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### Auden In-Between

Sidney White

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**Auden In-Between**

by

Sidney White

A Thesis Paper

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

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### **Abstract**

W.H. Auden consistently communicated a sense of “in-betweenness” in his writing, as a way of getting at his perceived truth about the modern experience of existence. He felt that modernity lacked a solid foundation in morals or philosophy. He sought security and stability; he sought a foundation. His poetic work throughout the course of his career reflects both his need to be true to the “in-betweenness” of life and his search for foundational concepts and security.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

W.H. Auden wrote an elegy for Sigmund Freud which describes him, in death, as “a whole climate of opinion” (379). Auden’s literary remains (now nearly complete in their arrangement and publication under the guidance of literary executor Edward Mendelson via Princeton University Press and Faber & Faber) are collectively so massive and varied that they have something of the nature of a climatological zone. How does one take stock of 1,300 pages of poetry, 1000 pages of theatrical plays, radio plays, cabaret, opera libretti, film narratives, songs, and 4000 pages of prose in a spray of styles and on a range of subjects which encompass a near-totality of human experience?

And this doesn’t include the 2000-odd pages of appendices and textual notes, where we find alternate versions and further writings; it doesn’t include an *allegedly* forthcoming final volume (details are sketchy and reports are contradictory), *Personal Writings: Selected Letters, Journals, and Poems Written for Friends*; it doesn’t include *The Table Talk of W.H. Auden*, a book-length collection of conversations with student Alan Ansen between 1946-48, or a similar book by Howard Griffin; it doesn’t include any transcripts of Auden’s radio appearances (which were many), television appearances, or published interviews.

Throw in the four biographies, the twenty-or-so book-length memoirs, the innumerable remembrances, journal entries, or chapters in books by friends and acquaintances, the mountain range of academic and scholarly criticism and interpretation, and the more public-facing literary journalism on the work and the life....and how does one take stock?

Approaching Auden for the first time can feel like standing in a boat being rowed toward the shoreline of some misty continent, obscure in feature and fogged with a near-century of modernity. Auden’s publishing career began at the age of 23 and lasted 43 years (from 1930 to

1973, the year of his death), and his written work evolved constantly in tone, style, and intent. His conceptual frameworks changed, his opinions changed.

For most statements which can be quoted him, elsewhere he said the opposite, or something substantially different. A 1947 *Time* magazine interview reports him as saying, “People don’t understand that it’s possible to believe in a thing and ridicule it at the same time...It’s hard for them, too, to see that a person’s statement of belief is no proof of belief, any more than a love poem is a proof that one is in love.” Late in life, over dinner, Auden told a clergyman the method of disposal he preferred for his body after death: he wanted it to be roasted and then eaten by his friends.

Auden is nearly *always* surprising, in verse as well as prose, and his (nuanced) embrace of apparently dated ideas or technical approaches *usually* reveals itself as inspired technique or bold wisdom, a clear-eyed diagnosis or strategy of response, or an audacious stylistic flourish that is also a stay against fashion hysteria and historical narcissism. The story of an encounter in his Oxford days gives a sense of the stillness and psychological penetration he was capable of, but largely kept under wraps. He was dealing here with Wyndham Lewis, who wrote the following in the mid 1930’s:

Nearly ten years ago, before Auden left Oxford, he came to see me in Ossington street, and I got to know Stephen Spender at the same time. Spender, who is half a Schuster, and combines great practical ability with great liberal charm, showed me a lot of jolly poems, mostly about Auden – he said modestly, a much better poet than himself. And then Auden came himself. He was very crafty and solemn: I felt I was being interviewed by an emissary of some highly civilized power – perhaps

over-civilized – who had considered that something had to be done about me and so one of its most able negotiators had been sent along to sound me...I always think of him as a rather *psychic* phenomenon. (emphasis in original, 164)

Auden's writing is without stuffiness, grand-standing or received opinion. Clive James remarked, of Auden's prose: "professional in the best sense, amateur in the best sense, free of bluff, full of life" (3). And of his poetry James says the following, in lieu of approving Auden's credentials for commentary on Shakespeare's sonnets:

There was almost nothing Auden couldn't do in the writing of a poem, and he was thus, in the reading of Shakespeare's most intricately wrought achievements, well qualified to assess what Shakespeare was up to at the level of technical performance. During the Second World War, the British and the Americans carefully studied captured enemy aircraft. The engineers learned a lot by taking them to pieces, but finally the judgments that mattered came from the test pilots. Auden was a test pilot... (3)

I love the metaphor: Auden as test-pilot of the English language, taking it out for a spin to see what it's capable of, how far he can push it.

## Chapter 2: Thesis

The personal reportage we have on Auden by those who knew or met him depicts, from the earliest days, an individual of remarkable stability. From at least the age of 20 he maintained a rigid daily structure of work, set often literally to the hour, and an early bedtime. On more than one occasion he remarked explicitly on his own sanity, and the enormous body of work which accumulated at a steady pace over the course of his mature life bears witness to a mind of consistent lucidity, and to a personal application which never wavered.

And yet why such militant discipline? Why the iron-clad daily structure, uncompromised even on vacation? I would argue that Auden felt keenly the dangers of despair, and of loneliness. He was isolated by his sheer intelligence, his artistic intuition, and his (mostly male-focused) sexuality. He was also living in Europe “between the wars” and watching the ground shift under his feet at every moment. Einstein, Marx, Freud, Eliot, Duchamp: the world was hurtling into the future at high speed. Always in motion, always in-between one station and the next, the clock between ticks. Unceasing change.

In his poetic work Auden sought to embody and express this mutability, this “in-betweenness.” If the theme was accurate to contemporary experience, it had within its potential poetic effects the suggestive, the associative, the non-committal, the neglected, the un-allied, the un-sentimental, the ironic and, at its least successful, the painfully obscure.

His initial readership found this a heady and hip brew. Tough and true. No easy answers. It helped that the language employed was beautiful, edgy, and surprising. It also helped that the drifting and fracturing imagery and ideas were contained within rigid formal structures.

If Auden kept the messiness of personal existence in practical check from the start through a strict daily ritual of work and rest, he soon sought a foundation and a stay against



chaos in intellectual and artistic matters. He never abandoned his theme of in-betweenness in the poetry, but his written search for some sort of security became apparent.

One intellectual anchor was “play.” He loved to play: with language, with ideas, with expectations. He positioned play amongst the highest ranks of activity. It was perhaps the premier intellectual employment, the game of angels, the most beautiful way to pass the time: Fun. Entertainment.

Next, his search for a foundation and security became explicit in the poetry: its subject. This yielded, perhaps, no easy answers. In that sense Auden was true to his younger self. One early answer was romantic love, though this was later qualified so far as to be practically rejected. But the search did serve up small, hard-won comforts. Some were proposed answers to the “how should one live” question, and they struck many in his audience as painfully difficult to enact and vastly unhip. These answers were, of course, recommendations for selfless behavior: patience, tolerance, loving thy neighbor, being of service to others, etc.

Finally, Auden would sing the praises of friendship in his poetry. Throughout his life he dearly desired a sustained, monogamous relationship with a loving partner. This was never achieved. He did, however, form a strong life-long family of devoted friends. His love for these individuals, and for human companionship in general, became a foundation on which he and his poetry could rest.

Philip Larkin’s 1960 article in *The Spectator*, “What’s Become of Wystan?” introduced the idea that Auden wrote no poetry of worth after 1940. This critical line has relaxed, but not been overturned. Auden died in 1973, and the thirteen years of poetry he produced after Larkin’s dismissal has seemed to many critics too cozy, too chatty, too concrete. To my taste, at my age, I would describe it as delightful, companionable, comforting. Is it poetry? Well, it says so on the

back cover. And anyway who cares? It's good-natured writing at the highest level. I reject the bitter, the solemn, the cynical, and the opaque as requirements for authenticity. I am arguing that Auden ultimately found a comforting foundation in his work to counteract the uncertainties of the in-between. I rejoice that Auden may have found and known peace (however qualified or contingent) and written about it, and written *with it*.

I will be focusing on Auden's poetry, with emphasis on the earlier and later career (1930-1942, 1960-1973). I will attempt to demonstrate how the poems "move" from an initial tone of uncertainty, anxiety, and in-betweenness first to something more explicitly playful, which uses the in-between as a tool, and finally to a settled, anchored acceptance.

### Chapter 3: The Beginning

Wystan Hugh Auden: physician father, dutiful mother, upper-middle-class upbringing (servants, boarding school), Icelandic heritage, high-church Anglican (Catholic-ish), Birmingham landscape (moors, abandoned mines), loss of faith, arrival at Oxford, fawning friends, the classics, the Sagas, Old English, Freud, Lenin, science, economics, a post-graduate year in Germany, and finally employment as schoolmaster (teacher) at a public (private) school for boys in Scotland. That takes us to 1930, his twenty-third year, and the publication of his first book, *Poems*, by Faber and Faber, shepherded by T.S. Eliot.

That book, split down the middle between a play in verse (Auden subtitled it a “charade”), *Paid on Both Sides*, and thirty poems titled with roman numerals, seems to have set a tone for the poetry of the 1930’s in the U.K. and the States: a sort of cerebral cool, a bit enigmatic, and an ability to “surf” from one linguistic register to another, i.e. highbrow to radio jingle. Here’s Elizabeth Bishop:

When I was in college, and all through the thirties and forties, I and all my friends who were interested in poetry, read him constantly. We hurried to see his latest poem or book, and either wrote as much like him as possible, or tried hard not to. His then leftist politics, his ominous landscape, his intimations of betrayed loves, war on its way, disasters and death, matched exactly the mood of our late-depression and post-depression youth. We admired his apparent toughness, his sexual courage – actually more honest than Ginsberg’s, say, is now, while still giving expression to technically dazzling poetry. Even the

most hermetic early poems gave us the feeling that here was someone who *knew* – about psychology, geology, birds, love, the evils of capitalism – what have you? They colored our air and made us feel tough, ready, and in the know, too. (2-3)

It is my assumption that *most* readers of poetry, and most readers of *Poems*, skip past longer pieces (initially) for the shorter work, and skip past plays in verse perhaps always, and permanently. While *Paid on Both Sides* may ultimately reveal itself to me as the first of Auden's many dazzling experiments in unorthodox longer form, a truly avant-garde refresh of a then-aging poetic genre (and *Paid* was certainly deemed fresh at the time by Eliot, Empson, Greene, and others), I must admit that it currently remains incomprehensible to me, and I'll skip, like I assume many others have done, to the thirty numbered poems that make up the second half of the volume.

The poems are flinty, compressed, and have a chilled distance which, even when dealing with a speaker's love, offers adulteration and loss, or at least something less than purity, permanence, or gain, as the standard for lived experience. Hence, Bishop's "toughness."

Dostoevsky's narrator in *Crime and Punishment* describes Raskalnikov at one point as "young, abstract, and consequently cruel." Auden here is certainly abstract, and if not exactly cruel then certainly cocksure in his determination to detonate illusions about certainty, stability, and sustained resolution. It is, perhaps, a kind of writing only a young person could stomach producing ("Here's the hard truth you old squares!"), regardless of whether it be "true" or overblown in bleakness.

There is here, along with a sort of cataloguing of moral shortcomings, a persistent focus on what lies “in-between” or “along-side of”: be they thoughts, feelings, moments of the day or times of the year. This factors into the general air of “moderation” about him (“take short views” is a line from his 1946 Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poem “Under Which Lyre” (387)), as well as what *could* be described as a sort of Buddhist, or Taoist, view on life (although he would never describe it this way): an “all is connected in a giant net” sort of thing. Indeed, the word “while” pops up often in his early poems, as does the word “between.” If we are between two temporal events in the world of a given poem then something has already happened, and something else is about to happen: we are in the now, always, and things will continue to change, always.

This motif also, in the early poems, allows the writing to hover indeterminately between fixed points of meaning. At its best, this ambiguity allows for a kind of spider-webbing of suggestion, of potential meanings and metaphors in the reader’s brain, at its worst (the “hermetic” quality Bishop mentions) it can read like randomness masquerading as profundity. But I’m beginning to bore myself with abstract declarations. Here are three of the more instantly “understandable” poems from *Poems*, in sequential order (note: the first two poems each have a single stanza break, the third poem has four):

## V

From the very first coming down  
 Into a new valley with a frown  
 Because of the sun and a lost way,  
 You certainly remain: to-day  
 I, crouching behind a sheep-pen, heard

Travel across a sudden bird,  
Cry out against the storm, and found  
The year's arc a completed round  
And love's worn circuit re-begun,  
Endless with no dissenting run.  
Shall see, shall pass, as we have seen  
The swallow on the tile, spring's green  
Preliminary shiver, passed  
A solitary truck, the last  
Of shunting in the Autumn. But now  
To interrupt the homely brow,  
Thought warmed to evening through and through  
Your letter comes, speaking as you,  
Speaking of much but not to come.

Nor speech is close nor fingers numb,  
If love not seldom has received  
An unjust answer, was deceived.  
I, decent with the seasons, move  
Different or with a different love,  
Nor question overmuch the nod,  
The stone smile of this country god  
That never was more reticent,

Always afraid to say more than it meant. (Poems I, 29)

## VI

Between attention and attention  
The first and last decision  
Is mortal distraction  
Of earth and air,  
Further and nearer,  
The vague wants  
Of days and nights,  
And personal error;  
And the fatigued face,  
Taking the strain  
Of the horizontal force  
And the vertical thrust,  
Makes random answer  
To the crucial test;  
The uncertain flesh  
Scraping back chair  
For the wrong train,  
Falling in slush,  
Before a friend's friends  
Or shaking hands

With a snub-nosed winner.

The opening window, closing door,

Open, close, but not

To finish or restore;

These wishes get

No further than

The edges of the town,

And leaning asking from the car

Cannot tell us where we are;

While the divided face

Has no grace,

No discretion,

No occupation

But registering

Acreage, mileage,

The easy knowledge

Of the virtuous thing. (Poems I, 29-30)

## VII

Upon this line between adventure

Prolong the meeting out of good nature

Obvious in each agreeable feature.



Calling of each other by name  
 Smiling, taking a willing arm  
 Has the companionship of a game.

But should the walk do more than this  
 Out of bravado or drunkenness  
 Forward or back are menaces.

On neither side let foot slip over  
 Invading Always, exploring Never  
 For this is hate and this is fear.

On narrowness stand, for sunlight is  
 Brightest only on surfaces;  
 No anger, no traitor, but peace. (Poems I, 30-1)

Poem V manages the high-wire act of “first-stage Auden” precisely: the language is unexpected and beautiful, the enjambment surprising. The narrative exists but remains unclear, the ideas are grounded largely in external objects, there is a sense of ongoing-ness, and of loss. With “Shall see, shall pass, as we have seen/The swallow on the tile, spring’s green/Preliminary shiver, passed/A solitary truck, the last/Of shunting in the Autumn. But now”, he compresses the change of seasons into heartbreaking speed, with the first burst of spring color simultaneous (“passed”

works with “shiver” and the next line) with the lone truck passing and last “shunting” (or moving something unneeded out of the way) of Autumn. It is, in one sense, like looking back on a lost relationship which played out over time but is now telescoped in hindsight, into the present.

Why does “...and found/The year’s arc a completed round/And love’s worn circuit re-begun,/Endless with no dissenting turn” burn itself into the brain? Perhaps the multiple sense of “circuit” as both a circle and an electrical structure, the mechanistic physical object-ness of the body, the scientific determinism of biology and emotion; it is the combined sense of despair and hope at the cyclical nature of life, of emotions, of love; the sense that when we are down we will be up again, but when we are up we will surely come back down. And that “coming down” will ever feel like “the very first.”

We are in-between here: between one love and the next, one year and the next. We begin after, and we end before. We are in one season in our minds and another in our bodies, and standing in the sun while a storm approaches. Our mood and thoughts follow the eternal curve of a circle, a circuit: always moving, always turning, never straight, never still. The seasons, the years, the emotions, and the individuals in our past are never forgotten, and linger alongside the present, with our internal reality somewhere in-between. And yet we experience the ever-arriving present as mostly fresh and new, the patterns obscure to us still.

Thus the speaker can feel renewal: “I, decent with the seasons, move/Different or with a different love”. But the qualifications are everywhere: “decent” is a hedged positive, and “different” is potentially much different than “with a different love”. In my reading, at least, the “country god” of the final lines is the speaker, and the not questioning “overmuch the nod” or “stone smile” of himself is driven by a newly arrived vigor and freshness (a god!), a new season, feeling and perhaps newly discovered love, or sense of love, a new beginning on the “circuit,” an

all-encompassing atmosphere that, prodded too diligently, would reveal itself as momentary, or vaguely familiar, and thus the speaker's reticence to intellectual probing.

Poem VI is fiercer, and its short lines tick like an ominous clock, or pound like a hammer. It *begins* with the word "between," and nestles in an anxiety of the idle, unoccupied moment. There is a suggestion that any sense of value or security, any sense of what decision to make, has gone out the window. Mistakes will be made hastily, stumbles will be made publicly. We will try to change, to be better or be done with something; these attempts will fail. These are mere wishes, and the ambiguity of the "get/No further than/The edges of the town" section is uncanny, and harrowing: is it "we" or our wishes who are "leaning asking from the car"? Have they split off from us? (This is echoed in "divided face" two lines later.) Somehow both have ended up out there, determined to leave. The final image slams it home: noting blank facts, "Acreage, mileage," (presumably as one continues to drive, even after acknowledging one is lost) numbers being the only thing one can take note of without any confusion as to their moral value.

Poem VII again features a first-line "between," and a simple gloss of the poem could be something like, "stay in between!", follow the middle path, or "don't cling, just let the moment and the relationships happen." Here the in-between is prescribed as the *way* to live, moment-to-moment, which sounds very similar to modern concepts of "mindfulness." This way of conceptualizing will extend even into Auden's later decades, when he was describing himself as Christian. Arthur Kirsch quotes him as saying, "for Christianity is a way, not a state..." (xx).

Let's consider two more poems from *Poems*, the first in its complete state, and the second reduced to its first four stanzas, of seventeen total (note: the first poem has no stanza breaks, the second's selection has three):

#### XIV

Sentries against inner and outer,  
 At stated interval is feature;  
 And how shall enemy on these  
 Make sudden raid or lasting peace?  
 For bribery were vain to try  
 Against the incorruptible eye  
 Too amply paid with tears, the chin  
 Has hairs to hide its weakness in,  
 And proud bridge and indignant nostril  
 Nothing to do but to look noble.  
 But in between these lies the mouth;  
 Watch that, that you may parley with:  
 There strategy comes easiest,  
 Though it seem stern, was seen compressed  
 Over a lathe, refusing answer,  
 It will release the ill-fed prisoner  
 It will do murder or betray  
 For either party equally,

Yielding at last to a close kiss  
 It will admit tongue's soft advance,  
 So longed for, given in abandon,  
 Given long since, had it but known. (Poems I, 35-6)

## XVI

### 1

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

So I remember all of those whose death  
 Is necessary condition of the season's setting forth,  
 Who sorry in this time look only back

To Christmas intimacy, a winter dialogue  
 Fading in silence, leaving them in tears.  
 And recent particulars come to mind;  
 The death by cancer of a once hated master,  
 A friend's analysis of his own failure,  
 Listened to at intervals throughout the winter  
 At different hours and in different rooms.  
 But always with success of others for comparison,  
 The happiness, for instance, of my friend Kurt Groote,  
 Absence of fear in Gerhart Meyer  
 From the sea, the truly strong man.

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

Coming out of me living is always thinking,  
 Thinking changing and changing living,

Am feeling as it was seeing—  
 In city leaning on harbour parapet  
 To watch a colony of duck below  
 Sit, preen, and doze on buttresses  
 Or upright paddle on flickering stream  
 Casually fishing at a passing straw.  
 Those find sun's luxury enough,  
 Shadow know not of homesick foreigner  
 Nor restlessness of intercepted growth. (Poems I, 36-7)

Poem XIV is the first to be discussed which overtly dabbles in imagery which suggests preparations for war, or some sort of vaguely defined, *looming*, armed conflict or violent revolution. *Poems* is awash in terminology, motifs, and thematic elements drawn from espionage, guerilla warfare, resistance or counter-revolutionary activity, and military maneuvers. Many of the poems allude to shifting or disputed borders, to rumors or glimpses of mysterious mobilizations in the dark, to paranoia of secret police or agents of uncertain association. The enemy is never identified, nor is it clear if they come from within or without of the community.

This quietly simmering ill-defined threat is a terminal pre- or inter- lude, and it causes a terminal anxiety which seems to turn individuals against each other and themselves. The poems never allow the tension to climax into a narrative of definitive event: the war or revolution does not erupt into a battle. Loud noises are scarce, isolated, and always distant. We are kept in the days or moments before a tangible beginning, or perhaps we are so long into a drawn-out crisis

that its features have become plodding and obscure. We wait, in-between peace and war, unable to rest or to act.

Poem XIV approaches this subject through a character: an individual with some authority over life and death, who uses the muddled complexities of conflict as license to serve only himself and his whims; he has godlike power to choose wrath or mercy for any individual, regardless of “party” alliance. He is a malignant, rogue force.

The “borderland” here, the “in-between” thing, is his face. “Sentries against inner and outer,/ At stated interval is feature”: the various parts of his face block his inner state from being revealed to others, and they block the appeals and emotions of others from penetrating his inner state.

The second, supplicant, character in the poem is searching for a weak point in these fortifications. The eyes are ruled out, then the chin, and finally the nose. “But *in between* these lies the mouth” (my emphasis) and *that* is the point of entry: the chink in the armor. The mouth is not only *in-between* the nose and the chin, it is also in-between the intentions and desires of its owner and those of others, in its function as instrument of verbal communication, or its pointed refusal of the same. It is in-between wrath and mercy, through its ability to declare death or freedom. It is in-between tenderness and rape, and exploitation and being exploited. The kiss as method of negotiation or victory suggests either (or both) that the tyrant needs only to be caressed, desired, cared for, loved, or that he has grown destructive through frustrated lust, and the weaker party must prostitute themselves to achieve their ends (and these may perhaps even be, ultimately, violent).

Finally, as an image of tense and stubborn masculinity, one could hardly do better than a mouth “...seen compressed/ Over a lathe, refusing answer”.



Poem XVI is a different affair, and one of only three poems in *Poems* to use a reliably personal “I” (Poem V: “I, decent with the seasons,” being another). The full poem runs to seventeen stanzas divided into four numbered sections. It stands as a kind of centerpiece in the collection: more than twice as long as any of the other poems, and as number 16 of 30, positioned right in the middle (*in-between* all the others!).

In comparison to the language and content of the rest of the book, the first four stanzas of this poem communicate a straightforward narrative in relatively clear language. We follow the speaker’s memory of a stroll through a city’s public garden in early spring, as his bright mood and ideas are turned suddenly by an encounter with human suffering and decay. His thoughts fold over his warm and sunny environment, and obliterate it. He begins to recount and relive the complex agonies recently experienced by individuals in his own life: the death of a formerly-resented teacher; the sad and perhaps needless and pathetic self-emasculation at length of a friend, endured with grim loyalty in installments paced and spread out over space to resist closure or rebuttal. Complex.

For a moment the narrator is neither in the present nor the past, but exists in some sort of middle-ground limbo (*in-between*). He finally snaps back to the present moment and the park, which is itself a place apart from its surroundings: a pastoral patch hemmed around by a buzzing iron, concrete, and brick metropolis. For a moment all is still, including the speaker, and then the rain comes down, “Making choice seem a necessary error.”

The second section begins with the speaker’s composure and language fraying into agitation; he grapples with the complexities of existence and consciousness in a staggering syntax: “Coming out of me living is always thinking,/Thinking changing and changing

living,/Am feeling as it was seeing—“ This is thrillingly communicated, and terrifying. The mad dash of the words, they way they warp and obstruct each other, and especially the opening of “Coming out of me...” It’s like an alien unstoppable force, a foreign power, is ceaselessly pouring out of the inmost self. This is also present in the “it” of “Am feeling as it was seeing—“

The speaker is momentarily caught in a spiraling terror of the “in-between” nature of experience, aware of the constant internal commentary on the external moment, and how a cue can turn that commentary, and cloud the external, and unleash a torrent of imagery and emotions from and about another time and place in *this time and place!*

He snaps out of it and refocuses on the external; on pleasant, calm little ducks. And yet the very simplicity and contentment of the ducks serves only as a reminder of the burden of human frustration and misery that they are spared. The peace of the ducks, so close at hand in the physical world, is not accessible to the speaker.

The poem proceeds from the first four stanzas to make a sort of arc through the seasons, emotions, memories. It enacts a circuit of grief processing, negotiation, “bargaining,” and so on. Moments of despair are followed by “and yet,” which are in turn followed by further calibration and correction. The ducks make a return appearance.

I’m aware that I sound a bit flippant here, but I genuinely love this poem. It is a first attempt for Auden at a larger poetic canvas; a first attempt at a more accessible language, and it is his first major overt poetic attempt to find some stable philosophy or moral foundation amidst the chaotic “in-betweenness” of a modern lived existence that threatens to make spiritual orphans of us all.

Most of the other poems in *Poems* feature elements of an ominous, or at least uneasy, geographic terrain in the aforementioned time of unspecified war or conflict: spies, treason, frontier-crossing, the sense of a slow-burning fuse. Seamus Heaney said the poems had “doomwatch and kicking energy” (112). Seamus Perry expands: “Auden created a wholly new mental space, a vivid psychogeography of industrial ruin and creaking infrastructure, mysterious power blocs and disputed borders, all played out against a desolate, tussocky northern landscape” (LRB).

Critics also noted the inclination and gesture towards dramatization and narrative, however momentary or obscure, in even the most obscure poems:

Consider this and in our time

As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman:

The clouds rift suddenly - look there

At cigarette-end smouldering on a border

At the first garden party of the year. (Poems I, XXIX, 52)

The street music seemed gracious now to one

For weeks up in the desert. Woken by water

Running away in the dark, he often had

Reproached the night for a companion

Dreamed of already. They would shoot, of course,

Parting easily who were never joined. (Poems I, XV, 36)

Finally, even the most difficult pieces manage passages of language that stick in the  
brain:

A neutralizing peace

And an average disgrace (Poems I, I, 26)

From gradual ruin spreading like a stain;

Converting number from vague to certain (Poems I, II, 27)

Their fate must always be the same as yours,

To suffer the loss they were afraid of, yes,

Holders of one position, wrong for years. (Poems I, III, 28)

Travelling by daylight on from house to house

The longest way to the intrinsic peace,

With love's fidelity and love's weakness. (Poems I, IV, 29)

Simple to prove

That deeds indeed

In life succeed

But love in love

And tales in tales

Where no one fails. (Poems I, XIX, 42)

And what was livelihood

Is tallness, strongness

Words and longness,

All glory and all story

Solemn and not so good. (Poems I, XXI, 44)

To ask the hard question is simple;

Asking at meeting

With the simple glance of acquaintance

To what these go

And how these do:

To ask the hard question is simple,

The simple act of the confused will.

But the answer

Is hard and hard to remember (Poems I, XXVII, 50)

The writing marked itself off, marginally, from “high-modernism” in a few obvious ways, the first in its flat rejection of allusions to classical sources in names and imagery. This was, marginally, a more populist poetry, more current, and whatever obscure images (at least, if not their meanings) arose could be ultimately identified in the present world. The second

difference is the dismissal, as unnecessary, of fragmentary form; instead the tangential or elliptical took its place within the flow of the speaker's ideas, the external "casing" being more-or-less of traditional poetic pedigree. And while Auden embraced rhyming he also wrote (to quote Kingsley Amis on Tennyson's poem "Ænone") "blank verse that sounds as if nobody else had ever used the form" (12). He sounded unique at the time: terse, intuiting a menace, with gestures towards the uncanny.

Auden became, with the publication of *Poems*, more famous more quickly than any British poet since Byron. He capitalized on this instantly, leaping into playwriting (in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood), book reviewing, and prose production for periodicals in general. Those associated with him: Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, Isherwood, and a few others, were assumed to be of a single mind, aesthetically and politically.

What their politics *were*, however, proved difficult to pin down, and the contemporary vogue for Communism amongst the youthful intelligentsia at large was ladled onto the group without tacit confirmation. For the moment Auden remained, like Bob Dylan later, ambiguous and non-committal with regards to political statement. Nonetheless he was, again like Dylan, hoisted into a position of artistic spokesman for the Left. He gave them their vocabulary, and he certainly did believe that the UK was smugly stuck in the past, head in the sand; dangerously static amidst the on-rushing tide of modernity.

In 1932 Auden published *The Orators*, a book-length, form-bending, unclassifiable text (it includes graphs and pictograms) that would require its own thesis-length study to do it justice. Frank O'Hara loved it, saying "it goes streaming along like the most marvelous thing imaginable" (66) and, when O'Hara got tired of delivering his own poems at public readings, he

would instead read Auden, frequently parts of *The Orators*. Edward Mendelson describes the book:

...a long three-part poem in prose and verse, alternately comic and gnomic, intended as an anatomy and critique of leader-worship in the larger world of left- and right-wing politics and in the microcosm of English middle-class schools. Friends who read the manuscript seem to have surprised him by their difficulty in making sense of it, and when he prepared it for publication he proposed to add a preface (vetoed by Eliot) that began, "I feel that this book is more obscure than it ought to be." (152)

Then, in 1933, he was blessed with that classic life-event for poets since time immemorial: the visionary experience. Disinclined as he was to hyperbole when it came to subjects immaterial, there is no reason to doubt Auden's sincerity in his few statements about this occurrence. This event took place at the Downs School, in the west of England, where he was teaching at the time. From a letter quoted by Carpenter:

One fine summer night in June 1933 I was sitting on a lawn after dinner with three colleagues, two women and one man. We liked each other well enough but we were certainly not intimate friends, nor had any one of us a sexual interest in another. Incidentally, we had not drunk any alcohol. We were talking casually about everyday

matters when, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, something happened.

I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly – because, thanks to the power, I was doing it – what it means to love one’s neighbor as oneself...My personal feelings towards them were unchanged – they were still colleagues, not intimate friends – but I felt their existence as themselves to be of infinite value and rejoiced in it. (138)

He knew at the time that the experience would come to an end eventually, and “when it did, my greeds and self-regard would return...The memory of the experience has not prevented me from making use of others...but it has made it much more difficult for me to deceive myself about what I am up to when I do.” (138)

This experience, which Auden called his “vision of agape,” had a lasting impact on all aspects of his life and work. His reading, book-reviewing, and public prose writing in general increasingly reflected his search for a moral and compassionate foundation or framework from which one could contemplate and interact with the outside world, as well as a search for some sort of artistic and civic plan of action, and for some sort of hope which could be presented responsibly, without denying the complexities and ambiguities of modern life. For his poetry, the effect was a gradually decreasing obscurity, and an occasional “happy ending.”



### Chapter 4: The Second Book

Auden's next collection of poetry, published in 1936 and titled *Look, Stranger!* in the UK and *On this Island* in the U.S., shows his expanding range, as well as his capacity to write verse with broad public appeal. The book contains a variety of poetic forms, including a sestina, sonnets, and pieces which could be described as "light verse." It also contains the first of what could be called his "biographical" poems (note: a single stanza break):

#### XIII

A shilling life will give you all the facts:  
 How Father beat him, how he ran away,  
 What were the struggles of his youth, what acts  
 Made him the greatest figure of his day:  
 Of how he fought, fished, hunted, worked all night,  
 Though giddy, climbed new mountains; named a sea:  
 Some of the last researchers even write  
 Love made him weep his pints like you and me.

With all his honours on, he sighed for one  
 Who, say astonished critics, lived at home;  
 Did little jobs about the house with skill  
 And nothing else; could whistle; would sit still  
 Or potter round the garden; answer some  
 Of his long marvellous letters but kept none. (Poems I, 195-6)

This is the mode and the tone that would, in John Fuller's phrase, make "the Auden of the Thirties a household name for apt metaphor, concision and suggestiveness." Fuller continues, "What is it we feel we require from an Auden poem? Something political, perhaps, something understated, but dramatic. And accurately coloured with deceptively simple moral observations and quietly charged implications" (xi).

In 1970 Fuller, a poet himself, published *A Reader's Guide to W.H. Auden*, and in a very real sense put his reputation and career on the line by doing so. Auden was "in those days still scorned by the Leavisites, regretted by English intellectuals as a Lost Leader, and naturally absent from syllabuses" (vii). I will come back to this fall from fashion which Auden experienced later in life. Fuller was amongst the earliest and most insightful commentators on, and explicators of, Auden's poetic work as its arc was nearing completion. From the introduction to his 2000 selection of the poems:

You might say that modernism has provided the automobile of literature with a fifth gear, but that post-modernism also likes to get out all the old road maps. In this sense, Auden is our first post-modernist poet. In the 1930's, in a restless quest for settled belief, he was driven by the investigative and forensic possibilities of all the varied genres, voices and forms of the English poetic tradition. (x)

But back to poem XIII. The language reads as simply as children's verse, is intelligible to most audiences, and contains nothing poetically "haughty" or elitist. There is no grand manner, no romanticist heart-on-the-sleeve in the language; nothing, let's say, that would be embarrassing to (let's pretend we're British) a pub full of football fans. And yet the text is surprising, and surprising in part *because* the subject, a sort of "grand public man," a man of action, was secretly a romantic. His unrequited love was perhaps the central factor of his life, and his beloved, to really rub it in, was not a person of worldly or societal accomplishment, not particularly driven, nor particularly attentive to his communications or his high regard in the eyes of society.

There is an inversion here of all that is typically held to be masculine, heroic, accomplished, and a sense that the truth behind the public personas of greatness is ordinary, unexceptional, even mundane, and perhaps pathetic. The beloved's sense of the subject's devotion is so disinterested as not even to elicit something which could be called a reaction. It seems to not even ruffle their world (noticeably, and masterfully, Auden (who was *mostly* gay) has kept the beloved's gender unspoken: a tactic he used often and which helped readers of all genders and sexual orientations relate to his work). In addition, the beloved does their "little jobs" with "skill," suggesting intelligence, and "could whistle" and "sit still" and "potter around the garden," all of which suggest some sense of joy and peace, a sort of confidence and self-sufficiency, a contentment with their situation and home, a situation which could of course include a spouse or partner (not explicitly denied) who by contrast with the "great man" ostensibly provides something he cannot. The final, double, indifference is to the great man's "long marvellous letters" (a hint of hollowness, or irrelevance, to the possession of literary virtuosity as a personal attribute) and to the portion of posterity which will deem them documents of importance.

There is so much going on here. There is the particular British note of “taking someone down a peg,” as well as of self-effacement, for by 1936 Auden was hugely famous and constantly in the press and on the radio, either in his own words or in pieces written about him and his “circle.” There is the chummy common vocabulary, as in “Love made him weep his pints like you and me.” There is the flawless simplicity of the opening, “A shilling life will give you all the facts:”. There is the capitalization of the “Father,” which adds to the deflation, into a beaten child, of the biographical subject. There is a democratic sense of “maybe we all have the same problems,” as well as a sense that “we’re looking to the wrong places for fulfillment and insight.” And there is a way of reading the poem that suggests the beloved is a woman, and that women have a greater intelligence, a greater understanding of value; and that the domestic sphere is a place of sanity, of true worth, requiring “little” jobs which are anything but small; a haven from the blustery, pompous, ridiculous, and vanity-driven outside world controlled by action-oriented “great men.”

What nailed the poem, and poems like this (‘Musée des Beaux Arts,’ for example), into the broad public (as differentiated from the poetry-reading public) mind, however, was the simplicity, memorability, quotability, and sense of inevitability of the language. Auden’s most popular poems stick in the brain. He *still* is quoted, often as a sort of shorthand (“x is like *this*...” or “As Auden said...”), all the time, in the literary press that I read most habitually. He pops up in 60% of *all issues* of the *London Review of Books* since it began publishing in 1979, and 65% of the issues of the *New York Review of Books*, which began in 1963.

Anyway, the poem opens up an “in-between” space for the reader, by gesturing ambiguously with unexpected facts about a character’s life. Their “textbook” hero narrative has

become something we can't pin down anymore, and we can be certain of nothing except that our prior certainty was mistaken.

Several poems in this second poetry collection suggest that Auden had come up with one “foundation” or answer to the in-betweenness and unmoored nature of life. The answer was personal romantic love. If the world is hopeless, at least we can support and comfort one another in a partnership. The first poem below continues to have one foot in the clipped language and the often armed and suspicious metaphorical territory predominating in his previous book, while the second poem blossoms into unabashed lyricism (note: both poems have two stanza breaks):

## XXVI

The night when joy began  
Our narrowest veins to flush  
We waited for the flash  
Of morning's levelled gun.

But morning let us pass  
And day by day relief  
Outgrew his nervous laugh;  
Grows credulous of peace

As mile by mile is seen  
No trespasser's reproach

And love's best glasses reach  
No fields but are his own. (Poems I, 212)

## XXVII

Fish in the unruffled lakes  
The swarming colours wear,  
Swans in the winter air  
A white perfection have,  
And the great lion walks  
Through his innocent grove;  
Lion, fish and swan  
Act, and are gone  
Upon Time's toppling wave.

We till shadowed days are done,  
We must weep and sing  
Duty's conscious wrong,  
The Devil in the clock,  
The Goodness carefully worn  
For atonement or for luck;  
We must lose our loves,  
On each beast and bird that moves  
Turn an envious look.

Sighs for folly said and done  
 Twist our narrow days;  
 But I must bless, must praise  
 That you, my swan, who have  
 All gifts that to the swan  
 Impulsive Nature gave,  
 The majesty and pride,  
 Last night should add  
 Your voluntary love. (Poems I, 212-13)

Poems like *these* might embarrass the football fans in the pub, and might be too unlike casual speech and narrative, too “poetic” for the broad public, but they succeed with the smaller audience, the poetry-reading public. Auden could go populist or play to the inside crowd.

Poem XXVI has an interesting schematic technique: it uses a vowel rhyme or near-rhyme scheme of ABAB *and* has the final consonants “rhyming” in a scheme of ABBA (for example, line 2’s “flush” vowel-rhymes with line 4’s “gun” and consonant-rhymes with line 3’s “flush”). So, two sets of line-ending “echoes” are happening simultaneously, each line-ending chiming with two of the other three in its stanza. The very tangible beauty of this technique, which can be easily heard if the poem is read aloud, is a sort of boomerang-like effect in each stanza: we launch into something completely foreign from the first to the second line: different vowel *and* different consonant, then the third line turns into doubly familiar territory, with combined energy: taking its consonant from line two and its vowel from line one, and finally the fourth line

sets us back down, but changed: the consonant from the first line, the vowel from line two. The consonant finishes the sound here, it is the “closer” (or final) note. Additionally, this consonant arc is formed with the first and final (twelfth) line of the poem as well: “began” and “own.”

Thus: three little, complicated arcs inside of a big arc, which begins with a beginning, soars out into an anxious development, and ends in a sense of security and fidelity (for now at least). That “credulous” in “credulous of peace” adds to the ambiguous whiff.

A further note on this poem’s stanza structure: While reading it again for this paper I thought I recognized it, and after a moment, Tennyson’s ‘In Memoriam’ came to mind. So, I took a look. I knew his stanza was four lines, and that both poems are iambic, but Auden’s is trimeter vs. Tennyson’s tetrameter. I knew that Tennyson had some kind of ABBA arc, but his is a hard “vowel *and* consonant” rhyme scheme, so his second and third lines remain paired and isolated from the lines on either side, rather than Auden’s more complex dual-technique. It *absolutely* may be too much to read into this (and I can find no previous criticism or scholarship making this connection to Tennyson with this poem, nor did Auden mention it), but I’d *like to believe* that this is a conscious *and* critical homage, tweaking the form into a more complex pattern of relationships, one in which, no matter which line-end in a stanza you pick, it will always be related to two others, but never the fourth, thus leaving a (“modern”? and “sophisticated”?) anxious element in each stanza scenario, no matter which way you parse it.

Also perhaps of note here are the three apostrophes, signifying possession, each of which are potentially related to danger, an enemy, or warfare: “morning’s levelled gun” obviously, but also the “trespasser’s reproach” and “love’s best glasses,” in this reading a pair of binoculars, not limited in purpose to scouting terrain for a threat, but in this case doing precisely that, and finding, gladly one presumes, the security of *possession*, his “own” “fields,” i.e. the territory of



his beloved's body and soul. The general sense of a passionate love affair beginning in anxiety from all the obstacles (here militarized) which could prevent its development into a relationship is seemingly resolved, but with a hint, perhaps, that a lover has taken to militaristic tactics (he is now linked to possessiveness, which the poem links to warfare, or violence, or an interloper) to survive the situation.

However, "love's best glasses" is a beauty of a phrase on its own, and interpretable in a number of other ways (it could be the beloved's glasses glancing at "him" and his fields (his body and soul), or love-personified's glasses (and thus Love's "nervous laugh" seeing that he (Love) has ultimately conquered all visible terrain (both lovers, the whole situation), and anyway there is no reason for a devoted lover in a fulfilling relationship to feel ashamed about "giving themselves" to their partner. I think the poem makes beautifully concrete the anxiety of the early days of new love, without reducing the complexity or potential problems inherent in the situation. It's interesting that the main and inciting "problem" or obstacle is merely the arrival of the morning after the passion begins, and thus originates, emotionally and psychologically, with the lovers themselves: "Will it last?! Will it wear off?! Will one of us change our minds or lose interest?! Is he or she really as great as I think?! Does he or she think I'm better than I really am?! I'm just a big phony!" We can all relate.

Again, Poem XXVI presents romantic love as a potential solution, foundation, anchor against the messy in-betweenness of modern existence. It does so, however, with enormous anxiety: no confidence yet, everything tentative. The poem is hopeful, but its personified love is on the lookout for threats, and the sense is something like "...*maybe* this is the answer." We are in-between the uncertainty of an individual on their own and a partnered state of love and mutual

support. This is a way-station on the road between anxiety and security: still rattled, but cautiously optimistic.

Poem XXVII has, I think, the texture of what most people envisage when they think of “poetry”: mellifluous language, sentence structures tinkered just a smidge, a swan, “Time,” yearning, seasons. It has, also, recognizably “poetic” ideas: the tragedy of self-consciousness, the purity of nature, the mixed motives of virtue, praise and gratitude for a lover.

“And the great lion walks” ... I just love that. Hilarious, I think. It both “works” *and* is fully conscious of straddling a line, beyond which is Victorian stentorian ridiculousness. Perhaps, in fact, it is already over that line. Don’t get me wrong: this poem completely achieves its somewhat straightforward goal: it is unironically gorgeous *yet* surprising, it is moving *and* instantly quotable (“Sighs for folly said and done/Twist our narrow days;/But I must bless, I must praise...”). But...there is *something else* in Auden here: his sense of play, of fun.

## Chapter 5: Play

William Empson said of Auden's 1930's speaking and public reading voice, "There is always this curious curl of the tongue, you didn't know quite what he was laughing at, but you could hear this, this mysterious tone of fun going on" (375). Spender said, "he brought a touch of absurdity to his pronouncements" (245). This sort of double-dealing (in-betweenness) problematized the hopes of politically leftist organizers in Auden as a sort of artistic mouthpiece for the "cause." He wouldn't be hemmed in. From 1932 he collaborated with Isherwood on writing plays for the Group Theatre. These plays took their cue from Brecht and foregrounded their own artificiality. They also mixed theatrical forms at will, but the dominant characteristics were cabaret songs, absurdity, and comedy. In 1934 the pair wrote *The Dance of Death*, which they described as a "Marxist pantomime." I haven't read it. But here's Seamus Perry's description:

The death in question is that of the bourgeoisie, which has obediently succumbed to its historical destiny as the play closes, at which point the chorus comes forward and sings to the tune of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*:

O Mr. Marx, you've gathered  
All the material facts  
You know the economic  
Reasons for our acts.

Then, to pile bizarre on whimsical, Marx himself enters and announces:

“The instruments of production have been too much for him. He is liquidated.” (LRB)

This is, I think, dryly hilarious. And it isn’t quite the tone one would expect from supposed leftist artists. But “socialist realism,” one imagines, would have been too boring for Auden and Isherwood, under-nuanced and therefore dishonest. It is as if they think *everything* is ridiculous. Nevertheless, when the play opened the *Daily Worker*’s critic reviewed it enthusiastically, noting its contribution to the class struggle, and emphasizing the straightforward (for the critic, at least) narrative conclusion, quoted by Perry: “Fascist demagoguery is punctuated by the slogans of the United Front. And as death dies Fate announces his will, in which the whole technical and cultural heritage of capitalism passes into the hands of the proletariat” (LRB). Tone, however, is a unit of meaning, and perhaps the *Worker*’s critic was deaf to the play’s “curl of the tongue.” Perry says, “you would be hard put to decide whether the play was a hearty endorsement of communism or a spoof of it” (LRB).

Meanwhile (1936), Auden proposed two literary projects to publishing houses: an anthology of “light verse” spanning the centuries, compiled and introduced by himself for the Oxford Press, and an Icelandic travel book for Faber & Faber. Both projects were accepted. Auden would work on the anthology over the next few years (along with many other similar projects, like *The Poet’s Tongue*: an anthology of poetry accessible to schoolchildren), but first he set off for Iceland by boat, on Faber’s dime. It was his first trip to the country of his ancestors, and the source of the beloved sagas.

In the 1930's the travel book was a major literary genre in the UK. These were generally written by people of wealth, with a hint of empire snobbery in their observations of life in the lands they visited; a sort-of anthropological "look at the natives" feel. These books included general travel tips for the reader who might wish to make the same journey, as well as synopses of national, regional, and local history, quotations from notable people in the past about their own experiences in the region, lyrically descriptive impressions and celebrations of nature, and finally photographs, tastefully composed, of the landscape, the major "attractions" or "sites," and the local people themselves.

Auden sailed with a plan to spend the initial six weeks alone in the country compiling information, impressions, and connections, and then to be joined first by Louis MacNeice (friend, poet, scholar, and collaborator on the travel book), and later by a group of ten schoolboys, students from the school where Auden taught until 1934. The collected group would take a ten-day guided tour of the country's interior on horseback.

For the boat journey Auden brought along two books, one of which was Byron's *Don Juan*, which he'd yet to read. Byron, during the years of writing the long poem, 1819-1824 (he published it in installments, only his death brought it to a close), was an exile from the U.K., first in Italy, later in Greece. And the world at the time seemed particularly full of conflict, disruption, and anxiety. With endless wit, Byron used the poem to meditate on current affairs, reflect on his home country from afar, and address writers from the past with whom he felt affinity or whose work he disliked. Auden felt he could use a similar form as a part of his Icelandic book project, and he began to compose the long poem "Letter to Lord Byron" during his early weeks in Iceland.

The “travel book” which emerged from this trip, *Letters from Iceland*, is an incredibly playful and sophisticated text. It is also very funny. I think it’s one of the more interesting and formally audacious books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a grand example of how a poet’s familiarity with formal conventions leads (in Auden’s case) not to stiff and standard museum-piece writing, but rather provides the ability to shape-shift at will within the text, to play style against tone, to construct a narrative or rhythm or atmosphere (and a readerly expectation along with it) and then to yank the rug out and head in a different direction.

Some readers unfamiliar with Auden’s broader body of work have a vague impression that he was a formal stickler and a stylistic reactionary. This couldn’t be further from the truth, or more beside the point. Technical knowledge was, for him, a set of possible maneuvers, which could be combined, exchanged, or discarded at any given moment. A high percentage of the work from every era of his career reveals itself on closer inspection (if not immediately) as a sort of Frankenstein-ing of formal elements into something brand new. Here’s James again:

Auden mastered all the traditional lyric forms as a matter of course, bringing to some of them – those which had been imported from rhyme-rich languages and for good reasons had never flourished – the only air of consummate ease they would ever possess. *At the same time* he did a far more thorough job than even “vers libre” had done of breaking down the last vestiges of the artificial grip the lyric still had on the written poem. He produced apprehensible rhythmic unities which were irregular not only from line to line but within the lines themselves. (emphasis added,

3)

Just as an experienced artisan is going to produce a finer chair, or a more expansive weapons arsenal is going to win a battle, so too a craft-aware poet can be more experimental, more precise or spectacular in effect, more liberating, and more sophisticated (and subversive) than a writer who's just "letting it flow" with language. Joseph Brodsky's idea about this: rejection of form is a rejection of innovation. My analogy for meter and form in writing is muscle tone. Generally, I would say, writing that doesn't have *something* going on with these elements looks, sounds, and feels flaccid, flabby, and wan; whereas writing which *does* contain them has contour, firmness, power, a pulse.

One more note on form: The imposition of rules or restraints (which can after all be discarded or exchanged at any moment) *generates* the unexpected metaphorical linkages and surprising turns of phrase that we expect from poetry. It *forces* the strange but somehow "true" (the uncanny, the mysterious, the "wild" beauty) to emerge in the text. It makes the writer *smarter* than they are on their own. Auden would add that, just as an individual's ego needs to be checked or instructed, so too does writerly whim. The argument against formal convention as an aesthetic embodiment of capitalist and patriarchal methods of thought and expression, as a sort of self-reproducing cultural virus, *sounds* plausible in theory, but in practice it restricts insight, reduces creative possibilities, and produces uneven (and often self-absorbed) writing.

## Chapter 6: *Letters from Iceland*

What immediately follows is a description, with quotes, of the contents of *Letters from Iceland*. I sketch it out before providing commentary, rather than alternating between the two, to give a sense of its on-rushing, multi-format, kitchen-sink nature.

It opens with the first of five “parts” of “Letter to Lord Byron,” the remainder of which arrive at forty-odd page intervals. Here are the first five stanzas:

Excuse, my lord, the liberty I take

In thus addressing you. I know that you

Will pay the price of authorship and make

The allowances an author has to do.

A poet’s fan-mail will be nothing new.

And then a lord-Good Lord, you must be peppered,

Like Gary Cooper, Coughlin or Dick Sheppard,

With notes from perfect strangers starting, “Sir,

I liked your lyrics, but *Childe Harold*’s trash”,

“My daughter writes, should I encourage her?”

Sometimes containing frank demands for cash,

Sometimes sly hints at a platonic pash,

And sometimes, though I think this rather crude,

The correspondent’s photo in the rude.



As for manuscripts – by every post...

I can't improve on Pope's shrill indignation,

But hope that it will please his spiteful ghost

To learn the use in culture's propagation

Of modern methods of communication;

New roads, new rails, new contacts, as we know

From documentaries by the G.P.O.

For since the British Isles went Protestant

A church confession is too high for most.

But still confession is a human want,

So Englishmen must make theirs now by post

And authors hear them over breakfast toast.

For, failing them, there's nothing but the wall

Of public lavatories on which to scrawl.

So if ostensibly I write to you

To chat about your poetry or mine,

There're many other reasons; though it's true

That I have, at the age of twenty-nine

Just read *Don Juan* and I found it fine.

I read it on the boat to Reykjavik

Except when eating or asleep or sick. (Prose I, 179-80)

The other book Auden brought on the boat was a novel by Jane Austen, about whom he writes here at length, but here's a snippet:

Then she's a novelist. I don't know whether

You will agree, but novel writing is

A higher art than poetry altogether

In my opinion, and success implies

Both finer character and faculties.

Perhaps that's why real novels are as rare

As winter thunder or a polar bear.

The average poet by comparison

Is unobservant, immature, and lazy.

You must admit, when all is said and done,

His sense of other people's very hazy

His moral judgments are too often crazy,

A slick and easy generalization

Appeals too well to his imagination. (Prose I, 181)

And another...

You could not shock her more than she shocks me;

Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.

It makes me most uncomfortable to see  
 An English spinster of the middle-class  
 Describe the amorous effects of “brass”,  
 Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety  
 The economic basis of society. (Prose I, 182)

The poem goes on to discuss the current world-wide state of affairs, state of literature, the author and Byron’s coinciding or conflicting opinions on particular writers (Wordsworth, it’s agreed, is a bore), and the form the Iceland book will take...

Every exciting letter has enclosures,  
 And so shall this – a bunch of photographs,  
 Some out of focus, some with wrong exposures,  
 Press cuttings, gossip, maps, statistics, graphs;  
 I don’t intend to do the thing by halves.  
 I’m going to be very up to date indeed.  
 It is a collage that you’re going to read. (Prose I, 182)

Part I of “Letter to Lord Byron” having come to a close, the next chapter is a “letter” addressed to Christopher Isherwood, but this “letter” begins with a *poem*. And *this poem* has a sincerely somber and contemplative tone. The first stanza (of thirteen):

And the traveller hopes: “Let me be far from any

Physician”; And the ports have names for the sea;  
 The citiless, the corroding, the sorrow;  
 And North means to all: “Reject!” (Prose I, 185)

After the poem has reached its conclusion, the “letter” continues in prose:

Dear Christopher,

Thank you for your letter. No, you were wrong. I did not write “the *ports* have names for the sea” but “the *poets* have names for the sea.” However, as so often before, the mistake seems better than the original idea, so I’ll leave it. Now, as to your questions:

1. “I can’t quite picture your arrival. What was your impression of Reykjavik harbour? Is there any attempt to make the visitor feel that he is arriving at a capital city?”

Not much. There is nothing by the pier but warehouses and piles of agricultural implements under tarpaulin. Most of the town is built of corrugated iron....My first impression of the town was Lutheran, drab and remote. (Prose I, 186)

This answer continues, after which the questions answered are: 2. “What does Reykjavik look like?” 3. “What do the Icelandic authors write about?” 4. “I suppose the originals of the fiction-characters are generally well-known?” 5. “Isn’t the audience of the Icelandic novelist very small?” 6. “Can he make a living?” 7. “Tell me about the young Icelander. What does he think about? What are his ambitions?” 8. “What about the sex-life?” 9. “Is there a typical kind of

Icelandic humor?” And, finally: 10. “What feelings did your visit give you about life on small islands?” Auden’s reply to this question:

If you have no particular intellectual interests or ambitions and are content with the company of your family and friends, then life on Iceland must be very pleasant, because the inhabitants are friendly, tolerant and sane. They are genuinely proud of their country and its history, but without the least trace of hysterical nationalism. I always found that they welcomed criticism. But I had the feeling, also, that for myself it was already too late. We are all too deeply involved with Europe to be able, or even to wish to escape. Though I am sure you would enjoy a visit as much as I did, I think that, in the long run, the Scandinavian sanity would be too much for you, as it is for me. The truth is, we are both only really happy living among lunatics. (Prose I, 190)

The next chapter is a “letter” to another friend, but in the form of a poem. Then we find a section entitled “For Tourists,” written in faux-guidebook style, which features practical information for the prospective traveler, as well as glowing recommendations and grudging endorsements, such as “The Borg is called a first-class hotel but is not the kind of thing you like if you like that kind of thing; still it is the only place where you can get a drink.” Throughout the “For Tourists” section, which was penned by Auden, are occasional remarks in parentheses by Louis MacNeice. These serve as correctives to Auden’s recommendations. For instance, after a long description of the clothing necessary for a wilderness expedition, we find, “(So W.H.A. I did not wear nearly as

much as this. L.M.)” (196). A bibliography of travel guides and informational sources ends this section.

Interspersed throughout the entirety of the book are photographs taken during the trip with captions excerpted from the poems, sometimes in a straight-forward manner and sometimes ironically.

Part two of “Letter to Lord Byron” follows. This simultaneously moves the poem’s speaker’s narrative forward (he’s been in the country a few weeks road-tripping around) *and* proceeds with its address to the dead poet, on topics from both of their eras. For instance:

The vogue for Black Mass and the cult of devils  
                                     Has sunk. The Good, the Beautiful, the True  
 Still fluctuate about the lower levels.  
                                     Joyces are firm and there there’s nothing new.  
                                     Eliots have hardened just a point or two.  
 Hopkins are brisk, thanks to some recent boosts.  
                                     There’s been some further weakening in Prousts. (Prose I, 212)

Next is a chapter titled “Sheaves from Sagaland: An Anthology of Icelandic Travel.” This is comprised of quotations (some sentence-length, some running to several pages) from English-language writers throughout history on their impressions of the place. Each quote is presented under an introductory title, which often presents an ironic counter-tone. For instance:

*Impressions of Poet*

“A gallows of slush.”

– A Tenth Century Scald. (Prose I, 217)

*Concerning their habits*

“If I attempted to describe some of their nauseous habits, I might fill volumes.”

– Pfeiffer (Prose I, 220)

*Good news for the Geography Mistress*

“The search for this useful lichen forms the annual holiday of Icelandic girlhood.”

– Howell. (Prose I, 222)

*Iceland is German*

“Für uns Island ist das Land.”

– An unknown Nazi. (Prose I, 217)

There then follows several pages of passages excerpted from other texts, which fill in the history of Iceland, including detailed descriptions of recent historical events which lead to the country’s increasing independence. Also included is a long contemporary account from 1809 of a traditional Icelandic supper, as well as a local church minister’s extended (and harrowing) account of the major eruption, in 1727, of one of the island’s volcanoes. A spreadsheet-style extract from an 1805 parish register lists local citizens, the farm they are associated with, occupation, age, whether they are confirmed in the church or not, their ability (or lack) to read, their conduct, and their general abilities. A bibliography then lists the sources of all extracted material.

Then we have another letter addressed to a friend, first in poem form. After the final stanza it jumps into prose: “Dear Dick, I have just been staying in the Njál country. I gather the Nazis look on that sort of life as the cradle of all the virtues. The enclosed laws and regulations seem so dotty, I thought they might interest you. W.”

Here Auden includes (still part of the letter) several pages of various laws extracted from the sagas and various other historical, Iceland-originating Viking texts. These are humorous in their “dotty”-ness, but Auden’s reference to the Nazis was no joke. The Nazis *did* have their eye on Iceland in 1936, and later in the book Auden will find himself on various forms of public transportation with them as they, presumably, “scout” the country under the guise of scholarly travel. We will come across this:

Great excitement here because Goering’s brother and a party are expected this evening. Rosenberg is coming too. The Nazis have a theory that Iceland is the cradle of the Germanic culture. Well, if they want a community like that of the sagas they are welcome to it. I love the sagas, but what a rotten society they describe, a society with only the gangster virtues. (Prose I, 265)

Auden next includes a prose diary of his first (solo) six weeks in the country. He is open-eyed and sympathetic but honest about moments of culture shock: “No one can accuse the Iclander of being dainty. I watched a large man opposite leisurely stuffing down large pieces of tepid fat like the hero of a Sunday-school story” (264). Included within the diary are even *more* native Icelandic writings which Auden has come across, and which he includes in full.



Following Auden's prose diary is a fictionalized expedition journal, jointly written by Auden and MacNeice, which narrates the wilderness trek of two middle-aged British women in the company of ten British schoolgirls and their female escort. This is an (otherwise basically factual) account of the authors and the party of schoolboys which accompanied them on their guided horseback tour of the island's interior, with the gender of all parties inverted. The results of this inversion and fictionalization are complex and difficult to relate in abbreviated form.

The book goes on and continues to twist and turn in form, content, and tone. It is a remarkably self-conscious and complex book, one which straddles eras and often sees them through the lenses of each other. It is thrilling even when dealing with serious subject matter, which it often has the audacity to mock. Auden takes the Nazi threat seriously, and that is all the more reason for him to make jokes at their expense, and to draw attention to legal doctrine in primary sources from Iceland's past which, though insane, may very well (as of 1936) become part of *some* code of law in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (as would prove to be true after the Nazis' rise to power).

Page-to-page Auden surfs from one register and style to another, here dishing with Byron, there reflecting on a regional fair or a village dance with calm, lyrical appraisal. He looks for signs of hope for humanity in the faces and cultural customs of regional people, and simultaneously keeps an eye on himself, lest he be romanticizing or belittling them. In his textual citations he revels in the lyricism, spiritual devotion, and calm observation of writers from the past, just as he is fascinated by their myopia, misguidedness, and self-delusions.

Taken as a whole, the book embodies the mutability and in-betweenness we find in so much of Auden's work. The perspective is constantly changing, as is the form and tone of voice.

The past is constantly building and informing the present, while the present talks back to the past. Letters turn into poems and then back into letters, mis-readings become the standard text, fictionalization stands in for reportage. The contemporary Icelandic people are sometimes viewed like the ducks in in poem XVI from Auden's first book: simple and sane, blessed with ignorance. The writer and his countrymen, however, no longer have access to this peace of mind. They can witness it but they can't get access it. For them "it's too late." Their contemporary, urban, multi-layered consciousness, with its simultaneous awareness of past and present, its relentless internal dialogue and drive for sense-making, its shifting sands of memory, emotion and analysis, is played out on the page in a constant shifting of styles, tones and methods of address. "Coming out of me living is always thinking,/ Thinking changing and changing living,/ Am feeling as it was seeing--".

The "play" of this is both a method of entertaining and a strategy for getting at the truth. Counterpoint can yield humor through contrast, but it can also suggest what is in-between: the unnamable center amidst the chorus of voices, eras, forms, emotions and ideas.

Three more notes on play or fun:

First: In *The Dyer's Hand*, a collection of essays published during his own lifetime (and which should be republished now), Auden at one point says, "among the half dozen or so things for which a man of honour should be prepared, if necessary, to die, the right to play, the right to frivolity, is not the least" (466).

Second: In *Academic Graffiti*, a slim late-career collection of four-line comedic portraits of authors from the past (entertaining but, in my opinion, his only inessential book) Auden uses an ABAB rhyme scheme, and in one poem ends line 1 with "Bysshe," and line 3 with "sissy." It

took me a minute to wrap my head around that move. It means that the reader must, retroactively, change the pronunciation of “Bysshe” from (the correct, as everyone knows) “*Bish*” to “*Bishee*,” which then rhymes with “sissy,” and which is then taken as a comment on the poet. This is either the sort of thing you find funny (I do), or it isn’t. Regardless, it’s play.

Third: For a 1967 profile for *The American Scholar*, Polly Platt visited Auden at his later-life summer home, in Austria, and he talked shop and showed her around the place. At one point in the tour, post-kitchen, she observes, “The poet smiled with the memory of last night’s dinner, declined to describe it, and opened the door to the guest room” (268). That “declined to describe it” is terribly funny, I think, and as behavioral humor goes, about as dry as it gets. Platt brilliantly conveys its spirit with her matter-of-fact tone.

## Chapter 7: The Career

Auden rounded out the decade with 1939's *Another Time*, his third collection of poems. The book features more poems familiar to modern readers than any of his other collections, in part because they are relatively short, but also because they are the perfection of some of his various modes of writing up to that time. The book features "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," "Musée des Beaux Arts," "As I walked out one evening," and "Lay your sleeping head, my love." The book is remarkable and deserves to be studied as a single text.

By necessity of space I must move swiftly over decades to come, but a few remarks are of importance. In the 1940's and 50's, when Auden lived primarily in New York City, he began to work in longer forms.

His 1941 book *The Double Man* (a particular favorite of mine), features the 41-page "New Year Letter" and, immediately following, 56 pages of "notes." Each note is associated with the line in the poem to which it relates. The notes are sometimes citations of sources or inspirations that gave birth to some element of the verse. Sometimes they are references to a further text for interested readers, sometimes elucidations of an idea, sometimes they are a further poem spawned off at an angle from the line to which they are addended, and sometimes they are something else completely, or several of these things combined in one. The result is at once a poem, its commentary, its sources, further poetry which is sometimes commentary and sometimes a fresh flight of fancy, and so on and so forth. The cumulative effect is sometimes bracing, sometimes overwhelming; the form is quasi-fractal, or branching out like a tree, a lichen network. It eludes any final grasp of its dimensions or implications. The poem plays with poetic conventions and expectations of proper poetic behavior. And, in its extra-textual poetic

extensions, self-commentary, citation of origin sources, and recommendations for further exploration, it challenges the idea that a poem is an isolated, frozen, unique object. “New Year Letter” is the capture of a fluid moment, in honest complexity, with all its layers of reflection and creation teased out: *here’s where this came from and here’s where it might go next*. The past and the future at the same time, *in the present*.

1956’s *For the Time Being* includes “The Sea and the Mirror,” which extends Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest* beyond its original conclusion, following the characters after the curtain falls. It is part verse and part prose poem, and features, in prose, “Caliban’s Address to the Audience,” a dazzling piece of literary art, the argument of which is, however, is the limits of art. John Ashbery thought it was the best thing Auden ever wrote.

As the decades moved on Auden continued to evolve his poetic style and continued to experiment. In subject matter there was somewhat of a shift of focus toward more private matters, or at least more local: community or household-based rather than civilization-wide. His search for security and stability, for a foundation or anchor, looked to the increasingly small-scale and commonplace. With his 1965 collection *About the House* he wrote of the joys and difficulties of friendships, dinner parties, and chores. The title poem from his final, posthumous collection *Thank You, Fog* provides a balanced example of the register he had largely adopted in the last stage of his life’s quest in verse:

Grown used to New York weather,  
all too familiar with Smog,  
You, Her unsullied Sister,  
I’d quite forgotten and what

You bring to British winters:  
now native knowledge returns.

Sworn foe to festination,  
daunter of drivers and planes,  
volants, of course, will curse You,  
but how delighted I am  
that You've been lured to visit  
Wiltshire's witching countryside  
for a whole week at Christmas,  
that no one can scurry where  
my cosmos is contracted  
to an ancient manor-house  
and four Selves, joined in friendship,  
Jimmy, Tania, Sonia, Me.

Outdoors a shapeless silence,  
for even those birds whose blood  
is brisk enough to bid them  
abide here all the year round,  
like the merle and the mavis,  
at Your cajoling refrain  
their jocund interjections,

no cock considers a scream,  
vaguely visible, tree-tops  
rustle not but stay there, so  
efficiently condensing  
Your damp to definite drops.

Indoors specific spaces,  
cosy, accommodate to  
reminiscence and reading,  
crosswords, affinities, fun:  
refected by a sapid  
supper and regaled by wine,  
we sit in a glad circle,  
each unaware of our own  
nose but alert to others,  
making the most of it, for  
how soon we must re-enter,  
when lenient days are done,  
the world of work and money  
and minding our p's and q's.

No summer sun will ever  
dismantle the global gloom

cast by the Daily Papers,  
 vomiting in slip-shod prose  
 the facts of filth and violence  
 that we're too dumb to prevent:  
 our earth's a sorry spot, but  
 for this special interim,  
 so restful yet so festive,  
 Thank You, Thank You, Thank You, Fog. (Poems II, 705-6)

Auden passed away shortly after penning this poem, and it provides a restful final note to the quest which played out through his life and work. Note the “in-between” nature of the holiday: a few “lenient days” sandwiched between minding the “p’s and q’s.” Life suspended for a moment. And spatially suspended: outside is a still, foggy, ill-defined, “shapeless silence.” Unlike the earliest poems, however, here the speaker has the solace of “Indoors specific spaces,/ cozy.” Indoors is distinct, loose but familiarly ritualized amongst friends. For the speaker now has non-anxious friendships, long-term battle-tested friendships, sanded smooth through endurance. A family of friends, a foundation. This gives strength. The fog will lift soon, with an animal and intellectual return to the outside world of action, volume, pressure. For the time being, however, the poem’s speaker has learned to accept and even embrace the in-between, the long pause, and to find peace in, *and in spite of*, the indistinctness of fog, vagueness, uncertainty.



## Chapter 8: Auden's "Stock" and the Availability of His Work to the Public

As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century tipped into its second half, several factors contributed to the slow descent of Auden's cultural "stock," on both sides of the Atlantic. First: his apparent return to the Anglican church and the Christian faith he had abandoned at thirteen. The reality of the situation is fully explored by Arthur Kirsch in his 2005 book *Auden and Christianity*, but Edward Mendelson summarizes it most efficiently:

His version of Christianity was more or less incomprehensible to anyone who thought religion was about formal institutions, supernatural beliefs, ancestral identities, moral prohibitions, doctrinal orthodoxies, sectarian arguments, religious emotions, spiritual aspirations, scriptural authority, or any other conventional aspect of personal or organized religion. (146)

...his religion had no supernatural elements, but instead focused on moral absolutes that he thought of as having the same kind of truth that the laws of physics have. (147)

Auden took seriously his membership in the Anglican Church and derived many of his moral and aesthetic ideas from Christian doctrines developed over two millennia, but he valued his church and its doctrines only to the degree that they helped to make it possible to love one's neighbor as oneself. (147)

Auden's "religion" was actually a sort of existentialism in which one has free will but an *obligation* of personal humility, love, and tolerance for one's fellow "man." This idea has plenty of ramifications for his writing, and for his critical sense, one example of which is his promotion of the small or "minor" (as when he collected and wrote an introduction for the anthology *19<sup>th</sup> Century Minor Poets*), and his gentle deflation of the "major," as in, for example, "Masterpieces should be kept for high holidays of the spirit."

This focus on acceptance, on love, and on improving oneself rather than criticizing others, was partially inspired by his close friendship with scholar and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the writer of a prayer which had recently been adopted by the new organization Alcoholics Anonymous (and subsequently by many other 12-step recovery programs) and called the "Serenity Prayer." The full prayer is: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

The problem, however, was that the idiosyncratic reality of Auden's "Christianity" was understandably lost in translation to the broad public (and even the literary press) throughout the remaining 30 years of his life, and in fact the misperception has yet to be corrected. From the outside this "churchy" thing dissuades many readers from "trying" Auden, and it fits snugly with the other major public misperception of Auden as a reactionary formalist in poetry, a priggish near- "grammar Nazi" who might correct your sentence structure across the dinner table.

Second: Auden's permanent move to the United States in 1939, which he described as a necessary escape from Britain's small, "grim," cultural "family" and its labelling of him as a Dylan-esque spokesman-for-a-generation, was viewed by the Brits, after the war broke out, as cowardice and betrayal. The fallout in the U.K. lasted until the 90's, when old grudges finally began to die off, and Auden's poem "Funeral Blues" was featured in the highly successful motion picture *Four Weddings and*

*a Funeral*. Suddenly Auden was a money-maker, and a cultural export to be proud of. Nonetheless, the semi-blacklisting of two decades in Britain did much to harm, diminish, and delay Auden scholarship and readership.

Third: Beginning in the 1940's, as Auden began to identify some of his earlier (and very popular) poems as morally suspect or irresponsible in their pursuit of effect at the expense of "truth," he decided to extensively revise them, or to refuse their republication outright. The effect of this was that a significant percentage of the poems from the first decade of his career were altered or suppressed until well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Only in 2013* did Faber & Faber begin to reissue his books in their original form, and even then *only in the U.K.* And it wasn't until 2022 that a *Collected Poems* finally emerge which presented all the poems in their original published form.

So, currently, an American reader can't get access to Auden's poetry as it was known and revered in its day without forking over nearly \$100 for the two-volume 2022 Princeton University Press hardbacks, and then they have to lug those things around. As far as I can tell, only one of the books Auden published in his lifetime is in print in the U.S.: *For the Time Being* from 1946. One can easily find various *Selected* editions (only one of which found Mendelson succumbing to pressure and printing the poems which had been disowned by Auden, and the revised poems in their original form), but *all* the *Collected* editions thus far produced by commercial publishing houses remain restricted to the poet's final revisions and restrictions. *Furthermore*, the 1976 *Collected Poems* (which was not redesigned until the mid-90's) had a page and font "setting" universally acknowledged as ugly, small, and difficult to read. Clive James claims an unnamed "major poet" once privately confessed that his inability to even attempt an acquaintance with Auden's work was due to the aesthetic appearance of that *Collected's* text, describing it as "barbed wire" which kept him out.

The complexities and difficulties of the situation go much further, but the outcome of all this is simple: confusion and difficulty for the reading public, particularly in America. The canon of the poet's work has been, and continues to be, obscured or poorly presented since all but the earliest days of his career.

Fourth: In the last year of his life Auden announced that he wished no biography would be written about him, and he requested that any acquaintances who had his letters in their possession burn them. Unsurprisingly, biographies did appear after his death, but the mood had been set, and although Mendelson's *Early Auden* and *Later Auden* are well-researched and insightful, they are focused primarily on the work rather than the life, while the three more traditional biographies are, as previously mentioned, not particularly thorough, insightful, well-researched or well-written. The effect of the situation is that knowledge of Auden's *lived life* and any insight it might throw onto the work has been obscured, perhaps permanently. Auden is the only major poet of his era whose letters have not been published, although this may change.

Finally: the sheer *mass* of Auden's literary output, combined with its variety of form (poems, book reviews, introductory essays, journalistic meditations, plays, songs, etc.) and the idiosyncrasy (and sometimes complexity) of its language, stylistic technique, thought and opinion, creates a difficulty for a reader to "get started" with his work, and difficult for a teacher to sum up or gloss. Auden is not a glossable writer; not a poet who can be wheeled out as an example of some "school" or "ism." As his close friend and one-time roommate Golo Mann (son of Thomas the novelist) said, "He thought truths out for himself. Many of them could have been expanded into whole books. But he presented them, in his own particular way, unsystematically. So there is no Auden 'philosophy'" (99). Nor, I would add, is there an Auden "style." All of this makes it easy to pass over him in an educational environment, or in a bookstore.

My recommendation for amending this state of affairs in the U.S.: A paperback reissue of all of his individual poetry collections, *Letters from Iceland*, and the volumes of prose published in his lifetime, with new and “sharp” covers. Don’t mess around: hire a design firm from Germany or the U.K.

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

Auden's body of work is the product of an immense struggle with existence. It wasn't easy for him to get up early and work a locked schedule every day for most of his life. It didn't come naturally to him to be patient, open-minded, or consistently kind to others. His early poetry flared with a sense of its own power. It evoked, or obliquely diagnosed, the "situation" on the ground: the contemporary spiritual and psychological moment; its in-betweenness. This poetic approach quickly came to feel vain, even immoral, and Auden made a choice to "use his powers for good," so to speak, rather than merely mimic, embody, or elucidate the insanity and paradox of modern human existence.

At this point his poetry becomes more longing, both for human connection and for a spiritual, moral, and intellectual foundation. Without dropping its use of the "in-between," either stylistically or as content, Auden's poetry consciously pivoted to a more caring, open, neighborly position. It became more formally playful, exploring possibility, new solutions. Ultimately, it had the confidence to directly address the ways in which we live, and how we might do better for each other and ourselves.

The changes of style and content in Auden's poetry are the result of a series of distinct, conscious, moral choices. No part of his evolution was easy. But each was deemed necessary, an obligation he bore to himself, his work, and his fellow humans.

Near the end of Polly Platt's interview with Auden in the summer of 1967, he discusses the "position" of poetry in contemporary culture:

There will always be people who like it, just as there always have been.

It is in a better position now. Just as before the camera, painting had to record many things having nothing to do with art, so before printing, poetry was the normal thing to write for recording because verse is easier to

remember. Now, poetry is freed from many things which were rather a burden. (267)

Platt then asks, “What should poetry do?” And....

Mr. Auden offered the chocolate biscuits around and lit a cigarette. Elbows on the table, he held it in front of his mouth as he talked so that his face was a smoky mask.

He said: “We are born in sin and it is very difficult to behave well. Human history is a sorry record, criminal and pathological. But life is as it is: difficult, but not impossible. You have to try to live as decently as you can, and not despair. One likes to think that poetry can help in certain ways...Some people write irresponsibly about despair. If they really gave up, they would commit suicide.” (267)

This statement, and the weight with which it is delivered, gives a sense of how seriously Auden took his role of compassionate advisor in later life. However much he enjoyed frivolity, here he is sincere. He answers the “big question” from the journalist (What should poetry *do*?), and he does so with care, and without cynicism. His note about individuals who “write irresponsibly about despair” shows a clear moral concern about the effect of dishonest, or dark, calculated writing on individuals grappling with their lives and their sanity. Auden acknowledges the chaos of existence and the difficulty of living, but his underlying note is encouragement. You feel that he believes in you.

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