

The Achievement of Auden

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If you believe, as I do, that W. H. Auden was not only the greatest English poet so far this century, but probably the last Englishman to dominate the civilized world of letters, then there is a great sadness in sitting down to assess his achievement as a writer. Everywhere English confidence is in flight — in many respects quite unnecessarily. Nobody wants any of the old arrogance to return, but the serene acceptance of his educated tongue as the true voice of feeling, an unpedantic knowingness and clubability, and a certainty that society is listening, were all qualities of the English man-of-letters in his prime which are sadly missed today. I have seen Dr Leavis's chastening of the limp-wristed "children of the sun" spoken of as an heroic campaign for truth, but the horrors of his Protectorate need no elaborating. And someone should tell Martin Green that a Brian Howard or a Harold Acton is not automatically equatable with an Auden or a Waugh, however willing the latter were to give testimonials to the former. Auden's (and Waugh's) lives were highly productive. They gave the world more than they took from it, and if each in his way adopted the attitudes of the over-privileged classes (to which they belonged rather haphazardly), then this was to avoid that Germanic-American solemnity which serious art has suffered from so badly during the last fifty years. I am sure anyone who knew Auden could give me chapter and verse to prove that he was a giggling, predatory homosexual, leader of an overvalued coterie, serious in none of his apparent enthusiasms, amateur as a psychologist, insincere as a theologian, lacking weight as moralist and poet alike. I acknowledge that there is much evidence — little bits of it peep through the pages of Christopher Isherwood and Stravinsky/Craft. I expect a lot more of it to be documented when Edward Mendelson's variorum edition gets under way and the biography appears (official biographies these days usually have to add warts, not excise them). Yet, whatever I encountered of this kind, I would still point calmly to the works themselves, and say that this corpus of poetry and criticism is the best contemporary example known to me of a serious and even tragic view of life made into human comedy with extraordinary resource and an absolute power to entertain.

I used to think that Auden's poetry was a watershed — after Auden seriousness meant solemnity. But now I believe that the

assertion that we live in serious times were made well before Auden's heyday, and that his life's work was an heroic one-man stand against the prevailing mode. Certainly, the sleepwalking authority of the early poems, their "sagaland-by-John Waddington" games-playing spruceness, promised a new art which Auden had no intention of supplying. The "lost leader" accusations brought against him were only secondarily for his and Isherwood's settling in America on the eve of the war: they were much more the howls of hate of a generation of modernists who had seen their exemplar calmly turn counter-revolutionary. Yet the evidence of Auden's intention of performing this palace revolution was there from the start. In *Christopher and His Kind*, Isherwood points out that it was in response to a particular Berlin boy (called "Bubi" in the book) that Auden wrote his cryptic poem, "This Loved One". The poem, utterly characteristic in its dropping of articles and telegraphese, seemed to those not in the coterie to be political in the Berlin, frontier-crossing sense of the times. In fact it was about love, and James Fenton's interpretation of it in a recent issue of *The New Review* (December 1977–January 1978) is surely the correct one—it is a warning to Isherwood not to presume that his present infatuation, rough trade and all, is the real thing, the love he is looking for. I go into all this, not just to praise Fenton's brilliant textual elucidation, but to stress the strong traditional concern with meaning in all Auden's poetry—from the very first brilliant communiqué poems right up to the final Horatian declensions of the seventies. He liked to be obscure but only in the most honourable sense. He always gives you the clues, and though he warned poets in "The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning" to "be subtle, various, ornamental, clever/And do not listen to those critics ever/Whose crude provincial gullets crave in books/Plain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks", his is also the finest harvest this century of clear, simple, telling poems, with direct emotional conviction.

Let them leave language to their lonely betters
 Who count some days and long for certain letters;
 We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:
 Words are for those with promises to keep.

("Their Lonely Betters")

How should we like it were stars to burn
 With a passion for us we could not return?
 If equal affection cannot be,
 Let the more loving one be me.

("The More Loving One")

These two poems face each other in the latest Faber *Collected Poems*, and in between them comes one of Auden's most audaciously accurate accounts of the pressures, delusions and responsibilities of love, "First Things First", with its superb final line, "Thousands have lived without love, not one without water". Even at its most didactic, Auden's poetry is fixed on the two proper poles of art — truth and eloquence. What makes him such a counter-revolutionary is his conviction that the poet's task is to harness the methods and forms of tradition to the necessities of the present. Just as much as Eliot, he believed that we could inherit the past only if we modified it through the sensibility of our own time. But, unlike Eliot, he was at home in his full inheritance: he said once that he had written poems in every known form except the triolet. Eliot's and Pound's distaste for utilizing received forms made them great innovators and gave their work an heroic stance, but when the dust has cleared it can be seen that Auden approaches them from the opposite direction.

He was more original than he knew within the modes of tradition: they were more traditional than they guessed, working on new and allegedly relevant templates. I mean more than just such things as the outcropping of rhymed quatrains in *The Pisan Cantos* or Eliot's blank verse cadences in *Four Quartets*. In Eliot, especially, the hauntings of Jacobean pentameters are seldom far away, and Pound has to keep a strict watch on himself to avoid slipping into Swinburnian language right through his career. Auden's whole-hearted embrace of tradition should not be thought of in the same way as the more timid holding on to the past which many reactionary poets adopted. His approach was exuberant and virtuoso. There is a sense in which he missed out, as the major poetic talent of his day, on the great work of forging an entirely new modern sensibility. He would have had no taste for such a thing, of course. And I am never sure, as I read my way through the countless books of experimental poetry which tumble from the presses nowadays in Britain, the States and Australia, whether there can be a new sensibility. I find that when I respond to something in the welter of words it usually carries tatters of the past along with it. This is the case with Olson, Duncan, Creeley and Ashbery. I am not suggesting that they would be better poets if they had been more traditional — you cannot legislate for other men's talents — only that the goddess Mnemosyne, as mother of the Muses, insists on our honouring her and looks to poetry as a means of maintaining stability in the world of the imagination. Offhand, I can think of only one poet whose work

carries no thread of the past in it and who seems to me to have that mysterious force which I recognize as poetic — and nobody reading this article will have heard of him. He is the Englishman, Spike Hawkins, a true innovator *sui generis*, but so overwhelmed by mental illness that he no longer writes. Auden's way with innovation was also Hardy's, though Auden is a much more bravura writer. Each changed the poetic style of his time by his point of view and his choice of subject matter. They left form much as they found it, except in so far as any powerful corpus of work changes the way we see the tradition it was written in. People sometimes forget that we know about sonata form in music only because Haydn and Mozart used it, and not because it existed in some golden text-book on Parnassus.

To attempt a summing-up of Auden's achievement, I propose to present first the accepted view of his career, which I believe to be a travesty, and then counter it with my version of his real achievement. Either way, he presents his critic with a major difficulty — his life was not a quest or a pilgrimage, as he made so many of his poems suggest people's lives are; nor does his work fall into the three periods of youthful promise, maturity and final transcendence. He wrote well and ill at every stage of his career — the only useful watershed being his removal to America in 1939, though I am sceptical of the notion of "the English Auden" as the true one. Here then is what Auden's life and work was not. The young revolutionary, inspired by the sagas, Eliot, Hardy and Gertrude Stein, sets out to analyse English society at the end of the twenties. Goes to Berlin and sees the reality of the ailing European world and at the same time picks up the ideas of Homer Lane and John Layard, which may be summed up as a species of psychosomatic historicism based on the notion that the "pure-in-heart" may walk through the world unscathed. Switches to the activist creed of Communism, or rather, applying the Lane and Lawrentian diagnosis of illness to the West, accepts that Marxism-Leninism must be the proper cure. By this time all the youth of England are on fire, and continue to be so throughout the thirties until the Molotov/Ribbentrop pact, as may be seen, in poetical terms, in countless anthologies and in many magazines, of which the most important, and the one chosen, along with *The Listener*, to receive most of Auden's first publications, is Geoffrey Grigson's *New Verse*. The early thirties are the time of the cryptic "gang-war" poems and the public school phantasy of sickness and healing called *The Orators*. This remains one of Auden's most audacious works,

though finished by the time he was twenty-five, and also one of the most misunderstood. It has been categorized inaccurately by G. S. Fraser as "fascist", though the allegation of inaccuracy must be qualified slightly if you believe, as I do, that fascism is a populist and democratic movement, rather than an élitist one. Freud is there with Marx, of course, and comes out in *The Dance of Death*, a charade of the economic sickness of Europe. This leads to the plays for the Group Theatre and Rupert Doone, written in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood — *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, *The Ascent of F6* and *On the Frontier*, didactic music hall at heart, for all their fashionable borrowings from Brecht and Toller. The gathering storm in Europe, plus travel and restlessness, together with the need to escape from the smothering tendencies of the English literary family, plus disillusionment with the left wing in action during the Spanish Civil War, most notably the Communists' equivocal part in it, leads to the decision to leave Europe and settle in America. Here Auden adopts almost immediately a more historically-knowing style (*Another Time*, *New Year Letter*, though the poems in the former were written during the period when he was deciding to go to the States and while travelling in China). At the same point he returns to his mother's church, the Church of England, and thereafter is a Christian with a fondness for the more paradoxical formulations of theology. The British part of the legend so far is that he suffered, at this time, an unfadeable blemish which showed in his work until the very end. In America, he becomes a University-minded pedant, with a still-existent faculty for lyric poetry. In the post-war years he returns slowly to Europe (emphatically the Continent and not England) and pioneers a mandarin baroque style which he describes as Horatian, until he becomes the Grand Old Man and Wise Pundit of Anglo-American letters ("a mid-Atlantic Goethe") and Candidate for the Nobel Prize (which of course cannot be given to him while the Americans are fighting in Vietnam). At this point, he dies in Vienna, and the British claim him as theirs after all, getting the Poet Laureate (an old chum, J. Betjeman) to unveil a stone plaque in the floor of Westminster Abbey. That is not too much of a travesty of the semi-official view of Auden's career, and some of the facts in it are accurate, if few of the judgments amount to much.

Now here follows my preferred version of Auden's progress, and in this extensive section I shall include more copious references to the works which mark his life's changes. In the end, it is the poems which are the true landmarks of his existence. The

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precocious boy poet, son of a doctor and medical health officer and a fiercely Anglican mother, tracing his descent from Iceland, is picked out by fortune early in his career at Oxford (Spender looked up to Auden; Auden looked up to Isherwood; and Isherwood looked Upward they said at the time) where he becomes a legend while still an undergraduate. T. S. Eliot tells his friends that "Paid on Both Sides", which he has included in *The Criterion*, is the best new poem by a young poet for years. Ironically, this street-gang charade is the only poem of Auden's which F. R. Leavis ever approves of — he finds a promise in it which ever after is balked of maturity. The early poems (*Poems, 1930*) apply the certainties and tensions of English public-school life to the altogether different world of Europe, still reeling from the self-inflicted wounds of the First World War. Right from the start, Auden sees that playing is better suited to literature than confessing. Poems bring nothing about. The Auden gang sweeps all before them in English letters, though their books do not sell very many copies and their life remains notoriously private:

Private faces
In public places
Are wiser and nicer
Than public faces
In private places.

Auden the healer takes much from Homer Lane, Lawrence and Layard, but his real source of myth and oracular pronouncement is the Anglican prayer book. A strange inner and outer self-preservation covers the Auden gang's attitude to homosexuality. Isherwood is the most combative about it, Auden the most ambiguous. According to all accounts, he is predatory in practice in the thirties, but conceals his predilection from the public by using the second person in his love lyrics and preferring male and female protagonists in such love encounters as he renders in dramatic form. But this fits in with his generalizing or "Theophrastian" bent. The politics of the time incline him to Marxism, but he is always much more moved by Freud, and even more so by Christianity. His real authority, however, comes to him intuitively. Like Pope, he seems to have been born knowing things which other men have to learn by painful experience. He is both inside society, by virtue of his celebrity as the best young English poet, and through his social origins and education, and also outside it through his homosexual nature. Early on, in 1932, after his initial sexual and psychological adventures in Berlin, he develops what remains for him a mainline in human archetypes —

namely, that health is an expression of the inner consistency of a man's nature and that sickness is a division of the same psyche. In *The Orators*, he presents a dazzling Joycean notebook of England's sickness, laced with his special Henry James-plus-Anglican-prayers prose and an extraordinary prescience about the inner rottenness of traditional Europe. *The Orators* is never Fascist, but nor is it Communist. It melds Headmaster's Speechday language (which Auden returns to in the great set-piece at the end of *The Dog Beneath the Skin*) with Groddeckian fantasias and a "Diary of an Airman", which is to T. E. Lawrence in his role as Aircraftsman Shaw what Leopold Bloom is to Stephen Dedalus. *The Orators* is topped and tailed by Auden's most gamey odes, one at least of which remains among the finest pieces of rhetoric he wrote:

Have you heard of someone swifter than Syrian horses?
Has he thrown the bully of Corinth in the sanded circle?
Has he crossed the isthmus already? is he seeking brilliant Athens
and us?

Anticipation of blitzkrieg methods of war and the fifth column of subversion from within are to be found in "The Journal of an Airman". "Letter to a Wound" (an anal fissure Isherwood tells us) shares with the scenes of the lunatics building their beds into an aeroplane, and the nightclub act of Destructive Desmond in *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, the honour of being Auden's most effective dramatization of the psychological background of human illness. *The Orators* has still never been properly assessed in Auden's output. Too many people are put off by its overt jokiness and public school atmosphere. Others have tried to read it as a map of discontent in political terms, encouraged by Auden's habitual liking for the "minatory mutter" and the landscaping of anxiety. It remains, in my opinion, his most ambitious work, and one which future critics will have to put at the centre of his oeuvre. His own late opinion that it was the work of a talented man near to madness carries no weight, since Auden's patronizing of his early self reached Franciscan proportions towards the end of his life. If G. S. Fraser thought it fascist, most of Auden's other critics (including Fuller, Speirs, Replogle and Beach) prefer to tidy it away rather than attempt any assessment of its value.

The sub-title of *The Orators* is "An English Study". So are most of Auden's works up till 1939 and his departure for America. In succession to the clipped style of the early poems, with their borrowings from Housman, Graves and Laura Riding, and even some of D. H. Lawrence, Auden produces the first of

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those musical structures which entitle him to be considered the finest writer of lyrics in English since the Earl of Rochester. Later he gathered them together under the heading "Songs and other Musical Pieces" in his first *Collected Poems*, and then "Shorts" in subsequent collections. They include many of his most famous and popular poems, and he goes on producing lyrics of this mellifluous sort throughout his life. The first culling of his lyrics is in *Look, Stranger!* (1936). The rest of the lyrical output of the thirties is gathered into *Another Time* (1940). Among the household words in these volumes are "As I walked out one evening", "Fish in the unruffled lakes", "Lay your sleeping head, my love", "Victor", "Miss Gee", "Let the florid music praise", "Look, stranger" and "O what is that sound which so thrills the ear?". At this time Auden begins to show an interest in the theatre — an interest which later adopts its true character in his libretti for Britten, Stravinsky and Henze. But the false start of the thirties is full of fascination. The theatre still carries many signs of its liturgical and hierophantic origins, and it was this prayerful and rhetorical side of dramaturgy which attracted Auden. Isherwood remembers that in their collaboration he had to make sure the characters weren't forever flopping down on their knees. In America, Auden came to believe that the heroic had no place on the modern dramatic stage: he therefore took no part in the false dawn of the poetic drama in the immediate post-war years — his name is not in that fallen company of Eliot, Fry, Duncan and MacLeish. Only music retains its heroic dimension today, and so all Auden's later excursions into the theatre are in the service of music. His last complete extended work is his libretto (after Shakespeare) for Nicholas Nobokov, *Love's Labours Lost* (first performed Brussels, 1974). At the same time as *The Orators*, Auden begins his work for Rupert Doone's Group Theatre, with his most directly Neo-Marxist piece, *The Dance of Death*. Even this propaganda pageant, however, is full of fun and demonstrates that Auden was as much influenced in his writing for the stage by Gilbert and Sullivan and Broadway musical comedies as he was by Brecht, Toller and the German epic theatre. A highlight of *The Dance of Death* is the droll retelling of European economic history in the form of a music hall solo and chorus:

Chorus: The Greeks were balanced, their art was great
 They thought out in detail the city state
 But a gap to the interior was found at Carcassonne
 So trade moved westward and they were gone.

Announcer: He leaves you his horses the light and the dark
 He leaves the oaks in the long deer park
 He leaves you his meadows, his harvests and his heath
 With the coal and the minerals that lie underneath.

Chorus: The Romans as every schoolboy knows
 United an empire with their roman nose
 But they caught malaria and they couldn't keep accounts
 And barbarians conquered them who couldn't
 pronounce.

Announcer: He leaves you his engines and his machines
 The sum of all his productive means.
 He leaves you his railways, his liners and his banks
 And he leaves you his money to spend with thanks.

Auden's next three works for the Group Theatre were collaborations with Isherwood. The first of them is much the best, *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, or *Where is Francis?* This is a romp in Auden's favourite form of the quest. It opens in the village of Pressan Ambo where the Vicar and the German-hating daughter of the squire are running a sports day and where they choose a village youth to search for the missing heir to the manor, the brother of the Germanophobe. A local simpleton is picked and he takes along a friendly dog as guide. Thereafter, the action is in the invented states of Ostnia and Westland, the first an amalgam of all the crumbling traditional autocracies of Europe, and the second a clear portrait of Fascist Germany. There are episodes, entr'actes, choruses, an exchange between a pair of feet and the whole piece culminates back in England where the Vicar, in an extraordinary sermon, leads the forces of British Fascism into battle, and the dog is revealed as the missing Francis in disguise. It is characteristic of Auden's ambiguous use of rhetoric that he later reprinted this speech in a Christian context where many of its ideas could be seen quite without irony. *The Dog Beneath the Skin* offers an ebullient portrait of Europe between the wars, or, at least, as Europe seemed to an upper-class Englishman of genius with an acute ability to survey the world *de haut en bas*. ("As the hawk sees it and the helmeted airman" is one way of putting it. Another might be the characteristic view of an immensely high-spirited nurse in a sanatorium.) Enshrined in *The Dog* are some of Auden's finest lyrics — "Now through night's caressing grip", "Seen when night was silent" — and some choruses of Sophoclean weight and inclusiveness, "Happy the hare at morning, for she cannot read the Hunter's waking thoughts". Isherwood's and Auden's prep-school gangmanship is felt throughout (there is a notable Francis in Isherwood's memoirs of his

Berlin escapades), and so are the theories of Lane and Layard. But its chief quality is its vitality: it shows Auden's demotic yet Ciceronian style in full fig. It is in the true English vein of poetical impurity, a gallimaufry of social and psychological insights. For some reason, the National Theatre has never mounted a production of the play, despite the company's prevailing mood of nostalgia. Auden's dramatic writing never achieves the same headlong force again. The second play, *The Ascent of F6*, has enjoyed a better press than *The Dog*, but is much thinner and more schematic. A party of British mountaineers sets out to scale the lofty peak marked F6 on the ordinance map. The hero Ransome (another half-portrait of T. E. Lawrence) finds the commanding figure of his mother when he reaches the top and his duly appointed destruction. A chorus of ordinary people cheer him on. The poetry tends to be forced and the ideas offer rather a Reader's Digest version of the psychology of heroism and the filial bond. *F6* is much tidier than *The Dog* and acts better, but it has a stale and period flavour about it, which is far from the impassioned recreation of an epoch which the earlier play achieves. A third collaboration, *On the Frontier*, is the full decadence of the authors' thirties style. The war it prefigures was about to begin and the play was soon overtaken by events. But its vision of total war was far more chillingly presented in *The Orators*, written five years earlier. Like most artists, Auden is a better visionary than he is a reporter. The fantasies he conjured up in *The Orators* of a controlled yet insane future fit the facts of World War II much more closely than any journalistic elaboration of the real condition of Europe. *On the Frontier* is the swan song of the English Auden: it has had no progeny. Even *F6* brought something about, in so far as the plot and some of the atmosphere of Auden's opera text for Henze, *Elegy for Young Lovers*, comes from the same pool of imagination — the mountains, the sick genius, the cardboard lovers, the triumph of the will (Auden probably took more from the Nazis than he knew. Or perhaps one might say that he knew what to borrow from Thomas Mann, who, in his turn, was more of a German than he cared to acknowledge).

One more work of great interest belongs to Auden's English period — *Letter to Lord Byron*, which occurs as a running commentary throughout the travel book which Auden and Louis MacNeice wrote in 1936, *Letters from Iceland*. The whole book has an extraordinary charm, but the *Letter* is the most significant part. Auden celebrates his fondness for light verse and for the

public manner in this adaptation to rhyme royal of Byron's ottava rima discursiveness in *Don Juan*. It is also strongly autobiographical, something one doesn't find in Auden's poetry again until his last years. Auden compiled the *Oxford Book of Light Verse* in the same year. In the introduction he makes the important observation that until the end of the Jacobean Age all good poetry had something light about it, in that it recorded the feelings of its authors in a manner accessible to a general public. It had oracular authority rather than individual validity. In an earlier anthology, edited with John Garrett, *The Poet's Tongue*, Auden began his life's work of purifying the speech of the tribe. His bias is towards the observable surface of the living world, and he is more hostile to aestheticism than he is to vulgarity. His light verse leaning has been a very important stylistic influence on the course of poetry in English in the second half of the century. By the end of his life, the lightness had broadened into an easy Horatianism, that tone of the Latin Clubman which has always been so agreeable to Englishmen. Horatianism can be fatally prosaic, of course, and Auden has not always escaped its curse of smugness. But his removal to America gave him a much more Pentecostal concern with language, while not curbing his English fondness for joking and playing in verse. In *Letter to Lord Byron*, he describes his own poetical manner as being "a cotton frock" to Milton's, Shakespeare's and Keats's more gorgeous vestments, but the richness never went out of Auden's poetry, any more than the obscurity and wilfulness did. He remains true to his canon of playing throughout his career, and none of his longer works maintains a consistently serious or solemn tone throughout its length. Herod jokes in *For the Time Being*, along with the old sweat helping at the Massacre of the Innocents; Rosetta, Malin and Quant spice their soliloquies in *The Age of Anxiety* with sardonic observations, and Mother Goose, Baba the Turk and Nick Shadow send the Rake down to his doom with many witty asides in *The Rake's Progress*. The Old Adam in Auden is very strong and at no time is submerged under the ritualist, the dogmatist or even the faith-healer.

Whatever Auden's actual experience in Spain, the end of the Spanish Civil War and his and Isherwood's return to England from their visit to the Chinese front, which produced *Journey to a War*, marks the essential watershed of his life. It is my belief that his decision to leave England and to settle in the States on the eve of the world war which he, as much as anyone, had been eloquently warning against, should be ascribed to two main

causes: first, England loved him too much and second, he wished to escape from politics (and incidentally back into the church) and to follow his homosexual nature more completely. There are several paradoxes in this which need explaining. A clear pointer to the smothering love which England offers her chosen sons is the last section of *Letters from Iceland*, where Auden and MacNeice write a cod "Last Will and Testament". The roll-call of names, cosily and wittily annotated, offers a portrait of a closed society which it would be hard to match in any other country or in any similar establishments. Edmund Wilson thought this density of name-dropping one of the sharpest indicators of the difference between English and American literary life. But Auden was much more than a coterie artist and he had a premonition of England's coming provincialism. Although he remained almost a caricature of the Anglican eccentric, in manner and prejudices, throughout his American sojourn, he also opened out his imagination and developed his sense of style in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of New York. This public-school Englishman became in New York the world's greatest master of the new English, a Pentecostal tongue made up of English formality, American vernacular, scientific jargon, journalistic breeziness, German sententiousness, nicknames, nonce words and neologisms — a Sargasso soup of language of which the only possible rival master to Auden is Vladimir Nabokov. It would not have been possible for him to work in such an international patois had he stayed in England. Auden's familiarity with the opportunities of modern baroque is as remarkable as James Joyce's and his use of a "lexically-sweetened" Alexandrianism is always more natural and less thoroughgoing than Joyce's. Many times Auden spoke of his inability to live with "family". One's family are admirable people and one loves them, he observed, but the essence of growing up is leaving home. For the artist, especially, staying with one's family is death. By 1939, Auden had exhausted the potential of the real England. For the rest of his life, he replaced it with an armorial, idealized England which the post-war nation of diminished options could not hope to compete with.

Isherwood has reported the relief he and Auden were able to express to one another on the boat carrying them from Shanghai to America when they discovered that they no longer wanted to discuss the world in political terms. Yet the strong stream of Auden's didacticism flowed on quite undeflected: he merely abandoned a vein of expression which was never more than superficial from the start. From this period come the most effective of

his political statements, the short poems collected into *Another Time*, and, particularly, the sonnet sequence from *Journey to a War*. They show him beginning to treat the material of politics — i.e. human organization, whether from a historical, economic or social viewpoint — as though it were capable of being fictionalized. Auden's power of converting everything to fiction has been seriously underestimated. Through many of his connected poems — in the sonnet sequences, *In Time of War*, and *The Quest*, in *The Age of Anxiety*, and in the operas — there runs an easily traced story, with its plot complications and psychological developments. The single poems of these last days in Europe before his American departure also have a strong fictional element in them. That "knowingness" which so upsets Auden's hostile critics is really no more than a brilliant journalistic flair for covering much ground in a few sentences. Some of these short poems are studies of well known human states of mind — especially those describing historical and literary persons, or those about creators, the novelist and the composer. The sonnets are eccentric in shape and control (though they never lose their sonnet-identity as the fourteen-liners of Lowell and Berryman usually do) but may be considered the most successful revivals of this difficult genre in modern English literature. The manner as well as the substance of No. 14 of the original set in *In Time of War*, which is so much admired by William Empson, was something utterly new in literature in 1939:

Yes, we are going to suffer now; the sky
 Throbs like a feverish forehead; pain is real;
 The groping searchlights suddenly reveal
 The little natures that will make us cry,

Who never quite believed they could exist,
 Nor where they were. They take us by surprise
 Like ugly long-forgotten memories,
 And like a conscience all the guns resist.

Behind each sociable home-loving eye
 The private massacres are taking place;
 All Women, Jews, the Rich, the Human Race.

The mountain cannot judge us when we lie:
 We dwell upon the earth; the earth obeys
 The intelligent and evil till they die.

This sonnet is not included in Auden's final definitive edition of his works. Like "Spain", with its "history to the defeated may say Alas, but cannot help or pardon", it presumably was excised by the poet as a theologically unsupportable statement of despair.

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I have neither the space nor the competence to discuss the huge question of Auden's rewriting of his works. Twenty or more years ago, Joseph Warren Beach could fill a large book with his pinning down of Auden's re-writings or "de-fusings", as the politically interested Beach called them. And since then, the situation has become vastly more complicated, as Auden has tinkered with many of his earlier and more popular works. It is simplistic to think that his changes are caused by an alteration of allegiance from politics to religion, but it is also over-pious to assert that his motives are purely in the interest of truth or aesthetic consistency. It is worth putting Louis MacNeice's words from the preface to the first edition of his *Collected Poems* up against Auden's various apologias. MacNeice said that after a time, the poet should leave ill as much as well alone. There is something priggish about the elder poet amending the cocksure assertiveness of his younger self. The butchery carried out on his canon by Auden is by no means confined to such famous examples as "1st September, 1939" (twice mauled and then finally suppressed) and "Spain", but has ruined many excellent poems, including "Dover", "Oxford" and passages in *The Orators* and *Letter to Lord Byron*. Simple suppression is not as bad as editorial substitution. In general, there seems little advice to offer readers but the injunction to keep Auden's first printings by them all the time. They may not always be the best, but they are invaluable as a check and reference.

Fortunately we now have Edward Mendelson's *The English Auden*, which collects his first versions from the time of his most controversial utterance. As it is an anthology, it is not quite the same thing as the books in their original form. For instance, it prints individual poems from the plays without their surrounding matter, and it omits the "Last Will and Testament" from *Letters from Iceland*. Most of the missing prose can be recovered as the three plays written in collaboration with Isherwood are still in print, but if Mendelson decided that *The Orators* (prose and all) should be reprinted, why did he not do the same for *The Dance of Death*, which is out of print and is represented in *The English Auden* only by a couple of lyrics — nothing of the great chorus quoted earlier in this article? Still, almost eighty poems are recovered (including famous suppressions from even the earliest book), and quite a few poems achieve book form for the first time, along with reviews, articles and musical texts. Whether *The English Auden* is the "real" Auden will be much contended: I think not, but to argue the case would require another article

quite as long as this one. I believe the reader will find discussed throughout these pages many of the leading points of contention in the evaluation of Auden, and that the publication of Mendelson's anthology will be a reminder of the brilliance and audacity of Auden's first decade as a poet, rather than a call to a completely new assessment of his life's work.

Auden's first years in the United States are easily his most productive. As Isherwood revealed, he quickly found the life partner he had been looking for in Chester Kallman. This seems to have added a stability to his life which departed only in the last unhappy decade of his existence. There was, however, a strange crisis at this time, which coincided with his return to the Christian communion. It is referred to by Auden in his contribution to the 1956 anthology, *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims* — "Providentially — for the occupational disease of poets is frivolity — I was forced to know in person what it is like to feel oneself in the prey of demonic powers, in both the Greek and Christian sense, stripped of self-control and self-respect, behaving like a ham actor in a Strindberg play". This was a love-affair, which remains unidentified (at least by me). Auden refers to the wrecking power of love often in his subsequent works, and explicitly in his introduction to Shakespeare's Sonnets. He identifies the humiliating force of sexual obsession with Racine's "Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée". However, it would seem that the too easy resolution of his crisis into the profundities but also the smugness of Christian *agape* left the gods no choice but to punish him in later life for the sin of *hubris*. At the end, Hannah Arendt said she saw "the misery, somehow realized vaguely his compelling need to hide it behind the 'count-your-blessings' litany, and still found it difficult to understand fully what made him so miserable, so unable to do anything about circumstances that made everyday life so unbearable for him. . . . He seems to have been an expert in the infinite varieties of unrequited love among which the infuriating substitution of admiration for love must surely have loomed large." Miss Arendt also writes of Auden's "extraordinary unhappiness . . . the extraordinary greatness, intensity of his poetry". Now it would be critically useless as well as impertinent to try to turn Auden into a confessional writer or some sort of "poète maudit", but the advantage of re-reading him with the insight gained by some recognition of the unhappiness of his life (or at least his later life) is simply that we no longer have to believe all the many public statements he made about his great good fortune and contentment, and can go back to the texts of

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his poems, where human emotions are themselves, whatever rage for order his philosophical mind and poetic imagination imposed upon them. We can see him as a great poet, not just as a hater of "wet legs" or as a marvellous rejuvenator of orthodoxies. We are fortunate in knowing almost nothing about Shakespeare's life: we know a surprising amount about Mozart's and very "Sturm und Drang" it looks, in retrospect. Suffering is essential to the production of great art. It is also almost always unavoidable in anyone's life, so we should not take too much notice of those who say that they find suffering vulgar. Auden, who warns us about just this point, falls into the trap himself. We will do better to listen to the warning:

But poets are not celibate divines:
Had Dante said so, who would read his lines?

"1st September, 1939" shows Auden, at the end of "a low, dishonest decade", sitting "in one of the dives/On Fifty-second street". The world is about to enter World War II and Auden to begin a new life. I see no reason to agree with Philip Larkin that a brilliant demotic poet becomes, from this time onwards, a boring academic American poet. Apart from such brilliant poems as "Law Like Love" (one of Auden's superb insights into human order, and a flawless piece of jurisprudence into the bargain), "Another Time" and "In Memory of Sigmund Freud", the first fruit of his American sojourn is *New Year Letter*. This long discursive and argumentative poem is in iambic tetrameter, a piece of great daring for a poet admired for his modernity. Although Auden had shown previously that he loved simple and popular verse forms, this affection had been put down to his Group Theatre bias. It was explained away in the phrase, "the Kipling of the Left". But octosyllabic rhymes of the sort employed in *New Year Letter* appear, on the face of it, quite unsuitable for the ruminative philosophizing of a long poem. If Swift made some notable forays in the form, it is still more familiar to modern audiences from Hilaire Belloc's *Cautionary Tales* and the bathroom and kindergarten doggerel of Mabel Lucie Atwell. *New Year Letter* should be read in conjunction with the hundred pages of notes which Auden originally attached to it, and into which he fitted a number of other occasional poems well worth reading for themselves, not merely as annotations of the references in the main poem. These notes reflect his reading at the time of the poem's composition, and few writers have been able to treat the books they read with such spider-like devotion as Auden. In his stomach, other men's ideas have proved continuously creative.

Here we can watch him absorbing Kierkegaard and Wagner, beginning his lifelong love affair with the mind of Goethe, and picking up brilliant detail from scientific studies, geophysical texts and speculative theories of psychology. The notes also show his own skill at aphorism and the oracular. Although discursive and sometimes bewildering, they are not meant as a tease as Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land* are. They are as revealing of Auden's intellectual attitudes as his later commonplace book, *A Certain World*. As yet, Lichtenberg and Halifax make no contribution, but the Christian and disciplined bias of his mind is already strongly felt. But Auden did not believe in preaching, except as an indispensable part of the Ciceronian manner. As he put it many years later:

Wild horses could not drag me to debates on
Art and Society: critics with credos,
 Christian or Marxist, should keep their trap shut,
 lest they spout nonsense.

The origins of this and many other of his warnings against the busybody side of didactic art may be found in *New Year Letter*. Here he begins to turn his back on the political commitment of the thirties:

Art is not life and cannot be
 A Midwife to society.

The poem's general direction is less important than the idiomatic scenery of its progress through the immediacy of war-besieged Europe, Auden's reflections upon the England of his birth, the moral law as revealed to artists and theologians, and finally the hope for a future based on Christian discipline and the reticences of orthodox doctrine. As much of Auden's thinking is naturally self-divided, we should not be surprised to discover that he is as much at pains in this long poem to contradict himself (in the name of the Old Adam) as he is to reinforce the dogmas of the established church or the canons of great art. The versification has that wonderful smoothness and naturalness of effect which was always his gift. He is as happy enlivening a cliché or redeeming a worn adjective as he is in coining some bright phrase. He has a seed-cataloguer's way with the poets:

Conscious Catullus who made all
 His gutter-language musical,
 Black Tennyson whose talents were
 For an articulate despair,
 Trim dualistic Baudelaire,
 Poet of cities, harbours, whores,
 Acedia, gaslight and remorse,
 Hardy, whose Dorset gave much joy

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To one unsocial English boy,
And Rilke whom *die Dinge* bless,
The Santa Claus of loneliness.

The poem is continuously quotable, but perhaps it goes against many people's notion of what poetry should be. The encyclopaedic references, the summings-up and the litanies are miles removed from most modern verse. Nothing could be more unlike the injunction, "no ideas but in things" than Auden's method in *New Year Letter*. It is almost an emblematic poem:

I can but think our talk in terms
Of images that I have seen,
And England tells me what we mean.
Thus squalid beery Burton stands
For shoddy thinking of all brands;
The wreck of Rhondda for the mess
We make when for a short success
We split our symmetry apart,
Deny the Reason or the Heart . . .
In Rookhope I was first aware
Of Self and Not-Self, Death and Dread:
Adits were entrances which led
Down to the Outlaws, to the Others,
The Terrible, the Merciful, the Mothers.

His "images" are clearly very different from Pound's or H.D.'s. And his playful warnings require learned interpretation

And through the Janus of a joke
The candid psychopompos spoke.

From 1940 (date of *New Year Letter*) till 1948, Auden's chief endeavours are in long poems, or sequences of poems. *The Quest*, another sonnet sequence, is less unified than *In Time of War*, but it has several brilliantly achieved poems in it:

His library annoyed him with its look
Of calm belief in being really there;

and the opening of another sonnet,

Incredulous, he stared at the amused
Official writing down his name among
Those whose request to suffer was refused.

The Kierkegaardian leap which Auden propounded was always accompanied by the right creative ambiguity towards knowledge and action. His talent for large-scale analytical/synthetical poems flowered the more strongly against the background of war. His friend Benjamin Britten had joined him in New York in late 1939 and their collaboration on *Paul Bunyan* in 1940 was the first of Auden's excursions into the world of libretto-writing. Its

revival in 1976 showed that the cessation of their collaboration when Britten returned to England during the war robbed the world of an ideal light music partnership. Included in *Paul Bunyan* are some of Auden's best lyrics — "Gold in the north came the blizzard to say", "The single creature leads a partial life" and "Carry her over the water". Earlier, for the Norwich Festival of 1936, Auden had prepared a song-cycle text for Britten on the relations between man and the animals and topped and tailed it with one of his most numinous poems, "Our Hunting Fathers".

Auden's next large scale work was intended as an oratorio text for Britten, a new and annotated telling of the Christmas Oratorio story, *For the Time Being*. At this time, Auden was teaching in various American universities and doing his best to shut out the news from Europe where the cause of democracy was doing very badly. It looks almost as if he needed daily bad news of the sickness of his land of origin to keep him up to the Kierkegaardian mark. Louis MacNeice, who visited him in New York in 1940-41, speaks of his intense involvement in teaching and writing. As a cosmopolitan air plant in New York, Auden had only one injunction from the gods to pay heed to — to work! *For the Time Being* is Auden at his most expansive and, for time to time, sloppy. It is extended far beyond its usefulness to a composer, and Britten never set it to music. The oratorio form, however, with its division into recitative (the Evangelist can become an announcer, a storyteller, a provincial governor reporting home, etc.), arias, ensembles, choruses and entr'actes, gave Auden a new way of dealing with narrative. Though all his life ready to serve music, he also derived from music a solution to the grievous problem facing the modern poet — how to construct long poems, when the discursive modes of the past are no longer usable in the impatient present. Pound's solution in the *Cantos* looks ever more ramshackle, while Olson's *Maximus* degenerates into vatic filibuster. Even Eliot's tight forms have an air of exhaustion. *For the Time Being* has passages of Auden's writing at its flashiest and most meretricious, but it stands up well over all. Composers know instinctively that total form must be made up of properly workable parts, and that from the inspired use of quotations and cross-references organic unity can grow. It was Auden's genius to appreciate that poetry shares with music a sense of form largely derived from thematic juxtaposition and cross-reference. Thus, much that seems shabby in his longer poems serves to make up an effective whole. The most quotable sections of *For the Time Being* are the double-chorus, "Great is Caesar", Herod's

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amusingly anachronistic confession (recitative), and the soldiers' chorus at the Massacre of the Innocents. As a whole, the oratorio works — rather in the way that a new litany for Pharisees works, after a millennium of penitence has hardened the congregation into automatism. But you have to be the sort of person who likes his styles mixed and doesn't want poetry to be always edging towards the solemn. If you can enjoy the jokes, you should be able to understand Auden's attitude to piety:

Come to our well-run desert
Where anguish arrives by cable,
And the deadly sins
May be bought in tins
With instructions on the label.

Come to our jolly desert
Where even the dolls go whoring;
Where cigarette-ends
Become intimate friends,
And it's always three in the morning.

Auden's next major work has always pleased his public best — it is without doubt the most loved of his longer compositions. *The Sea and the Mirror* is a product, along with the discursively baffling essays entitled *The Enchafèd Flood*, of Auden's new way of making a living, teaching in universities. While England was fighting for her life against Hitler, Auden buried himself in hard and serious study of the iconography of literature. But his creative impulse knew how to turn this, silk-worm-like, into new poetry. *The Sea and the Mirror* is a fantasia on Shakespeare's *Tempest* and a beautiful example of the principle of metamorphosis in literature. To make stories and myths *ab ovo* is given to few men (it is doubtful that it was given to Shakespeare or Dante), and much of the world's finest art is really an enrichment of well known fabulous material. There are many sources behind Shakespeare's play, of course, though they are not exploited by Auden. Instead, he writes a fantasia in the simple form of a set of soliloquies, interspersed with songs, for the whole cast of the play. He keeps many of their Shakespearian properties but sets beside them freely anachronistic insights, which both open out the cast list and serve to remind the modern reader of the general Theophrastian drift of the people in the play. The three main pieces are allotted to Prospero, Alonso and Caliban. After each speech, Antonio, the villain and in a sense the only free man, comments sardonically on what has been said, in one of Auden's favourite tightly rhyming stanzas. Many readers have favoured

Miranda's speech, which is a villanelle, but it could well be thought to be rather contrived and saccharine. Prospero's soliloquy is in Auden's deepest but most natural vein. Prospero worries about the relationship between knowledge and action, about the crippling consequences of human pride. There are two interpolated songs (since Prospero is talking to Ariel, he could be teaching him his songs), which are among Auden's finest lyrics, especially the second:

Sing first that green remote Cockaigne
 Where whisky rivers run,
 And every gorgeous number may
 Be laid by anyone;
 For medicine and rhetoric
 Lie mouldering on shelves,
 While sad young dogs and stomach-aches
 Love no one but themselves.

The Master and Boatswain's song is also a fine lyric, with a sardonic echo of Eliot's "Sweeney among the Nightingales", but the *tour-de-force* of the work is Caliban's long speech, couched in the ripest of late Jamesian prose. The extraordinary appropriateness of clothing these thoughts of the Id (for this is what Caliban is in Shakespeare also) in the self-justifying, infinitely self-elaborating cadences of Henry James's most teasing style could have occurred only to Auden. It is a *coup-de-théâtre* which justifies itself triumphantly. Caliban's speech and the address of the vicar in *The Dog Beneath the Skin* are the best embodiments of Auden's strange approach to seriousness. It is almost as if the serious is too important to be portrayed in its own clothes, there being too great a danger of Manicheanism and false profundity. The voice of conscience must always be ambiguous, as an Empson's line, "ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be." So Caliban comes to the conclusion that there can be no solution to suffering, but that suffering is real and not a chimera. Yet we can "envisage Mercy; it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours." Auden the re-constituted Christian is orthodox to this extent: there is a Way and there is a Voice, and we must not listen to any of the plausible lies of perfection here and now or the inevitability of improvement.

Auden's third large-scale piece (the longest of his purely poetical creations) is *The Age of Anxiety*. Nobody seems to have thought it one of his finest works, but there are several remarkable features about it. He calls it a baroque eclogue. The eclogue

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was a form rather oddly revived by the thirties poets, and both Auden and MacNeice wrote several examples during that decade. In classical literature, the eclogue is a verbal encounter between traditional characters out of the pastoral convention — shepherds, shepherdesses, nymphs, satyrs and gods. In *The Age of Anxiety*, three men and a woman meet in a New York bar in wartime, and the poem follows their conversational exchanges, inner soliloquies and fantasy projections in some hundred pages of highly artificial verse. The only action in the real world occurs when they all go back to Rosetta's flat where the expected sexual encounter between her and the young airman, Emble, fails to take place owing to alcoholic exhaustion. But the symbolic action is elaborate and idiosyncratic.

Auden solves the problem of what sort of verse to use in a long poem by inventing an alliterative line, reminiscent in some ways of the sagas, but also capable of bearing all the weight of modern baroque elaboration which he uses throughout. The insistence on three alliterative words per line is never relaxed, and it is only through his enormous technical skill that the whole performance is bearable. *The Age of Anxiety* is perhaps the first of his works to reveal Auden's fondness for a playful sort of baroque. The chief fault of this long poem, and the reason, I suspect, for the general suspicion with which it is regarded even by Auden experts, is that the cleverness becomes monotonous. Since the events of the real world, with war raging outside the inner consciousness of the people in the bar, are insoluble to the human wills, the rococo versification seems a very infantile pastime. Yet, poetry is not life, and must find ways of converting reality to imagination, and Auden does this strikingly well. It is a paradox that the poem is probably his most characteristic and original production, but nothing like his best composition. It is a strange thought that this poet, whose style is instantly recognizable (not least when it turns up in other men's poetry), writes best when he is imitating other authors — Laura Riding, Graves, Marianne Moore, Yeats, Henry James, the old balladists, Rilke — the list is very long. As in Ivy Compton Burnett's novels, the style of *The Age of Anxiety* is generalized, and Quant, Malin, Emble and Rosetta, though equipped with different personalities, express themselves in the same fashion. It is a synthetic but lyrical mode, which may be compared to Stravinsky's Neo-Classicism. One long speech of Rosetta from fairly early in the poem illustrates the poem's artificiality (in which so much reality has been skilfully dissolved) at its most intense:

From Seager's Folly

We beheld what was ours. Undulant land
 Rose layer by layer till at last the sea
 Far away flashed; from fretted uplands
 That lay to the north, from limestone heights
 Incisive rains had dissected well,
 For down each dale industrious there ran
 A paternoster of ponds and mills,
 Came sweet waters, assembling quietly
 By a clear congress of accordant streams
 A mild river that moseyed at will
 Through parks and ploughland, purring southward
 In a wide valley. Wolds on each side
 Came dawdling downwards in double curves,
 Mellow, mature, to meadowlands and
 Sedentary orchards, settled places
 Crowded with lives; fat cattle brooded
 In the shade of great oaks, sheep grazed in
 The ancient hollows of meander scars and
 Long-legged ladies with little-legged dogs
 Lolloped with their lovers by lapsing brooks.
 A counth region: consonant, lofty,
 Volatile vault and vagrant buttress
 Showed their shapeliness; with assured ease,
 Proud on that plain, St. Peter Acorn,
 St. Dill-in-the-Deep, St. Dust, St. Alb,
 St. Bee-le-Bone, St. Botolph-the-Less,
 High Gothic growths in a grecian space,
 Lorded over each leafy parish
 Where country curates in cold bedrooms
 Dreamed of deaneries till at day-break
 The rector's rooks with relish described
 Their stinted station.

It is no defence of such exaggerated lispings in verse to say that Rosetta is only offering an American daydream of England derived from a lifetime's reading of detective stories (well categorized by Auden himself in his essay "The Guilty Vicarage"). There is far too much loving connivance by Auden in her mock bucolic ramblings for this excuse to be acceptable. Rather, Rosetta's speech, and much else in this always overdone poem, can be seen to be the epitome of Auden's Theophrastian method with types and styles. *The Age of Anxiety* derives from Pope in its scope and feeling, but through Auden's choice of a baroque diction imposed on a classic mode, lacks the justness of means to ends which is always to be found in Pope. The problem is a central one in Auden's work, and accounts for the alternation at all stages of his career of elaboration and stark simplicity. He is a natural generalizer (as I believe all great poets must be), but

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he has a fondness for the details of life which exfoliates lavishly whenever he allows it to. The four dramatis personae of *The Age of Anxiety* are really no more than embodiments of points of view, yet the opportunities they get in Auden's presentation of them to decorate their thoughts with arabesques of observation make them uncomfortable presenters of themselves. The disproportion in the poem can seem very great: as if *Everyman* had been rewritten by Henry James. At its worst, the verse even has something of Stephen Phillips to it, though Auden never writes merely dully, as Eliot does so often in his incursions into dramatic poetry. *The Age of Anxiety* is more readable than *Finnegans Wake*, for example, but it shares with Joyce's poem/novel/concordance the character of a repository of its author's various talents, rather than of a work of art in itself. People go to it for a taste of Auden: they seldom read it through more than once.

With the publication of *The Age of Anxiety* Auden ends his preoccupation with major works. The year is only 1948 and his death is still twenty-five years away. Biography treats these years as either steady consolidation of reputation, or as confirmation of his role as Lost Leader. But they may be more fairly characterized as the time of Auden's second genesis, his counter-reformation. Perhaps America, for all his comfort at living there, and his stout defence of the country when in England, made him cherish his European inheritance once more. If so, then Europe's past had to be filtered through his New York experience. Wars and tyrannies made Auden sceptical of Europe's right to interpret her own culture. His club of New York intellectuals (made up of the sort of politics-and-art oriented polemicists who now write in the *New York Review of Books*) were the filter for his perception of life and poetry. But he seems never to have taken more from America than a few of its surface quirks of language (just as his accent remained pure Oxford, except for the obligatory shortening of the "a"). His redeeming work was to preside over the construction of a new International English. Less show-offish than Nabokov, he is a far greater master of modern demotic than the expatriate Russian. After all, he was working in his own cradle tongue: he would be incapable of the solecisms and sheer un-rightness of the prefatory poem in *Pale Fire*, though I do not say this to belittle the extraordinary achievement of the rest of Nabokov's novel. The unanswered question is how far Auden's counter-revolution helped poetry itself. He seems not to have influenced Wilbur, Hecht, Nemerov and the school of button-down-collar, Ivy League poets very much, while in England the Move-

ment took its inspiration from Empson. A few dandies over the decades reveal his influence consciously — John Hollander, John Fuller, James Fenton — but he is not an antecedent of Lowell, Berryman or Plath. Strangely, a number of the wilder men have testified to Auden's strong presence in their verse — Ted Berri-gan, for instance. But it is through his steady acceptance of a mixed and changing vocabulary, his constant belief in poetry's right to concern itself with any subject, as well as his resourcefulness in shuffling the inherited forms of verse, that Auden's example has been so important. He alone of the traditionalists has kept faith with the genius of tradition and not just honoured its letter. Through America, he approached a common market of European/American culture with roots in many pasts. English is its language, but its sensibility is Jewish/German/Italian, and it finds Britain provincial. Auden was lucky after all, to get into Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

The first of his collections after *The Age of Anxiety* is probably his most successful individual book — *Nones*. Here are gathered together the earliest, and in many ways the freshest pieces to be written in his re-ordered style. They show a new-found resource of technique, an armoury of special if distancing effects, deployed with love and total confidence. Not all are baroque — "The Love Feast", "Song" ("Deftly, admiral, cast your fly"), "The Fall of Rome" and "Footnotes to Dr Sheldon" have that hauntingly witty directness which Auden alone of modern poets can master:

Altogether elsewhere vast
Herds of reindeer move across
Miles and miles of golden moss,
Silently and very fast.

This last stanza from "The Fall of Rome" typifies the way Auden's talent defies the moralists and categorizers, and in so doing fulfils the timeless requirement of poetry — that it should remind us of what we know and become a household word in the doing. The whole poem is an instance of what we have been so often (and rightly) warned against — extrapolating from a previous civilization's decline the end of our own. Since "The Fall of Rome", dozens of poets have had fun drawing parallels between Roman decadence and the troubles of our own times. Few have done it with the light touch and memorable feeling of Auden. *Nones* is redolent of nostalgia, but of the highest Horatian order, and always with an energy which belies its message. For instance, comparing "The Fall of Rome" with another Roman/Modern confrontation from the book, the elaborate ode-

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like poem, "Under Sirius", one sees how many different ways Auden has of touching upon the pool of inherited knowledge we call culture. In "Under Sirius" he is as indirect as he is direct in "The Fall of Rome". The language is now made up of simulacra-words, neologisms and revivals, and the verse is formal and changeable. Yet, at the end, the contentment in the mind of the reader is the same. A well-made object will survive the destruction of nations, or the boredom of any interregnum:

How will you look and what will you do when the basalt
Tombs of the sorcerers shatter
And their guardian megalopods
Come after you pitter-patter?
How will you answer when from their qualming spring
The immortal nymphs fly shrieking
And out of the open sky
The pantocratic riddle breaks —
'Who are you and why?'

For when in a carol under the apple-trees
The reborn featly dance,
There will also, Fortunatus,
Be those who refused their chance,
Now pottering shades, querulous beside the salt-pits,
And mawkish in their wits,
To whom these dull dog-days
Between event seem crowned with olive
And golden with self-praise.

The Shield of Achilles (1956) carries us further into the world of *Nones*, though tendencies in the former book become slightly hypertrophied in the later. The lexical sweetening is more of a mannerism, though not yet quite so suffocatingly so as at the end of Auden's career. There are, however, three masterpieces in this book — the title poem, "The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning", and the song "The Willow-Wren and the Stare", as well as two sequences which are among Auden's more remarkable constructions, *Bucolics* and *Horae Canonicae*. Auden made no bones about his fondness for technical rings of poems — all his long works are constructed this way except *The Age of Anxiety*. *Bucolics* has its successes and its failures — "Woods", "Lakes" and "Islands" being among the successes. It shows Auden entering a neo-classic world of poetry, as though, rather late in life, he were attempting Pope's *Pastorals*. Many critics have found *Bucolics* a fruitful field for exegesis, but the temptation to write about Auden's ideas rather than his poetry should be resisted. Poets are not philosophers or even pop sociologists. *Bucolics* are really summings-up of the European tradition of Nature. They

are his *Versions of Pastoral*. And Auden has the instinct to get all his generalizations and references right. "Woods" begins "Sylvan meant savage in those primal woods/Piero di Cosimo so loved to draw", and even if you know that he is quoting from Panofsky, you applaud Auden's choice of a neglected but highly significant painter of the fables of nature. And humour still comes to the rescue of exaggeration, as with "Islands", which begins in so delightful a way:

Old saints on millstones float with cats
 To islands out at sea
 Whereon no female pelvis can
 Threaten their agape.

The *Horae Canonicae* are meditations on Man's character appropriate to the times of the day as celebrated by the Christian Church. The most original as well as the most moving, "Vespers", is cast in a mode which Auden has often returned to throughout his career — the near-prose litany. He offers up the contending types of person — the worldly, for whom society is essentially a problem in mechanics, and the unworldly, for whom it is a constant temptation to despair. He is of the second persuasion of course, but he accepts that the world will not survive without both. The juxtapositions he provides are of an engaging quiddity: if they were not, the poem would collapse into a collection of truisms.

In my Eden a person who dislikes Bellini has the good manners not to get born: In his New Jerusalem a person who dislikes work will be very sorry he was born . . .

In my Eden each observes his compulsive rituals and superstitious tabus but we have no morals: In his New Jerusalem the temples will be empty but all will practise the rational virtues.

One reason for his contempt is that I have only to close my eyes, cross the iron footbridge to the tow-path, take the barge through the short brick tunnel and there I stand in Eden again, welcomed back by the krumphorns, doppions, sordumes of jolly miners and a bob major from the Cathedral (romanesque) of St Sophie (*Die Kalte*):

One reason for my alarm is that, when he closes his eyes, he arrives, not in New Jerusalem, but on some august day of outrage when hellikins cavort through ruined drawing-rooms and fish-wives intervene in the Chamber . . .

. . . (but for him I could forget the blood, but for me he could forget the innocence).

On whose immolation (call him Abel, Remus, whom you will, it is one Sin Offering) arcadias, utopias, our dear old bag of a democracy, are alike founded.

For without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand.

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Here, rather than among the poems he wrote to bring the revolution closer and fulfil the prophecies of Marx, is the closest Auden has come to defining his political position. Despite his Anglicanism and orthodoxy, he never became a right-winger. He believed, with Sydney Smith, that the liberal position was the best one in social and political affairs, however much it displeased great right-wing artists like Yeats and Eliot. Similarly, "The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning" is an artistic credo in condensed form, and spells out Auden's views of the limitations of art and the responsibilities of belief. He is not simply putting art in its place, well below the vocation of The Saints, but calling instead for an art of formal limits, of the cries of the heart resounding movingly in their impotence. The title is what Touchstone told the country folk in *As You Like It*. Auden warns against the plainness of schoolmen, but also against the truth-telling of "confessional" artists:

No metaphor, remember, can express
A real historical unhappiness;
Your tears have value if they make us gay;
O Happy Grief! is all sad verse can say.
The living girl's your business (some odd sorts
Have been an inspiration to men's thoughts):
Yours may be old enough to be your mother,
Or have one leg that's shorter than the other,
Or play Lacrosse or do the Modern Dance,
To you that's destiny, to us it's chance.

The poem's coda is among the most dignified and stately passages in all his poetry:

For given Man, by birth, by education,
Imago Dei who forgot his station,
The self-made creature who himself unmakes,
The only creature ever made who fakes,
With no more nature in his loving smile
Than in his theories of a natural style,
What but tall tales, the luck of verbal playing,
Can trick his lying nature into saying
That love, or truth in any serious sense,
Like orthodoxy, is a reticence.

"The Willow-Wren and the Stare" recalls the effortless lyrics of the thirties. This is one department in which the allegations of Auden's accusers, that his poetry declined after 1940 from urgent vernacular to academic wordiness, may have some element of truth. The lyric force can seem spent or, more often willed and too complex. But "The Willow-Wren and the Stare" has all the old grace and memorability, as well as something new. It is as anti-Pelagian as "The Truest Poetry", and might be written to

the text "When ladies ask *How much do you love me?*/The Christian answer is *cosi cosi*", except that self-delusion in the poem is nicely distributed between the man and the woman. Two lovers are by a river and their dialogue (as much a tissue of self-flattering confidence tricks as it would be in an exchange by Rochester) is commented on by the two birds of the title. At the end, body and soul will have their way, and the point is left unresolved:

Waking in her arms he cried,
 Utterly content;
 'I have heard the high good noises,
 Promoted for an instant,
 Stood upon the shining outskirts
 Of that Joy I thank
 For you, my dog and every goody.'
 There on the grass bank
 She laughed, he laughed, they laughed together,
 Then they ate and drank:
Did he know what he meant? said the willow-wren —
God only knows, said the stare.

That unthinking daily saying, *God only knows*, in its literal meaning, would probably be as far as Auden would go in either direction — towards authority or to the Old Adam. But the options can be so hard that neither orthodoxy nor millenarianism seems to offer any solution. Such is the vision of *The Shield of Achilles*, perhaps the most uncompromisingly serious poem Auden wrote after his heyday of the thirties and a rebuke to those who find his later poetry too decorated to be moving. Quite as much as any other poem of the century, it looks at the human condition unflinchingly, and takes from its Greek ambience the gift of total realism. The shield which Hephaestos made for Achilles to please his mother Thetis, showed the order of the world with its cruelty and indifference. Auden offers the minimum of comfort: the powerful rule the earth without pity or conscience: our only consolation is the brevity of their lives. There will be no end to suffering and injustice, as there will always be brawling heroes, but the heroes will not live long. The detail of the poem is urgent, the myth being merely the frame for concentration camps and *realpolitik*:

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.

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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
And could not hope for help and no help came:
What their foes liked to do was done, their shame
Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
And died as men before their bodies died.

Auden's volumes appeared at regular intervals (usually about five years between them) until his death. He did not, like so many youthful prodigies, atrophy or live off his reputation. *Homage to Clio* (1960) is something of a marking-time book, though it includes some excellent poems — "First Things First", that strange Coleridgean formula for writing an (unwritten) poem, "*Dichtung und Wahrheit*", "Metalogue to the Magic Flute", "Good-Bye to the Mezzogiorno" (Auden's farewell to ten summers on the Island of Ischia) and one of the simplest but most moving of all his poems, "An Island Cemetery". It is his ability to turn out marvellously natural poems composed in the most unforced of traditional forms which endears him to his readers. The central paradox of Auden's life and work resembles that of his friend and collaborator, Stravinsky. These two apparently cold and formalistic men have a direct route to the human heart. All their masks and claims to objectivity serve only to purge their art of false sympathy and phoney identification.

Where men are many, acres few,
The dead must be cultivated too,
Like seeds in any farmer's field
Are planted for the bones they yield.

It takes about eighteen months for one
To ripen into a skeleton,
To be washed, folded, packed in a small
Niche hollowed out of the cemetery wall.

And who would be ashamed to own
To a patience that we share with stone,
This underlying thing in us
Which never at any time made a fuss?

Considering what our motives are,
We ought to thank our lucky star
That Love must ride to reach his ends
A mount which has no need of friends.

About the House (1966) is the first fruit of Auden's move from Italy to Austria where he bought a house at Kirchstetten, outside Vienna. In many ways Austria was the right country for him.

No lover of France or Frog culture, he nevertheless might have found it hard to live in the reconstituted Germany of the FDR, but Austria ("Italia in Germania") gave him Teutonic responsibility and mythic sense without cutting him off completely from the homeground of European culture, classic Italy. There was no question, until the senile end, of his living in post-war England, a society which he found increasingly (if over-peevisly) provincial. He was voted Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1956, but they required no more of him than three lectures a year and a willingness to sit in the Kardomah Café and talk to the undergraduates. *About the House* is an uneven book, but shows many signs of warmth missing from its immediate predecessors. The poems, dedicated to friends, which are ruminations on having "a toft and croft" of his own are ingenious examples of the genre of occasional odes. The daring celebration of that underestimated room, the lavatory, is something which only Auden would have thought of and only he could have carried out so wittily. His lament for Louis MacNeice ("The Cave of Making") is one of his finest generalizing poems, and elsewhere the verse ranges from adapted haiku to the smoothest of Praedian stanzas. The quotient of wisdom is as high as ever. After returning to Iceland, Auden writes, in a fashion which was to grow on him in the following years, of the miseries of contemporary living: "Fortunate island,/Where all men are equal/But not vulgar — not yet." But the most original poem is a short one, "*Et in Arcadia Ego*", one of several which Auden composed in stanzas obeying no more serious constraint than their being curtailed to seventeen syllables each. For myself, I find this a reasonable discipline, but am surprised that the obsessively formalistic Auden should have been contented with such minimal corseting of his verse. The poem is another anti-Pelagian lecture:

I might well think myself
A humanist,
Could I manage not to see

How the autobahn
Thwarts the landscape
In godless Roman arrogance,

The farmer's children
Tiptoe past the shed
Where the gelding knife is kept.

The next two books can be considered together — *City Without Walls* (1969), and *Epistle to a Godson* (1972). They are

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stuffed with aphorisms masquerading as poems. Rationally, there is no reason why a poem should not belong in a book of sayings, but in practice Auden's domesticated oracular can be self-defeating. Most of what he says is true and usefully memorable — it is only the tone (his habit of thinking of himself as a “mid-Atlantic Goethe”?) which becomes dispiriting. If acting wisely were as easy as the reciting of encapsulated wisdom, there need be no villains or dullards in the world. The best of the multifarious “Shorts” are those which admit the imperfection of his own personality. He describes himself complacently, but reveals more than he means to:

He thanks God daily
that he was born and bred
a British Pharisee.

A childhood full of love
and good things to eat:
why should he not hate change?

Vain? Not very, except
about his knowledge of metre
and his friends.

So obsessive a ritualist
a pleasant surprise
makes him cross.

Conscious of his good luck,
he wonders why so few
people kill themselves.

A selection of other haiku-like pieces from “Marginalia” and “Shorts” shows the more disembodied sort of aperçu which Auden was devoted to:

Their Gods: — like themselves
greedy skirt-chasing blackguards
without compunction,
but (as, thank God, they were not)
for ever young and intact.

The class whose vices
he pilloried was his own,
now extinct, except
for lone survivors like him
who remember its virtues.

Virtue is always
more expensive than Vice, but
cheaper than Madness.

•
 What is Death? A Life
 disintegrating into
 smaller simpler ones.

The title poem of *City Without Walls* is a return to the very highest of baroque, spangled with odd words and elaborate poetic locutions, yet once again displaying a strange power to coerce the reader. He is indulging himself, playing "Jeremiah-cum-Juvenal" as he puts it, yet the pleasure is that of recognition, of seeing through the screen of words to a terrible time which only this playful pretence of warning can make bearable. As a prophet, Auden is almost alone in preferring not to be honoured or believed. Many other poems in the two books exhibit (as this one does) his fondness (tic or spasm almost) for employing adjectives as nouns and nouns as verbs. It becomes a hallmark of his later style. The end, if not quite in sight, was clearly easy to imagine and prefigure. In "Talking to Myself", Auden addresses his own body in words which are not a whit less moving for their still demonstrating that supreme self-confidence of personality which all his life stood in danger of turning into complacency:

Time, we both know, will decay You, and already
 I'm scared of our divorce: I've seen some horrid ones.
 Remember: when *Le bon Dieu* says to You *Leave Him!*,
 please, please, for His sake and mine, pay no attention
 to my piteous *Don'ts*, but bugger off quickly.

Such acute and unselfpitying insight is to be preferred to Auden's more usual later stance — the bad temper of an Anglican whose corns are hurting him as he crosses the cloisters. Even this can be attractive when he treats it lightly, as in "Doggerel by a Senior Citizen":

My family ghosts I fought and routed,
 Their values, though, I never doubted:
 I thought their Protestant Work-Ethic
 Both practical and sympathetic.

•
 Then Speech was mannerly, an Art,
 Like learning not to belch or fart:
 I cannot settle which is worse,
 The Anti-Novel or Free Verse.

Though I suspect the term is crap,
 If there *is* a Generation Gap,
 Who is to blame? Those, old or young,
 Who will not learn their Mother-Tongue.

His last book, *Thank You, Fog*, came out posthumously in 1974. It could be accounted the merest addendum to a finished

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story were it not for one poem, "Lullaby", where he shows his hand in yet another invention of complete originality. The poem is a sort of *Wiegenlied* by a tired intelligence singing to the even more tired body it has inhabited for more than sixty years. Auden's mind floats in that all too solid flesh which his orthodoxy told him would be resurrected eventually. The result is tender and even happy. If he warned against Pelagianism, Auden always avoided the stronger temptation of Manicheanism:

The old Greeks got it all wrong:
Narcissus is an oldie,
tamed by time, released at last
from lust for other bodies,
rational and reconciled.
For many years you envied
the hirsute, the he-man type.
No longer: now you fondle
your almost feminine flesh
with mettled satisfaction,
imagining that you are
sinless and self-sufficient,
snug in the den of yourself,
Madonna and Bambino:
Sing, Big Baby, sing lullay.

At this point, more than 10,000 words later, I come to the end of my preferred account of Auden's career as a poet. Clearly, in these past pages, I have said what I believe to be important about Auden, but there is summing-up to be attempted. Quite apart from the many aspects of his talent which I have ignored or under-stressed, there is the need to emphasize his wide-ranging mind and the universality of his understanding. So much of even the best of modern art depends on a reduction of the scope of the artist. In painting, we have seen strong talents since Duchamp deliberately denying themselves the full range of their palettes in the name of anti-academicism and historical necessity. Composers have either rendered form and content nugatory by gross over-complication, or hung themselves up in the concert-giving air like so many aeolian harps. The writers who have resisted this urge to minimalism and chaos best have been Thomas Mann, Joyce, Stevens, Pound and Auden. Pound, however, is guilty of an irresistible urge to the colossal and the prophetic — a taste which disciples like Olsen and Duncan have carried to ludicrous lengths. Auden's great good sense has been his determination to use all the weapons in the poet's armoury, while, at the same time, never deluding himself as to the power of poetry. The best way to guarantee that poetry performs at the height of its ability

is never to pretend that it can do things it can't — the typical heresy of Modernism. By respecting the limits of poetry, Auden has achieved more than those contemporaries who have made world-encompassing claims for it. Seriousness resides in performance and not in intention: its true ally is talent, not aspiration.

Auden's development has been by addition rather than by refinement, and the following qualities (under specific headings) will be found in his verse at all stages in his progress.

A Passion for Generalization It is this which links him with the great poets of the past. One of my nightmares is that poetry will eventually shrink (partly due to a misunderstanding of Blake's commitment to minute particulars) to an evocation of one drop of dew on one petal of one rose in one vase on one table of one house in one town in one country somewhere. Auden's poetry is stuffed with particulars of place (the *genius loci* is always properly served), but he takes from them the lesson of universality. While not coy, except in the matter of sexing his pronouns, he does not write confessional verse. He is always aware of an editorializing necessity when telling the truth. He has re-introduced the device of personification to poetry, though sometimes too brashly — "desire, like a police-dog, is unleashed". The early clipped-accented poetry is generalized with the urgency of communiqués from a battlefield: connectives are decimated and articles omitted. The lyrics and middle-period poems enjoy a Popean confidence of statement: Auden is willing to generalize from each of his chosen encounters. The later poetry has many sympathies with litany. His Horatian tact is to be able to find new forms of address for sacred objects and proper states of mind. Auden remembers that the poet was once the man who knew all the holy names of all the things and places of the world. His ingenuity extends to inventing new names and new ways of celebrating our permanent mysteries.

This is the right point to mention briefly his powers as a critic. His cast of mind is not truly academic and his criticism is full of quirks and inducements to the public to share his enthusiasms. Only *The Enchafèd Flood*, sub-headed "A Romantic Iconography of the Sea" is a fully-worked-out book of criticism — the essays collected into *The Dyer's Hand* being his longer exegetical forays and those in *Forewords and Afterwords* the shorter ones, tied to specific books and ideas. He almost always writes well about Shakespeare and about music. Some of his most original critical essays are on themes which only he would have chosen to de-

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velop — detective stories, for instance, and surveys of cooking, which lead him to discuss the Christian sacraments in culinary terms. His short introductions can be extraordinarily illuminating: nobody but Auden has written as much sense about subjects so perennially obscured by special pleading as Shakespeare's sonnets and the character and works of Baron Corvo. *A Certain World*, his commonplace book, testifies to the width of his reading and the originality of his enthusiasms. He can go straight to a poet and illuminate the heart of his work, as he does with Hardy and Lawrence. Speaking for myself, it is his freedom from the orthodoxies of the modern academy which I value in his criticism. He also reminds us that it is better to know one book supremely well than a hundred superficially. All his criticism is designed to return the reading of books and the study of literature to the domain of pleasure. As a teacher, he is a demonstrator, not an analyst. And, as a moralist, his tone is the only acceptable one — he is always heuristic, as Stravinsky noticed.

A Love of Specific Locality Chiefly the north of England and the detritus of industrial society. Auden is the first English poet to make industrial archaeology into an art, though there is an element of nostalgia in his celebration of it. In his early poems, the landscape varied from the disputed terrain of the sagas to the clinically-diseased centres of British collapse, the scar-tissue of the Industrial Revolution. Auden has indicated that the lead and coal mines, already disused, which he came across in the Midlands and the North were the chosen landscape of his imagination. Whatever their reality (and the same could be said of Wordsworth's lakes and crags), they were soon subsumed into a working "*paysage moralisé*". An early poem could generalize ("Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys,/Seeing at end of street the barren mountains"); a middle-period one trace a moral fondness through a less articulated but more immanent dream landscape ("In Praise of Limestone") and a very late poem re-frame his childhood affection among the last images before death — "In boyhood/you were permitted to meet/beautiful old contraptions,/soon to be banished from earth,/saddle-tank locks, beam-engines/and over-shot waterwheels./Yes, love, you have been lucky". Later, the Mezzogiorno and the Wiener Wald became the countrysides he looked out on, but it was always the man-made landscape of England which earned from him his deepest response. After settling overseas, Auden evoked "an England of the mind" to provide the terrain of his poems. It was

only half a joke when he wrote in 1936, "Clearer than Scafell Pike, my heart has stamped on/The view from Birmingham to Wolverhampton." The habit of referring back to England became a necessary resource after his emotional identification with New York, a city so cosmopolitan it might be a model of Limbo.

Great Mastery of Traditional Forms For all his innovatory feeling, Auden is not an inventor of forms. Even at the beginning, his poems are close to the established forms of poetry. As he grew older, his passion for ingenuity within an accepted framework grew on him. But his orthodoxy was always daring and virtuosic, and he never suffered from those drab low spirits which vitiate so much of the verse written by defenders of tradition in our age. In the thirties, St John Ervine and John Sparrow attacked him for being a dangerous and obscure revolutionary. Ezra Pound saw more clearly than they did—in the Auden Double Number of *New Verse* (1937), Pound asked why the English over-valued Auden as an innovator and referred them to W. C. Williams. But reactionaries who fly under his flag in our own time should be warned that imitating Auden is not as easy as it looks. The hardest thing to emulate is his exuberance and his flair. Conservatism must have something to conserve and if virtuosity is not to be empty it must follow rules of harmony which are deeply felt. Auden like Horace is a traditionalist who gets more of his life and times into his poems than do any of his radical contemporaries. He is also Arcadian, not Utopian, which puts him in the central English tradition of revolutionary conservatives.

A Profound Concern for the Sister Art of Music Auden's lyrics are musical in the best sense—that is, they are shaped thematically, follow a proper line of development and take care of their cadences. Poets who love music are seldom merely mellifluous: they leave that to the tone-deaf writers. But Auden's musical sense has another and far rarer side—he is the first major British poet since Dryden to believe that poetry is well employed working with music, both in the concert hall and the theatre. His collaborations with composers are well known—Benjamin Britten, Stravinsky, Henze are the best known, but there are examples of words intended for Walton, John Gardener and Nicholas Nobokov. Auden's influence on Britten would be hard to exaggerate, even if it is true that Britten had to break away from it before he could establish his own personality. Many of Auden's finest lyrics of the thirties were written for Britten or

set by him soon afterwards — “Let the florid music praise”, “Fish in the unruffled lakes” and “Look, stranger”. Later in New York their collaboration led to the best piece of British Music Theatre so far — *Paul Bunyan*, a celebration of the legendary backwoodsman of America’s expansion, which outdoes Copland in naturalness. Before Britten and Auden parted, their alliance achieved fruition in the *Hymn to Saint Cecilia* (set in 1942), the finest tribute by a poet to music since the time of Dryden. Auden was just setting out on his rich middle period of composition:

In a garden shady this holy lady
 With reverent cadence and subtle psalm,
 Like a black swan as death came on
 Poured forth her song in perfect calm:
 And by ocean’s margin this innocent virgin
 Constructed an organ to enlarge her prayer,
 And notes tremendous from her great engine
 Thundered out on the Roman air.

When Igor Stravinsky wished to crown his long career as the world’s exemplary Neo-Classicist with an opera, he was advised by Aldous Huxley to approach Auden for a libretto. Auden had been converted to opera (mostly in its Italianate form as Grand Opera) by Chester Kallman: before this, his musical tastes ran to *lieder* by Wolf and to playing through the slower movements on the harmonium. He quickly concluded that opera was the only form still capable of reproducing the heroic in a modern age — he went so far as to liken its importance to that of the Aeschylean drama for the Athenians. Stravinsky suggested *The Rake’s Progress* by Hogarth and together he and Auden plotted the opera in only a fortnight’s consultation. Tom Rakewell was to be tempted by the Devil with three wishes — the first, to be free master of his sensual nature; the second, to be free of necessity by embracing an *acte gratuit*, and the third to be God, and to free mankind from its dependence on material existence. Consequently Nick Shadow (Mephistopheles) takes him to a brothel, persuades him to marry Baba the Turk, a bearded lady, whom he could not conceivably desire and therefore may unite himself with wholly on a whim, and finally presents him with a machine which turns stones into bread, a feat associated with Christ himself. All are, of course, deceits and Tom is ruined. Only Ann Truelove can save him, but the Devil must be paid and Tom, having beaten him at cards, escapes Hell only to be punished by madness and confinement to Bedlam. Such a plot and the pastiche eighteenth-century language of the libretto show that we

are far away indeed from Verdi and his straightforward *brevità*, yet I believe this libretto can be called the finest for the lyric theatre since the time of Lorenzo da Ponte. It is also tailor-made to Stravinsky's talent, and *The Rake's Progress* joins Strauss's, Puccini's and Britten's as the only twentieth-century operas which hold the stage. Auden's (and Kallman's) versification is at its most perfect in *The Rake*. The libretto abounds in near-aphorisms:

It pleases well the damned in Hell
To bring another there.

In the Stravinsky/Robert Craft books, Auden is quoted as saying that the brothel scene (Act 1, Scene 2) was wholly written by Kallman. I find this hard to believe, but if it is so, then Kallman had the power to impersonate Auden to perfection. Auden's and Kallman's later collaborations with Henze — *Elegy for Young Lovers* and *The Bassarids* — cannot be rated as highly as *The Rake's Progress*, though each is ingenious and streets ahead of most modern libretti. It is a certain sign of an unequal collaboration when a composer allows a libretto to be printed with half the lines in square brackets to indicate passages he has not set — as Henze did with these two works. The matching of Auden and Henze was not a happy one — Auden being playful, exemplary and classic, and Henze rhapsodic, romantic and noisy. Nor are the translations which Auden and Kallman prepared for American television of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte* as good as they should be. Auden's theories run away with him and he writes most of the time in fustian. On the other hand, some lyrics adapted from Brecht for Broadway are perhaps the best translations that overrated poet has ever received into English. All in all, Auden served music well. He praised it, wrote for it and showed other poets how to esteem it:

Blessèd Cecilia, appear in visions
To all musicians, appear and inspire:
Translated daughter, come down and startle
Composing mortals with immortal fire.

A Belief in Literature as a Subject for Poetry Cocteau, that master of false epigram, said that art can derive from anything but other works of art. Pope and Auden know better. All his life, Auden adapted other men's flowers, and wrote what might be called criticism of art in the form of poetry. He quotes, includes and explains, though he usually avoids collage, and is not guilty of that dismaying fondness for quotation which bedevils

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Eliot. In the late thirties and early forties he produced many fine vignettes of the personalities of other writers — Forster, Rimbaud, Housman, Voltaire. His poems in memory of Yeats, Henry James, Freud, Ernst Toller and Louis MacNeice are among his most successful. But it is the continuous thread of judgement and discussion of art and artists which runs right through his poetry which makes his practice the best example of applied criticism in verse since Pope's *Essay on Criticism* and his various late *Epistles*.

Love of Light Verse I have discussed Auden's remarkable fondness for wearing his seriousness lightly earlier in this article. All that needs to be said here is to differentiate his talent from that sort of intellectual apartheid practised by many serious poets, which writes solemn works with its right hand and composes satires and squibs with its left (Graves) or, turning from the pompous, relaxes with jokey poems about cats (Eliot). Auden's light and heavy brigades fight together: his is the method of Shakespeare and Chaucer, the leavening of seriousness by high spirits which was always the English fashion until continental modes took over. From *Poems* (1930) until *Thank You, Fog*, Auden turned out a consistently successful chain of light poems. Examples taken from any period of his career will prove to be exemplary, yet at no time is the urgency of his voice endangered by his lighter tone. He is never flippant, and always relevant. This little known fragment from *About the House* is typical of his fine judgement in moralistic light verse:

Some thirty inches from my nose
The frontier of my Person goes,
And all the untilled air between
Is private *pagus* or demesne.
Stranger, unless with bedroom eyes
I beckon you to fraternize,
Beware of rudely crossing it:
I have no gun, but I can spit.

As editor of *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, and joint editor of *The Poet's Tongue* and the *Faber Book of Aphorisms*, as well as author of *Academic Graffiti*, Auden can be considered the father of good sense in poetry in the modern age. Wisdom is even more welcome (and memorable) when it arrives smiling:

Oxbridge philosophers, to be cursory,
Are products of a middle-class nursery:
Their arguments are anent
What Nanny really meant.

In Service to the Pleasure Principle Auden often thanked his Super-Ego for directing him to the right disciplines, the best books to read and the least time-wasting of obsessions. Indeed, his Super-Ego remained kind to him throughout life, working in conjunction with his Id to defraud his Ego — which is the best possible pattern for a creative artist. Both giving and receiving pleasure was Auden's highest principle at all times. The paradox, of course, lies in his constant didacticism, but the Pleasure Principle, in Freud's formulation, is the source from which all imagination flows and Auden's stayed in excellent shape. His didacticism was at least partly disguise. Stephen Spender has recounted how unhappy Auden could be when he found people promising to act on his lectures. Stay the way you are, he would counsel them. He was fond of quoting Dr Johnson on the purpose of poetry — "to enable men the better to enjoy life or the better to endure it". In fact, he offers few clues to endurance, but many openings into enjoyment. He could not keep up the pretence when he was prophesying doom: he preferred to turn away from the things his own prophetic intelligence told him — like a man switching off a radio talk on ecological disaster to keep a luncheon appointment at a good restaurant. Since our individual doom is certain (a matter hardly qualified by even the most vehement faith in resurrection and the after-life), there is a great deal of sense in Auden's habit of turning even apocalypse into "favour and to prettiness". But he is not evasive or insipid. His paradigm for poetry would undoubtedly be music — an art which changes nothing in the world but makes it a better place to live in.