

Auden's Styles of Verse

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There are two myths about Auden's poetry. The first myth, that he is a left-wing political poet, underwent modification in the light of the poems Auden wrote and the revisions he made after 1940; it was said that he had been a political poet of the thirties, who later perversely embraced the right, religion, America and great literature; but even so amended, the myth has little truth. Auden has never written poetry on political issues. He has written poems on how individuals respond to being placed in political situations. He studies, not the political animal as such, but the nervous life of its interior. He analyses political gut responses, and his analyses are valid for different species of the political animal and different phases of its evolution. Yet in a recent study of his poetry it is still possible to come across a pronouncement like the following:

Ode 5 is addressed to Auden's former pupils who are now in army camps. He speaks angrily of the deceits that put them there and reveals that the enemy against whom they fight is really the down-trodden poor of their own land. They are trained by the Seven Deadly Sins and they must not imagine that simple interpersonal love will stop the carnage. They are doomed to attack — but never the right foe.¹

Students of Auden familiar with the ode in question ("Though aware of our rank and alert to obey orders") will recognize that most of this summary comes from misreading and over-reading, or perhaps from reading critical biography in place of the given poem (in which, for instance, I can find no mention of "simple interpersonal love"). But even readers of Auden not familiar with the particular ode will feel uncomfortable with the *précis*. It so fundamentally misunderstands the whole tendency of Auden's political poetry, which is always to centre attention, not on the specific evil or set of circumstances, but on the internally apprehended political process, a process which is not peculiar to one state or one decade. Auden has been praised for his commitment as a poet to his period, and for his power as a poet to recreate the thirties' atmosphere; yet if this is so, why has his poetry not dated, why is it not read

1 Elton Edward Smith, *The Angry Young Men of the Thirties* (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1975), p. 112.

more for its historical interest, why have continued generations of readers and poets found in the lingering terrors and the "neural itch" of his earlier verse an experience and speech immediately pertinent to later decades?

The second myth about Auden's verse can be justifiably called a critical or "historical myth",² since it at least is based on an intimate knowledge of the poems. It is a myth of Auden's own devising, and it effectively isolates one of the most important and more neglected aspects of his verse. For myself, the central importance of Auden's verse is its questioning of the reasons for its existence. It asks the basic questions: what is the function of poetry in a society, and to what audience does a poet, particularly in this century, address himself? Modern poets are unsure of their status and their audience. Modern poetry has a bad reputation with its audience: it has a reputation for being difficult. Because of their insecurity, modern poets, to explain to their audience why their poetry is as it is, have frequently constructed "historical myths", based on theories of the history of English literature. These myths trace the history of English or of European literature from Chaucer or earlier to the present, in order to show how the poetic tradition leads, logically and inevitably, to the writing of the kind of poetry the poet himself writes. T. S. Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" is such a theory. After the crisis which in the seventeenth century overcame the English sensibility, poets could no longer think and feel simultaneously, think their feelings and feel their thoughts, as Donne had in his love poetry. A modern poet had to strain every nerve to achieve the reunification of his sensibility, and his poetry would become "more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect" as he struggled "to dislocate . . . language into his meaning".³ His poetry, that is, would become difficult in the manner of Eliot's own.

Auden puts forward his self-explanatory critical myth in the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*. It is about a dissociation, not of feeling from thought, but of the poet from his audience. In early Elizabethan England, Auden surmises, the majority of the population shared a consensus of beliefs,

2 The term is borrowed from Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 171, with specific reference to ch. 8.

3 "The Metaphysical Poets", *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London, Faber, 1975), p. 65.

interests and attitudes. At this time the poet was not "conscious of himself as an unusual person, and his language [was] straightforward and close to ordinary speech". For these reasons he wrote "light verse", as Auden defines it in *The Oxford Book*. Light verse for Auden means something more than "*vers de société*, triolets, smoke-room limericks": it is verse written for a general audience in common speech, it can be read aloud and it has "for its subject-matter the everyday social life of its period or the experiences of the poet as an ordinary human being". It was only during the Elizabethan period and "the great social and ideological upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" that the poet began to feel himself a special being, possessed of ideas and gifted with insights that set him apart from the common. It was only then that, for a "fit audience . . . though few", for a sympathetic élite, the first difficult poetry was written, "some of Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, and others". Gradually light verse came to mean trivial verse,

because, under the social conditions which produced the Romantic Revival, and which have persisted, more or less, ever since, it has been only in trivial matters that poets have felt in sufficient intimacy with their audience to be able to forget themselves and their singing-ropes.⁴

Auden's love for the Elizabethan song is part of a larger nostalgia for a not-too-specific time when the poet was accepted by a broadly based audience, for whom he therefore wrote light verse. It is my belief that Auden saw his vocation, not just when writing the songs or the *Letter to Lord Byron* but throughout his poetic career, as being the rehabilitation of light verse, for a variety of audiences. His difficulties arose from the lack of a continuous, homogeneous, general audience.

As critics like Leavis have been telling us since the 1930s, twentieth-century Western society lacks a belief in any one ideology or religious system, and this has had special consequences for creative artists; but it would be wrong, I think, to argue further that this century has produced the most heterogeneous and disintegrative civilization so far known. Two generalizations about our social condition, however, might be let pass. Firstly, a proliferation of knowledge in this century has led to a high degree of specialization of knowledge; and secondly, perhaps as a consequence of the policy of universal education in Western

4 *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, ed. W. H. Auden (London, Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. viii-x.

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communities, a concern for acquiring such forms of specialist knowledge as are available has become polarized. On the one hand the poet is confronted by the academic intelligentsia, who have their own "areas" and want him to cater to their élitism and in-games; on the other hand he must face the philistines, who, if asked, would say they never read poetry and have no wish to, being unaware that they are exposed to quantities of poetry, in advertising, in church, in folk doggerel (like dirty songs) and, above all, in pop music lyrics. How is the modern poet to write for both these audiences?

Auden admires that degree of specialization which results from a sense of vocation. In "Horae Canonicae" he declares:

You need not see what someone is doing
to know if it is his vocation,

you have only to watch his eyes:
a cook mixing a sauce, a surgeon

making a primary incision,
a clerk completing a bill of lading,

wear the same rapt expression,
forgetting themselves in a function.

How beautiful it is,
that eye-on-the-object look.

To ignore the appetitive goddesses,
to desert the formidable shrines

of Rhea, Aphrodite, Demeter, Diana,
to pray instead to St. Phocas,

St. Barbara, San Saturnino,
or whoever one's patron is,

that one may be worthy of their mystery,
what a prodigious step to have taken.

There should be monuments, there should be odes,
to the nameless heroes who took it first,

to the first flaker of flints
who forgot his dinner,

the first collector of sea-shells
to remain celibate.

Where should we be but for them?
Feral still, un-housetrained, still

wandering through forests without
a consonant to our names,

slaves of Dame Kind, lacking
all notion of a city. . . .

To specialize is to civilize, when it takes the individual beyond the lusts of the unsocial id. Auden has written odes for one race of latter-day specialist, the G.P., in *Epistle to a Godson*, the last volume he completed before his death, and medicine is one of the areas of modern professional knowledge into which he occasionally ventures in his poetry. Others include psychology, geology and music criticism. As a poet Auden's own specialization is clearly language, however, and he exacts respect from his lay readers for his linguistic expertise, his ability to write in all the metres possible in English, and his virtuoso performances in difficult stanzaic forms, like the sonnet, villanelle and sestina. His later verse in particular is studded with rare, technical and dialect words, "soodling", "mesomorph" and "epanaleptics". Wallace Stevens is another poet given to introducing unusual words into the texture of his verse, but with Stevens the difficult word is always pivotal to an understanding of the poem; with Auden it is peripheral. It is a baroque verbal decoration for the reader who enjoys the game of words, for the lovers of dictionaries, crosswords and scrabble. These, then, are some of the levels of appeal in Auden's poetry to a specialist audience.

To write for a polarized audience, of academics and philistines, Auden tended to develop two styles of verse. The first style, a low style of avowedly light verse, is best represented by many of Auden's songs and ballads. These are sometimes composed to the tunes of popular ballads ("Victor" can be sung to "Franky and Johnny") or of ribald university songs ("Miss Gee" can be sung to "St James Infirmary"); sometimes they draw on or parody the conventions of ballads, folk-songs and nursery rhymes ("As I Walked Out One Evening" and "The Witnesses"); sometimes they imitate the styles and rhythms of negro jazz and West Indian music ("Roman Wall Blues" and "Calypso").⁵ These

5 "Calypso" ("Driver, drive faster, and make a good run") is in the bracket of "Twelve Songs" in Part III of *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957*, (London, Faber, 1966), p. 158. "Roman Wall Blues" ("Over the heather the wet wind blows") is so entitled in *W. H. Auden: A Selection by the Author* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1958), p. 46, but not in *Collected Shorter Poems*. Apart from this title, the latter text has been used in this article.

affinities of Auden's poetry with ballad and folk-song have been well documented by Monroe K. Spears.⁶ Auden has also borrowed his forms and formulae from popular poetry. His admiration for John Betjeman is well known ("The Love Feast" and "On the Circuit" owe something to Betjeman's jingling metres and arch whimsy), while in "The Unknown Citizen" he has imitated the amusingly unmetrical, long, rhymed lines of Ogden Nash. Earlier poems smack of earlier poetic favourites. A. E. Housman, Walter de la Mare and Robert Graves are all poets who, with their Georgian affiliations, would have been considered more established and popular than Auden during his "radical" period. Housman's "In Valleys Green and Still", de la Mare's "Dry August Burned" and Graves's "Apples and Water" all present what might be called the girl-and-the-platoon situation: a girl has her relationship with another, perhaps her sweetheart, disturbed by the arrival of a band of marching soldiers. In "O What Is That Sound" Auden has taken the antiquatedly pastoral situation and remodelled it, the sweetheart becoming a betrayer, the girl a victim of menace and violence: it has been converted into a parable of terror in the modern totalitarian state.

Nevertheless, the modernist reworking of the Georgian situation is no more significant than its adoption in the first place. Auden is often at his best parodying or composing by pastiche, yet his use of conventional elements always has in it an element of conventionality, a readiness to approach his audience through their expectations, through common knowledge and accepted belief. If he could, he would be the Elizabethan madrigalist, and his poems do draw on the elegant formulae of Elizabethan song.⁷ "Lullaby" has a trochaic metre which is a staple of these songs (rhythmically it is close to "Take, O! Take Those Lips Away" from *Measure for Measure*) and the address to the beloved by a lullaby might well have been suggested by Skelton's "My Darling Dear, My Daisy Flower" (this is certainly the case with Auden's second "Lullaby" from *Thank You, Fog*). But in looking to the Elizabethans, Auden has crossed from the territory in which he is making some concession to "popular" taste (however widely that is to be defined) to that in which the appeal is to a specialist audience.

6 See Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 108, to which I am indebted for some of these attributions.

7 See Geoffrey Thurley, *The Ironic Harvest* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1974), p. 71.

The second style of "light verse" Auden developed is serious in tone, and treats topics of wide public concern in terms of the intellectual fashions of the day. This high style reaches its apogee in a series of elegies written during the first years of World War II, "September 1, 1939", "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" and "At the Grave of Henry James". "September 1, 1939" earns its place among these elegies by its commemoration of the death of a decade. Like them it is addressed to an audience of concerned intellectuals, an audience who will appreciate the benefits of "Accurate scholarship", who can construct for themselves a myth connecting the Reformation and the Third Reich, and who will recognize analogies between the present war and the Peloponnesian:

Accurate scholarship can
 Unearth the whole offence
 From Luther until now
 That has driven a culture mad,
 Find what occurred at Linz,
 What huge imago made
 A psychopathic god . . .

Exiled Thucydides knew
 All that a speech can say
 About Democracy,
 And what dictators do,
 The elderly rubbish they talk
 To an apathetic grave;
 Analysed all in his book . . .⁸

A display of erudition is made in these opening stanzas, and yet the reader who knows Thucydides will be at no greater advantage than the reader who knows *about* Thucydides. Auden's allusions do not operate in the same degree as Eliot's. The reader who misses an allusion in an Eliot poem is at a disadvantage, not in that he will therefore misconstrue the poem, but in that he will remain unaware of a whole dimension of meaning worked into the poem; and to pursue that allusion, once discovered, will be progressively to unfold, as it seems, a whole new poem. Auden's allusions are seldom so integrated into the texture of his poetry, and this is a form of concession (though an unnecessary one) to the burden of understanding they place on the reader. Moreover, to the reader who, not perceiving that no depth of knowledge of European or classical history or psychoanalytical

8 This is the first version, quoted from *Poetry of the Thirties*, ed. Robin Skelton (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1964), pp. 280-83.

theory is demanded by these lines, still feels rebuffed by them, a further consolation is extended. He will not misunderstand the poem or the war's beginnings, if he can but relate them to an experience of cruelty and aggressiveness, which he and all others, even Hitler, have shared:

I and the public know
 What all schoolchildren learn,
 Those to whom evil is done
 Do evil in return.

Assurances of the simplicity at the heart of things and appeals to universal experience are characteristic features of Auden's verse. At their best, as in "In Memory of Sigmund Freud", they usher in the moment of penetrative insight:

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

long ago the accusations had begun,
 and suddenly knew by whom it had been judged,
 how rich life had been and how silly,
 and was life-forgiven and more humble . . .

Also characteristic of Auden's verse is the effort to speak to and on behalf of "us", of "I and the public", coupled with a simultaneous scepticism that the poet can speak for any but himself, if that. It is an underlying theme of "September 1, 1939", this incompetence of the poet to speak of events involving the lives of millions, when he is no more than one individual, restricted in time and place, limited in subjective and objective knowledge:

I sit in one of the dives
 On Fifty-Second Street
 Uncertain and afraid
 As the clever hopes expire
 Of a low dishonest decade:
 Waves of anger and fear
 Circulate over the bright
 And darkened lands of the earth,
 Obsessing our private lives;
 The unmentionable odour of death
 Offends the September night.

The poet must overcome his sense of isolation, however, and speak for the obsessions of other private lives, if he is to fulfil his own injunctions towards universal love. Otherwise the

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interstitial darkness will fill with death and evil-doing. Yet the darkness subverts from within; it is subconscious as well as external; and so each individual must face, first, the tribunal of self-knowledge —

Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the international wrong

— and second, the despair of knowing that the darkness is “conservative”, the sin original and ineradicable, the solitary, lusting self life's inheritance. The image of the self as one of many “Ironic points of light” isolated in the darkness recurs in the last stanza, but has become the image of a desperate courage rather than a final despair.

The poet is solitary, yet has obligations:

There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

This line, which Auden has so hotly debated with himself, becomes more a paradox and less a contradiction in the context of these self-communings. The individual must love or his total isolation, his *moral* death, is inevitable. That death will bring in its train a surplus of literal death. A poet must fulfil the further duty imposed by his gift (“All I have is a voice”) of speaking, truthfully and memorably, to others. Not that, to switch poems rather than arguments, his speech will alleviate “the nightmare of the dark”. Although the poet is very much of the world, although “Mad Ireland hurt [Yeats] into poetry”, the writing of “Easter 1916” could do nothing for Ireland's “dead of winter”:

Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

That “poetry makes nothing happen” must be deemed an hyperbole: for a few, free individuals the river of poetic speech thaws the “dead cold” and connects “ranches of isolation”. But for Auden the act of love which is the poem's creation is of another order than that of quotidian experience, of emotional giving: it is a purely aesthetic phenomenon, a different “way of happen-

ing". The poet creates an autonomous world, in which order does prevail (the free verse of Part I is forged into the trochaic quatrains of Part III), and by means of this artificial creation he can "Still persuade us to rejoice". The pessimistic inference is that non-aesthetic experience offers all too little in which to rejoice. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is one of Auden's finest poems, precisely because Auden was able to give himself so completely to its theme, *the* great modern poet in his representative relationship to modern society.

There is, then, some reason for terming these deeply serious elegies "light", in that they are addressed to a more selective audience but an audience that the poet has constantly in mind while writing. The question of "lightness", of the directness of a modern poet's connection with his readership, is one of the themes linking them together. To illustrate the opposite pole of Auden's writing, overtly light poems in the low style, I should perhaps use the most frivolous examples to hand, songs like "Some Say That Love's a Little Boy" and "Calypso"; but for various reasons I have selected a song whose humour is slightly more reserved and ironic, "Roman Wall Blues". Nevertheless, any of these songs might be used to demonstrate that Auden's major themes, his serious preoccupations, are as integral a part of his populist as of his intellectualist verse. The three songs mentioned, for instance, are all concerned

To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:

— they are all three concerned with the varieties of love, of Eros and Agape.

"Roman Wall Blues" first appeared in a BBC radio script on Hadrian's Wall in 1937.⁹ It further exemplifies how Auden tested the possibilities of extending the audience for poetry, and paved the way for Dylan Thomas's media successes. The dramatic monologue (a blues song is nothing if not that, though it should also be about exile and estrangement) assured Auden's radio listeners that a young Roman centurion, stationed at some dismal, forgotten outpost of the Empire, was little different from his modern counterpart on military service:

9 See John Fuller, *A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1970), pp. 111-112.

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Over the heather the wet wind blows,
I've lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose.

The rain comes pattering out of the sky,
I'm a Wall soldier, I don't know why.

The mist creeps over the hard grey stone,
My girl's in Tungria; I sleep alone.

Aulus goes hanging around her place,
I don't like his manners, I don't like his face.

Piso's a Christian, he worships a fish;
There'd be no kissing if he had his wish.

She gave me a ring but I diced it away;
I want my girl and I want my pay.

When I'm a veteran with only one eye
I shall do nothing but look at the sky.

Only the names of people and places have been changed. Tungria was a nation in what is now the north of Belgium and the southern Netherlands in the first century B.C. The Wall soldier's girl is not so far away, only the North Sea estranges them, but in the meantime he must bear Piso's preachments and the thought of what Aulus is doing in more civilized Tungria. Piso's fish-worshipping is explained by the Greek, as it were, acronym for Christ, *ichthus*, a fish.¹⁰ Piso is a surprisingly early precursor of the north-country Puritan tradition, but there is no particular significance I can find in his name. In choosing Aulus for the name of the soldier's supposed betrayer, however, Auden may have had in mind Aulus Platorius Nepos, who was governor of Britain during the second century, when Hadrian ordered the building of the Wall, and who supervised its early construction. Perhaps the reader is to imagine Aulus posted back to Tungria and flirting with the soldier's girl, though the gulf in social class is an obstacle to the theory.

Winter in the north of England lives gloriously up to expectations, with "the wet wind", pattering rain and creeping mist. Most of the soldier's discomforts, not admittedly his lice but certainly his head-cold, emanate from the uncertain heaven. As the syntactical ambiguity indicates

The rain comes pattering out of the sky,
I'm a Wall soldier, I don't know why

10 I (*Iesous*) CH (*Christos*) TH (*Theou*) U (*Uios*) S (*Soter*): "Jesus Christ, Son of God, and Saviour".

— the soldier not only doesn't know the why of his military duties, he also stands in a curious ignorance of the meteorology of his misery, indeed of all higher things whatsoever. He is ignorant of love, too, so much so it is difficult to call his rather childish cupidity ("I want my girl and I want my pay") by that name. His desires are rigidly and jealously centripetal, and though his jealousy of Aulus reminds him at once of Piso, whom he would have heard expounding another variety of unjealous neighbour-love, his nonetheless unadulterated possessiveness in love ideally equips him to be a guardian of frontiers, a patrolman of the imperial property. His and Piso's definitions of love seem mutually self-exclusive, in spite of which the reader is subtly manipulated into an admiration for the soldier's cocky energy and simple-minded plain-spokenness. The attractive rhythmic modulations played on the four-stress base no doubt add to this favourable impression (they are the kind of variations produced by working from a melodic rather than a metrical line), but it is the soldier's refusal or inability to escape from the simple sentence and the present tense that commends him, an unconscious stoic. He only escapes into a clausal sentence and a thought for the future at the last:

When I'm a veteran with only one eye
I shall do nothing but look at the sky.

Like Wordsworth's "pool bare to the eye of Heaven", the staring confrontation anticipated here between the long-forsaken heaven and the carnal purity of the soldier's Eros is frightening, in its nakedness, to contemplate. If a reader does wish to consider the soldier in this light, he can see him raised to a higher power of meaning, equivalent to that of the lovers in "Lullaby":

Soul and body have no bounds:
To lovers as they lie upon
Her tolerant enchanted slope
In their ordinary swoon,
Grave the vision Venus sends
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope . . .

Other readers will prefer not to, and complain at the ponderousness of analysing this direct and charming song. I can only reply that critics may themselves be embarrassed by the clumsiness of their procedures, when it comes to the dissection of poems like "Roman Wall Blues", poems whose apparent clarity is matched by a deftness and subtlety of manipulation which place them in the best traditions of light verse.

Another exposé of military service and the *dulce et decorum* syndrome, "Ode" ("Though aware of our rank and alert to obey orders") typifies Auden's ability to fuse his high and low styles of light verse, to maintain two modes of address to two audiences in the one poem. Despite the relaxed versification, carrying a suggestion of second-intensity poetry, the ode is in my opinion the finest achievement of Auden's first period.¹¹ The loose stanzaic form, filled to bursting with Audenesque data, and the syntactical inventiveness, breaking with grammatical strictures to release an uninterrupted conversational flow, anticipate the methods of much in the later verse, from "Dover" to "In Praise of Limestone". The ode has suffered primarily by being read in terms of its epigraph, *To my boys*, and secondarily by being read exclusively in the context of *The Orators*. This has led to the standard interpretation that it is a poem in which a schoolmaster lectures his pupils on the evils of the school cadet corps, whereas, if the poem is read as a self-contained entity, there is rather more reason for supposing its setting to be prehistoric Scotland than a public school. Has it escaped so many critics that Auden might be, not haranguing his boys, but dedicating a poem to them, in the belief that they might find the problems entertained in "Ode" pertinent to their own situation? It is noteworthy that Auden subsequently withdrew the dedication, evidently feeling that it furnished no aid to interpretation of the poem. Not that Auden's dedication was misplaced. Though it is wrong to insist that Auden addresses his boys *in* the ode (he addresses them *through* it), it is still true that a young student is its ideal reader, a reader who is capable of a fresh, generalist response, yet whose curiosity might be roused by certain of the more refractory details to further, specialist reading of his own. It is unfortunate that much of the following analysis has had to be devoted to a merely specialist interpretation.

A school is not the wrong political context in which to set the ode's action, but it is only one of many. It would be a pity not to connect the ode with Auden's remark that he opposed fascism because, having taught in a school, he knew what it was like,¹² and yet the *mot* does point to more than one setting for the poem. It would be a shame not to recognize that the

11 Auden himself defines this in Part I of *Collected Shorter Poems* as 1927-1932.

12 *The Old School*, ed. Graham Greene (London, Jonathan Cape, 1934), p. 17. I am indebted for the reference to Fuller, *Reader's Guide*, p. 52.

schoolteacher with a foot in each camp, sympathetic to “the youngest drummer” while he works for the veterans and bishops, is the exact modern embodiment of the ode’s persona. Yet a greater omission would be to fail to see how the ode creates a sense of political process by disrupting the reader’s sense of definite social roles. A greater loss would be not to notice that the persona’s uncomfortably sliding scale of “us”, and the other syntactical confusions by which he avoids admitting his own confusions of sympathy and role, dramatize Auden’s poetic dilemma, his conviction that a poet must speak for “I and the public” and his scepticism any modern poet can. In “Ode” Auden succeeds in creating a poetry of the pronoun.

“Ode” starts out on manoeuvres, but plunges quickly into the mental landscape of “the youngest drummer”. His mind is loaded with all the mental paraphernalia of the military, rank, orders, frontiers and codewords: he is as nervously cocked as his pistol. In support of his present state of alert, he also “Knows all the peace-time stories like the oldest soldier”. He knows his nation’s ancestral myth of how “tall white gods” once instituted an Audenesque Eden, where men followed their specializations (“Skilled in the working of copper”), wild animals roamed plentifully, there was “an open wishing-well in every garden/[And] love came easy”. “The peace-time stories” are as vital to the young soldier’s mental stability as tales of heroic action. They tell him that, though the Garden has been lost by negligence, military vigilance might regain it. His psychology pivots on the Garden of childhood where, as stanza six reveals, he had a bad fall: it is this garden, as well as the garden of his cultural inheritance, which he must protect from the encircling wilderness of moving grass. His private myth, of an innocence threatened by anxieties, overlaps conveniently with the social myth in which he has been reared, of a homeland threatened by secret aggressors. The ode is an action shot of a system replicating itself by means of its younger members; it is a study of social conditioning. Conditioned from the cradle by pious mother and warrior father, by peer-group expectations and the alternate barbs and overtures of his elders, by church and state, it is not surprising that his inner needs find fairly complete satisfaction in the outlets for action provided within the by now renewed system, that the questions he asks of himself receive fairly thorough answers from the established verities of his society. Only the overseeing persona, as he speaks of the verities “we” all acknowledge, by

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his over-protestation of the pronoun elicits an outsider's doubts and qualms as to where these blind acceptances might be leading.

Private and public myths coincide fairly well for "the youngest drummer" (who must also be the "recruit" spoken of in stanza three and after), but not fully, as an ambiguity of the persona's indicates. The recruit "Knows all the peace-time stories . . . About the tall white gods", while remaining "frontier-conscious"; but is he not also "frontier-conscious,/About the tall white gods", to the point of confusing them with the much-publicized aggressors? In the third stanza, where both archaeological records, which would give information about "tall white gods", and espionage, which would give information about aggressors, are muddled together by the veterans, the recruit's confusion is shared by "all of us", as we pretend to be "Perfectly certain". He asks his first empirical question, "Who told you all this?" and is promptly silenced by the veteran's remedy for all empirical doubt, "Go to sleep, Sonny." Sleep heightens his confusion, however, for in his dreams he returns to the foundation of his psyche, the restored Eden: "in a moment/Sees the sun at midnight bright over cornfield and pasture,/Our hope . . ." This is the ode's first crisis. If the recruit at this point identified aggressors and "tall white gods" as being one, and as being the party able to restore the Garden and the new millennium, he would turn against his elders to become a revolutionary. The system is saved only by his being in military training: there's no time to think or dream, he must get out on guard duty. He is jostled awake by "Someone", presumably the veteran, hears a brusque explanation-cum-apology, and stumbles out. Already his fate is sealed: he has taken over from the Old Guard.

Stanzas seven to nine present a diptych of "us" in the cathedral (the reader may imagine a spire) and the chthonic mirror-image, "them", "in a great rift in the limestone". The persona allows himself the perception that the veterans appear, not as conquerors of wine-dark seas, but as themselves wine-dark with bibulousness, but his remark has little more pungency than a later aside about inverted commas in newspapers. The principal force of the stanzas lies in the contrast between the bishop with his choirboys and the "scarecrow prophet" screaming his jeremiad, between "our" rather primitive shouting about past victories and "their" howl for vengeance, followed by a vow to the future. The more nearly one approaches the structure of Auden's early poems the more clearly is discovered that dualistic habit of thought,

which was to take on epidemic proportions in some of his critical prose. In his poetry, by contrast, the dualism is usually held in an artistic suspension or developed dialectically or even criticized, as in this ode, when carried to Manichaean extremes. Here the balancing of one side against the other makes prominent "our" party's lack of the figure of the Leader, "that laconic war-bitten captain".

As has been generally recognized, the Leader's battle-cry and his men's response are an almost verbatim translation from the Anglo-Saxon poem, *The Battle of Maldon*.¹³ The allusion is not only to the ideals of heroism and fidelity to a leader, but also to the virtue of implicit obedience to the elder or veteran. Evidently the aggressors are impeccably trained in this virtue. In addition, by his capitalization of "Lord", Auden attracts his reader's notice to a tentative identification in *The Battle of Maldon* of Byrhtnoth, the man who gives his life for his nation, with Christ. For Auden, however, the man who inspires the fanatical love of a Byrhtwold for a Byrhtnoth is less a Lord of Love than of Fear, and the moment of recognition of this by the persona is the second crisis of the poem:

What have we all been doing to have made from Fear
That laconic war-bitten captain addressing them now?

The enemy, who never manifest themselves above the grass-tops, are the product of the society's subterranean anxieties. They need have no objective existence. Although the persona still speaks for "us all", the flash of recognition has been granted to him alone.

The medievalism continues, and continues to elucidate the realization, for an outsider, that the enemy is an objectification of the group's subconscious fears. In the motley ranks of the enemy are enrolled all whom the society has branded as evil, from drop-outs to bank-absconders and to those favourite whipping-dogs of the medieval preacher, the Seven Deadly Sins. This is how Chaucer's Parson lists these "chieftaynes of sins":

Of the roote of these sevene synnes, thanne, is Pride, the general
roote of alle harmes. For of this roote spryngen certein branches,
as Ire, Envye, Accidie or Slewthe, Avarice or Coveitise (to commune
understondyng), Glotonye, and Lecherye.¹⁴

13 *The Battle of Maldon*, ed. E. V. Gordon (London, Methuen, 1937), p. 61.

14 *The Parson's Tale*, 397; quoted from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (2nd edn) (London, Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 239.

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Noticeably, when they are externalized as aggressors, the Sins take on qualities diametrically opposed to those they display as inner weaknesses: Wrath is cunning, Envy is true to his profession, Sloth "famed . . . for her stamina", Greed "simple" instead of various, Gluttony "austerer than us" in pursuing his ends and Lust "skilful". Less immediately noticeable is the fact that Auden has listed only six of the seven. The sin omitted is that which the medieval Parson considered the "general roote" of all the others, and the reason for its omission, why "we" have ignored it, may be explained in terms of the Parson's *Remedium contra peccatum Superbie*:

now shul ye understonde which is the remedie agayns the synne of Pride; and that is humylitee, or mekenesse./ That is a vertu thurgh which a man hath verray knoweleche of hymself, and holdeth of hymself no pris ne deyntee, as in regard of his desertes, considerynge evere his freletee. [My italics]¹⁵

"We" have not recognized Pride as the true captain of the enemy, because to do so would require, firstly an unmilitaristic, religious humility, and secondly and more importantly, a degree of self-knowledge. The self-analysis "we" have shunned would tell us that the enemy is ourselves (our id or Jungian shadow). The persona and the dreaming recruit reached the frontiers of this consciousness, but the general preference has been to do battle with the Fear of such knowledge. If it has been difficult at times to establish the objective presence of an enemy, "we" have chosen to attribute this to the ruthlessness of their social conditioning: "their code is/'Death to the squealer' ". The stanzas on the enemy are an elucidation of the logic of paranoia: so cunning is my enemy he pretends not to exist.

The study of modern paranoia through medieval (or earlier) allusion concludes by following "The hidden path to their squat Pictish tower". Pictish towers, or *brochs*, are tall, round, stone structures, dotted about the extreme north of Scotland and the northern isles. They are sometimes thought to indicate a race of northern Picts, or broch-dwellers, who carried on intermittent warfare with the southern Picts, or fort-dwellers. The Pictish tower compresses a wealth of suggestion. Possibly the "aggressors" were, like the Picts, an aboriginal race pre-dating "the tall white gods", the myth of whose coming records the invasion by the present nation. The myth may alternatively be interpreted psychologically, as having a racist basis but as extending into

15 *The Parson's Tale*, 475-76; *ibid.*, p. 242.

the province of folk-lore, since, to quote the OED, "in Scottish folk-lore, the *Pechts* are often represented as a dark pygmy race, or an underground people; and sometimes identified with elves, brownies or fairies". Short, dark and subterranean, the Pictish enemy are the counter-projection of the ancestral myth of "the tall white gods". The minds of "all of us" are plagued by the Manichaeic heresy, the desire to see our lives as a battle against the darkness for the light. The association of the aggressors with the extreme north, and hence with the apocalyptic armies of Gog and Magog, neatly seals the previous hints that the approaching Armageddon is a psychomachia. Auden's insistence on a "*squat* Pictish tower", when *brochs* are remarkable for their height, introduces a further layer of reference to another

round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart,
Built of brown stone, without a counterpart
In the whole world.

The squat, dark tower to which Childe Roland finally comes in Browning's poem should be considered as extending into the earth, as in Robert Graves's exegesis:

The castle that they [the heroes of classical and Celtic mythology] entered — revolving, remote, royal, gloomy, lofty, cold, the abode of the Perfect Ones, entered by a dark door on the shelving side of a hill — was the castle of death or the Tomb, the Dark Tower to which the Childe Roland came in the ballad.¹⁶

While Auden's tower may not have all the properties of Graves's archetypal castle, its squatness will indicate to a specialist reader that it, too, is a "castle of death", death being the only fruit of this society's unquestioned mythologies, and the tower being the first of many intimations of mortality brought together by the ode's conclusion.

In the last two stanzas winter and cold have invaded the land, as "We entrain . . . for the North". The penultimate stanza, a brief sketch of an industrial wasteland, is the inversion of stanza two; it is the sacking of the dream of the Garden. Fighting for Eden has destroyed it. With the last stanza comes the return to manoeuvres. In a real sense what the young soldiers are "doomed to attack" are "*headlands*". In the coming battle the distinctions and frontiers, in which they have been trained, will melt and vanish, "snow down to the tide-line": they may discover the true battle, if they do not die first. With the

16 Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (2nd edn) (London, Faber, 1961), p. 107.

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ultimate breakdown of communications and the dissipation of all energy, the persona will be able to cease enunciating his insights. One of his dilemmas, with which group of "us" to identify, he has solved in favour of the recruits but at the cost of his own life. "We shall lie out there": death is his desperate solution. The last line is, of course, a multiple pun, referring to the lying position for firing, to the final self-deception in which the soldiers will be engaged, and to their deaths (*hic jacet*). The recruit has finally laid down his life beside the only Lord he has been permitted to love, the Lord of Fear. The bitter ironies of the line prepare us for the fact that it also alludes to Wilfred Owen's "Exposure":

Since we believe not otherwise can cold fires burn;
Nor ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were born,
For love of God seems dying.

"Exposure" details the appalling conditions of winter warfare in the trenches in order to show how much more unbearable is the pitch of mental torment endured by the soldier. In the stanza quoted the ceaseless, circular punning and the relentlessly multiple syntax recreate the doubts of the conscientious volunteer as to the moral justification for "our" fighting of this war. Owen's "Exposure" has an immediacy and a difficult sincerity which Auden's "Ode" does not and could not have. It penetrates more deeply into the psychological extremities suffered by the soldier on active service. But Auden's "Ode" has its compensatory strengths. It has a wider range of reference and application than Owen's poem, circumscribed as "Exposure" is by its historical context. And Auden has been able to bring home to a civilian, peace-time audience the desolation and waste of war, in its least horrific, most mundane aspects:

Passports are issued no longer; that area is closed;
There's no fire in the waiting-room now at the climber's Junction,
And all this year
Work has been stopped at the power-house . . .

There are two points here. The first is that the ode deliberately subverts a reader's sense of period. Perhaps for Auden's more intelligent boys there are certain clues that it is set around the first or second century A.D., and concentrates on a conflict between southern and northern Picts. The "stone pillar" of stanza three can be related to a Pictish sculptured stone, while the myth of "the tall white gods" might refer to a race who

did work bronze, as well as iron, stone and clay, and who are believed to have migrated to Scotland from the south-west of England about the first century B.C. But what can one make then of the sudden transition to eleventh-century Essex, or of finding oneself in a cathedral with choirboys or on manoeuvres with binoculars? The anachronisms and discontinuities compel a reader to consider the continuity of the political process under his inspection. The ode conveys the relentlessness and cruelty of the human law that traditional societies, whether in ancient Scotland or modern Britain, whether for the furtherance of life or the multiplication of death, must replicate themselves.

The second point is that Auden everywhere furnishes the concrete, not image but as Geoffrey Thurley has aptly said, instance.¹⁷ The ode achieves universality without loss of specificity. It is packed with sociological data, just the right data to reify and expand upon the conceptual framework. It was Auden's capacity to seize on instances that solidified in the mind of the public their vague fears of political process, it was this capacity that captured him a reading public in the thirties. There is the famous stanza from "As I Walked Out One Evening", expressing the neurotic horror of death that can live, concentrated, in the utensils of our daily lives:

The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.

Or there is the finely controlled doggerel of "The Witnesses", addressed to a generation brought up by nannies on nursery rhymes in secluded gardens (the Garden again):

We're afraid in that case you'll have a fall;
We've been watching you over the garden wall
For hours:
The sky is darkening like a stain;
Something is going to fall like rain,
And it won't be flowers.

When the green field comes off like a lid,
Revealing what was much better hid —
Unpleasant:
And look, behind you without a sound
The woods have come up and are standing round
In deadly crescent.

17 Thurley, *Ironic Harvest*, p. 60.

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The bolt is sliding in its groove;
Outside the window is the black remov-
-er's van:
And now with sudden swift emergence
Come the hooded women, the hump-backed surgeons,
And the Scissor Man.

This might happen any day;
So be careful what you say
And do:
Be clean, be tidy, oil the lock,
Weed the garden, wind the clock;
Remember the Two.¹⁸

Auden's assessment of his time was sufficiently shrewd for his formula for averting disaster, if ineffective ("poetry makes nothing happen"), yet to become the orthodoxy of that generation. One should practise self-analysis

O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress . . .

— political alertness

O stand, stand at the window . . .

— and though these had less attraction, compassion and Agape:

As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.

The standard critical argument from here is that Auden's genius lies in his evocation of the political climate of the thirties, of a decade of dread that looked back on the carnage of the First World War, that mistrusted in consequence all the political institutions which had permitted that war, that was beset by fears of communist uprising and fascist repression, and that found ahead of it, as the decade drew to its close, the inevitability of a second war. The conclusion which follows from this argument is that Auden's poetry, like Owen's, is limited by an historical circumstance. Yet when the historical circumstances changed, when the constant threat of war became a threat of nuclear war, when political anxieties oscillated between McCarthy and the Red Menace, when Spain became Vietnam, Auden's methods were just as applicable:

18 The Scissor Man, incidentally, derives from Hoffman's *Struwwelpeter*, and gave "a wholly pleasing fictional fear" to Auden as a child. See Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London, Faber, 1971), pp. 52-3.

You must leave now, take what you need, you think will last.
 But whatever you wish to keep, you better grab it fast.
 Yonder stands your orphan with his gun,
 Crying like a fire in the sun.
 Look out the saints are comin' through
 And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

The highway is for gamblers, better use your sense.
 Take what you have gathered from coincidence.
 The empty-handed painter from your streets
 Is drawing crazy patterns on your sheets.
 This sky, too, is folding under you
 And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

All your seasick sailors, they are rowing home.
 All your reindeer armies, are all going home.
 The lover who just walked out your door
 Has taken all his blankets from the floor.
 The carpet, too, is moving under you
 And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

Leave your stepping stones behind, something calls for you.
 Forget the dead you've left, they will not follow you.
 The vagabond who's rapping at your door
 Is standing in the clothes that you once wore.
 Strike another match, go start anew
 And it's all over now, Baby Blue.¹⁹

No laborious analysis of Bob Dylan's "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" is needed to link lines like "When the green field comes off like a lid" and "This sky, too, is folding under you"; or "The crack in the tea-cup opens" and "The carpet, too, is moving under you"; or "We've been watching you over the garden wall/ For hours" and "The vagabond who's rapping at your door/Is standing in the clothes that you once wore". Nor is it necessary to do more than point to the connection between Dylan's well known "hard rain" and Auden's "Something is going to fall like rain". Auden has done more than take from popular poetry. Both poets, or should one say song-writers, show the surreal horror with which the distant arena of international politics can invest our domestic lives. Dylan's songs in the sixties are sufficient proof that Auden's poetry survives the thirties.

I began by saying of "Ode" that it had a dual level of appeal, to an academic and a lay audience. Whereas the full range of reference of the ode would be accessible only to a specialist

19 Bob Dylan, *Writings and Drawings* (St Albans, Herts., Panther, 1974), p. 289.

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reader, the generalist reader will not fail to be adequately amused and instructed by its portrait of doomed youth. Nevertheless, the ode's puzzle aspect is there for the specialist alone (why, for instance, only six Deadly Sins are named) and it should be added that the puzzle provides further instruction as well as amusement. The hidden meanings of "Ode", that is, while not directly didactic, do have moral significance. For Auden's later poetry, where verbal puzzling greatly increases in scope, the same claim cannot be made. The later poetry breaks decisively with the Eliotic tradition of the difficult poem, by asserting that the verbal puzzle is its own justification in poetry, giving pleasure in its own right. The aesthetic of the later verse takes for its catch-cry one of the most anti-Puritanical of Shakespearian apothegms, that "the truest poetry is the most feigning".²⁰ In the poem of that title Auden advises the apprentice poet:

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 . . .

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.

"Sad verse", even when it deals with human suffering, has pleasure as its end; and its means for giving pleasure is a "subtle, various, ornamental, clever" verbal structure. The repudiation of deliberate moral purpose in poetry and the acceptance of poetry as a record of "the luck of verbal playing" work a considerable transformation in Auden's later verse. This change I shall analyse briefly, as it operates in two poems, one concerning the Garden, the other about the military establishment. These two poems will suffice to show that the change in aesthetic is inextricably bound up with a change in Auden's feeling for his audience.

"In Praise of Limestone" is a measure of how far Auden's experiments with syllabics enabled him to flatten out the rather heavy stressing, so alien to his customary, urbane tone, which he at first produced ("Ode" is an example) in his attempts to refashion stress-syllabic metre into a more discursive, prosaic medium. Not that the poem is in pure syllabics; the couplets vary around norms of thirteen and eleven syllables; and the

20 *As You Like It*, III. iii. 18-19.

smoothness of the verse derives in large part from the fact that most lines have five and four conversational (as opposed to metrical) stresses, respectively. George Fraser, who understands prosodic niceties better than most, remarked to me once in conversation that he believed the metre might have a quantitative base as well; and while the smattering of classical scansion left me suggests no possibility of this under the rules of Latin prosody, the lines do, notwithstanding, give an impression of similar duration, and Auden did retain an interest in this least feasible of English metres.²¹ Metrical considerations aside, "In Praise of Limestone" is a marvel of syntax, of self-absorbed conditionals, imperatives and invitations, observations that grow by participle upon participle, digressions that expand by catalogue and a conclusion that dazzles with its rhetorical footwork. The conversational fluency of the rhythm and the involutedness of the syntax are mimetic of the limestone landscape described, and poem and landscape together, it seems, are the only possible expression of the late Auden.

For a eulogy the poem strikes an exceptionally defiant note in its address to the "dear" reader. The limestone terrain has some of the properties of Eden, but its principal metaphoric reference is to a mammoth body or Womb, fed by gurgling conduits and joined "To the big busy world by a tunnel". The poet defies the reader to call his affection for this simple, comfortably materialistic backwater of Mother Earth regressive. The poem implements a comparison between "them", the inhabitants of limestone country, gamins and rivals dedicated to a life of hedonistic underachievement in harmony with Mother; and "us", the creatures of the modern world, who have quit their Eden out of sheer boredom, to seek in granite wastes, in clay-and-gravel soils and on the sea, the goal of our moral, political and spiritual ambitions. As in "Ode", the poet purports to speak for "us", but arouses suspicion that his loyalties lie with "them". In conclusion, he avers that the limestone does serve a purpose:

It has a worldly duty which in spite of itself
 It does not neglect, but calls into question
 All the Great Powers assume; it disturbs our rights. The poet,
 Admired for his earnest habit of calling
 The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle, is made uneasy
 By these marble statues which so obviously doubt

21 See *A Common Reader*, pp. 373-6.

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His antimythological myth; and these gamins,
Pursuing the scientist down the tiled colonnade
With such lively offers, rebuke his concern for Nature's
Remotest aspects: I, too, am reproached, for what
And how much you know. Not to lose time, not to get caught,
Not to be left behind, not, please! to resemble
The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water
Or stone whose conduct can be predicted, these
Are our Common Prayer, whose greatest comfort is music
Which can be made anywhere, is invisible,
And does not smell. In so far as we have to look forward
To death as a fact, no doubt we are right: But if
Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead,
These modifications of matter into
Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains,
Made solely for pleasure, make a further point:
The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,
Having nothing to hide. Dear, I know nothing of
Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love
Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur
Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.

The persona of "In Praise of Limestone" no longer counts himself as "the poet", who has as his vocation the construction of serious mental puzzles and an "antimythological myth" (a portrait, this, of the young Auden). Yet, as has been seen, diffidence in speaking on behalf of the modern "us", coupled with a persistence in doing exactly that, is no new development in Auden's work. What is new, what leads to Auden's identification with the limestone's hedonism rather than the poet's seriousness, is his sense that an audience might no longer take seriously his doubts or his seriousness. "In Praise of Limestone" has all the apparatus of a major poem, and seems to be raising itself up to make a major proclamation on Auden's central theme: that art is what consoles modern humanity for its condition, especially the art of music, "Which can be made anywhere, is invisible,/And does not smell". Try to wrest a moral utterance from the poem, and it evaporates utterly, leaving only the whimsical, running murmur of a voice. The reader who reaches for the line, "How evasive is your humour", to epitomize this poetic delinquency, finds himself echoing the call of the granite wastes, the voice of an ascetic Puritanism already diagnosed by the poem. "In Praise of Limestone" is not the less evasive, however, for the acuteness of its self-consciousness. The evasions seem to originate, not in any unease the American Auden feels as an expatriate in Europe, but rather in an anxiety that what are now his personal concerns, the afterlife and "a faultless love",

the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body, will not be of compelling interest to a contemporary audience. Nor can Auden's adoption of America be held responsible for the highly idiosyncratic diction of the later verse, described by a fellow-poet as

a wilful jumble of Age-of-Plastic nursery rhyme, ballet folk-lore, and Hollywood Lemprière, served up with a lispng archness that sets the teeth on edge . . . Are there people who talk this dialect, or is it how Auden talks to himself?²²

I consider the late Auden to have been a master of parody and pastiche, able to adopt at will the *patois* suited to his ends. In "In Praise of Limestone" the idiosyncrasies of language and the rich, Jamesian self-absorption of the syntax constitute a strategy for handling another generation of poetry readers, a new voice for a new generation on whose behalf Auden can no longer pretend to speak. The voice is urbanely self-deprecating ("Dear, I know nothing of either"); it invites the dismissal of any opinions it may divulge as eccentric; and it tacitly cajoles from the reader his confession that its way of stating these opinions, whatever they were, has been, oh, infinitely amusing ("Made solely for pleasure"). It is a voice whose tone submerges what is said in a way of saying, and whose easy fluency takes for its emblems "the murmur/Of underground streams" and "a limestone landscape".

The Garden of "In Praise of Limestone" is under little threat from "the big busy world" outside its walls. True, the poet may be tempted away, but in slack moments he is likelier to fall into it than from it. An equal relaxation is evident in "Fleet Visit", where the warrior, who always for Auden had his childish tendencies, has dwindled to the perfect boy. The American sailors on shore leave in the small Italian port may have descended from "hollow ships", but they are without every other qualification of the Homeric hero:

Mild-looking middle-class boys
Who read the comic strips;
One baseball game is more
To them than fifty Troys.

They look a bit lost, set down
In this unamerican place
Where natives pass with laws

22 Philip Larkin, "What's Become of Wystan?", *Spectator*, CCV (15 July 1960), p. 105. Is Larkin one of the "provincial gulleets" warned against in "The Truest Poetry Is The Most Feigning"?

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And futures of their own;
They are not here because
But only just-in-case.

With the observation that, unlike the natives, the sailors “neither make nor sell”, “Fleet Visit” seems to be mounting towards a decisive moral judgment. But at this juncture attention is diverted to the ships:

Without a human will
To tell them whom to kill
Their structures are humane

And, far from looking lost,
Look as if they were meant
To be pure abstract design
By some master of pattern and line,
Certainly worth every cent
Of the billions they must have cost.

The humorous whimsy of Auden’s late verse, very different from the essentially serious humour of “Roman Wall Blues”, often allows an admirable lissomeness in feeling, a celebration of life’s unoverwhelming moments; but many readers, irritated by “Fleet Visit”’s flirtation with the intensely serious, will agree with John Fuller’s censure:

Auden’s defence of [the ships’] presence, on the purely aesthetic grounds that they look beautiful, is an interesting by-product of the Pax Americana, as though the purpose of NATO could really be disregarded for a second in 1952, however striking the ‘pattern and line’ of the ships in the harbour.²³

Fuller has missed one irony: the tone of “Certainly worth every cent” certainly implies the opposite. Like limestone the poem seems to ignore, but by so doing “calls into question/All the Great Powers assume; it disturbs our rights”. Moreover, the total tone of voice, the persona of “Fleet Visit”, should be registered. The aged poet, who has been so immersed in aesthetics all his life that what he sees in American destroyers is “pure abstract design”, this is obviously an ironic persona, whose limitations are placed by the poem. But the poem is only marginally less limited than its persona: it raises questions of political morality only to skirt them. The ironic tone conveys no more than that such questions are serious and unpleasant, likely to give offence and out of place in the carefree “verbal playing” of poetry. The avoidance of offensive moralizing in

23 Fuller, *Reader’s Guide*, p. 216.

"Fleet Visit" is plainly not unrelated to the consciousness of an American audience; but the triviality of the irony, the mask of the English eccentric *tolerantly* amused by the misadventures of the American young, is just as much assumed because of the awareness of diverging generations. Sensible that he cannot speak on behalf of a new readership, Auden discards the right to speak authoritatively to them. To catch the ear of this unknown quantity, he assumes a role of universal appeal: he clowns. Keats once complained that certain of his earlier poems were "weak-sided", lacking in defensive irony;²⁴ the deficiency of Auden's later verse is its failure, frequently, to present any side at all. Should a reader wish to delve beneath the entertainment of "Fleet Visit", all the irony has left for analysis is the neatness of phrase and rhythm and the intricate rhyme, the "pure abstract design".

It is understandable, then, that Auden's successors on the English scene, poets like Philip Larkin, Thom Gunn and Donald Davie, have rejected Auden's later poems, partly because they seem unserious, partly because they seem unimportant: "They are garrulous, ingenious, playful-sentimental, and get nowhere."²⁵ The personae of these more recent poets are more sincere and more engaged in large cultural and metaphysical issues. Notwithstanding, Auden's later aesthetic was implicit in his high style as much as his low, in the elegies' assertion that the poem is an autonomous world, a world of affirmative sanity created in the teeth of despair. But the poem of despair came to seem hypocritical, since its very making negated negation; the poem of suffering was a contradiction, since poetry gives pleasure, aesthetic pleasure admittedly, but only a very bad poem literally gives pain. Auden was to the end an historical pessimist, as later poems like "The Shield of Achilles" amply testify, but he came to see art as necessarily the repository of human optimism. Although suffering remained a viable subject for a poem, the fact of suffering was neutralized by the poem. There could be no soliciting of vicarious pain in a true poem. In "The Shield of Achilles" the poetic feigning is emphasized: the grisly murders and humiliations are insulated with recurrent frames of artefacts and mirror-images. The same effect had been achieved earlier

24 To Richard Woodhouse, 21, 22 September 1819; quoted from *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 298.

25 Philip Larkin, "No More Fever", *Listen*, II, i (Summer 1956), p. 23.

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in "Musée des Beaux Arts", where Icarus' death is framed firstly within the Breughel painting, secondly within an epicurean sampling of the Breughel canon, and finally within the museum and "the great masters". On returning to the human kernel, what is there but a Greek myth most memorably recorded by Ovid, a suggestion of Joyce's overreaching modern artist, a succession of further frames? From the first announcement of its theme, "About pain", the poem spends all its energies flying that subject into art criticism. The symbol for the artefact within the artefact of the poem I take to be (as it was in "Fleet Visit") "the expensive delicate ship", and it responds to human calamity just as Auden would have art do: it sails calmly on, having other purposes to fulfil. In Auden's Museum of Fine Art the tour-guide directs our attention to the graceful pillars and pilasters, to the rococo frames, to the harmonious configuration of pigments on the well-preserved canvas; not at all to the attitude of a boy's body, the expression on a face. That, the tour-guide tells us frowning, is not art but a confusion of art and life, even though it is this confusion which we have come to see, though it is this awakens our wonder and pity at "Something amazing, a boy falling from the sky". In trying to write light verse to entertain a widely based audience, late in his poetic career Auden verged on writing a pure poetry, in which the only human interest was the technical game of the prosody and diction; and in my experience, even among academics and specialists, there are few who are much interested in that.