication without cynicism - though not without gentle mockery - involvement in, interest in, dependence on, the here-and-now, day-to-day world. Sophistication is command of one's 'soul'.

Auden always had a kind of sophistication, and a technique of command by being on a height, above and at a distance from the here-and-now world to which, one always felt, he would soon, if somewhat reluctantly, return. A long view of history; a bird's-eye view of huge tracts of territory with its isolated pockets of humanity; a Breughel picture; the degree of perspective that an In Memoriam poem offers; all these have, by comparison with the transcendence in the later poems, a touch of the presumptuous and the contrived. But, of course, they have the boldness and exciting persuasiveness of a freely ranging imagination, the 'egotistical sublime'.

In the later poems the sophistication and transcendence are the perspective that unobtrusively simplifies and coordinates day-to-day living, from its here-and-now details into a sense of God, and of the crucifixion, everywhere.

In his inaugural lecture at Oxford in 1956, on the occasion of his becoming Professor of Poetry, Auden interpreted Coleridge's Primary Imagination in his own way:

> The concern of the Primary Imagination, its only concern, is with sacred beings and sacred events. The sacred is that to which it is obliged to respond; the profane is that to which it cannot respond and therefore does not know. The profane is known to other faculties of the mind, but not to the Primary Imagination. A sacred being cannot be anticipated; it must be encountered. On encounter the imagination has no option but to respond ... The response of the imagination to such a presence or significance is a passion of awe. This awe may vary greatly in intensity and range in tone from joyous wonder to panic dread. 1

> Whatever its actual content and overt interest, every poem is rooted in imaginative awe. Poetry can do a hundred and one things, delight, sadden, disturb, amuse, instruct - it may express every possible shade of emotion, and describe every conceivable kind of event, but there is only one thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being and for happening. 2

The poet, to Auden, is therefore one who consistently and irresistibly experiences in certain places, or with certain kinds of people, or with certain combinations of sensation, a need to understand. A poet needs to command what is otherwise at a purely unconscious level a passive overwhelming, a kind of worship even, the worst kind of return to the womb. 'She' must never win.

Auden's sacred awe was always in the presence of suffering and helplessness, seen, heard, reported or assumed, and also in the presence of those activities - to do with work or pleasure or politics, and so on - which indicate an indifference towards ignorance or neglect of those who suffer or may suffer.

However, just as Auden had a full armoury of things like intelligence, education, a cultured upbringing, humour and, of course, his poetry, with which to make his own life of suffering and loneliness not only tolerable but actually enjoyable, so he was compelled to accept the fact that people must be left to work out their own destinies. He had to allow himself to believe in each one's armoury; he had to believe that all people could achieve a Christian meaning in their lives which are otherwise ruled by luck - the luck of being ruled by people and forces when the individual does not count, the luck of class, race, education, intelligence.

In other words Auden had to withdraw his earlier identification with others' suffering, real or assumed; or more accurately perhaps, he was no longer able to identify in the same way because he himself no longer suffered in the same way. In the earlier poetry there was a kind of enjoyment of dereliction and economic chaos - a rejoicing in the proof that the individual has no chance, is not to blame for neurosis or economic

depression, or a rejoicing in the community of world-suffering. In the later poetry, 1941-47, there is a tendency to insist that no way of life can be full or happy, undeluded, if it is not Christian (Kierkegaardian). After 1947 the insistence disappears.

In the Christian period, and especially from about 1948, Auden's 'passion of awe' was not transferred to the cross, or the crucifixion. The world of people and events, his own person and his immediate sense of things about him came first, but were, with increasing spontaneity, significantly related to the cross and the crucifixion. This increasing spontaneity offers in his poetry an urbane grace and worldly ease, a kind of daring indifference to danger and suffering, and an indulgence in the personal pleasures of life that a Christian commitment permits. This commitment dictates a transcendence over the transient chanciness of the individual who can, in living, rejoice, and who can make poetry 'praise all it can for being and for happening'.

In the period of Auden's finest poetry, 1948 to 1960, a period that yielded 'Horae Canonicae' as a splendid possible culmination of a poetic career, there is very little critical writing on Auden that is, firstly, searching, and secondly, enthusiastic, and only Roth's and Bayley's appreciation combines both qualities. Hoggart's book was written at the time Auden was entering this period of his best poetry; much of it is concerned with the uncertainties, experiments, faults of the earlier poetry, and the final judgement is hesitant. Beach's book is often very penetrating but is concerned mainly with Auden's poetry up to the Collected Poems of 1945 so that the ten years preceding the publication of Beach's book in 1956 are largely ignored. This attention to the early Auden,

rather than to a contemporary poet, makes up much of the other criticism in this period 1948 to 1960, and this is perhaps inevitable in academic consideration. A contemporary review such as Philip Larkin's in THE SPECTATOR is an indication of the potential superficiality and harmfulness of up-to-date comment.

The kind of criticism that tries to survey a poet's career and estimate his most recent achievement offers the good critic the chance of being balanced, just and penetrating, as the early SCRUTINY articles by Leavis were. But all too often this kind of survey-criticism is tedious and of little use; also, quite often, it can be of some harm to a poet's reputation, as for example Cox's chapter for Penguin's English Literature series.

After 1960 we get Spears' and Blair's books. There had already been invaluable bibliographies from Callen and Clancy, as well as from Beach. The number of theses for advanced degrees on Auden grows constantly. There can be little doubt that Auden's stature will gradually become recognised, and publicly acknowledged. Meanwhile the fact remains that, in his own lifetime, of which the major active part is now over, Auden has been denied the stature that has always been his due.

When literature-minded people are asked nowadays about major writers in English, they will most probably name Auden among the poets, and probably first. But this seems to be for two reasons: firstly the absence of a Yeats or T.S. Eliot among living poets; and secondly, the length of Auden's career and the quantity of his output. A deep hesitancy about him remains. The real reason for this, it is here ventured as an opinion, is that by the

time Auden was writing his best work he had been so labelled with terms like 'socialist', 'obscure', 'facile', that few people felt prepared to read him at all; and to a predominantly humanist world of Western intelligensia, the Christian element was no incentive to do so.

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