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Vin Audenaire

In an essay on the *Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot* written for the Mid-Century Book Society, W. H. Auden, never one to fear a risky generalization, remarked that "to become a poet of the first rank, great talent is not enough; one must get born at the right time and in the right place." The right time to be born, he asserted, was between 1870 and 1890, a period of great ferment in the arts. Picasso, Joyce, Stravinsky, Proust, all were born in the 1870s and 1880s, so, too, William Butler Yeats, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens; and none was born in England, which was also, in Auden's view, a good place for a great poet *not* to be born, for England was still irretrievably locked into the poetic conventions of the nineteenth century: those of the Romantics which were attenuated by the Victorians. To have been born when Auden was, in 1907, and where he was, in the city of York later to be raised in Birmingham, left his own career short-circuited right out of the gate; the best he could hope for, or so he averred, was "the useful role of colonizer" in cultural lands already discovered by others.

Auden wrote this in 1953. Today, an even half century later, he seems a good deal more than a mere colonizer. He seems, in fact, the last indisputably major poet to have used the English language. Although Auden put in his time as a teacher—and, also, as a playwright, librettist, book reviewer, anthologist, and man of all literary work—no poet since him has seemed so inevitably, so unalterably, so irretrievably a poet, in his vocation (in the sense of calling), point of view, bearing, and very being. He wrote and said many brilliant things about literature, some lent extra authority by his accomplished poetry. Had Auden not been a poet, he would have been sad and a little ridiculous even—unthinkable, really.

Geniuses appear young only in music and mathematics; there are no Mozarts in literature. (Come to think of it, there has been

only one in music.) But Auden came into his gift quite early. His intellectual penetration showed itself even sooner than his poetic power, but by the time he arrived at Oxford, he not only knew that he wanted to be a poet but was confident that he would be exceptionally good at it. “You don’t understand,” he told his Oxford tutor Nevill Coghill, who on first meeting didn’t understand the seriousness of Auden’s ambition. “I’m going to be a great poet.”

That is of course precisely what he became, though how great remains in the flux of controversy. Philip Larkin saw a clear division between Auden’s career before and after he left England for America—in 1940, at the age of thirty-three—with before, in Larkin’s view, and that of many others, being much better. After Auden’s departure to America, Larkin thought his poetry “no longer touches our imaginations.” The oddity of all this is that Larkin seems to have appreciated Auden most when, given his own views, he should have despised the ideational content of his poems most deeply.

What isn’t in controversy is Auden’s legendary facility. He appears to have “lisped in numbers.” Christopher Isherwood has remarked that “problems of form and technique seem to have bothered him very little,” and while they were in Germany together Auden took to composing poems in German such that a German writer to whom Isherwood showed them immediately detected his talent. He could apparently knock off a poem between teaching classes at Swarthmore College. He could produce birthday poems for friends on demand, and give, like the dry cleaner’s, same-day service. Far from being chilled, he was stimulated by a commission for a poem. “I am proud of my friends,” he said, “and of my knowledge of metre.” As a poet, his technical resources seem to have been without limit.

The other gift that Auden came into early was superior perspective, allowing him to see on a wider canvas than most people. “He saw things in better proportion than most of us,” a classmate from his preparatory school noted. Noteworthy for an Englishman of his generation, he sized up all the ignorance inherent in discriminations based on social class, race, and religious difference, and appeared easily to rise above them. He was able to seem a citizen of the world while remaining, even after more than thirty years in America, in some ways English to the highest power. Oliver Sacks, the neurologist and writer, who

knew Auden when he, Sacks, was young, allowed that he functioned as a "reality-bearer" for him. "Wystan was," Sacks writes, "at once the most common-sensical and down-to-earth man I have known, but also the most fantastic and fanciful when he let himself go."

Auden was also the most purely intellectual of poets—the most caught up in the intellectual and political currents and movements of his time. Because many of these preoccupations found their way into his poems, his work also poses, among other questions, the question of to what extent the weight of bookishness and involvement in the realm of ideas heightens or slackens many of his poems. A serious reviser of his own work, Auden doubtless was much taken up with such matters; and perhaps all the more so as a man who, during his sixty-six years, regularly shucked off previously held ideas and thoroughly changed his politics and even his point of view.

In his own life, too, Auden poses the at first flush comical but finally serious question of how elegance of mind can live with utter squalor of quotidian life, while his poetry poses that of the real distinction between truth and beauty, since most people sensitive to poetry are in agreement that his early poems are more beautiful than his later poems, in which Auden specifically cultivated such truths as he felt available to him at the close of his life. To bring these questions into high relief, one must revert to biography, which Auden himself would doubtless disapprove, for he made a regular habit of disparaging even as he read and wrote about every literary biography that came his way.

Auden considered himself lucky in his parents. His father was a physician with wide interests, who kept both scientific and literary books about the house. His mother was musical, churchgoing, and a stronger influence than his father—strong enough, he felt, to cause him to emphasize the feminine streak in his own nature that led to his homosexuality, on which he seems lifelong to have been on entirely comfortable terms, quite without self-pity, though at the same time he never romanticized it. In later life, writing about a poem in which C. P. Cavafy recounts a liaison with a male prostitute, which ends by Cavafy writing: "Tomorrow, the next day, years later, vigorous verses / will be composed that had their beginning here," Auden's capping remark is: "But what, one cannot help wondering, will be the future of the artist's companion?" That anchor in reality served Auden well.

Auden seems to have impressed his teachers and schoolmates by his wide knowledge and self-assurance. He took the best his early schooling had to offer, chiefly the study of Greek and Latin, which gave him a feeling for the necessity of precision in language, and made a mental note of the worst, chiefly the "very intense group life" of schoolboys, distinctly not his cup of tea. "Wystan," a public school friend remarked, "did not talk like a boy. He spoke a language which was mature, worldly, intellectually challenging." With the *sang-froid* that was never to desert him, he wrote: "I have never, I think, wanted to 'belong' to a group whose interests were not mine, nor have I resented exclusion. Why should they accept me? All I have ever asked is that others should go their way and let me go mine."

Diddling around writing poems as he did as an adolescent, what apparently turned him into thinking in earnest about becoming a poet was his stumbling upon Walter de la Mare's verse anthology *Come Hither*, which included a wide variety of poetry, all of it far from superior. Not everyone, after all, is swept away, at least at the beginning, by the sublime; sometimes the merely second-rate can incite ambition, causing one to think: "Wait a minute—I can do that."

Oxford was made for Auden, and a fellow undergraduate claimed that he treated it as if it were "a convenient hotel." At first he was going to do a scientific degree, then, recognizing his commitment to poetry, did English Literature instead. But what he studied didn't much matter, so intellectually finished did he already seem. His contemporaries at the university, Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNiece "saw in him," as Spender wrote in a memoir after Auden's death, "a man who, instead of being like us, romantically confused, diagnosed the condition of contemporary poetry, and of civilization, and of us—with our neuroses." ("MacSpaunday" this group of poets was known as collectively, but it is probably closer to the truth to call them Auden & Co.) Auden left Oxford with a third-class degree, a mystery to his teachers, but in fact a point of no final interest, for the deeply talented have never had need of the official approval of universities.

The young W. H. Auden had the gifts, the self-assurance, and the early mastery of the craft of poetry, at least in its technical aspects, but what would his subject be? The General Strike in England was in 1926, when Auden was nineteen, and it was

followed hard upon by the Depression. The class war was the thing wherein to catch the conscience of the left-wing, with which Auden (& Co.) quickly became caught up. “Private faces in public places / Are wiser and nicer / Than public faces in private places” he wrote in a poem of 1931. He put his private face into very public places fairly early in the game. His artful trick was brilliantly to limn in verse the private side of the public life, as in this sonnet of 1934, “Who’s Who,” partly about T. E. Lawrence:

> A shilling life will give you all the facts:
> How his father beat him, how he ran away,
> What were the struggles of his youth, what acts
> Made him the greatest figure of his day:
> Of how he fought, fished, hunted, worked all night,
> Though giddy, climbed new mountains, named a sea:
> Some of the last researchers even write
> Love made him weep his pints like you and me.
>
> With all his honours on, he sighed for one
> Who, say astonished critics, lived at home;
> Did little jobs around the house with skill
> And nothing else; could whistle; would sit still
> Or potter round the garden; answer some
> Of his long marvelous letters but kept none.

Auden must have given the impression of greatly scattered energy. He wrote plays, much verse, reviewed books, taught at boys’ schools, traveled and wrote collaboratively with Louis MacNiece and Christopher Isherwood. “He reported brilliantly,” as Edward Mendelson notes in *Early Auden*,[1] “on history and science, history and economics, people and places, and the many varieties of public and private hatred.” He zipped off to Iceland, China, Spain, wanting to be where the action was. His intellectual travels were not less jaunty—or is it jumpy?—going from Marx to Freud to Kierkegaard to the twentieth-century Christian theologians, acquiring new idea systems the way other people do wardrobes.

It is to the point that W. H. Auden rarely wrote about nature,

[1] EARLY AUDEN, by *Edward Mendelson*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $16.00p. LATER AUDEN, by *Edward Mendelson*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $30.00; $17.00.

partly owing, doubtless, to his poor eyesight. Another of his biographers, Humphrey Carpenter, writes: "In fact, none of his senses seemed to be highly developed; everything had to be scanned by his intellect before he could become really aware of it."[2] Auden himself, in "Letter to Lord Byron," wrote: "To me Art's subject is the human clay, / And the landscape but a background to the torso, / All Cézanne's apples I would give away / For one small Goya or a Daumier." Even though he wrote the best poem ever written about a painting, "Musée des Beaux Arts," on the subject of Breughel's *Icarus*, he never spent much time on visual art. (He also disliked ballet, which he called "an adolescent's art.") Cityscapes were more in the way of his specialty, as in these last six lines from "Brussels in Winter":

> Ridges of rich apartments loom tonight
> Where isolated windows glow like farms,
> A phrase goes packed with meaning like a van,
>
> A look contains the history of man,
> And fifty francs will earn a stranger right
> To take the shuddering city in his arms.

In 1928, Auden went off to Berlin with his friend, three years older, Christopher Isherwood. Weimar Republic Berlin was then a kind of Disneyland for homosexuals, and Auden made sure to go on all the rides. He and Isherwood, though they had slept together, were not actually lovers. Auden was never less than candid about his homosexuality. Always the pursuer, never the pursued—"If equal affection cannot be / Let the more loving one be me," he wrote—he felt unregenerate and unembarrassed about his sexual appetites. His various biographers speak of his having had brief affairs with women. In a *mariage blanc* of convenience (for her), he married Thomas Mann's daughter Erika, giving her instant American citizenship and thus saving her from the Nazis. Late in life, in the hope of finding domestic stability, he proposed marriage to Hannah Arendt, who didn't for a moment consider the proposal seriously. Yet he never politicized his homosexuality, never for a moment thought himself a victim

[2] Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston, 1981).

because of it—though he wrote of J. R. Ackerley: "few, if any, homosexuals can honestly boast their sex life has been happy."

The great tragicomedy of Auden's life, illustrating this last point, was his lengthy, ragged, on-again, off-again relationship with Chester Kallman. Auden considered the relationship a marriage, and at one point wore a wedding ring. Kallman was fourteen years younger than Auden—he was eighteen years old when they met in 1939 at a poetry reading—Brooklyn-born, Jewish, and very clever. He introduced Auden to American popular culture and, more important, to opera. (They would later collaborate on libretti, the most notable of which was for Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress.*) He also drove him crazy with his unfaithfulness. After they had been together for a few years, Auden wrote to Kallman: "You are to me, emotionally a mother, physically a father, and intellectually a son . . . I believe in your creative gift . . . I rely absolutely on your critical judgment . . . with my body, I worship yours." The problem was that Auden, despite all his efforts to make Kallman feel his equal, was much the more talented and generally superior man. "It is through you, "Auden wrote to Chester Kallman after his own turn, or return, to Christianity, "that God has chosen to show me my beatitude." To which one can only add the commonplace thought that the Lord does indeed work in mysterious ways.

I have always thought that the material for a splendid play is to be found in the relationship between W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, a greater and a lesser man, with the greater suffering at the hands of the lesser in good part owing to the envy of the latter for the former's gifts, position, high place in the world. The first scene for this play, a dialogue on the New York subway that actually took place, has already been written and is quoted in its entirety in Richard Davenport-Hines's *Auden*:

> Wystan: I'm not your *father*, I'm your *mother*.
> Chester: You're *not* my mother. I'm *your* mother.
> Wystan: No, you've got it all wrong. I'm *your* mother!
> Chester: You're not. You're my *father*.
> Wystan (screaming): But you've *got* a father! I'm your bloody mother and that's that, darling! You've been looking for a mother since the age of four!
> Chester (shouting): And you've been obsessed with your mother from the womb! You've been trying to get back ever since, so I *am* your mother! And you're my father!

Wystan: No, you want to replace your father for marrying women who reject you, for which you can't forgive him. But you want a mother who will accept you unconditionally, as I do . . .

Chester: *I'm your goddamn mother, for the same reason!* You're always sucking on me as if I were one giant tit.

Wystan: I must always have something to suck.

Chester: Not now, Wystan, not now.

Although Auden came to America before he met Chester Kallman, his relationship determined him to acquire American citizenship, lest he lose Kallman. Much speculation, some of it quite petulant, had been proffered about Auden (and his friend Isherwood) leaving England for America just as World War II was beginning. Many people thought he skulked off to avoid the war, and was no better than a deserter. "No more Auden," Anthony Powell wrote to Kingsley Amis. "I'm delighted that shit has gone." Cyril Connolly called Auden and Isherwood "ambitious young men with a strong instinct of self-preservation, and an eye on the main chance." Evelyn Waugh referred to Auden as "a public bore," and inserted him and Isherwood in his war trilogy as two cowardly pansy poets.

All this was most unjust, especially in the case of Auden, who did all he could to enlist in the war once America joined the fight. More important, had Auden stayed on in England he might have ended a smaller-gauge poet than he did—a John Betjeman, say, or a Philip Larkin—more the little Englander, isolated, a touch provincial, breathing the thick smog of English irony through a thin reed. "I knew it [that he must leave England] because if I stayed I would inevitably become a member of the English establishment," he wrote. America opened up the world to him, though he came to think himself less an American than a naturalized New Yorker, New York that world city but of no known country. America made him, I believe it can be argued, an international poet, in a way that remaining in England would not have allowed. It also gave him—a point of originality, this—command of two distinct dictions, or vocabularies, English and American, which he could alternate or mix as the poetic occasion demanded. What Auden wanted, and found in America, was the chance to be a "minor Atlantic Goethe." He became at least that, and perhaps rather more.

With hindsight there seems something quite as right about Auden emigrating to New York as T. S. Eliot, earlier, having emigrated to London. Eliot grew more concentrated in England

as Auden widened his perspective in America. Although he remained very English—in some ways more English than the English—Auden nonetheless also seemed a most cosmopolitan poet and found himself perfectly at home in Italy and Austria, though he was staunchly Francophobe.

T. S. Eliot generally supported Auden in his poetic career, and was, while at Faber & Faber, his first publisher. Auden felt a respect bordering on reverence for Eliot: "I shall never be as great and good a man if I live to be a hundred," he told Louise Bogan. The admiration was, at first, far from reciprocal; in 1935 Eliot wrote to Virginia Woolf that he, Auden, "was a very nice rattle brained boy." But then he also called him, when Auden was twenty-six, "about the best poet I have discovered in years," and opened up the pages of the *Criterion* to him for reviewing. Auden meanwhile, at Eliot's death in 1964, told an interviewer that "no future changes and fluctuations in taste will consign his work to oblivion."

In their personal lives, the two poets could not have been more different: Eliot, quiet, costive, beautifully organized, a careful caretaker of his career; Auden, publicatious, locquacious, voracious, living with cigarette ashes and nicotine fingers and brutally bitten-down fingernails, sleeping with overcoats, in some instances drapes, even paintings atop him, seeming to dress out of the laundry bag (not the clean laundry bag, either), finding his natural habitat in alcohol, general squalor, and relentless work. No one could have been less calculating. Although he enjoyed having money, and knew its value to the penny, Auden wrote an introduction to Dag Hammarskjöld's book *Markings* that touched on the author's delusion that he was God's servant, if not imagining he was God himself, that was certain to offend the Nobel Prize committee. Knowing this, he still refused to make any changes in it, remarking, apparently without rancor, "Well, there goes the Nobel Prize."

Whatever the disarray in Auden's life, and it was rarely less than impressive, his extraordinary intelligence always seems to have shone through. Vast imperfection of the life, near perfection of the mind seemed to be his lot. "At one or another time there must be five or six supremely intelligent people on earth," Howard Moss wrote shortly after his death. "Auden was one of them."[3] Auden was an authentic intellectual, with all the good

[3] Howard Moss, *Minor Monuments: Selected Essays* (New York, 1986).

and bad qualities that go with the title. Not all that many superior poets have been intellectuals—I am hard pressed to name one, though Robert Lowell came close—and herein lies, I think, the source both of Auden's originality and also some of his flaws.

Anthony Hecht has nicely formulated the characteristic Audenesque poem as one that "interfuses the public with the private domain," in which he "wrote of one in terms of the other."[4] These were the poems, again to quote Hecht, in which "the outer and public world impinges, imposes upon, and endangers the personal and private realm." Perhaps the most famous among these poems of Auden are "New Year Letter," "Spain 1937," "September 1, 1939," "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," "The Shield of Achilles"—many of them poems about which the poet had second and third thoughts, editing and shearing off parts as he grew older. He later decided that the world would not pardon Kipling and Paul Claudel for writing well and cut the passage from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," and he deleted the famous line from "September 1, 1939"—"We must love one another or die"—concluding that, love one another till we are quite blue in the face, we shall die anyhow. As for *The Orators*, he claimed: "My name on the title-page seems a pseudonym for someone else, someone talented but near the border of sanity, who might well, in a year or two, become a Nazi."

But the single line that got Auden in the hottest of water was that of "The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder," from "Spain 1937," which seemed to justify killing for political reasons. This was the line that George Orwell jumped on in his essay "Inside the Whale," where he wrote: "The Hitlers and the Stalins find murder necessary, but they don't advertise their callousness, and they don't speak of it as murder; it is 'liquidation,' 'elimination,' or some other phrase. Mr. Auden's brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled." Although he eliminated the poem from his official collected poems, he justified his position by saying that all he intended was to make the point that in any war, unless one is a pacifist, one must find it necessary to kill other human beings whose only fault is that they are fighting on the other side; and that if any war can be called just, then murder, in a just cause, becomes necessary.

[4] THE HIDDEN LAW: The Poetry of W. H. Auden, by *Anthony Hecht*. Harvard University Presss. $46.95; $16.95.

Which is certainly fair enough, but it does bring up another, more complicated question, and this is ought a poet, within his poems, to deal so directly with such opinions, ideas, issues? Everyone will remember the famous reply to Degas, who was trying to write poems, when he asked Mallarmé where he got his ideas. "But Degas," Mallarmé wisely replied, "poetry is not written with ideas but with words." This deceptively simple remark, like so many of Mallarmé's remarks, has great weight and subtlety, speaking about the dangerousness of ideas to poetry. One may end up with ideas but one should never start out with them. The remark is a precursor to Eliot's famous remark about Henry James: "He had a mind so fine no idea could violate it." When young and even well into his maturity, Auden seemed to invite violation from every idea he encountered.

In his late poem "Thanksgiving" (1973), Auden thanks those who influenced him as a poet. His list includes Hardy, Thomas, and Frost; Yeats, Graves, and Brecht; Kierkegaard, Charles Williams, and C. S. Lewis; and ends with Horace and Goethe. But he could easily have added Marx, Freud, D. H. Lawrence, Gerald Heard, Georg Groddeck, Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, and many others. Much of Auden's experience derived from books, as opposed to observation and direct experience, and, naturally enough, the books he read most intensely were those intellectually fashionable during his time. This is what made him so very much more the intellectual than Frost, Stevens, even Eliot. Like the standard intellectual, he seemed to live completely in his age. John Bayley writes that "Auden could not get into things and people, but he got instead into the spirit and sense of the age, into its moods and dreams, its fashions and crazes, from Homer Lane to Sheldon, from the yo-yo to carbon dating."

The ideas in Auden's poetry were always what seemed to bring Randall Jarrell up short. Jarrell, the best poetry critic of the age, could never quite come to terms with Auden, the age's best poet. Nor could he quite leave him alone. For Jarrell, Auden always had deep flaws, but when he corrects them and goes in the right direction, he goes, for Jarrell "a good deal too far." The best poems in the 1940 book *Another Time* are better than any poems being written, but they are accompanied by so many poor poems, containing "comments that are often interesting or clever or amusing; [but] poetry is not comments." In the 1950s, Jarrell found Auden to have written better in the 1930s, though he

didn't quite satisfy him then, either. Auden "is the most accomplished poet alive," and "his laundry list would be worth reading—I speak as one who's read it many times, all rhymed and metered," and "even when Homer nods, it's quite a performance." Of course, "Auden was, and is potentially, one of the best poets on earth," yet, when one gets down to cases, so many of his poems, for Jarrell, turn out to be, like "New Year Letter," "not quite first rate."

To a long essay titled "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry," Jarrell appends an altered epigraph from Heraclitus: "We never step twice into the same Auden." Wherever Jarrell stepped into the long river of Auden's verse, he seemed to discover something unpleasant on his shoe. This particular essay sets out, brilliantly, all the devices—twenty-six major and many minor ones—that Auden used to get his brilliant poetic effects. The feeling one has at the end of the essay is diminishment, which Jarrell surely realized, for he closes on this note: "An essay like this may seem an ungrateful return for all the good poetry Auden has written; and I feel embarrassed at having furnished—even in so limited an article—so much Analysis and so little Appreciation. But analyses, even unkind analyses of faults, are one way of showing appreciation; and I hope at another time to try another way." Alas, Jarrell never got around to doing so.

Few people interested in the serious game of poetry would deny the enormous achievement of W. H. Auden. The poet himself surely could have had no genuine doubt about this, either. By the time he reached fifty, such was the monumentality of this achievement, he had become almost posthumous while still alive. Where complication sets in is in specifying the nature of that achievement. In the preface to the 1945 edition of his *Collected Poetry*, Auden wrote:

> In the eyes of every author, I fancy, his own past work falls into four classes. First, the pure rubbish which he regrets ever having conceived; second—for him the most painful—the good ideas which his incompetence or impatience prevented from coming to much. (*The Orators* seems to me such a case of the fair notion fatally injured); third, the pieces he has nothing against except their lack of importance; these must inevitably form the bulk of any collection since, were he to limit it to the fourth class alone, to those poems for which he is honestly grateful, his volume would be too depressingly thin.

Auden's final *Collected Poems*, edited by his executor Edward

Mendelson, comprises nearly 900 pages. That's a lot—a ton, really—of poems. "Though I don't think anyone doubts Auden wrote masterpieces," Howard Moss remarked soon after Auden's death, "it is not easy to say, as it is in Eliot's or Stevens's case, exactly what—which—they are." Everyone who cares about poetry will have his or her own personal Auden anthology. Mine includes: "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," "In Praise of Limestone," "At the Graveside of Henry James," "Voltaire at Ferney," "Musée des Beaux Arts," "Lullaby," "Embassy," "As I Walked Out One Evening," "Their Lonely Betters," "Letter to Lord Byron," "The Shield of Achilles." Not many surprises here, I fear.

But, somehow, Auden seems more impressive than even his best poems. I know no poet who, even in quite slapdash poems, can provide more pleasant and provocative surprises. So many of Auden's rhymes have, in miniature, the same effect as a good story; they seem at once unpredictable yet inevitable: "Hunt the lion, climb the peak, / No one guesses you are weak." His juxtapositions—"Hegelian bishops"—get one's attention like those of no other poet. His diction can be ornate, arcane, colloquial, and precise. For those interested in the pure pleasure of watching language beautifully manipulated, no modern poet—make that no modern writer *tout court*—did it better than Wystan Hugh Auden.

Auden has long been regarded as "the poet's poet." This not only because poets were in the best position to appreciate what is behind his achievement, but also because of all that he did—in prosody, in opening up new realms of subject matter, in advancing the art of verse generally—to widen their own sense of possibility. "God bless this poet who took the honest chances," Karl Shapiro in his poem "W.H.A." wrote. "God bless the live poets whom his death enhances."

More than forty years ago, in a classroom at the University of Chicago, I heard the poet and critic Elder Olson read a long passage from *The Waste Land*, close the book, sigh, remark on its beauty, then add: "What a pity that I cannot believe a word of it!" I'm not sure that I now believe it either, but I have no doubt that T. S. Eliot did, just as he believed every semicolon in his *Four Quartets*. And, one might add, as Robert Frost believed in those "Two Tramps in Mud Time" or Wallace Stevens in the view of the world of that woman in her peignoir sitting of a Sunday morning in her sunny chair with her coffee and oranges.

The Auden problem, for me, is not only do I not believe in so

many of the ideas behind his earlier poetry, but I am far from sure that he believed in them himself. His early Marxism, his Freudianism, even his Kierkegaardian existentialism leading on to his renewed Christianity—none of these seem quite convincing. (The philo-Semitic Auden once told Alan Ansen: "I've been increasingly interested in the Jews . . . I wonder what would happen if I converted to Judaism.") They feel instead more like the work of an intellectual window-shopping on the Rodeo Drive of ideas.

In his biography, Humphrey Carpenter mentions that Auden "was not especially ashamed that his poetry at this period [the early 1930s] preached ideas to which he did not really subscribe." In 1933 he wrote a friend that "I am living miserably like a hen scratching for food," which Carpenter interprets to mean that he felt "starved of an ideology," or workable set of ideas on which to base his poetry. On this question, in *The Dyer's Hand*, Auden wrote somewhat equivocally:

> What makes it difficult for a poet not to tell lies is that, in poetry, all facts and beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting possibilities. The reader does not have to share the beliefs expressed in the poem in order to enjoy it. Knowing this, a poet is constantly tempted to make use of an idea or a belief, not because he believes it to be true, but because he sees it has interesting poetic possibilities. It may not, perhaps, be absolutely necessary that he believes it, but it is certainly necessary that his emotions be deeply involved, and this they can never be unless, as a man, he takes it more seriously than as a mere poetic convention.

"For poetry," Auden famously told us, "makes nothing happen." Later, in confirmation of this, he would write about his own politico-poetic forays: "I know that all the verse I wrote, all the positions I took in the thirties, didn't save a single Jew. These attitudes, these writings, only help oneself. They merely make people who think like one, admire and like one—which is rather embarrassing." Did Auden ever look back on his adulatory poem about Sigmund Freud, whom he makes out to be a secular saint of science, with similar embarrassment, once it began to seem that Freud's ideas may have hurt more people than they helped? Are ideas in poetry, the question is, no more than playthings, or, as the journalists have it, good copy?

Paul Valéry, the only modern French writer whom Auden unstintingly admired and who contemplated these matters all his life, felt that "philosophizing in verse was as silly as an attempt to

play lotto according to the rules of chess." In his *Cahiers*, Valéry wrote: "Poetry is not obliged to expound ideas. Ideas (in the usual sense of the word) are conventional expressions or formulas. That is not the *stage* at which poetry arises. It exists at a previous point—where things themselves are as it were pregnant with ideas. So it has to shape or communicate a state which is sub-intellectual or pre-ideational and reconstitute it as a spontaneous function, using all the artifice required." Not that ideas have no place in poetry, but the purest poetry entails "the simultaneous management of syntax, harmony, and ideas" in proper register, with thought in a poem "concealed like the nutritive value in a fruit."

Auden could manage the syntax and the harmony with ease, but toward the middle of his life he began to doubt the import of his or any other ideas. At which point he turned from being the public poet so many admired—"the Court Poet of the Left," Edward Mendelson calls that incarnation of Auden—to the later, domestic one his admirers merely tolerated.

I find the domestic Auden, if not the better poet, certainly the more impressive human being. I also agree with Clive James, who wrote: "I think an appreciation of Auden's later work is the only sure test for an appreciation of Auden, just as an appreciation of Yeats's early work is the only sure test of an appreciation of Yeats." Like all highly intelligent people, Auden realized the staggering limitations of politics. His understanding of the limits of human power generally conditions much of his thinking and writing, which takes on a more mature, hence more resigned, feeling.

He began to write more literary journalism, much of it smart and very winning. He was always in demand as a reader of his own poetry: "Though warm my welcome everywhere, / I shift so frequently, so fast, / I cannot now say where I was / The evening before last." He bought and moved into a house in Kirchstetten, half an hour outside Vienna. In New York, he lived amid the cigarette ashes, mouse droppings, and cat-piss smells in his apartment on St. Mark's Place. He lost his teeth. Christopher Isherwood said that his face belonged in the British Museum. (He apparently suffered from Touraine-Solente-Gole Syndrome, causing the skin of the forehead and face to become thick and deeply furrowed.) In Manhattan he padded about the streets in house slippers, making sure to carry at least $5 on him at all times so as not to disappoint muggers and turn them more violent. He continued to churn out verse—". . . Against odds / Methods of

dry farming may still produce grain"—but libretti and belles-lettres projects (a commonplace book, an anthology of aphorisms) began to seem his main work.

His drinking became heavier and heavier. He was certain he was living in an age of decline, and, having long ago given up on saving mankind, wished only to save the language that had served him so well. (He claimed to have written poems in every metre, and he may have also written them in every form, save the epic and the chant royal.) Not much past sixty, he began to regard and carry himself as an old man, not at all displeased to be considered a back number. He ceased listening, and began telling and retelling his old anecdotes, sometimes more than once in the same evening. He became punctilious about small things—bills should be paid and returned the same day they were received—and unconcerned about large ones. He found New York, as he put it, "Hell," and arranged to move into rooms in his old Oxford college. He died one night in his sleep—in a hotel room in Vienna—where, presumably, his heart gave out—in 1973 in his sixty-sixth year.

Auden was famous early—when he arrived in America in his early thirties, a reporter awaited to interview him—and retained his fame throughout the remainder of his life. He carried himself as someone not only richly accomplished but assured of his place in literary history. But what, now, thirty years after his death, seems likely to be that place?

Auden may have been correct about not having been born at the right time and in the right country, but I think he must also have known that his own place as a poet was below that of Eliot, Stevens, and Frost. They wrote out of direct feeling and the heart; he much more out of books and the intellect. "The work that was only *new, passionate, significant of the ideas of a period*," wrote Valéry, "can and must perish." Not all of Auden will, far from it; not, I think, those poems that are not primarily ideational and proceed from the clear vision of a brilliant mind. W. H. Auden was a professional poet, an immensely talented writer, and if there is a line in Anglophone literature out of which he derives, it is, I believe, that of Alexander Pope and Lord Byron, two other professional poets, miraculously gifted, whose facility was perhaps greater than their feeling, who provided more pleasure than wisdom, and whose work will live on for as long as language beautifully handled continues to be admired.