Introduction

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Conventionally, introducing a collection of essays such as this involves mentioning each contributor, in order to persuade prospective readers that the volume amounts to a coherently-argued whole. Where essayists are numerous and space limited, this is at best a rather perfunctory courtesy, and at worst risks turning the editor into a kind of major domo at some grand event, announcing the names of new arrivals as they hand across their 'invite with gilded edges'. In the present case, it would also be misleading, because a book offering current perceptions of Auden's work should quite properly reflect a range of views, that range itself reflective of the variety of responses which one who was not uncontroversial during his own lifetime continues to elicit. Any imposed coherence would additionally mislead, by misrepresenting the nature of Auden's career and ignoring the warning given by Barbara Everett, for whom he is 'the genius of the makeshift, the virtuoso of contingency': 'to perfect his achievement is to endanger his essential character'.[1] Auden, after all, was not always in agreement with himself, seen in his sometimes substantial later modifications of published poems and on occasions in their brusque ejection from his canon – 'thrown out', he genially if tersely explained, 'because they were dishonest, or bad-mannered, or boring' (*CP* 2007, p. xxix). That invite with gilded edges could, then, be summarily withdrawn from unsatisfactory poems, whose abrupt relegation to the category of uninvited guest formed part of the quarrel with himself out of which Auden's poetry characteristically emerged (rather more visibly than with Yeats, who coined the phrase).

Poetry, if the most important element of Auden's *oeuvre*, is nevertheless just one aspect of a career that also saw the production of a very substantial quantity of critical prose, a number of co-authored plays, travel books and libretti, participation in the making of documentary films and the compilation of various literary anthologies. Later, it included the functions of a public intellectual, called on to adjudicate literary prizes and

asked to deliver lectures and graduation addresses – this last a reminder of Auden's practical as well as theoretical involvement in education, at both school and university levels.

Responding to this multiplicity, the essays which follow offer various perspectives in which Auden's career may be perceived and his work considered. He himself was very aware of the power of contexts to shape or distort thought and action and aware, too, of a certain ambiguity in their nature: there were contexts one could choose and others which claimed you for themselves. You could not choose the social class into which you happened to be born, yet much could follow from that initial fact – and interestingly, Auden continued to define himself with relation to the English class-system, long after it might be assumed to have lost relevance to his circumstances. Nor could you choose the nation into which you were born; yet that, it turned out, *could* be changed: one could decide, as he did, to stop being English and start being American. Gender was more complex; there seems to have been a period when Auden believed his homosexuality could be altered, which he attempted; later he regarded it more as a given of who he was. If nationality and the attitudes it encouraged serves as one example of a distorting context, another, about which he had professional sensitivity, was that of the expectations readers bring to the work of literature. Both in his own regard and that of others, he tried to ward off the potential harm this brought. When compiling the schools' poetry anthology *The Poet's Tongue* (1935) with John Garrett, they arranged the poems anonymously in alphabetical order of first line, in order to decontaminate a reader's 'bias' toward 'great names and literary influences' (*Prose I*, p. 109); Auden adopted a similar strategy for his first *Collected Poems*, published in America a decade later; again, this was a deliberately preventative measure, designed to thwart any reader keen to use that collection as a means to analyse the poet's development.

'Consider this and in our time', runs the opening line of one of his characteristically imperative early-period poems (*EA*, p. 46; written 1930), which goes on to enforce a sequence of insistent perspectives. While Auden had increasingly few illusions about what sense might emerge from what he much later styled 'History's criminal noise' ('The Common Life', *CP* 2007, p. 714), he could never have penned T. S. Eliot's notorious 1923 definition, 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'.[2] To conceive poetry as a means of engagement with his current times – rather than an evasion or dismissal of them, for example by preference for some timeless realm of Art – was a position Auden consistently held. '*What should I write in Nineteen-Hundred-and-Seventy-One?*'

was a question of much greater import, he asserted, than '*What should I write at Sixty-Four?*' The notion of a poet's particular responsibility to be 'in [his] time' was illustrated by the 'Short' immediately following, when 'two poems' begging to be written each have to be refused: '*Sorry, no longer, my dear! Sorry, my precious, not yet!*' (*CP* 2007, p. 858, both). But, for all that, there is potentially a tension between 'our' collectively historical time and the essentially personal growth of a poet's mind in his privately demarcated lifetime. Were those two poems denied composition because of the date on the calendar or the stage reached in his own life? The question is made more relevant by the fact that one effect of Auden's continuing revisions of his canon was, by inference, to associate the work more closely with his life: he didn't amend or reject poems because it was 1971 but, surely, because, aged 64, he had lost sympathy with the earlier self who had written them.

The dialogue (or dispute) between private and public impulsions and responsibilities was a continuing provocation of his work. His decision at the end of the 1930s to relocate to America may have been driven by essentially personal and professional considerations, but took on a public significance because of when it occurred. Despite her wish to diminish the significance of that decision in any proper understanding of Auden's career, Everett acknowledges that '(f)or Auden to have left England at that time had a kind of terrible gracelessness, from which the poet's reputation has never really recovered' (Everett 1986, p. 218). This 'gracelessness' may, in fact, have been more evident in his turning up in England at the end of the war in American uniform, keen to inform old friends in a self-consciously Americanized accent that, compared with the bombed-out German cities, they'd got off lightly during the London Blitz, which of course he hadn't himself endured. But even in such an episode, a different contextual understanding might see these details less in the light of his repudiation of England than in the light of essentially courteous acts of affiliation with his adopted country – and, with regard to his judgment of the relativities of destruction, in the light of an actual, if somewhat tactless, truth.

A significant proportion of Auden's writing of the 1930s had seemed to engage with what he so memorably termed 'the dangerous flood/ Of history' (*EA*, p. 157), understood to be the unignorable claim of 'our time', with its imbalanced tyrannies, injustices and inequalities, on the responsive individual. Even an iconic poem like 'Out on the lawn I lie in bed' (1933) is – especially in the earlier version (*EA*, pp. 136–38) – alert to the wilfulness inherent in its very evocation of social and

spiritual harmony, when set in the context of the underprivileged outsiders excluded from such gratifying tranquillities. The personal as well as poetic culmination of the troubled decade's claims on Auden came with the Spanish Civil War, when he explained his intention to enlist in the International Brigade in terms of a sensed obligation: 'here', he wrote to E. R. Dodds (8 December 1936), 'is something I can do as a citizen and not as a writer', adding, later the same month, 'in a critical period such as ours, I do believe that the poet must have direct knowledge of the major political events . . . I shall probably be a bloody bad soldier but how can I speak to/for them without becoming one?'[3] Contrasting with such anticipation, the weeks he spent there were unsettling and anticlimactic, even if 'Spain', the poem written and published on his return, showed little sign of this in its repeated insistence on 'to-day the struggle' (*SP* 1979, p. 51). But this poem marked the first of Auden's serious quarrels with himself; George Orwell fiercely criticized some aspects and although Auden thought his objections rather dense he made alterations and, later still, outdid Orwell in his own misunderstandings of what he had written, suppressing the poem altogether.

Auden would become increasingly aware of what might be termed the dangerous flood of language, the 'false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonorities' that could drip from his pen at the prompting, he told Stephen Spender, of 'my own devil of unauthenticity' (*Early Auden*, quoted p. 206). 'Spain' was probably a case in point; for although, as Nicholas Jenkins has argued, 'the sense of great literary powers placed, decisively but without full conviction, in the service of a just cause, is essential to [its] effect', the actualities of the evolving conflict meant that 'the language and structure of "Spain" became increasingly compromised by their links to a Government which was more and more clearly the tool of a repressive Soviet foreign policy' ('Auden and Spain', *AS I*, p. 93). What happened to this particular poem highlights issues of authenticity in its relations to history, language, and readership that were of more general and enduring concern to Auden in coming to see, if not exactly the kind of writer he desired to be, then more certainly the kind he earnestly wished *not* to be. These issues are audible in the crucial transitional poem composed almost immediately on arrival in America, in which he addressed the newly completed life and career of the poet whose injurious influence on his own writing Auden would later summarize in those phrases quoted previously.

'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' (*EA*, pp. 241–43) uses the occasion of Yeats's transition to non-being as a covert parallel for Auden's own move toward

a new state and a new state of mind. Although the poem performs some of the conventional work of an elegy, there is a governing austerity of tone (especially on its first American publication in March 1939, when it lacked the second section added in April for magazine publication in England) that nowhere indicates especial grief.[4] That the current of Yeats's feeling has 'failed' – in the poem's oddly-objectifying phraseology – is symptomatic of failures of feeling discernible not only amongst the 'living nations' but also in the poem itself, poised uneasily between the disfigurements of public pronouncement and the fugitive, ambivalent personal response. The exilic note in other 1939 poems such as 'Refugee Blues' and the elegy for Freud is also sounded here, as the 'peasant' forests of European legend give way to American 'ranches of isolation'; for Yeats, indeed, interment has comprised no return to significant soil, since he died in France and was temporarily buried there. The 'Irish vessel' remains literally empty (and would do so until the ceremonial repatriation of his body after the war – although Louis MacNeice claimed the wrong one had been brought back); Yeats's defining contexts are henceforward 'unfamiliar' or 'foreign'. The poem's other named writers, Kipling and Claudel, had also, like him, lived for significant periods outside their mother countries: as Auden himself would do.

The rhetoric of diminution – Yeats has merely 'disappeared', only 'A few thousand' are likely to take much notice of the loss of this major poet – reaches its logical climax in the assertion that 'poetry makes nothing happen': the elegy's most famous phrase. Yeats's disappearance as a contingent inhabitant of 'our time', anonymous now ('He') because irrelevant, leads to an Orphic scattering that despite its destructiveness resurrects and names him, in section III, as 'William Yeats' – one of many identities that might be associated with the generic 'poet' here invoked, although also recalling his own self-identification as 'the poet William Yeats' (similarly, the river of poetry described in section II suggests his 'living stream').[5] Section II remedies the absence of Yeats from section I as well as his purely iconic presence in section III, addressing him as a biographically embedded 'you', albeit with the presumptuous over-intimacy of one already embarked on that process whereby 'The words of a dead man/ Are modified in the guts of the living' – which, as a model of transmission, is in almost every aspect the reverse of Eliot's formulation in 'Burnt Norton' (1935): 'My words echo/ Thus, in your mind'. This ingestive modification of Yeats's writing, by a readership that now becomes the sole determinant of its meanings, is earthily comparable to worms' supposed consumption of dead bodies in the grave and,

sacramentally, to the reception by participants at the Eucharist of 'the body of Christ', also associated with 'the Word'. The individual poet dies, but poetry collectively 'survives'; Yeats's corpse goes the way of all flesh, while his *corpus* comes alive.

It does so because he was one of those by whom the language 'lives' – which resembles but is crucially different from merely being someone who lives by language like, say, a journalist. In his contemporary essay, 'The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats', Auden clinched the case for the Defence by asserting that 'there is one field in which the poet is a man of action, the field of language, and it is precisely in this that the greatness of the deceased is most obviously shown' (*EA*, p. 393). The separation of art from agency separates it not only from 'executives' who don't see its point, but also from the earlier Auden intrigued by heroes or tempted to Spain; but poetry's making nothing happen doesn't consign it to irrelevance or complacent inactivity. Instead, as 'a way of happening', it finds itself at the close of the elegy charged with an agenda scarcely less ambitious than that with which, ten years earlier, 'Sir, no man's enemy' (which he later disavowed; *EA*, p. 36) had closed: if there 'the house of the dead' required harrowing, here the 'poet' must descend 'right/ To the bottom of the night'. The successful completion of these assignments would evidently see poetry rectify deficiencies of feeling underlying both individual pitilessness and collective 'hate'. Auden's poem closes in resonant semi-paradoxes: poetry cannot constrain but must persuade. Not the least paradoxical aspect of this elegy, curiously unresponsive to the human dimensions of Yeats's death, is its deployment of verbs such as 'rejoice' and 'praise' (different from the sadness and weeping with which Auden's Freud commemoration would close).

Within twelve months, composing 'New Year Letter', he would acknowledge that 'No words men write can stop the war / Or measure up to the relief / Of its intolerable grief' (*CP* 2007, p. 204); but in February 1939, Auden comes close to implying that poetry, when most true to itself, *might* help avert impending 'nightmare'. Any such belief had vanished by the time, in 'Prologue at Sixty' (1967), he recalled the Nazi 'torturers/ who read *Rilke* in their rest periods' (*CP* 2007, p. 832); but if the Yeats elegy looks backward – despite appearances to the contrary – in its inferences about the power and place of art, it is forward-looking in its recognition of the ways art and artists become cultural consumables. Its lesson about the manner in which the historically actual figure of Yeats is irrecoverably elided in contexts to which he and his work are assigned by successive readers is an apt reminder that the 'Auden' I have been discussing is an

imagined figure, of whom it is largely irrelevant to enquire what did it mean to him 'there, then', as opposed to 'what does it mean to us, here now?' (*EA*, p. 61).

The contexts proposed in these essays offer a series of instigations for thinking about what Marsha Bryant has usefully termed 'the signifier "Auden"' – denoting ways in which he continues to be imbued with meaning by successive communities of readers.[6] Of course, this does not occur in complete disconnection from what our instruments of historical recovery agree that W. H. Auden (1907–73) did and wrote; but it also involves, as the Yeats elegy saw (not without foreboding), some quasi-predatory readerly modifications that, equally, are inseparable from processes of poetic survival. It is unquestionable that Auden *has* survived – and not simply as an object of literary study on university courses. Notably, he is regularly mentioned in serious journalism, even when the subject is not directly literary: 'September 1, 1939' came into renewed prominence in Internet discussions, after New York's Twin Towers were destroyed and, more recently, a letter-writer to the *Guardian* cited 'The Shield of Achilles' in connection with the serious riots that had affected some English cities. If these uses of Auden's work exemplify the significance of poetry's ways of happening suggested by the Yeats elegy, they also indicate the variance between poet and readership this poem also foretold: for such high valuation of 'September 1, 1939' directly contradicts the contempt and rejection Auden later directed toward it. Contributors to this volume continue to unbury poems he dispraised, finding not only 'September 1, 1939' but also 'Spain' and 'Sir, no man's enemy' necessary to an assessment of his work.

What, then, is Auden in our times? In some ways he is of the past, offering a kind of literary career it is difficult to imagine for the twenty-first century, even if his stupendous talents were to be replicated: is poetry ever going to seem quite so centrally important as his continuing eminence implies it was? But even his eminence was something which in his own lifetime he subverted, dismissing poetry as 'small beer'; it seems as if, once he had fulfilled and exhausted his undergraduate ambition to become a 'great' poet, what survived was the belief that poetry was the most important unimportant activity imaginable. One of the challenges he poses is just how to combine this sense of seriousness with this sense of levity – as when in 1932 he responded to Geoffrey Grigson's proposal to start *New Verse*: 'Why do you want to start a poetry review Is it as important as all that? I'm glad you like poetry but can't we take it a little more lightly' (*sic*; quoted RD-H 1995, p. 127). The registers adopted in Auden's poems

can perplex, by the difference between them and the language of 'a man speaking to men', in Wordsworth's formulation; so that in the very late 'Lullaby' we encounter archaizing diction of 'another day has westered / and mantling darkness arrived', closely followed by 'you've gotten the garbage out' (*CP* 2007, p. 877). Many readers have found irritating such a *mélange* of idioms and the attitude implied by it; but this is a poem about the inherent wisdom of submitting to the body's desire for sleep (sleepiness, therefore, producing the poem's strange lexical mish-mash), of attending to 'the belly-mind', without whose sub-linguistic admonitions 'the verbalising I / becomes a vicious despot' (*CP* 2007, p. 878).

The dangers of despotism and the need for subversion of its importance and noise (which sometimes included the wrong kind of poetry) became a constant concern – heard, for example, in 'Under Which Lyre' (1946), whose subtitle, 'A Reactionary Tract for the Times', indicates Auden's continuing desire to notice the date. The war just ended ushers in renewal of the conflict between Hermes and 'Pompous Apollo' (*CP* 2007, p. 334), respectively the spirit of play and the spirit of self-aggrandizing responsibility. It is obvious Apollo is winning, despite Auden's declared affiliation with the losers; but perhaps what his poem yearns for is balance rather than Hermetic victory, the pun lurking beneath 'lyre' (liar) suggesting that a despotism of playfulness would be every bit as intolerable: 'The earth would soon, did Hermes run it, / Be like the Balkans' (*CP* 2007, p. 335). Taken to extremes, any position contains the potential for falsifying damage to human nature; thus it may be that Auden came to hear and despise the voice of the sloganeer in his famous line, 'We must love one another or die' (from 'September 1, 1939'), which elsewhere I have seen as encoding a totalitarianism of love.[7]

Auden's temptation by totalizing explanations – political, psychological, historical, and religious – generated an equal and opposite reaction against them, seen, for example, in his foreword to *The Dyer's Hand*, with its aversion for 'systematic criticism' (*DH*, p. xii). Although I hope the structure within which the following essays are grouped is largely self-explanatory,[8] and although this book is substantial, it does not attempt exhaustiveness: as Robert Frost saw, the chosen road implies the road not taken, and other contexts could with equal plausibility have found place within. To take merely two examples, Auden's sense of literary lineage could easily justify an essay covering poets like Hardy, Edward Thomas, and others; but the need for such is perhaps made less pressing by the great helpfulness of Katherine Bucknell's edition of the *Juvenilia*. A topic like 'Auden and Music' would be tempting, but would

be difficult to treat adequately within an essay's format. So 'chance and my own choice' have made the book this is; although the overall design and basic conception of its topics has been mine, what contributors have chosen to make of their subject has been theirs to decide: the plurality of voices and approaches heard here is an important part of the collection's richness and vigour. It was no part of anybody's remit to agree with me or with each other, so no embarrassment need follow from encountering divergent views, as these do not detract from the collective contextual orientation around Auden, approached 'Arm in arm, but never, thank God, in step' (*CP* 2007, p. 539).

A focus purely on 'context' might, taken to extremes, omit the subject centred in it altogether: Auden, like Yeats, could 'disappear'. Such rigorous exactitude is not characteristic of these essays, which in various ways explore what is revealed when 'Auden' is considered within a particular setting; some are placed closer to setting, others to 'Auden'. The expertise of those writing them speaks, I trust, for itself and needs no puffery from me. It is a source of particular pleasure that many have been written by those who are also published poets in their own right – an appropriate mark of the professional respect which Auden continues to command. By the same token, however, I am obliged to regret the low proportion of women contributors, which does not accurately reflect the overall state of criticism. To any reader who, like me, is dissatisfied with this, I can only offer the assurance that more women were invited to contribute than felt able to accept the invitation; and more accepted the invitation than were enabled by events to submit their essay.

NOTES

1 'Auden Askew', reprinted in Barbara Everett, *Poets in Their Time* (Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 228–29. Hereafter cited as 'Everett 1986'.
2 '*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth', in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 177.
3 Letters to E. R. Dodds in Bodleian Library, Ms Eng.Lett.c.464.
4 Mendelson sees this 'bleak new mode' as Auden's transformation of the traditional elegy (*LA*, p. 4 *et seq.*).
5 See, respectively, 'To be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee' and 'Easter, 1916'.
6 Marsha Bryant, *Auden and Documentary in the 1930s* (University of Virginia Press, 1997), p. 4; see also Stan Smith, *W. H. Auden* (Blackwell, 1985), pp. 5–6.
7 Tony Sharpe, *W. H. Auden* (Routledge, 2007), p. 90.
8 The description of Auden as 'the most professional poet in the world' was Randall Jarrell's, in his review of *The Shield of Achilles* (Haffenden, p. 400).