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STAN SMITH

Introduction

'Of the many definitions of poetry, the simplest is still the best: "memorable speech"', W. H. Auden wrote in the Introduction to his 1935 anthology, *The Poet's Tongue* (*Poet's Tongue,* p. v). Auden is one of the few modern poets whose words inhabit the popular memory. Long before the recitation of 'Funeral Blues' in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, many of his phrases had passed into common use. His characterisation in 'September 1, 1939' of the 1930s as a 'low dishonest decade' has become definitive and ubiquitous, invoked even in quarters not normally associated with high literacy. Dan Quayle, for example, announcing his 1999 Presidential candidacy, applied it to the Clinton years. This poem alone has supplied titles for countless books, including studies of the economic origins of World War II (*A Low Dishonest Decade*), Soviet espionage (*The Haunted Wood*), the history of saloons (*Faces Along the Bar*) and a play about AIDS (*The Normal Heart*). Such diverse co-options indicate the range of reference Auden can pack into a single poem.

Ironically, a poem Auden rapidly disowned has become one of the most widely cited modern texts. Written in a 'dive' on New York's Fifty-Second Street on the day Germany invaded Poland, it took on a whole new significance after 11 September 2001. The *Times Literary Supplement*'s 'Letter from New York' after those events reported that Auden's words were now everywhere, reprinted in many major newspapers, read on national Public Radio and featured in hundreds of web chat-rooms. Students at Stuyvesant High, four blocks from Ground Zero, included the poem in a special issue of their newspaper distributed free by the *New York Times*, stressing its closing admonition: 'We must love one another or die.' Only rarely, however, did a country reeling from this assault on its security acknowledge the moral at the poem's heart: 'those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return'. Indeed, a nation in denial as well as in shock slapped down as un-American the few voices that dared draw the lesson which, the poem insists, all schoolchildren learn.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (1993) contains forty citations from Auden's work, shrewdly succinct observations such as that on Yeats ('silly like us'), and semi-aphoristic opening lines like those of 'Musée des Beaux Arts' or concluding ones, as in *Spain*'s reflections on an unforgiving history. Auden shares with Yeats (fifty citations) and T. S. Eliot (fifty-seven citations) a talent for turning the memorable phrase. But what distinguishes him is the *range* of his emotional and verbal reference. No one else strikes roots in such diverse areas of the collective linguistic unconscious as Auden. Even Yeats cannot match the range revealed by the *Dictionary of Quotations*, which extends from the lyric melancholy of 'Lay your sleeping head', through the gnomic utterances of the dense early poetry and the political intensities of the 1930s, to the brash demotic formula a former Tory Minister for Education, Kenneth Baker, adopted in 1980 as the title for an anthology of 'satirical and abusive verse': *I Have No Gun, But I Can Spit*.

Such responses testify to an ambivalent aspect of Auden's verse: its ability, as he put it in 'We Too Had Known Golden Hours', to sing from the 'resonant heart', with words that over the decades accrue new significances and establish new connections between some original complex of particulars and later ones. That poem also registered the dangers of such a talent: one's words may be hijacked, 'soiled, profaned, debased', 'pawed-at and gossiped-over' by the public, or concocted by meretricious editors into 'spells that befuddle the crowd'. In 1939, newly arrived in New York, Auden spoke at a dinner to raise money for Spanish refugees. The speech's success provoked a bout of self-contempt. As he wrote to a friend a few months later, 'I suddenly found I could really do it, that I could make a fighting demagogic speech and have the audience roaring. I felt just covered with dirt afterwards' (Carpenter, p. 256). Auden knew his poetry could have a similar effect. The self-loathing of the reformed sinner lies behind his expulsion of 'September 1, 1939', 'A Communist to Others' and even the revised 'Spain 1937' from his *Collected Shorter Poems* in 1966. A Foreword explained that such poems had been excised because they were 'dishonest', expressing feelings or beliefs he had never held, 'simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective'.

This somewhat rhetorical attempt to wring rhetoric's neck echoes Yeats echoing Verlaine. There is some irony in this, since it was Yeats Auden blamed for what a letter to Stephen Spender called in 1964 'my own devil of unauthenticity . . . false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonorities'. Yeats may indeed have made him 'whore after lies' (*Early Auden*, p. 206). But in 1941 he had explicated a punning line in *New Year Letter*, 'There lies the gift of double focus', with a note to the effect that the Devil is 'indeed, the father of

Poetry, for poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings'. An equally emphatic pronouncement in 1968 in *Secondary Worlds* declared that 'It is with good reason that the devil is called the Father of lies', in the context of distinguishing 'the White magic of poetry' from the verbal 'Black Magic' of propaganda, which practises 'enchantment as a way of securing domination over others'. For millions of people today words like communism, capitalism and imperialism, peace, freedom and democracy, he wrote, have 'ceased to be words, the meaning of which can be enquired into and discussed', and have become instead 'right or wrong noises to which the response is as involuntary as a knee-reflex' (*SW*, pp. 126–9).

The situation is actually a little more complicated. 'Art poétique', Verlaine's poem denouncing rhetoric, commends the 'chanson grise' (grey song, neither black nor white) where ambiguity is joined to precision, opening itself to 'other skies' and 'other loves'. But this is only a different kind of rhetoric, posturing flamboyantly in the very refusal to take sides. Auden's gift of double focus performs a similar function. Indeed, his art is often at its richest when it testifies, rhetorically, to just such mixed feelings and nebulous horizons. With unabashed chutzpah, his 1939 sonnet about Verlaine's lover Rimbaud speaks of 'the rhetorician's lie' bursting like a frozen pipe to make a poet. As he wrote in his elegy for Yeats, 'the words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living'. But it is in part rhetorical contrivance which ensures their resurrection as apparently direct responses to events they could not possibly have foreseen.

From his first public collection, *Poems* (1930), Auden was everywhere in the 1930s, both text and talisman. Naomi Mitchison in *The Week-end Review*, 25 October 1930, welcomed the volume as the harbinger of 'the New Generation', proof that 'the country is not going to the dogs after all'. Dylan Thomas carried around a copy of the volume until it fell to pieces. In 1932 John Hayward, the keeper of T. S. Eliot's critical conscience, wrote of *The Orators* as 'the most valuable contribution to English poetry since *The Waste Land*' (Haffenden, p. 114). The 'Auden effect' lay in that ability to catch the changing moods of the time in luminous images, magical phrases and breathtaking aperçus, expressing sentiments that people were unaware they shared until they read him. Such sentiments were often decidedly political, indicting a disintegrating social and economic system ripe for fascism, and propagating an alternative future in the form of a woolly, undefined 'communism' which bore little relation to the brutalities of Stalin's Soviet Union.

Auden's poems, however, also had a distinctive personal timbre, the sense of a vulnerable, embattled self which made them iconic to a generation whose psychic integrity seemed to be threatened by the impersonal forces

of a history out of control. 'Consider this and in our time' defined the stance of a generation, looking down on its culture with disdainful detachment from the Olympian heights of hawk or airman. Another poem set that generation's agenda as the quest for 'New styles of architecture, a change of heart'. The question at the start of *The Orators* in 1932, 'What do you think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well?' was asked with varying degrees of anxiety throughout the decade. The title poem of his major collection of 1936, *Look, Stranger!*, invited its readers to look without illusions on contemporary Britain, 'this island now'.

If Auden was the unremitting critic of 'our time', a large part of his appeal lay in the verbal and imagistic ferocity, the rhetorical splendour, of his denunciations and dissections. His readers went to his poetry to make their flesh crawl. Auden was himself sufficiently shrewd to recognise and manipulate such impure motives. Thirty years later, in *Secondary Worlds*, the poet who in 1939 had written in *Journey to a War* of places 'where life is evil now: / Nanking, Dachau', argued that to write or attend a play about Auschwitz would be 'wicked', for 'author and audience may try to pretend that they are morally horrified, but in fact they are passing an entertaining evening together, in the aesthetic enjoyment of horrors' (p. 84). In a similar vein, *A Certain World* in 1970 observed that Christmas and Easter could be subjects for poetry, but, like Auschwitz, not Good Friday, the reality of which was too horrible even for many Christians to contemplate. Yet in 1951 the crucifixion had provided the subject for the title poem of *Nones*, and became part of a major sequence of poems about Good Friday, 'Horae Canonicae', in *The Shield of Achilles* (1955), a contradiction unpicked here by Gareth Reeves.

Auden's apparently tough-minded attitude towards the bad faith of art is focused in a much-cited and decidedly rhetorical axiom of 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats': 'poetry makes nothing happen'. This somewhat dubious claim has become a truism of debates about the social function of art. But Auden's poetry, modified in the guts of innumerable successors, has certainly made happen innumerable later poems, by writers as diverse as East European dissidents like Joseph Brodsky, postcolonial poets of exile and deracination like Dom Moraes and Derek Walcott, and playful postmodernists like New York's John Ashbery, Northern Ireland's Paul Muldoon or Yorkshire's Simon Armitage, for all of whom Auden's verbal 'polymorphous perversity' has been exemplary. By contrast, the plays he wrote in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood for the left-wing Group and Unity Theatres, widely admired in the 1930s, have had little subsequent influence, though Eliot learned much about Brechtian alienation techniques from their example.

The plays remain, nevertheless, the most significant British attempt to break with the traditions of bourgeois realism, as Christopher Innes demonstrates, drawing their models of dramatic artifice from 'charade' ('Paid on Both Sides'), 'tragedy' (*F6*), and 'melodrama' (*On the Frontier*), and giving a political edge, as Harold Hobson noted at the time, even to the forms of musical comedy. Auden's deconstructive dramaturgy incorporated song and dance (*The Dance of Death*) as well as parodying and pastiching other performative elements: a mock trial in *F6*, cabaret in *Dogskin*, mock sermons, perorations, encomia variously, devices from mummers' plays and Norse sagas in 'Paid'. 'For the Time Being' (1944), subtitled 'A Christmas Oratorio', contains a whole range of liturgical and religious forms, including those of miracle and nativity play. Its accompanying text, 'The Sea and the Mirror', is billed as a 'Commentary' on *The Tempest*, delivered as a series of dramatic monologues by characters from Shakespeare's play. *The Age of Anxiety* (1945), dubbed 'A Baroque Eclogue', for which Leonard Bernstein composed a symphony, intersperses dramatic monologues and dialogues with narrative, and contains a 'Masque'. Starting with *Paul Bunyan*, Auden wrote a series of libretti for operas, largely in collaboration with Chester Kallman. The latter works are now beginning to attract new critical interest, as speculatively 'postmodern' multi-media texts which subvert traditional genres.

Mould-breaking was Auden's forte. By the time of the Auden Double Number of *New Verse* in 1937, he was the undisputed uncrowned laureate of the age; and yet, as Geoffrey Grigson argued there, 'Auden does not fit', and his representativeness, his power to speak for his times, emerged from this very anomalousness: 'Auden is a monster', Grigson wrote, but he is 'an able monster', by definition therefore a being 'extremely difficult to measure up or confine'. 'The era in which Auden has grown up', Grigson concluded, 'has been one of bewildered mediocrity, triviality and fudge', justifying his refusal to 'obey the codes':

> But when a monster who writes so much is so fidgety and inquisitive, so interested in things and ideas, so human and generous, and so rude to the infinite, it does not matter at all if the lines of his development are twisted and obscure, if he writes plenty of verse which is slack, ordinary, dull, or silly . . .

By 1940 it mattered a great deal. The virtues of the past decade had become vices. Criticised by Christopher Caudwell in 1937, from an orthodox Communist position, as 'anarchist, nihilist and *surréaliste*', 'glorify[ing] the revolution as a kind of giant explosion which will blow up everything they feel to be hampering them',[1] Auden found himself attacked in 1940

by George Orwell, in 'Inside the Whale', for presenting in *Spain* 'a sort of thumb-nail sketch of a day in the life of "a good party man"', and giving callow approval to the politically 'necessary murder'.[2] The same year, Grigson's monster 'rude to the infinite' was cabined and confined in what sounds like an obituary in the Catholic journal *The Tablet* by Martin Turnell. If Auden spoke for a generation it was now because he was silly like them: 'For the tragedy of this generation was not the tragedy of too little faith, but of too much. It lay in the uncritical acceptance of all the revolutionary slogans of its time which led to the waste and destruction of its immense abilities' (Haffenden, p. 36). The ground has here been prepared for postwar constructions of a rather different Auden.

The foremost of these arose from what was almost universally seen at the time as Auden's 'desertion' to a neutral United States on the eve of war, which was coupled with an apparent abandonment of Leftist politics. It is difficult now to imagine the fury with which this was greeted not only by his regular detractors but by those who had previously been his most ardent fans. The early reservations of his friend Cyril Connolly set the tone for what was to become a critical orthodoxy in the postwar period. Connolly, who boasted of having invented the concept of the 'Homintern' and the characterisation of the Auden group as the 'Pylon Boys', was already in 1936 impatient with what he called 'the authentic rallying cries of homo-communism' in Auden's verse, and offered his considered conclusion – 'the point of view', he admitted, 'of the anarchic 1920s about the political 1930s' – that Auden was 'essentially an obscure, difficult, personal writer'. Reviewing *Spain* in 1937 he added that 'the Marxian theory of history does not go very happily into verse', and claimed that 'Lay your sleeping head', 'Auden's non-pamphleteering love lyric [was] by far the best thing' in his recent work, 'and utterly without political purpose' (Haffenden, pp. 187–8, 238–9).

Connolly's *Enemies of Promise* (1938), which Auden regarded as one of the best books of contemporary criticism, attributed the failure of the Auden generation to that state of 'permanent adolescence' induced by a British public school education. Stephen Spender, within a few years to renounce his own 1930s fellow-travelling in his autobiography, *World Within World* (1951), could still in a 1941 review of *Another Time* reproach Auden for running away from the 'struggle'. Auden's hurt response queried his old friend's 'assumption of the role of the blue-eyed Candid Incorruptible', which he found 'questionable', and replied that 'the intellectual warfare goes on always and everywhere, and no one has the right to say that this place or that time is where all intellectuals ought to be' (Osborne, pp. 206–7). Nicholas Jenkins in the present volume rightly stresses Auden's genuine patriotism.

But as John Lucas's chapter demonstrates, there is no reason at all why one praised by William Plomer in 1932 for 'a brilliant attack on English staleness, dullness and complacency' (Haffenden, p. 95), should after Munich have harboured any sentimental affection for a venal and hypocritical British establishment.

Postwar British critics tended to follow Spender in seeing expatriation as causing a decline in Auden's poetic powers. John Wain claimed in 1955, of 'the Auden line', that 'what smashed it . . . was Auden's renunciation of English nationality' (Haffenden, p. 40). The conviction of failing powers lies behind the rhetorical question asked in Philip Larkin's 1960 retrospective in the *Spectator*: 'What's become of Wystan?' For the younger Larkin, Auden 'was, of course, the first "modern" poet', not just in his ability to 'employ modern properties unselfconsciously' but primarily in the 'dominant and ubiquitous unease' at the heart of his poetry. Auden's 'outlook was completely dislocated', therefore, when prewar anxiety ceased with the outbreak of war and his simultaneous absconding: 'At one stroke he lost his key subject and emotion – Europe and the fear of war – and abandoned his audience together with their common dialect and concerns.' For Auden, Larkin argued, the damage was 'irreparable'. His work was taken over by 'a certain abstract windiness' which ensured that *New Year Letter* was merely a 'rambling intellectual stew', 'The Sea and the Mirror' 'an unsuccessful piece of literary inbreeding', and 'For the Time Being' 'too often chilly . . . or silly'. As for *The Age of Anxiety*, Larkin continued, 'I never finished it, and have never met anyone who has.' Larkin offered a vague hope for the future: 'If his poetry could once take root again in the life surrounding him rather than in his reading', then we might see a new Auden, 'a *New Yorker* Walt Whitman viewing the American scene through lenses coated with European irony'. But the 'poetic pressure' was not high in the recent work, which seemed little more than 'agreeable and ingenious essays'. Auden, he concluded, 'has not adopted America or taken root, but has pursued an individual and cosmopolitan path which has precluded the kind of identification that seemed so much a part of his previous successes'.[3]

A parallel case was argued by the American poet Randall Jarrell, who mourned the lost leader's resiling from a tough-minded secular humanism as a sign of 'the decline and fall of modernist poetry', 'a waste of . . . the greatest powers'.[4] The prevailing US consensus, however, saw Auden's reputation as an *American* poet grow apace, consolidated by his assumption of US citizenship in 1946. During the Cold War era, the increasing professionalisation of literary criticism in the American academy found in Auden a ready candidate for exegesis in scholarly dissertation and monograph. Much of this early enthusiasm for the later Auden drew sustenance from his

return to a somewhat unorthodox Christianity inspired by Charles Williams, Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Isherwood had written in *New Verse* in 1937 that, though 'the Anglicanism has evaporated . . . he is still much preoccupied with ritual', so that 'when we collaborate, I have to keep a sharp eye on him – or down flop the characters on their knees . . . If Auden had his way, he would turn every play into a cross between grand opera and high mass.' This is astute as well as prophetic. It was as much an aesthetic choice, the appeal of liturgy and ritual, of Kierkegaard's existentialist or Martin Buber's 'I / Thou' theology, that led to Auden's return to the Anglican faith after 1940. St Augustine's Heavenly City furnished opportunities to talk about the earthly city, and even that prolonged meditation on Good Friday, 'Horae Canonicae', has an odour of incense and play-acting about it. The parsonical tone was nothing new. His supposedly secular poetry of the 1930s carried its own freight of Christian, particularly Pauline baggage, the fruits of a pious Anglican upbringing. As late as 1965 he could write that 'I feel myself sufficiently close to Mr Waugh theologically and to Mr Woolf politically to act as a moderator' (*F&A*, p. 493), remaining what he had mocked in 'Letter to Lord Byron', 'a foolish pink old liberal to the end'. At times it almost seems as if the doctrine of Original Sin, like that of Historical Necessity before it, had been invented to get him out of moral scrapes. Auden was always a materialist, his theology centred in a radical conception of the Incarnation. The posthumously published 'No, Plato, No' could not imagine anything he would less like to be than 'a disincarnate Spirit', unable to chew, sip or touch physical surfaces. 'Whitsunday in Kirchstetten' (1962) draws a sceptical anthropological parallel between those in church on this holy day / holiday and the 'car-worshippers' outside who 'enact / the ritual exodus from Vienna / their successful cult demands'. Auden certainly underwent spiritual reinvention in the 1940s. A sense of the numinous pervades all his work, and he continued to deploy Christian motifs to the end. But they seem, to one critic at least, increasingly to resemble those 'metaphors for poetry' delivered by Yeats's spirit voices.

Auden's Americanisation was always a matter of playing at being what he had chosen to become. His Introduction to *The Faber Book of Modern American Verse* attempted to distinguish his new environment from a ruined Europe, at the level both of linguistic nuance and of the sociopolitical macrocosm, quoting Goethe's observation, 'things are easier for you, America, than for this old continent of ours; you have no ruins of fortresses, no basalt intrusions', glossing the latter as 'meaning, I presume, no violent political revolutions'.[5] In 'Prologue at Sixty' Auden spoke of himself

not as an American but a New Yorker, though born in old York in Edwardian England – one 'whose dream images date him already'. He remained to the end what the US title of his first American volume had proclaimed him, a 'Double Man'.

That doubleness Auden had summed up, in the undergraduate magazine *Oxford Poetry* he edited in 1927, as 'the psychological conflict between self as subject and self as object' (*Prose 1*, p. 4). The Ode to his pupils near the end of *The Orators* depicted school as a kind of guerrilla warfare in which the frontier is everywhere and nowhere. The anguished retitling of the poem later, 'Which Side Am I Supposed To Be On?', indicates what is happening on this shifting frontier. A schoolmaster in a public school, only recently a schoolboy himself, Auden inscribes in the duplicity of the text's many voices the crisis of a consciousness belatedly recognising its own contradictory subject-position, as simultaneously patient, carrier and agent of power-relations that originate outside but penetrate every aspect of the self. This was the tenor of a shrewd critique by Irvin Ehrenpreis, which spoke of 'his habit of playing solemn games with his categories, especially with certain divisions between opposed sides', games with language and reality alike which allowed him to disclose 'the way the commonplace hides the extraordinary, and the outside of things grows from and yet misrepresents their inside' (Haffenden, pp. 499–500). Lincoln Kirstein, pursuing the analogy of guerrilla warfare in reviewing *Journey to a War*, thought this made him 'a really dangerous person', who 'threatens even our most recent and difficultly entrenched ideas' and 'employs pragmatic treachery to every preconceived poetic formula', recruiting allies from any English poet from Beowulf to Byron, and successively scrapping them, to open 'a new front' when it suited (Haffenden, p. 299).

Such a perception makes sense of that 'improvisatory' quality to which English moralist critics such as F. R. Leavis and Donald Davie have objected. Kirstein was right to link the moral and political positions to a stylistic one. Auden's use of pastiche and parody, his sleeping-around with poetic forms and his plagiarising of other poets' voices, constitute a deliberate assault on the idea of the autonomous authentic self, speaking with its own unique accents. All art is ventriloquism, he implies, and the discourses which shape our identity are impermanent, continually shifting. The poet always speaks from 'Another Time', the 'Double Man' remains a double agent, his heart set on the spy's career, and his playfulness, like that of the 'Flying Trickster' evoked in *The Orators*, an earnest of good faith.

New Year Letter announces that 'England to me is my own tongue', and a double relation to Englishness and the English language is central to both his British and American 'identities'. It is significant that Patrick Deane's

chapter here views the 'English Auden' in the light of his American exodus, while Nicholas Jenkins examines Auden's American sojourn in the perspective of a continuing 'Englishness'. With characteristic slipperiness, Auden in later life deconstructed such binaries by adopting a third provisional location, reinventing himself as a European, taking up residence in Italy and then Austria, becoming, as he suggested in one poem, 'a minor Atlantic Goethe', and commuting between two worlds become much like each other in the accelerating logic of globalisation. Auden played self-consciously at being an English 'metic' in New York and an 'American abroad' in Europe, enjoying a double expatriation, in which each less than absolute allegiance simultaneously reinforced and yet relativised the other. While proclaiming his Americanness, he wrote of both Italy and Austria as places where he felt 'at home' as never before, and of his European residence as a kind of homecoming. Whereas the years of his exclusive American residence, years of world war and postwar reconstruction, are characterised by the fraught Kierkegaardian title of his 1947 work, *The Age of Anxiety*, there is a decidedly more relaxed tone from *Nones* (1951) onwards. There are poems of bitter disenchantment in *The Shield of Achilles*, but the volume closes with the complex and major harmonies of the sequence 'Horae Canonicae', working its way through to the absolution and self-reconciliations of his later years.

Traditional readings of Auden's sexuality concurred with Allan Rodway that, 'Its influence on his work, were it not known of, would be literarily imperceptible; known, it is negligible.'[6] The position coincided with Auden's own view and with the ascendant New Critical orthodoxy in the decades after the Second World War. Ground-breaking studies by Gregory Woods and Richard Bozorth[7] have reinstated Auden's homosexuality as a determining context of his poetry, underpinning its allusive infrastructure, informing his ideas about *Homo Ludens*, and adding a second order of discourse to many poems which can be read 'straight', revealing, as *F6* put it, that 'there is always another story, there is more than meets the eye'. Many of the early love poems encode homosexual as heterosexual relations, by a change of noun or pronoun, as for example the consummate love letter tricked out as 'A Bride in the Thirties'. While Auden's own critical pronouncements insisted that love poetry should be universal and not gender-specific, he also in '"The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning"' reminds us of poets' traditional subterfuge in dissembling the addressee of a poem, with politic cunning converting a love lyric into a celebration of the dictator who has just seized power. According to Bozorth, 'practicing queer identity in all its contradictions between public and private, universality and marginality' (*Auden's Games of Knowledge*,