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**Newsletter**

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## Vernacular Diction Is Tossed into a Group of Elegant Neighbors

I started reading Auden at Putney School in 1953 and I've never stopped. Because most of the poems are tours-de-force, it's hard not to want to use his maneuvers yourself, as you read along. It always seemed that Auden's poems had their high quality very early, including their notes of humor and wit, which only intensified in time. I found I wanted to learn three Auden techniques: diction level switches, syntax experimentation, and complex forms.

1. Diction: Auden's use of a great variety of diction levels first struck me in "Lullaby" (1937), where political hacks' cries are "pedantic" and "boring." I was thrilled that anyone could link an SAT word like "pedantic" with the couch-potato word "boring" and create a scene of soap-box oratory. I've always admired Auden's deliberate choice of "low" diction—"George, you old matador," "schlemozzled" (*For the Time Being*, 1942); "a nice/ Marsh-mallow salad" ("Under Which Lyre," 1946), "creepy-crawlies" ("Thanksgiving for a Habitat," 1963), "squiggling" ("Nocturne," 1972?), "jargling" ("Unpredictable but Providential," 1972). And of course he linked this level with solemn or abstract or grand words: "smidge/ of nitrogen" ("Thanksgiving for a Habitat"). Then there is the language of pop psychology and of various technical fields—"special-usage words," as Justin Replogle calls them (*Auden's Poetry* 233, 237). The variety of registers made the poems unsnobby, catholic and exciting! You never knew where he'd go next. As Replogle puts it, "Auden made diction *clashes* his big item. Vernacular diction is tossed into a group of elegant neighbors. . . . The sense it made came from producing a voice with wry, spoofing, self-mocking intonations" ("Vernacular Poetry: Frost to O'Hara" 148).

Auden's ear was so good that he didn't overdo the high/low diction link. Here's an attempt of mine which misfires:

We are going to la shirty Scala and il spiffy Duomo,  
together in Italy for the very first time.  
Dog-eared Rome of the Caesars, warm to the touch . . .  
(*"Customs,"* 1988)

These lines try too hard; the “shirty Scala” and “spiffy Duomo” call attention to themselves as manufactured and showoffy.

2. Syntax. In the following section of “1929,” a poem highly experimental in syntax, Auden could have made philosophical statements in a plain, mainstream English, but he chose to make them in a kind of deliberately “translated”-sounding English.

And I above standing, saying in thinking:  
‘Is first baby, warm in mother,  
Before born and is still mother,  
Time passes and now is other  
Is knowledge in him now of other,  
Cries in cold air, himself no friend.  
In grown man also, may see in face,  
In his day-thinking and in his night-thinking  
Is wareness and is fear of other,  
Alone in flesh, himself no friend.

This English omits many articles and other even more necessary words, such as the subject! It also inverts standard word order. (Here’s another example of the poet’s delight in inverting word order: “As I and you/Go kissed away” – “To You Simply” [1931] – two inversions!) Thus there turns out to be a kind of grand poetic syntax (faintly like Old English) – slightly cracked – to issue “1929”’s vatic and Boethian statements.

(Jeremy Treglown’s biography *Romancing: The Life and Work of Henry Green* shows that Auden was reading Green in the late twenties. Green perfected, for example, the maneuvers of omitting many articles [“Tuesday afternoon Mr Dupret went to offices” (*Loving*, 1929)] and of modifying a verb with an adjective where we would use an adverb to do so [“Raunce arrived . . . He came quiet: (*Living*, 1945; 14)]. Maybe Auden in “1929” was inspired by Green’s syntax experiments to conduct his own.)

3. Form. Auden’s poems in complex forms gave me the courage to try the forms myself – canzone, pantoum, sestina, villanelle. Canzone-making isn’t entirely impossible: if “living is always thinking,” and we think out loud, we repeat somewhat unedited what we’re trying to figure out, “saying in thinking”:

Maybe I should stop at the dry cleaner.  
Oh, no, I don’t have time to stop at the dry cleaner.

Two lines even as pedestrian as these could do double duty providing the canzone end-words. To give another example of form to admire, from “Under Which Lyre” (1946), the elegance of the stanzas of the just post-war Harvard Phi Beta Kappa ode belies the ghastliness of the war in its comic and dance-like step, epic theme included with uplifting lilt:

... [E]xistentialists declare  
that they are in complete despair  
yet go on writing.

The best way to identify Auden’s influence on how I write poetry is, if the reader doesn’t mind, to look at the first stanza of a poem I wrote in about 1985, long after I’d begun reading him, and soon after I’d been assigned a lot of his work in grad school. “Souvenir de Roc-Amadour” came out of listening to others read (among other poems) “In Praise of Limestone” (1948) and “Mountains” (1952) several times, two poems comprehensively analyzed in Chapter 4 of Replogle’s *Auden’s Poetry*.

Clydesdales with feet like plungers exhaust themselves  
long before they reach the view-encrusted decoupage  
of your belled summits, turfless town, whence a tumble  
necessarily results in the valleys of geology.  
Biographed in *The Gentle Giants*, an expensive book,  
the best stompers in St. Louis are no match for you.

But your winding mountain path where the valiant Renault  
lies fallow would be unsuitable even for Arabian  
aristocratic streakers. I see them puzzled by your steeps,  
the dear bloods, digging out for the respite of the Massif Central!

The present piece began by noting three hallmarks of Auden style which I hoped to learn how to use: varied diction levels, varied syntax patterns, and use of complex form; “Souvenir” is a try. I meant to create a hero, a doltish pilgrim, who was unequipped to deal with travel and change—self-important but clueless. I wanted the anonymous speaker of the poem to be a little like the pilgrim, since we’re all cut out of the same cloth; but mainly to be a wise commentator who, while sympathizing, still despairs of the pilgrim’s ever improving. Oddly, the speaker apostrophizes the village of Roc-Amadour, which

was chosen because it's historically and art-historically important, and at the same time it's a tourist trap: I aimed to link high and low in the setting.

Incongruous diction levels: "biograph" is a neologistic verb out of the advertising world or TV; "decoupage" is a handcraft of cut paper; "bloods" is from horse breeding; "tumble" and "stompers" are highly colloquial. A syntax switch: in the second stanza, the speaker addresses Roc-Amadour this way: "oh hamlet small" – needlessly inverting word order for fake grandeur. For form, I chose four ten-line blank verse (more or less) stanzas, as having a slightly rigorous look and ring, and as also giving the speaker the flexibility to wander casually around the subject and speculate on it. To go along with these incongruities, I wanted to have some fake and irrelevant feminism in suggesting the red herring that the pilgrim might actually be Mademoiselle from Armentières, the unlovely heroine of a World War I song resung in World War II. What kind of an idiot would ask the beautiful and noble Clydesdales to climb up an Alp? Who cares if the coffee-table book is expensive? So I wanted the style to have a mix of registers from all realms of life, thrown together to get along as they might inside the poem.

I wouldn't ever want to stop using what I learned from Auden. Recently I included in the same poem the words "girandole," "smaragdine," and "usufruct," with "teensy," "high-tops," and "brisker." It's a pleasure to look forward to combining high-tech terms and New Age jargon, for example, into the mix, to promote further incongruities in poetry.

CAROLINE KNOX

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## **An Unpublished Letter**

The letter printed below was written to Simon Hardwick, an Open Scholar at Auden's old school, Gresham's, Holt. As Auden had been before him (1920-1925) Hardwick was a member of Farfield House. He had the temerity, aged eighteen, to write from school a personal letter to the poet and famous Old Greshamian and included a few of

his own poems. He was surprised and delighted by the detail of Auden's response, but, at the time, rather hurt by the critical comments on his poetry! Simon Hardwick left Gresham's School in 1951 to go up to Oriel College, Oxford.

Auden's original is written in a vivid green ink.

I would like to thank Mr Simon Hardwick for his generosity in sending me a photocopy of this previously unpublished letter in his possession, and the Estate of W. H. Auden for permission to publish the letter here.

Via Santa Lucia 14  
Forio d'Ischia  
Prov. di Napoli

July 20<sup>th</sup> 1951

Dear Mr Hardwick,

Thank you for your letter of July 13<sup>th</sup> and the poem which has just reached me here.

As regards the poem, I find it most interesting rhythmically. I presume you know that quietness/ madness, delight/sight, see/ within me are not orthodox rhymes in English verse. In this particular poem I like their effect but I hope it was deliberate, as one must always know the rules before one tries to break or modify them. One or two little points of criticism:

LL7-8 No one but me shall know this strange new madness

Like the night birds whispering in their silent mirth.

Like is grammatically ambiguous, but I presume you mean that the madness is like the birds whispering. In that case the madness is shared between the birds and me. If the birds whisper then they are not silent

LL9-12 You begin by contrasting the dull sanity of daylight with the night's mad rush. That's fine. The next line [?breaks] into another contrast which is not really clear, because the blind hurrying populace is another sort of mad rush and you don't really say how it differs. Fastness. This word means stuck fast or fortress not speed. Things inanimate. I don't believe you are saying what you mean to say, eg when you enjoy the Cumberland mountains you

are looking at inanimate things. What I think you mean are abstract ideas of success, money, popularity etc don't you?

As to your letter, I was delighted to discover that you share my taste for Yorkshire and the Lakes. At Holt, I liked best what was most unlike that, eg the salt marshes of Blakeney and Cley. Perhaps they are all spoilt now.

Solitude versus Society. I think you will find that there are times in one's life when one wants one and times when one wants the other. If you are about to go to Oxford or Cambridge you will, I think, be as agreeably surprised as I was to find that the social life there is not just like Farfield. All boys between 14 and 18 are uncertain of and frightened by themselves as individuals. The majority find security, and quite rightly for them, in conformity, House spirit etc etc. But there are always some, like myself and I gather, yourself, who neither want to nor are able to escape that way; at school, therefore, we tend to be solitary and find our happiness alone or with one or two friends than in a group. That is alright, too. The only important thing, I believe, is not to day-dream but to attend to whatever surroundings we are in, either by choice or fate, eg if you go for solitary walks in the country, attend carefully to the country, to the flowers, the trees, the birds etc., so that you really learn from what you are doing. It's the same thing in writing poetry. No one can be inspired by wishing to be, but one can train oneself to be a good craftsman so that if and when the Muse should visit, one is a well-tempered instrument to her hand.

With best wishes  
Yours sincerely

W. H. Auden

What strikes one about this letter? Perhaps, firstly, the generosity of the poet to write in such detail to a schoolboy and, secondly, the practical comments on the art of poetry. Auden wanted clarity and any sloppy contradiction or careless usage is firmly panned. Even a schoolboy cannot be allowed to get away with "silent whispering."

Auden loved the North Norfolk landscape and he began his piece on Gresham's School, Holt, in *The Old School*, a selection of school

reminiscences edited by Graham Greene, thus: "The first condition for a successful school is a beautiful situation." The wildness and drama of the Norfolk landscape held a particular hold on his imagination as a contrast to the limestone and granite he celebrated in his poetry. His remarks in this letter are echoed by his comments in *The Old School*: "Watching a snow storm come up from the sea over the marshes at Salthouse and walking in a June dawn (not so legally) by Hempstead Mill are only the most vivid of a hundred such experiences."

Auden, as the letter tells, was never a conformist, although fascinated by conformity. He followed his own precepts and valued solitude as well as the friendship of a small and intimate group of friends when he was at Gresham's School. The writer John Pudney was one of those intimate friends and he recalled in his autobiography, *Home and Away*, how Auden "initiated a friendship which though brief was romantic and grandiose while it lasted." Auden would shin up the drainpipe to his friend's study in the early hours of the morning leaving a note or correcting the younger boy's prep.

Pudney also referred to another feature of the letter: how much Auden struck him as a teacher. He took "long didactic walks" with Auden and added that even Stephen Spender (who had also been at Gresham's for a short while), meeting Auden at Oxford, "felt himself a pupil in the presence of a teacher." From the evidence of this letter it is clear that Auden found the role of teacher a natural one. What a stimulating and demanding teacher he would have made!

The general remarks on the writing of poetry and the way in which craft serves the Muse are important statements about Auden's poetic theory and practice. Of vital importance is the need to pay attention, to develop a kind of scrupulous realism and not to give way to fancy. Finally Auden stresses the need for craft, not to replace the Muse, but to assist its utterance.

It is curious to note that the one item belonging to Auden still at Gresham's School is a small, well-built cupboard which he made in the school workshops. An appropriate memento.

JOHN SMART

## Wallace and Wystan: Antimythological Meetings

In his personal copy of Wallace Stevens's 1947 *Transport to Summer*, W. H. Auden jotted the following poem, which he never published:

Miss God on Mr. Stevens

O my dear, more heresy to muzzle  
No sooner have we buried in peace  
The flighty divinities of Greece,  
Than up must pop the barbarian with  
An antimythological myth,  
Calling the sun the sun, his mind "Puzzle."<sup>1</sup>

The poet who "call[s] the sun the sun" is of course Stevens, the poet of "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," the last poem in *Transport to Summer*. The opening stanzas of "Notes" command a young poet, an "ephebe," to rethink "The inconceivable idea of the sun":

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was  
A name for something that never could be named.  
There was a project for the sun and is.

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<sup>1</sup> While Auden's copy of *Transport to Summer* has not been found, Alan Ansen—Auden's secretary at the time—reports that Auden's poem was written in a copy of the Stevens volume. Ansen's transcript of the poem is housed in the Berg Collection of the New York City Public Library, written on the bottom right-hand corner of a note amid letters from Auden to Ansen, with the label: "WHA in a copy of Transport to Summer." The poem also turns up in a June 6, 1947 letter from Auden to Ursula Niebuhr in which Auden comments on his reading of *Transport to Summer*. The text of the poem, untitled, follows this note: "Have been reading the latest Wallace Stevens, some of it is very good, but he provoked me to the following little snoot." Library of Congress, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Box 34. Three drafts of the poem, under the title "Art History" appear in Auden's notebook, "Poems 1947[-49]," also housed in the Berg Collection of the New York City Public Library, showing the poem in its various stages of composition.

There is a project for the sun. The sun  
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be  
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

(*CP* 380-81)

Stevens asks us to erase our assumptions about what the sun represents, mythically and poetically, and to see the sun as if for the first time. But as Auden's playful jibe at Stevens suggests, Stevens's poetical "project" is itself myth-making: "an antimythological myth."

Auden was suspicious of Stevens's inheritance of the romantic principles that he himself sought to reject. According to Auden's poem, Stevens's sun exists only in the mind of the poet, an imagined and inaccessible "puzzle." Auden questions Stevens's belief in the imagination's ability to create its own world—what Stevens calls the "poem of the mind" in "Of Modern Poetry" (*CP* 239). Auden mistrusts—and even wants to "muzzle"—Stevens's notion that we must rid the sun of its mythical layers, its Apollonian name, and he believes that this only creates another myth—one of the mind—in its place. "Miss God," a phrase that Auden started using in the 1940s (at the time of his conversion to the Anglican church), points to a good-natured deity that is substantially different from Greece's "flighty divinities." Making moral judgments of people on earth, Auden's "Miss God" ridicules romanticized myth-making.

Three drafts of the poem in Auden's journal reveal a few notable revisions. The phrase "flighty divinities of Greece" was first "polytheism of Ancient Greece," suggesting a more serious critique of a mythic, pagan religion that Stevens perhaps resurrects.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the playful tone of the final version, with its puckish opening phrase "Oh my dear," differs from the earlier drafts; the first line of the poem initially read "There's always some heresy to muzzle," then "Dear oh dear, more heresy to muzzle," and finally "Oh my dear, more heresy to muzzle." Most significantly, Auden titles the poem "Art History" in the drafts, not "Miss God on Mr. Stevens." The ironic title "Art History" suggests a wry disapproval of Stevens's definition of art—of imagined paradigms untethered to the world outside of myth, untethered to actual history.

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase "polytheism of Ancient" is crossed out in Auden's letter to Ursula Niebuhr as well, replaced with "flighty divinities of."

But particularly striking about the final title, “Miss God on Mr. Stevens,” is Auden’s projection of himself onto a mock-feminine or homosexual authority who condemns Stevens. Richard Davenport-Hines notes that Auden’s first use of the phrase “Miss God” occurs in “Last Words,” a 1941 article for *Harper’s Bazaar* quoting the deathbed comments of the famous and obscure. One of Auden’s concluding quotations runs as follows: “Bert Savoy, the famous female impersonator, was watching a thunderstorm with some friends, ‘*There’s Miss God at it again,*’ he exclaimed and was instantly struck by lightning” (quoted in Davenport-Hines 215). The phrase “Miss God,” as it is used here and in Auden’s poem, conjures up the voice of a priggish *prima donna* – arbitrating both world events and poetics – who cannot bear her fragile powers being doubted or interfered with. Granted, Auden’s short poem is an occasional piece (that he probably never imagined Stevens would read), but why would Auden address Stevens, even obliquely, in a language so heavily encoded with homosexual overtones, something he rarely does in his published poetry? Tracing Auden’s later use of the poem, and his other references to Stevens, may allow us to see more clearly what Auden (perhaps unconsciously) had in mind.

Auden’s poem about Stevens makes its way into “In Praise of Limestone,” composed in May 1948, just over a year after Stevens’s *Transport to Summer* was published. Valuing human imperfection, “In Praise of Limestone” considers the beauty of limestone faults in the Italian landscape and the frailty and flaws of the body. Marked by error and accident, our human condition is rooted in the limitations of the earth, not in the “infinite space” of imagined perfection. Poets who present the world otherwise are “rebuke[d]” by the very materials of the land:

... The poet,  
 Admired for his earnest habit of calling  
 The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle, is made uneasy  
 By these solid statues which so obviously doubt  
 His antimythological myth; and these gamins,  
 Pursuing the scientist down the tiled colonnade  
 With such lively offers, rebuke his concern for Nature’s  
 Remotest aspects . . .

(SP 186)

“Solid statues,” constructed from the same stone that the poet admires, exhibit man’s ability to shape and control earth’s terrain and to create classically ordered art here on earth. The direct path of the “tiled colonnade” meets the step of the scientist, who reinforces art’s perfection with his knowledge of the human body and the natural world. But “gamins,” neglected young boys roaming the town’s streets, do not adhere to this ordered march, disrupting both classicism on earth and the Stevensian poet’s mind-myths. Unruly nature inevitably checks the “supreme fiction” of the poet’s pure imagination.

On another level, the boys’ “lively offers” suggest that Auden figures himself into his critique of poetical myth-making. To read Auden foremost as a “gay poet” can certainly be reductive, but in this particular instance (as with his phrase “Miss God”), Auden interpolates a gay male discourse into his critique of Stevens, as if he sees in Stevens something he fears in himself. Suggesting that “the poet” might do well to ditch his “mind puzzle” for the offer of a more satisfying rendezvous, the poem consequently positions Auden as “the poet” in his poem—one who often had affairs with younger men. Identifying himself with Stevens, Auden conflates two anxieties: a fear of the poetic imagination as the cause of political and ethical retreat, and feelings of guilt about his own homosexuality, sharpened by his religious conversion. Poetics and politics and (homo) sexuality all become blurred here as variations on what it means to be a poet, and a man.

But how fair is Auden’s assessment of Stevens’s poetical project? And how did Stevens respond to Auden’s references to him? As a poem like “Esthétique du Mal” suggests (a poem included in *Transport to Summer*), Stevens also advocates the earthy imperfections of life on earth; “Pain is human,” “Life is a bitter aspic” (CP 314, 322). The necessary existence of humanity’s evil impulses should only encourage our satisfaction with the substance of the earth, our ultimate pleasure: “the greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world” (CP 325). Perhaps Stevens wanted to clarify his poetic credo in response to Auden when he picked up the phrase “antimythological myth” and used the phrase “antimythological poem” in a 1953 letter to Renato Poggioli, Stevens’s Italian translator. In a June 3, 1953 letter, Stevens explains the possible difficulties inherent in translating “The Comedian as the Letter C”:

It may be a little difficult to translate *The Comedian as the Letter C*. The sounds of the letter C, both hard and soft, include other letters like K, X, etc. How would it be possible to translate a line like

Exchequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed,

And preserve anything except the sense of the words? However, it is true that that poem has made its way without reference to the sounds of the letter C. There is another point about the poem to which I should like to call attention and that is that it is what may be called an *anti-mythological poem*. The central figure is an every-day man who lives a life without the slightest adventure except that he lives it in a poetic atmosphere as we all do. This point makes it necessary for a translator to try to reproduce the every-day plainness of the central figure and the plush, so to speak, of his stage. (L 778; italics mine)

To some extent, the older Stevens here rereads his younger work, recasting "The Comedian as the Letter C" in a light more conducive to his new emphasis on "plainness" (as in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," written in 1949) rather than on the riotous verbal extravagance that also unquestionably characterizes the poem. According to the older Stevens, Crispin the comedian lives a life rooted in everyday things, not in some mythological world of the imagination. The poem, as many have noted, is highly biographical: Crispin's grand sea voyage and return home (material for an epic "myth") might be understood as a quest for poetic subject matter and a search for worldly satisfaction. A "poetic atmosphere" does not require that Crispin, or Stevens, remove himself from working in the world (for forty years as an insurance attorney), but rather allows him to be consciously committed to the living in a practical, "actual," day-to-day reality. The poem embraces the quotidian as an answer to the life-long dilemma of how to live.

Stevens, like Auden, was quite aware that poetry has real limitations; Crispin realizes: "The words of things entangle and confuse. / The plum survives its poems" (CP 41). As Frank Kermode has pointed out, Stevens believed that metaphor does not change reality, and that to ignore this fact is to falsify reality (Kermode 35-36). "For poetry makes nothing happen," Auden famously wrote in "In Mem-

ory of W.B. Yeats," a sentiment that Stevens also expressed around the time that his *Selected Poems* was about to be published. In a letter to his friend Barbara Church, who was driving around Italy surveying the ruins of World War II, Stevens writes:

There is going to be a *Selected Poems* published in London shortly. I returned the proofs yesterday. The book seemed rather slight and small to me—and unbelievably irrelevant to our actual world. It may be that all poetry has seemed like that at all times and always will. The close approach to reality has always been the supreme difficulty of any art: the communication of actuality, as [poetics?], has been not because it loses identity as the event passes. Nothing in the world is deader than yesterday's political (or realistic) poetry. Nevertheless the desire to combine the two things, poetry and reality, is a constant desire. (L 760)

This letter to Barbara Church, as Alan Filreis maintains, should be considered within the political context in which it was written: at the height of the 1952 presidential campaign when the positive political rhetoric of reconstruction dramatically contrasted with the accounts Barbara Church sent Stevens of the misery of post-war Europe. Stevens never believed that his poetry could actually change the way that people (or politicians) behaved. Thus, poetic thought, Stevens suggests, should acknowledge the "actual world," but only in a way that the poems are not restricted to contemporary political meanings that lack enduring relevance.

Stevens questions "political (or realistic) poetry," what he also calls an "academic" approach to problems that he associates with Auden, in another letter to Barbara Church about six months later. Here, Stevens explains why he must decline participation in a mid-week "Symposium on Art and Morals" at Smith College (April 23-24, 1953) in which Auden participated:

They asked me to come as a guest, which I declined because I don't want to be away from home over night. Auden, Allen Tate and Trilling one night, and Barzun, George Boas (of Johns Hopkins) and W.G. Constable (of the Boston Museum) the next. This would be of the greatest interest. But will even exceptional men say anything exceptional on such a familiar subject in circumstances of such concentration? I wish I could

have seen my way clear. Boas is a man of considerable value, who is obscured by his job. And all of these men, except Constable, are Academic Figures. I wonder whether the academic analysis of the problem presented is really the right analysis—the right answer. (L 772-773)

Stevens's meaning here is not entirely clear; despite his "greatest interest" in the symposium's participants, he objects to the "academic" nature of analysis, as if the problem of "art and morals" should be treated differently, perhaps aesthetically. In other instances, Stevens uses the term "academic" to refer to art that too obviously "teaches" a doctrine or espouses a political ideology, as in his 1936 poem "Academic Discourses at Havana," in which he writes: "Politician ordained / Imagination as the fateful sin" (CP 143). Similarly, in a 1948 letter to José Rodríguez Feo, a young Cuban poet and founder of the literary magazine *Orígenes*, Stevens disdains the "academic" quality of Mexican art because it privileges pedagogical principles over the imagination. And of course, Stevens's 1947 lecture at Harvard, "Three Academic Pieces" includes a poem inspired by a painting of a pineapple; the poem exemplifies "resemblance" at work, versus the academic examination of metaphor that begins the lecture (NA 71-89).

But "academic" may simply refer to the fact that most of the men listed as participants in the Smith symposium were associated with colleges and universities, including Auden, who was employed during various periods by the University of Michigan, Swarthmore College, Bennington College, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, the New School for Social Research and Oxford University. In contrast, when Archibald MacLeish invited Stevens to be the Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard for the 1955-56 academic year, Stevens declined.

Stevens perhaps shied away from any poetic relationship with Auden, whose ability to address the "reality" of wartime—the ethical and religious questions that emerged from the sufferings of World War II—characterize many of his most well-known poems. Stevens may have resented Auden for doing what he himself could not naturally do: write successful political poetry. Most notably, Stevens revised his 1936 group of political poems, *Owl's Clover*, for inclusion in *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), but subsequently did not include *Owl's Clover* in his *Collected Poems* (1954). Dissatisfied with how the poems deal with art's relationship to contemporary issues, or "To

What one reads in the papers," Stevens eventually called the poems "rather boring" (*LWS* 308). As many critics have noted, the excessive rhetoric of the poems sabotages Stevens's attempt to defend poetry against the political and social pressures of the time. Auden's poetry—particularly poems like "Spain 1937," "In a Time of War" (1938) or "September 1, 1939"—is a testament to what Stevens could not do.

Accordingly, when Auden actually surfaces as a topic in Stevens's correspondence, Stevens assumes a certain protective distance from Auden's work. When Rodríguez Feo solicits Stevens's opinion on Auden's *Age of Anxiety*, Stevens's response assumes a posture of remarkable literary ignorance; he pretends never to read other poets' work so as not to inherit influences that critics might eagerly trace: "You are wrong, by the way, in thinking that I read a lot of poetry. I don't read a line. My state of mind about poetry makes me very susceptible and that is a danger in the sense that it would be so easy for me to pick up something unconsciously. In order not to run that danger I don't read other people's poetry at all" (*Secretaries* 114). But as many have noticed, Stevens's knowledge of other poets was deeper than he let on; for instance, while he sometimes feigned only a slight familiarity with his contemporaries' work, his bookshelves at home were full of their books.

Auden was decidedly more open about what he thought of other poets' work than was Stevens. Auden's assessment of Stevens emerges not only in "In Praise of Limestone," but also in his quadruple sestina "Kairos and Logos" (1941). The poem's title refers to Paul Tillich's *The Interpretation of History* (1936) in which the biblical concept of Kairos, or the fullness of time, is interpreted through the tasks demanded of Logos, or the kingdom of God at a specific historical time (*Later Auden* 168). Edward Mendelson has suggested that the third sestina in "Kairos and Logos" offers a view of the world that probably belongs to Stevens, or a poet Auden envisions as "a late-romantic heir to Mallarmé" (*Later Auden* 169-170). The poem describes the ethical temptations faced by two different figures, a young girl and a poet, and implies that the temptations are one and the same: relying on the individual imagination as a creator of one's own world is akin to believing in childlike fairy-tales. The poet of the third sestina essentially repeats the choices made by the child—or a young "miss"—in the second sestina. Thus, the Stevensian poet—as in "Miss God on Mr. Stevens"—is again reprimanded for his juvenile (and feminine) behavior.

The third sestina suggests that an adult (like Stevens) can, like the child of the second sestina, live in a false reality of the imagination:

He woke one morning and the verbal truth  
He went to bed with was no longer there;  
The years of reading fell away; his eyes  
Beheld the weights and contours of the earth.

One must be passive to conceive of the truth:  
The bright and brutal surfaces of things  
Awaited the decision of his eyes  
(CP 240)

Used to describe a poet whose creative power is essentially passive, Auden's diction—"bright and brutal surface of things"—calls to mind Stevens's early poems, "Of the Surface of Things" and "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," both from *Harmonium* (CP 57, 98). In Stevens's "Of the Surface of Things," a poet sits in his room composing lines: "In my room, the world is beyond my understanding / But when I walk I see that it consists of three of four hills and a cloud" (CP 57). And in Auden's poem, the Stevensian poet passively regards what he sees; he no longer believes in language's ability to represent truthfully the world and is thus tempted to provide order based upon his own perception of things:

One notices, if one will trust one's eyes,  
The shadow cast by language upon truth:  
He saw his rôle as father to an earth  
Whose speechless, separate, and ambiguous things  
Married at his decision; he was there  
To show a lucid passion for their fate.  
(CP 240)

Preserving the child's "Magic Word," the poet pretends to be "father to an earth" rather than to be part of it. He yokes together heterogeneous things, never minding that his created world differs from what others might perceive. Inevitably, this poet will suffer from loneliness, seeing the world "with an exile's eyes" (CP 241). As Mendelson notes, this poet is "the type of artist for whom the ethical vocabulary of personal and social relations has no meaning, whose narcissistic task is to discover the patterns created by his own mind,

and whose fantasy leaves him . . . with no hope of escape from his self-condemned loneliness" (*Later Auden* 169-170). The poem also might be read as a more overt expression of Auden's uneasiness with poetry's impotence; the poet does not actually "father" the earth: "instead of earth / His fatherless creation; instead of truth / The luckiest convention of his eyes" (*CP* 241). The poem projects an anxiety about being a "father" to a world of named objects (to write poetry) rather than being an actual father to a family. If we keep in mind Auden's sense of failure at not having a family of his own (or a meaningful heterosexual marriage), it again seems striking how Auden's critique of Stevens becomes a critique of himself. The poem assesses both a poetics that Auden wanted to avoid and a state of familial deficiency that Auden personally feared. Despite his "lucid passion," the poet in "Kairos and Logos" can only imagine a fantastic, whimsical world: "To father dreams of talking oaks, of eyes / In walls, catastrophes, sins, poems, things / Whose possibilities excluded truth" (*CP* 240). This kind of poet, fathering only images, does not see the world honestly, but wants to imagine all "things" as if imbued with powers that he has bequeathed to them himself.

If Auden indeed had Stevens in mind when composing "Kairos and Logos," it seems fair to say that Stevens accepted Auden as a poet of importance perhaps more than Auden accepted Stevens. While Stevens, to my knowledge, never offered a direct opinion of Auden (as he did, for instance, regarding both Eliot and Pound), his participation in the Bollingen Committee that awarded the prize to Auden in 1954 suggests an approval—if somewhat ambivalent—of Auden's work. Stevens never openly commented on the committee's choice, though there are several documents relating to the selection proceedings. In a January 15, 1954 letter to Richard Eberhart, a younger poet and academic, Stevens enthusiastically describes the experience of being on the committee; he enjoys the occasional experience of participating in literary events:

The Bollingen Committee met last week-end in New Haven and I assume that you know that it chose Auden. I went down and had a remarkably good time. In Cambridge there used to be an old wheeze about Cambridge not really being part of the United States. The same remark was made by someone in New Haven but Cambridge was changed to New Haven. Everyone left after dinner to go to hear the Eliot play

and then came back after the theatre to talk about it. (L 813-814)

The Bollingen committee in 1953-54 consisted of Stevens (who won the award in 1949-50 after the Pound controversy the year before), Marianne Moore, Randall Jarrell and Winfield Townley Scott. Stevens refers to this committee as "it," whereas in the next sentence he refers to himself—having a more than ordinary evening in New Haven—as "I." Syntactically, Stevens disassociates himself from the committee's praise for Auden. But an announcement of Auden's award, presumably written by the committee members, was released to the press and a carbon copy was eventually found in Stevens's own volume of Auden's *Poems* (1930), a fact that reveals Stevens's familiarity with at least Auden's early work as well as his attention to the honor given Auden.<sup>3</sup> The announcement reads as follows:

The Committee of Award of the Bollingen Prize in Poetry of the Yale University Library awards the prize of 1953 to W. H. Auden. Mr. Auden is to us the poet. A tough thinker, he is a man who expresses himself acutely and with poetic vivacity. In his identity as an American he has become a permanent part of American poetry. The Committee is delighted to honor him.<sup>4</sup>

Emphasizing his American "identity," the announcement salutes and enlists Auden as a national poet, together with a previous prize-winner like Stevens.

Yet despite the literary, geographic and social proximity of the two poets in the 1940s and 1950s, I have found no conclusive evidence that they actually met. The Bollingen Committee held no formal event for Auden; the prize money was awarded to Auden by

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<sup>3</sup> Stevens kept the Bollingen announcement in his copy of Auden's *Poems* (1930), Huntington Library 323688. The announcement was removed from the volume after the Stevens Papers and Library were acquired by the Huntington Library in 1975.

<sup>4</sup> Huntington Library, WAS 4037. The names of the committee members are also listed below the announcement.

Yale's University Librarian.<sup>5</sup> But possibly the two poets crossed paths in and around New York City. For instance, they may have met in November 1953 when Stevens was the spokesman for a committee that tried to raise funds for Dylan Thomas's widow after Thomas died suddenly. Auden, among many others, signed the appeal (Brazeau 57). Another likely meeting may have occurred on October 1, 1954 at a lunch that Knopf held when Stevens's *Collected Poems* was published. The guest list included Auden, although it is unclear whether he actually attended or if the two poets talked (Brazeau 196). Characteristically private about personal and poetic matters, Stevens turned down many opportunities to meet other people, most likely missing any gathering that included Auden. Perhaps intimidated by Auden's success with poetry charged by politics, Stevens still would have enjoyed knowing Auden. The meeting between these two poets may not have been "actual," but it was certainly on both of their minds.

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## **A Night of Auden's Poetry**

*James Fenton discusses and reads the poetry of W. H. Auden at Cooper Union, March 21, 2002.*

In what proved to be a remarkable evening, James Fenton, poet, war correspondent, journalist, critic, and Oxford Professor, spoke of Auden's life and read a varied selection of Auden's poetry. He

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<sup>5</sup> A January 11, 1954 letter to Auden from James Babb, Yale's University Librarian, congratulates him on the award and encloses a check for \$1000. On a carbon copy of the typed letter, (which was cc'd to Stevens), Babb has written in his own hand on the bottom: "Presented to him personally this AM." Huntington Library, WAS 2597.

paused halfway through the reading, during which time pianist Phillip Bush and tenor William Ferguson premiered Charles Wuorinen's piece "September 11, 2001," the lyrics of which were drawn from Auden's "Anthem for St. Cecelia's Day."

At Oxford, Fenton has recently presented several lectures which make up his latest book, *The Strength of Poetry*. Three of these lectures are on Auden. Fenton shares much common ground with his subject—both were students at Oxford and later became Professor of Poetry there, both won the Newdigate prize for poetry. Like Auden, Fenton is a journalist and critic as well as a poet.

Fenton spoke of Auden's "equivocal reputation" in England immediately following his death in 1973. In some circles—and Fenton was careful to distance himself from this point of view, stating that he often argued against it—Auden's move to the United States just before the outbreak of World War II was considered an act of avoidance. Some English admirers of Auden also maintained that his poetry suffered in quality as a result of his move to the states.

Auden left the UK, Fenton stated, because he had grown increasingly uncomfortable with his role as a public figure connected with the Left. Although he still maintained left-wing views, he felt he had to sever his connections with the party line. Such a change also explains why Auden chose not to have the poems "Spain" and "September 1, 1939" reprinted in the *Collected Poems*; he felt he no longer agreed with the poems' statements, particularly their conclusions, he felt he could no longer be represented by them.

Fenton introduced the first poem he would read, "Night Mail," by recalling that he heard the poem as a child when it formed the spoken narrative of a 1930's documentary film about the British mail system. Because these documentaries featured steam engines, they were often shown to children at parties. Fenton began to read rapidly through the first half of the poem, and, remarkably, he maintained the poem's extraordinary sense of forward movement while simultaneously articulating its line breaks and rhymes. At the poem's turn, at "dawn," he paused and slowed. He then read several more poems that demonstrated Auden's command of various styles and forms, including the cabaret song "At last the secret is out," "Happy the hare in morning," which he introduced as Auden's "rhetorical mode." "As I walked out one evening" elicited a collective response from the audience, somewhere between a sigh and *yes*. We had been on the edge of our seats since the first poem, rapt by the muscular progress

of the steam engine. The rather vast atmosphere of Cooper Union's Great Hall had become intimate and charged. Among other poems Fenton read were "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," "The Shield of Achilles," "September 1, 1939," and "Spain." He concluded, aptly, with "A Walk After Dark," to send us out into the night.

Fenton spoke of how Auden's work has undergone a dramatic increase in and broadening of readership within the last decade, primarily because of two events. The first was the inclusion of his "Song IX" from "Twelve Songs" in the funeral scene of the 1993 film "Four Weddings and a Funeral." After the film was released, a paperback volume of Auden's love poetry began to be sold in grocery stores in England, an occurrence in which Auden would have delighted. The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 also occasioned a revival of interest in Auden; his "September 1, 1939" began to appear on internet sites and in journals and newspapers all over America as both readers and editors sought some sort of commentary on the bewildering events.

Introducing the poem that begins "Wrapped in a yielding air, beside," Fenton characterized Auden's lyric poems as works of "great abstract beauty in their movement and rhythm." So clearly at home in Auden's poetry, not only in its subject matter and tone but also in its rhythm, syntax, and rhyme, Fenton created something palpable, an unforgettable tribute to a poet whose work at once dwells on and transcends history and time.

SARAH HANNAH

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## **Auden and Italy**

Go I must, but I go grateful (even  
To a certain Monte) and invoking  
My sacred meridian names, Vico, Verga,  
Pirandello, Bernini, Bellini,

To bless this region, its vendanges, and those

Who call it home: though one cannot always  
Remember exactly why one has been happy,  
There is no forgetting that one was.  
(Goodbye to the Mezzogiorno)

Readers familiar with Auden's biography know that his relationship with Italy was a privileged one. The ten summers he spent in Ischia covered the in which the middle-aged poet published three collections—*Nones* (1951), *The Shield of Achilles* (1955) and *Homage to Clio* (1960)—which marked a change in his poetics towards the Horatian mode, and expressed a more relaxed and joyful approach to life. Poems such as "In Praise of Limestone," "Ischia," "An Island Cemetery" or "Goodbye to the Mezzogiorno" articulate Auden's personal relationship with a country which, for a cultivated northerner, is characterized by a weighty cultural heritage—art, music, opera, literature—by sun-drenched landscapes, good food, a relaxed life-style and by many contradictions.

For Auden Italy was the place where "peace / in any case is a cure for, ceasing to think/ of a way to get on, we learn simply to wander about /... / Not that you lie about pain or pretend that a time / of darkness and outcry will not come back; ... (Ischia). He associated the country with some kind of noble *otium* which, to his tormented northern ethics, meant a truce—a reprieve in his struggle for meaning - equal to a joyful acceptance of what is given.

The Italy Auden and Kallman knew does not exist any longer - there are no donkeys left to bray in Ischia, cement has ruined many beautiful spots and many negative aspects of economic globalization have been accepted uncritically. What persists, however, is a strong interest in foreign literatures, connected with a tradition to translate major and minor artists. The country which commissioned and first performed *The Rake's Progress* has paid Auden due homage by translating the whole of his poetic *opus*, many of his essays, and by publishing some important critical studies.

The following pages aim at presenting a *status quaestionis* of Auden studies in Italy; without claiming to be exhaustive, they wish to suggest how much he is read or known today. The final bibliographical section gives a list of major critical studies in Italian, and may be of some help to scholars interested in what can be found in translation.

As to poetry and its readership in Italy, it should be mentioned that, although much is published every year, especially by praise-

worthy small to middle-sized publishing houses such as Guanda, SE Studio Editoriale, Adelphi, Archinto, the market is rather limited. Newspapers and weeklies do regularly review translations of poets' works, and Radio Three, the major National Radio cultural programme, devotes broadcasting time to poetry and literature from all over the world; however, Auden and English poetry in general are mostly topics for scholars, teachers and students. As a result, Auden is much less known than other 20th-century poets such as T. S. Eliot or Dylan Thomas, although a few opera-goers may associate his name with *The Rake's Progress*.

It should also be added that trends in the editorial policies of the 1960s' and 1970s' did penalize him because his ideas and poetry were considered conservative in the light of a dominant left-wing culture which preferred Dylan Thomas or the American Beat Generation.

There were indeed very early translations and critical studies in the 1950s and 1960s, mainly by Carlo Izzo (1952), who actually worked under Auden's "supervision" on the translations, and by Aurora Ciliberti, who is Auden's major translator into Italian; Francesco Binni first published a monograph on Auden in 1967. However, apart from the essays written by two notable scholars – Alessandro Serpieri and Agostino Lombardo in 1969 and 1974 respectively, the main *corpus* of translations and critical studies was published in the 1980s and 1990s, when some of the poet's uncomfortable positions turned out to be prophetic.

Today, a very good bookshop in Italy may be expected to have at least three out of the ten books actually in print [see bibliography] - I myself found *The Dyer's Hand*, *Tell Me the Truth About Love* and *Horae Canonicae*. It is also notable that some of his collections of poems or essays have had various reprints: for example, *The Age of Anxiety*, first published in 1966, was reprinted in 1969 and in 1994; *The Dyer's Hand* first published as a selection in 1968, reappeared in a full translation in 1972 and in the year 2000.

Much of Auden's fame in Italy today, at least among lay readers, is connected with "Stop all the Clocks," made popular by the film *Three Weddings and a Funeral*. *Tell Me the Truth about Love*, the book which contains the text, was translated shortly after its publication in English.

Schools, Universities and Libraries are of course another matter.

Auden is part of secondary school-syllabi but, as he is a difficult poet to translate and to teach in an English Language class, the majority of secondary school anthologies limit the choice to his more

“approachable” texts, and generally neglect his 1940s, 1950s or 1960s production. After a perusal of four of these anthologies, the recurring titles were “Musée des Beaux Arts,” “September 1939,” “Sonnet from China XII,” “Refugee Blues,” “Miss Gee,” “The Unknown Citizen.” However, teachers of foreign languages in secondary school are not given a strict syllabus but are free to organize their literature class according to “themes.” A poet like Auden would be included if such themes covered war, immigration, and the problems of refugees, or, say, a modern use of the ballad. On the other hand, Shakespeare, the Metaphysical poets, the Romantics or Eliot remain cornerstones of any English Literature course.

As to university syllabi, he is regarded as the most important representative of the 1930s generation of English poets, in fact, most single author courses tend to focus on his Thirties production

Searches in university and local libraries in the north or in the south of Italy have also given interesting results. University libraries in the north, for instance in Turin, Milan, Venice, Bologna, or southern universities with a long-standing tradition, such as Rome or Naples, offer a lot in the way of both primary and secondary texts, in English and in translation, otherwise much less can be found elsewhere. As to local libraries, such as district or village libraries, there exist big differences: Milan’s Biblioteca Comunale (Palazzo Sormani) is excellent in many respects in that it offers most of Auden’s works, also in original, and is thus even better than some libraries in provincial universities in the south. In Palazzo Sormani I found translations of Auden’s editions of Dag Hammarskjöld’s autobiography (1992) and of Frederick Rolfe’s essay *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole* (1984) with his introductory essays. Of course Italy’s biggest city offers the most, but one can always expect some surprise: Caltanissetta’s local library, in central Sicily - a part of Italy where I think a few donkeys still bray - has the two volumes of Ciliberti’s translation of Auden’s poems (1969).

Critical studies on Auden and translations of his works would deserve more attention than the scope of these pages allows. There are at least four monographs on the poet, the latest published in 1994 (Carmen Dell’Aversano) and 1995 (Francesco Binni) respectively.

Francesco Binni is without doubt the scholar who has most contributed to Auden studies in Italy in the course of the last thirty years, together with Carlo Izzo. There are also many contributions in histories of literature (Bertinetti, Amoruso/Binni) and in studies on Modernism (Cianci), while Università Cattolica Milan published four es-

says in one volume in 1985. Articles range from introductions to some of Auden's poems (Binni, Sanesi) and to his "school" (Izzo, Lombardo), to thorough analyses of some of his texts (Serpieri, the Cattolica volume, Dell'Ago) or of his poetics (Binni, Dell'Aversano, Panaro). One recent volume also deals with the theme of Auden's homosexuality (Bergamini).

Izzo's historic translation (1952) of the poems published in the American edition of *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (1945) deserves a final mention. The volume also includes the whole of the "In Time of War" and "The Quest" sequences, plus passages from *The Sea and the Mirror*, *For the Time Being*, *The Age of Anxiety* and *Nones*. Izzo, who knew Auden personally, gives interesting information on the kind of suggestions he had from the poet and thus sheds some light on the approach Auden had to his own works.

On the other hand, Aurora Ciliberti's *Poesie*, published in 1969, comprises *The Orators*, "Letter to Lord Byron," *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1932*, and 1932-38, "The Quest," "Sonnets from China," "New Year Letter," "For the Time Being," and "The Sea and the Mirror." In her introductions to the two volumes she mentions her epistolary exchanges with Auden and her work of translation on the two versions of the sonnet sequence "In Time of War."

In the light of all these translations and of the 1980s and 1990s renewed interest in Auden, it is to be hoped that further publications and translations—especially of his essays—could make aspects of his poetry and poetics more accessible to a wider audience.

## **A bibliography of Auden in Italy**

This section is devoted to major translations and critical studies published in Italy from the 1950s. The works marked with an asterisk are currently available in bookshops all over Italy and through internet-based booksellers; where not indicated, the names are those of the translators.

### *Translations*

Dessi Lina, Rinaldi Antonio. \**L'Età dell'Ansia (The Age of Anxiety)*, Mondadori, Milano 1966, repr. 1969 and Melangolo, Genova 1994.

Ciliberti Aurora. *Per il Tempo Presente (For the Time Being)*, All'Insegna del Pesce D'Oro, Milano 1964.

- *Opere Poetiche di Auden*, Lerici, Milano 1966, 2 vol.

- *Poesie*, Lerici, Milano 1970.
- *Grazie Nebbia (Thank You Fog)*, Guanda, Parma 1977.
- *Città senza Mura e altre poesie (City without Walls)*, Mondadori, Milano 1981.
- *\*Horae Canonicae*, SE Studio Editoriale, Milano 1986, repr.2000.
- *Il Mare e lo Specchio: commentario a 'La Tempesta' di Shakespeare (The Sea and the Mirror)*, SE Studio Editoriale, Milano 1987.
- *\*Lettere dall'Islanda (Letters from Iceland)*, Archinto, Palermo 1993. \*
- Ciliberti Aurora, Lucia Corradini. *\*Viaggio in una Guerra (Journey to a War, by Auden and Isherwood)*, SE Studio Editoriale 1993.
- Dotti Guido ed. *Tracce di Cammino, Dag Hammarskjöld*, prefazione di W. H. Auden, Quigajon 1992.
- Forti Gilberto. *\*La Verità vi prego sull'Amore (Tell Me the Truth about Love)*, Adelphi, Milano 1994.
- *\*Shorts*, Adelphi, Milano 1995.
- Fiori Gabriella. *\*Lo Scudo di Perseo (The Dyer's Hand)*, Adelphi, Milano 2000.
- Gardini Nicola, *\*Un Altro Tempo (Another Time)*, Adelphi, Milano, 1997.
- Izzo Carlo. *Poesie di Auden*, Guanda, Parma 1952, repr. 1961.
- Macherelli Fabio, Binni F. *Il Prolifico e il Divoratore (The Prolific and the Devourer)*, in "Linea D'Ombra," n.98, 1994, pp. 39-46. (Translation of the text in *The English Auden*)
- Oddere Bruno. *Rolfre Frederick, Il Desiderio e la Ricerca del Tutto*, con una introduzione di W. H. Auden, Longanesi, Milano, 1984.
- Sanesi Roberto ed. *Poeti Inglesi del 900*, Mondadori, Milano 1960 [a selection].
- Sacerdoti Gilberto. *\*Gli Irati Flutti (The Enchafed Flood)*, Arsenale, Venezia 1988, repr. 1995 and 2000.
- Siciliano Enzo ed. *Saggi*, Garzanti, Milano 1968 (a selection from *The Dyer's Hand*, tr. by Fiori Gabriella).
- *Il Jolly nel Mazzo*, Garzanti, Milano 1972. (*The Dyer's Hand*) In "Linea D'Ombra," n.62, December 1993, works translated into Italian updated to July 1991.

### ***Critical Essays***

- Bergamini Andrea. *Amori grandi per grandi Uomini*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2000. (The story of ten gay couples including Auden and Kallman.)
- Binni Francesco. *Definizione di Poetica per W. H. Auden*, "Letteratura," XXIX, 1965. (*A Definition of Poetics for W. H. Auden.*)

- *Saggio su Auden*, Mursia, Milano 1967. (*An Essay on Auden.*)
  - *Auden: il dissenso della 'ragione'*, "Letteratura," XXXI, 1967. (*Auden and Reason's Dissent.*)
  - *Auden: il "Garden e la "City," "Arte e Poesia,"* 4-5-6, 1969.
  - 'Wystan Hugh Auden', in *Letteratura Inglese: I Contemporanei*, edited by Vittorio Amoroso and Francesco Binni, Lucarini, Roma 1987, pp. 235-321.
  - "I Trentisti e il Modernismo," in *Modernismo/Modernismi, dall'Avanguardia storica agli anni Trenta e oltre*, Giovanni Cianci ed., Principato, Milano 1991, pp. 459-73. ("Auden and the poets of the 1930s")
  - *Un Pragmatismo Imperfetto. La Poesia Pubblica di Auden*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli 1995. (*An Imperfect Pragmatism. Auden's Public Poetry.*)
- Cianci Giovanni. "I Trentisti," in *Storia della Letteratura Inglese*, vol 2, P. Bertinetti ed., Einaudi, Torino, 2000, pp. 191-95. ("The Poets of the Thirties").
- Dell'Aversano Carmen. *The Silent Passage: Itinerario Poetico di W. H. Auden*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa, 1994.
- Dell'Ago Nicola. *W. H. Auden: 'In Memoria di W.B.Yeats', la natura, la memoria della scienza e dell'arte*, "Praz: Quaderno di Poesia Straniera" nn. 4-5, Agosto 1996. (*W. H. Auden: 'In Memory of W.B.Yeats' nature and the memory of science and art.*)
- Gardini Nicola. "The Dyer's Hand," in *L'Antico e il Nuovo, lo straniero nella lirica moderna: esempi da una storia della poesia*, Edizioni Dell'Arco, Milano, 2000, pp. 78-83.
- Izzo Carlo. *La Generazione Post-eliotiana e la poesia di W. H. Auden*, Bologna, 1962. (*The Generation after T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden's Poetry.*)
- "The Poetry of W. H. Auden," in *Auden: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, 1964, pp. 125-41.
- Lombardo Agostino. "Dalla Scuola di Eliot alla scuola di Auden," in *Il Diavolo nel Manoscritt: Saggi sulla Tradizione Letteraria Americana*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1974, pp. 312-42. ("From Eliot's to Auden's School").
- Marchetti Paola. *W. H. Auden: Teatro e Dramma Musicale, (W. H. Auden: Drama and Opera)* "Aevum, Rassegna di Scienze storiche linguistiche e filologiche, LXII, Settembre-Dicembre 1988, pp. 507-34.

- W. H. Auden: *'The Rake's Progress', il libretto e i suoi modelli* (W. H. Auden: *'The Rake's Progress', the libretto and its models*), "L'Analisi Linguistica e Letteraria," II, 1994, pp. 197-219.
- Panaro Carlo. *L'Arte inclusiva di Auden*, "Convivium," 36, 1968. (*Auden's Inclusive Art*).
- Rossi Sergio, ed. *W. H. Auden, Riti della Parola*, (W. H. Auden: *Word Rites*), Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 1985. The volume contains four essays by Bellorini M. G., "Realtà e Sacralità del Paesaggio"; Balestra Francesca, "I sonetti della *quest*"; Giulietti Margherita, "*The Tempest* e *The Sea and The Mirror*: testo e metatesto"; Pezzini Domenico, "*For the Time Being*: una lettura alla luce della tradizione."
- Sanesi Roberto. *Nota per la 'New Year Letter' di Auden*, "Aut-Aut," 3, 1953. (*A Note on New Year Letter*).
- Serpieri Alessandro. "Lo Specchio e il Caos," in *Hopkins, Eliot, Auden, Saggi sul parallelismo poetico*, Patron, Bologna 1969, pp. 165-208. ("The Mirror and Chaos").

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## Teaching Auden in Britain

Auden just won't go away. Every time one feels that he has been relegated to the status of a period piece, either of the 1930s, the turbulent 1940s, or the liberal post-war era, along comes a cultural or political event and shoves his works into the center of attention again. This happened on a rather facile level with the inclusion of his poem "Funeral Blues" in the highly successful British film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in 1994. The declamation of the piece at the funeral of one of the key characters by his gay partner apparently moved not only the audience but also the British publishing house Faber & Faber, who, clearly expecting large sales, almost instantly issued an inexpensive selection of Auden's verse entitled *Tell Me the Truth about Love* that even used a still from the film and the subtitle *Four Weddings and a Funeral* on its cover. An audiobook of the same title read by John Hannah, the actor who had performed "Funeral Blues" in the film, appeared on the market as a further tie-in.

It is obvious that *Four Weddings and a Funeral* toyed with the idea of Auden as a “gay” poet, at least for the “knowing” part of its audience, for its effect. For everyone else, the poem appears to have represented an original, because unsentimental, elegy with a decidedly modern imagery and tone. What the film necessarily had to ignore, of course, was the origin of “Funeral Blues” as an ironic cabaret song, originally published without a title as one of “Twelve Songs.” While the irony of the poem is easily visible upon paying only the most superficial attention to its imagery and form, it has escaped even academic teachers. I remember, for instance, being asked about the background of the text by a British colleague who turned out to be rather troubled by the idea that it might not be a “serious” one. His choice of the poem for an introductory poetry class for first-year students had apparently been motivated by the fact that here was a rare example of a poetic text that had managed successfully to cross over into popular culture, something increasingly rare in recent decades and mainly reserved for pop and rap lyrics.

The second event that pushed Auden into the limelight again, in Britain, as around the world, was of course of much more serious proportions. The September 11, 2001 attacks suddenly tempted numerous newspapers to declare Auden’s poem “September 1, 1939” a prophetic text. While this was obviously a silly idea as far as Auden’s fortune-telling powers are concerned, what made sense in this assumption was the identification of one of Auden’s persisting strengths: his ability to inquire into the ethics of the everyday in the face of world-wide challenges. A potential that Auden slowly and painfully developed after his experience of the Spanish Civil War, namely recognizing the importance of major world events while continuing to ask for the role and responsibility of the ordinary person when faced with them, was rightly recognized as an appropriate and useful response to a very different threat to world order.

Despite these partly vogueish, partly tragic reasons for Auden’s lasting popularity, in Britain as much as elsewhere, Auden had in fact never really left the British educational scene. In the National Curriculum, the set of goals that the British government designs for all of its schools, he firmly remains one of the explicitly mentioned authors who is supposed to be taught in the so-called “Key stages 3+4.” This means school years 7 to 11 and consequently the age groups between 12 and 16. There he features in group “vi,” defined as “poetry by four major authors published after 1914.” The vagueness of the label is instructive. It first and foremost pinpoints the fact that

there is an implicit assumption that the First World War (still known as the “Great War” in Britain) changed literature and culture profoundly. It also conveniently, though problematically, implies an inclusion of Modernism—which is often (wrongly, I think) believed to have emerged around 1914—in what is then frequently called “modern” poetry.

Auden’s role as a supposedly “major author” in this vague and open field becomes even more interesting when one takes a look at the list of “Examples of major poets after 1914” in which he is included. It encompasses (in alphabetical order) W. H. Auden, Gillian Clarke, Keith Douglas, T. S. Eliot, U.A. Fanthorpe, Thomas Hardy, Seamus Heaney, Ted Hughes, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin, Wilfred Owen, Sylvia Plath, Stevie Smith, Edward Thomas, R.S. Thomas, and W.B. Yeats. While one should keep in mind that this is a list of options and not a prescriptive one, what becomes clear is that it is the result of several compromises. What is apparent is the nod in the direction of the “Celtic Fringe” authors, which motivates the inclusion of Clarke and R. S. Thomas—interestingly enough not Dylan Thomas—as Welsh poets and Heaney and Yeats as Irish. The list also reflects attempts to include women, although the odd combination of Clarke, Jennings, Smith, and Plath (the latter with Eliot the only American-born poet in the list) smacks of very diverse, not to say random ideas behind the choices. The list also partly panders to popularity, as in the cases of Edward Thomas and Plath. It moreover (with Edward Thomas and Thomas Hardy) includes writers who are not really firmly stylistically on the side of “modern” verse.

What is interesting is that Auden thus ends up occupying the position of the joker in the pack. Does he belong somewhere between the pastoral of Hardy and Edward Thomas, Yeats’s and Eliot’s modernism, and what comes after? Does he straddle the Anglo-American divide signaled weakly by the inclusion of Eliot and Plath? Is there perhaps a faint awareness of his similarities with the sly humor of Smith or the more cynical one of Larkin? The National Curriculum does not explain the reasons behind its suggestions, and it is safe to assume that it is put together by compromise achieved by consulting a number of academics and teachers rather than by solid and consistent intellectual reasons. In the case of the poets thus selected—and in the case of Auden—this need not be a bad thing, since it leaves it to individual teachers to find a rationale for teaching specific authors from this list or beyond. It is also too academic an approach to demand a decision as to the firm location of an author in whichever

form of literary history one adheres to. Secondary school teachers and academic tutors especially of undergraduates know the increasing difficulty of persuading pupils and students to engage with any form of poetry at all. In the case of Auden this makes much of his experimental early poetry virtually unteachable in class. It also excludes many later, longer poems with their elaborate intertextual references. Yet it leaves many of the shorter, seemingly less technically adventurous poems dealing with questions of politics, suffering, responsibility, but also love, as interesting options.

These are also the poems commonly selected for non-specific poetry courses at university level, especially for introductory courses. At the more specific levels 2 and 3 and especially in dedicated MA courses, the British university system identifies more clearly its continuing interest in Auden and his writings. Not surprisingly, they often feature in courses on the 1930s. Thus, a forth-year course taught by Professor Peter Davidson at Aberdeen University in Scotland (Scotland's undergraduate degrees last four years compared to England's and Wales's three-year programs) is called "Auden in the 1930s: Landscape, Violence and Desire." It interestingly enough includes not only Auden's poetry, but also his plays and involvement in films. (All information on the National Curriculum and British university courses dates from summer 2002.) A slightly more general course entitled "Auden and the Poets of the Thirties" is offered by Brunel University in London. It compares the works of Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice in terms of style and themes, and understandably also focuses on the politics of the Thirties, on Marxism, and psychology.

A second major way of addressing Auden's works at British universities concentrates on his role in the development of contemporary poetry. Bristol University runs a course entitled "Poetry up to 1945 – Influence and Tradition." It encompasses A. E. Housman, Robert Frost, Thomas Hardy, Robert Graves, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens. The list is comprehensive, if somewhat broad. Explanatory subheadings such as the one attached to the Auden-section, "History, Politics, Mythology," show the direction that some of the inquiry is intended to take, though one could imagine many ways of once again using Auden as a connecting figure or perhaps a confluence and generator spinning themes such as "Native Tradition," "Modernism," "Politics," "Mythology," and "Place" in unexpected directions.

Another very open course entitled "Modernism to the Present Day" advertised by University College Chichester starts with the poetry of the First World War in order to move via Virginia Woolf and Yeats to Auden, and then to Larkin, Heaney, and Carol Ann Duffy. Once again, the crucial role of the "Great War" for British Culture is emphasized when the course description states that "the social consequences of the Great War, shifts in class structure, new political, psychological and scientific theories, will be related to modernist experimentation with form and voices."

Leicester University also makes Auden an explicit component of its third-year course "Literature 1870-1945." The secondary reading prescribed for its Auden component hints at the fact that he once more acts as a representative of the 1930s and also marks a stage in the development from late-Victorian to post-war literature. Another such general course is available at the University of Nottingham. There, "Twentieth-Century British Poetry" explicitly lists as its featured authors Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Hardy, Thomas, Owen, Auden, Larkin, Plath, Heaney and Walcott. One could quibble with the inclusion of Pound and Plath, and also Yeats, Heaney and Walcott, on narrow nationalistic grounds, yet what the course obviously intends to provide is an overview of those poetic voices that have proved most influential on British literature and culture today.

Birkbeck College at the University of London more narrowly offers a course comparing "Eliot and Auden," which aims at combining comparative close readings with an attention to "the intellectual, social and political context in which these two very different poets were writing." It is interesting to see the list of Auden's poems that is given for the course: "Sir, no man's enemy," "A Summer Night," "As I walked out one evening," "Musée des Beaux Arts," "Miss Gee," "Victor," "New Year Letter," "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," "At the Grave of Henry James," "In Transit," "In Praise of Limestone," "The Shield of Achilles," "Goodbye to the Mezzogiorno," "City without Walls," "Thank You, Fog," as well as the essay "The Dyer's Hand." It hints at a balance between checking for possible analogies (as in the attitudes towards religion, cultural heritage, power and violence, but also the banal and everyday) and establishing an individual position (it would be hard to imagine counterparts to "In Praise of Limestone," "Goodbye to the Mezzogiorno," or "Thank You, Fog" in Eliot's oeuvre).

Cambridge University indeed runs a part-time Masters degree in Modernism whose third term (which covers the years between 1925

and 1939) focuses particularly on Yeats, Woolf, and Auden, an interesting and not entirely conventional combination. One would love to play mouse during the discussions in which students and their teachers compare Woolf and Auden.

A more specific and highly interesting MA course is offered by the University of Manchester. It is entitled "England, Identity and Writing: The Empire and After, 1918-90." Its first part "addresses debates on Englishness in relation to modernism and empire," and the authors that it explicitly addresses are Woolf, E.M. Forster, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Auden, Isherwood, Robert Byron, and Eliot. Two themes that have recently shifted into the focus of some research on Auden, namely personal or national identity and their entanglement with Britain's declining imperial ideology and reality, are thus addressed. What is further noteworthy concerning this MA course is that it unflinchingly connects its inquiry of the years leading to the Second World War with a second term that takes the results of the first into a debate culminating ultimately with the resignation of Margaret Thatcher. It is daring, yet also reassuring, to see even in the layout of a postgraduate course a conviction that there is indeed no such thing as a "period piece" in literature and culture. Instead, debates are seen as leading to new debates, and issues that are addressed, poetically or otherwise, in one era resurface in altered shape in later ones.

Altogether, this brief and necessarily sketchy overview of Auden's continuing "career" in British culture, its popular manifestations as well as educational institutions, signals that he is both an established author in the sense of being counted as a significant figure in the development of British poetry (although Auden would very likely have shrugged off the label "major writer") and a stimulus of continuing debate.

RAINER EMIG

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## **Bibliographical Note: The Interview That Wasn't**

Scholars seem to have ignored an uncharacteristically dull published interview with Auden, reported by Marvin Cohen and published in the magazine *Arts in Society* (Ann Arbor), Fall-Winter 1974, under the title "An Interview with W. H. Auden." A copy of the magazine recently in the stock of the bookseller Ken Lopez includes an inscription by the interviewer that says in part: "I confess that all of W. H.'s lines here are sheer Marvinisms. This is a literary hoax."

## **Source Note: "We Are All on Earth to Help Others"**

Auden never claimed authorship of what he called "the conceit . . . of the social worker—'We are all here on earth to help others; what on earth the others are here for, I don't know'" (*Prose*, vol. 2, p. 347; cf. variants on pp. 160, 180, and 424), but he is commonly cited as its author. A letter by R. Meikle to the *Spectator*, 22 November 2002, traces the line to the English music-hall and radio comedian Vivian Foster, who was known as the Revd. Vivian Foster, the Vicar of Mirth. His mock-sermons invariably began, "My dear sheep, you who I have fleeced so often." Foster made about ten recordings on the Columbia label in the late 1930s and early 1940s with titles like "The Parson Addresses His Flock" and "The Parson's Christmas Address." If any member of the Society has access to these recordings, and can locate the exact text of Vivian Foster's teaching about our purpose on earth, the *Newsletter* will be pleased to publish further details.

E. M.

## **Recent and Forthcoming Events**

### **Auden's Eden: A BBC Broadcast**

BBC Radio 4 presented a half-hour feature, "Auden's Eden," about Auden's favorite Pennine landscapes in the North of England, discussed by Anita Money, Stan Smith, and Robert Forsythe. The feature was first broadcast on Sunday, 24 March 2002, at 16.30 GMT, and was

repeated on Saturday, 30 March 2002, at 23.30 GMT. The programme was described as “a journey to the heart of the poet's Eden, the ‘original chasm’ at the desolate and deserted Rookhope lead mine. To Auden, Britain's leading 20th century poet, this location was as formative as the Lake District was to Wordsworth.” A photo gallery of scenes connected with the broadcast may be found at this internet address:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/tv\\_radio/miscprogs/auden.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/tv_radio/miscprogs/auden.shtml)

### **New and forthcoming books**

Peter Edgerly Firchow. *W. H. Auden: Contexts for Poetry*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002; ISBN 0-87413-766-7.

David Garrett Izzo. *W. H. Auden Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishers, Autumn 2002; ISBN 0-7864-1443-X.

*W. H. Auden: A Legacy*, ed. by David Garrett Izzo. West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2002; ISBN 0-93395-194-9. (A collection of twenty-six essays on Auden, mostly written for this volume.)

Richard Bozorth. *Auden's Games of Knowledge: Poetry and the Meanings of Homosexuality*. New York: Columbia University Press, August 2001; ISBN 0-231-11352-8.

Kathleen Raine. *Defining the Times: Essays on Auden and Eliot*. London: Enitharmon Press, 2002; ISBN 1-90056-488-2. Letterpress-printed booklet, limited to 90 signed copies at £30.00. A collection of essays first published in periodicals from the 1940s on.

Stephen E. Tabachnick. *Fiercer than Tigers: The Life and Works of Rex Warner*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002; ISBN 0-87013-522-x. The first biography of Warner, who was a close friend of Auden during his years at Oxford and the early 1930s; includes an account of their relations.

## Editor's Notes

The cost of producing the *Newsletter* has increased considerably, and the Society has been lax in asking for subscription renewals. We would be deeply grateful for renewals from members who have not sent payments in more than a year.

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