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The Double Man: W. H. Auden's Transatlantic Transformation

ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to consider the problem of W. H. Auden's political engagement in the 1930s in the context of his (in)famous decision to leave England and settle down in the USA. The transatlantic journey of the eponymous member of so-called "Auden generation" prompted certain critics (notably Randall Jarrell) to set up a distinct caesura between the "English" and the "American" Auden, giving primacy to the accomplishments of the former and downplaying the works of the latter. As it is argued, America was not the place of the poet's radical volte-face, but only a certain important, logical stage (and not a final one) in his personal and poetic evolution. His entanglements with politics were often mythologized, and occasional public and semi-political verse he "committed" often tended to subvert any attempts to pigeonhole the author in terms of his ideological stance.

When in January 1939 W. H. Auden arrived in the USA to settle down there, he faced the uphill task of launching a virtually new literary career. As his biographer Edward Mendelson points out, the expatriate poet “began to explore once again the same thematic and formal territory he covered in his English years, but with a maturer vision, and no longer distracted by the claims of a public” (Preface xiv). Auden’s concern with a variety of old and new problems following his move across the Atlantic and return to the Anglican Church was notably reflected in four longer “American” poems: “New Year Letter,” “The Sea and the Mirror,” “For the Time Being,” and *The Age of Anxiety*.¹ His poetry composed in a new homeland² defied a rigid, definite national or cultural classification; instead, it proposed “the new kind of hybrid ‘mid-Atlantic’ style . . . an in-between of voices and forms” (Jenkins 43). In the midst of a global conflict, Auden’s American adventure began with fundamental and, given the circumstances, surprising questions on the relation between art and life, the real and the represented. The marine symbolism that surfaced in his poetic and academic discourse at the time was, as it seems now, of utmost importance: both in his *oeuvre* and his life. In one of the lectures delivered at the University of Virginia he said:

The sea or the great waters . . . are the symbols for the primordial undifferentiated flux, the substance which became created nature only by having form imposed upon or wedded to it. The sea, in fact, is the state of barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilization has emerged and into which, unless saved by the efforts of gods and men, it is always liable to relapse. (*Enchafed* 6)

The seemingly trifling recognition that art, while holding up a mirror to nature, imposes a certain—distorting, yet necessary—order on this “flux” is the springboard for one of the most extraordinary poems of the previous century, “The Sea and the Mirror. A Commentary on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*” (1944), American Auden’s *Ars Poetica* as well as an “absurd” project that by means of elaborate, often unrivalled artistic forms consistently showed the limitations, if not futility, of art. By revaluing art, it revalued the artist and, most meaningfully, the author himself. Assuming the context of

¹ “The New Year Letter” constituted the main part of the volume *New Year Letter* (London: Faber, 1941), published in the USA as *The Double Man* (New York: Random House, 1941). “The Sea and the Mirror” and “For the Time Being” originally formed the two parts of *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (New York: Random House, 1944; London: Faber, 1945). *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue*, Auden’s last book-length poem, first appeared in 1947 (New York: Random House).

² In 1946 Auden became a naturalized citizen of the United States.

the poet's transatlantic journey as one of the most decisive moments in his career, the present paper examines the validity of the division into the so-called English and American Auden, paying special attention to his alleged, and often mythologized, political engagements in the late 1930s.

Considered as a whole, Auden's literary career provides an apt illustration of two ways of thinking about the nature and obligations of poetry. As he claimed in his late essay "Robert Frost," poetry is a constant battleground for the contention between Prospero and Ariel—i.e., every poet is to decide whether his or her writing should consist in providing the reader with significant messages, thus being predominantly aimed at moral or intellectual instruction, or in grouping words in such a way that they constitute an incantation, which necessitates ceaseless experimentation with language and is, in fact, an aesthetic game (*The Dyer's* 337–38). On a deeper level, this binary division exemplifies two human desires: for truth and for beauty. Poetry is expected to disintoxicate us from delusions and deceptions so as to increase our understanding of what life is *really* like, but it is also the domain of aesthetics, which offers an often-required escapist counterpoint to the shoddy, painful, quotidian existence. The recognition of the two different obligations of poetry is strongly connected with yet another problem—its communicability. While Prospero-dominated verse is always "reader-oriented" and achieves its purpose only as long as it can be instrumental in establishing a rapport of mutual understanding between the one who writes and the one who reads, an Ariel-dominated poem—being, in its extreme form, purely self-referential—ostensibly defies such a requirement. It can be argued that while making the above distinctions Auden was not writing only about Frost but also about himself. His whole *oeuvre* is an evidence of the tension between Prospero and Ariel.

Unquestionably, the publication of his first volume of verse, *Poetry*, in 1930, and *The Orators*, two years later, pushed the young Auden to the vanguard of poetic revolution in Great Britain in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. His quirkiness of manner, precociousness, and exceptional idiom signaled what was later to become the most pervasive poetic influence of the decade:

[H]e caught native English poetry by the scruff of the neck, pushed its nose sharply into modernity, made it judder and frolic from the shock over the course of a decade, and then allowed it to resume a more amiable relation with its comfortably domestic inheritance. His opus represents in the end what his insights insisted upon in the beginning: the necessity of a break, of an escape from habit, an escape from the given;

and he insists upon the necessity of these acts of self-liberation only to expose their ultimately illusory promise. (Heaney 110)

The rejection of “the given” is only natural for any avant-garde artist—it clears the path for an unrestrained growth of fresh ideas. Auden’s early poetry is very radical in its determination to find an adequate expression to the sense of an ultimate change that informed the time after the Great War. This obsession with newness and anxiety, yet to be precisely named, drove the young poet’s language to the point of “defamiliarizing abruptness” (Heaney 117). In fact, oftentimes his early poems are jumbles of muddled lines, too fractured and too abrupt to form a cohesive and coherent whole. They are both inklings of a certain new dimension of reality and recognitions of some flaws inherent in the times Auden lived in. From the reader’s point of view, however, their willful obscurity may possibly be tamed if we decide to approach them on their own terms. Then the semantic *glitch* they contain will become a message in itself—a sign of the poet’s stubbornly held conviction that there is a fundamental, unbridgeable gap between art and life.

Yet Auden’s perception of a border that existed between literature and the world it aspired to represent was subject to evolution, which is observable in the mid-1930s. The obvious example of such an aesthetic shift is the poem “A Summer Night” (June 1933):

Out on the lawn I lie in bed,
Vega conspicuous overhead
In the windless nights of June,
As congregated leaves complete
Their day’s activity; my feet
Point to the rising moon. (*English* 136)

Documenting an allegedly authentic vision of *agape*, the verse testifies to the poet’s significant change of voice and his attitude to the circumstances of his life. This “placatory and palliative” poem “functions to produce a sensation of at-homeness and trust in the world” (Heaney 121–22). It is the poetry that does not unfold against the expectations of the reader; on the contrary—here, a smooth melody of words alleviates the feeling of estrangement so characteristic of Auden’s writing before.

At the end of the previous century, Czesław Miłosz famously criticized the poetry that is marked by excessive escapism and far too much bent on formal experimentation, implying that there is a point on a scale of tolerance behind which the aura of uncanniness turns into a simple, primitive contempt towards the reader (99). But does poetry really have to be

understandable? Does it have to be *meaningful*? Understanding and meaning are important questions in the world of philosophical speculation in the twentieth century. Adjacent to these philosophical debates, modern poetry has put the notion of understanding to an ultimate test; it has, in other words, revised our understanding of understanding.

In the mid-1930s, and especially after the relocation to New York, Auden's poetry made a concession to traditional forms and strove for greater communicability. And not always has it been perceived as change for the better. For Seamus Heaney, for instance, such a decision deprived Auden's verse of its power to galvanize the public, offering a sense of doubtful consolation instead:

To avoid the consensus and settlement of a meaning which the audience fastens on like a security blanket, to be antic, mettlesome, contrary, to retain the right to impudence, to raise hackles, to harry the audience into wakefulness—to do all this may not only be permissible but necessary if poetry is to keep on coming into a fuller life. (122–23)

Heaney's voice in praise of supposedly unintelligible or, better still, cryptic poetry is interesting in itself. We can ask whether the problem of "intelligibility" is really so central and fundamental in the context of poetry. And the answer is far from obvious. While the postulate of "antic" and "mettlesome" verse would certainly outrage a poet such as, say, Miłosz, Heaney sees a great value in it. For him, poems may possibly be treated as testing grounds for the potentialities of language.

Favoured by early Auden, approved of by Heaney, but deplored by Miłosz, cryptic poetry appears to act *against* language, i.e., it works to prevent language from fossilization, from its catching a groove of predictability, from a deadly routine of clichés. Cryptic poetry, then, does not have to be detrimental to language; on the contrary—it can, to paraphrase the famous Poundian exhortation, "make" language "new." Probing and sounding language by cryptic poetry effects a destruction of a certain myth: namely, that "meanings" of words are stable. And arguably, the refusal to state the obvious has always been the driving force of good literature.

According to Edward Mendelson, a synthetic view of Auden's poetry oscillates between yet another dichotomy of theoretical proposals. He identifies two distinct "kinds of poetry," or "ideas of the poet's task," or better still "poetic traditions" that Auden was tempted by at the beginning of his career (*Early* xv-xix). The outcome of a contention between these two traditions informs the direction that the poet eventually took in the early 1930s.

The so-called “civil” and “vatic” traditions date back to the very dawn of European literature—their symbolic illustration being taken from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In Homer’s epics, stories—metonymically understood by Mendelson as verse—are told for two main purposes. In *The Odyssey*, the poets, or rather professional singers, Phemius and Demodocus (Books 1 and 8) make their best to always cater to the public taste, to always act with the view to satisfying the listeners’ needs. By the same token, Odysseus, when he finds himself in a desperate need of assistance from the Phaeacians, spins a yarn, carefully selecting words and images to provide his audience with a slightly exaggerated narrative of man-eating whirlpools and one-eyed giants so as to achieve his goal (Books 11 and 12). His is the art of manipulation. And yet, there is another Homeric model for a poet, or storyteller—Achilles singing his heroic songs in a tent, while awaiting the battle (Book 9 of *The Iliad*). This song differs greatly from the ones by Phemius, Demodocus or Odysseus—it is sung for oneself, and the singer is not only oblivious of, but virtually not interested in getting any attention from an audience. The three characters from *The Odyssey* epitomize poets who act first and foremost as citizens, being focused not as much on giving entertainment as on instruction; they are, in other words, dedicated to social issues and eagerly react to what is happening *hic et nunc*. Achilles singing for himself is, in turn, a forefather of all poets-seers, occupants of ivory towers, mental exiles, “at home only in their art” (Mendelson, *Early* xv-xvi).

The gradual shift from the vatic model of nearly autistic and rather cryptic verse to the civil model of public-oriented, communicable writing was the most decisive occurrence in Auden’s literary life, his real watershed. In such poems as “Spain,” Auden’s art did not declare emancipation from the dynamics of the present moment, but willingly embraced its elected civil obligations. In “A Summer Night,” he did not create a verbal autonomous object, unburdened by any moral standards, but passionately yearned for a community that is governed by *agape*, however small this community should be. Putting aside typically modernist free verse, which originates from the romantic instruction to work out a unique architecture for each poem, Auden in “A Summer Night” picked repetitive stanzaic “bricks,” fashioned after the poetry of Robert Burns, to build on so as to strengthen the poem’s communal dimension.

Ideological stance of the so-called Auden generation is by no means easy to define in distinct terms as the writers classified under such a rubric did not constitute a movement or a group *sensu stricto*, nor did they cherish identical political, social, or aesthetic beliefs. Nevertheless, most of them had to, in one way or another, come to grips with the dilemmas

of self-identification in the time of a serious crisis, “when public and private lives, the world of action and the world of imagination” could not be treated separately due to their constant interpenetration (Hynes 9). The dynamic circumstances of the 1930s implicated literature in politics; particularly, the process affected those young writers who at the beginning of the decade had just come of age and were virtually on the threshold of their artistic careers. The pressure of immediate history left its imprint on the pages of their works.

To see young Auden’s poetry and prose in a *significant* context means to have to juxtapose his “English” works with the landmarks of English literature published by the representatives of the generation *entre deux guerres*. It was in direct confrontation and dialogue with his contemporaries that Auden would hammer out his unique literary idiom. At the same time, however, the question remains whether it is justified, or even fair enough, to qualify him as truly representative of the generation. He was its eponymous member, that is true, but to what extent does this classification allow us to label him as the generation’s main ideologue?

In 1931 Michael Roberts and John Lehman struck upon an idea of preparing an anthology of recent English poetry. The volume under the title *New Signatures*, edited by Roberts and released in 1932, gathered, among others, the verse of W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, William Empson, and John Lehman. Not only was it the first attempt to self-define the emerging generation of new writers, but (later on) it also came to be perceived as their multi-vocal, collective manifesto.³ Samuel Hynes, however, is rather scornful about the value of this volume as a generational document:

It was a small and circumscribed group—not so much a generation as a circle of friends. But the poems that they contributed to the anthology do not suggest a school or a movement: they are too dissimilar—some public, some private, some traditional, some modern, some difficult, some transparently clear. There is nothing surprising in this, it must be true of any modern anthology, but the point is worth making because of the subsequent reputation of the book as a manifesto of the generation. It wasn’t, and couldn’t be; it was too various. (79)

Political commitment of the fledgling writers, especially their sympathy for communism, was in each case different and subject to constant fluctuations of intensity—ebbs and flows of their conviction that literature could

³ At least such was the opinion expressed by its publisher Leonard Woolf (174).

possibly be an agent in history were strongly correlated with the present political and social situation. Having no ready solutions to most imminent and acute predicaments of the decade, they simply did their best to keep up with the times. Consequently, what they wrote then was later, with the wisdom of hindsight, viewed as *pro tempore*, mistaken, flawed or simply naïve. This is what Stephen Spender said about the decade:

In the 1920s there had been a generation of American writers—Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Malcolm Cowley, and some others—whom Gertrude Stein had called the Lost Generation. We anti-Fascist writers of what has been called the Pink Decade were not, in any obvious sense, a lost generation. But we were divided between our literary vocation and an urge to save the world from Fascism. We were the Divided Generation of Hamlets who found the world out of joint and failed to set it right. (202)

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Auden's political sides on the spectrum from liberalism to communism cannot be drawn in black-and-white terms.⁴ His *The Orators: An English Study*, published in 1932, was an indirect response to what he perceived as an ultimate crisis of democratic rule in Europe: the crystallization of National Socialism in Germany, Fascism in Italy, and Soviet Communism in Russia. As utterly new proposals, these authoritarian systems seemed to be much more effective than the traditional British one, which—in the eyes of the post-World War I generation—did not work well. England was economically and morally sick: the industry was crippled, unemployment was on the rise, the middle class was conservative and unwilling to renounce the *status quo*. No wonder then that the indispensability of a gifted leader for imposing order on the society is an important, if not major, theme in *The Orators*. Auden's fascination with psychology and psychoanalysis led him to the recognition that people are constitutionally inclined to exist in a relation of power: either by obeying or commanding obedience. However, while divining the nature of the English disease, his book was too obscure to offer a definite political course.

By 1935, quite a few key young writers of the decade had made a decisive move in the direction of manifestly political literature and political literary criticism. Social preoccupations prevailed in Spender's *The Destruc-*

⁴ Auden's "dutiful proto-communism" (Sharpe 13) emerged as early as in the 1932 poem "A Communist to Others." As Osborne states, around 1934 his infatuation with communism was rather serious and "remained undiminished for some years to come" (103). There is evidence in a form of letter (whether it was actually sent or not remains unclear) that he even considered applying for a teaching post in the Soviet Russia (having no command of Russian).

tive Element, C. Day Lewis's *Revolution in Writing*, or William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*, the last title being somewhat misleading because the author's partisan comments on the works by Shakespeare, Marvell, Milton, or Lewis Carroll, were preceded by a remark that the purpose of the study is to "deal with the popular, vague but somehow obvious, idea of proletarian literature" (Empson 17). And it was in the same year that Auden, collaborating with his old school friend John Garrett, compiled an anthology of poetry, *The Poet's Tongue*, in the introduction to which he was most skeptical about the possibility of assigning a serious political function to "Poetry" (the term, of course, being a synecdoche for literature *per se*):

The propagandist, whether moral or political, complains that the writer should use his powers over words to persuade people to a particular course of action, instead of fiddling while Rome burns. But Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice. (*English* 329)

The above fragment—in itself an "index" of a fluid, hard-to-nail-down ideological position—inadvertently but prophetically named a trap that Cecil Day Lewis fell into when he composed and published, in 1936, his *Noah and the Waters*. Drawing on the long tradition of parabolic morality plays, his poem reconsidered the well-known biblical story by locating its elements within a matrix of contemporary class struggle: here Noah, an intellectual of bourgeois background, is at great pains to decide whether to join the all-encompassing Flood, i.e., the revolution. Day Lewis's all-too-eager commitment to communism (signaled by the epigraph from *The Communist Manifesto*) turned out a commercial and—more importantly—critical failure, and it demonstrated how detrimental an ideological agenda may be to the integrity of a literary work and its author. Not only did the idea of fusing Old Testament symbolism with Marxist intuitions produce a jarring note, but Noah's dilemma itself proved to be an empty one: after all, how can you choose, or not choose, to yield to the forces of a natural disaster?

By the middle of the decade, Auden was sensitive enough to spot the looming of an impending catastrophe of a different kind: war. And the time of crisis called for ways of responding to it. In 1935, the year when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia and Nazi Germany legalized anti-Semitism, he wrote in an untitled poem beginning with the line "August for the people" and dedicated to Christopher Isherwood:

So in this hour of crisis and dismay,
 What better than our strict and adult pen
 Can warn us from the colours and consolations,
 The showy arid works, reveal
 The squalid shadow of academy and garden,
 Make action urgent and its nature clear?
 Who gave us nearer insight to resist
 The expanding fear, the savaging disaster? (*English* 157)

In his commentary to the above quoted fragment, Samuel Hynes finds in it “a new and different conception of literary act,” encapsulating the idea that literature is directly related to action, or that writing is the correlative of making things happen in the public world (13). But when Hynes asserts that it is “different,” we should ask *what* exactly it is different from. The self-assured, strongly articulated conviction that the artist—the one whose mind is not confused by the “colours and consolations”—*can* come up with a curative formula against “crisis and dismay” and *can* push others in the right direction makes Auden a different modernist from the earlier literary generation: from Ezra Pound, whose *Canto I* persona, Odysseus, sails (with morbid fascination) to the land of the dead; from T. S. Eliot, who was immersed in history and literary history structured like an ideal order; and from Joyce, who preferred his mythically reconstructed Dublin to the real place.

In 1937, Auden had a stint as an ambulance driver in Spain during the Civil War, as he wanted to make plain his support for the anti-Franco forces. The experience went into the famous, or maybe infamous poem “Spain,” which later on the author resented so much that he excluded it from all his subsequent volumes of collected verse. The criticism it provoked is as fascinating as the poem itself.

In his seminal, and overtly partisan essay “Inside the Whale,” George Orwell identified a group of those writers that after the Great War came to represent what he calls “pessimism of outlook”: Joyce, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Aldous Huxley and Lytton Strachey. Irrespective of all the obvious differences among their literary preoccupations, Orwell perceived them as displaying, or at least implying, their contempt for the idea of progress: “it is felt that progress not only doesn’t happen, but *ought not* to happen” (507). Eliot, for instance, came in for most acute criticism as an individual taking perverse pleasure in despairing over the fall of the Western world and as one who achieved something absolutely unique: he almost convinced his readers that modern life was much worse than they had thought. Orwell did not go as far as to treat the first generation of modernists as authors of cheap, conservative propaganda, or as skillful

dabblers in sophisticated language games, but the fact of the matter is that generally they did not seem to be immersed in immediate problems: “Our eyes are directed to Rome, to Byzantium, to Montparnasse, to Mexico, to the Etruscans, to the subconscious, to the solar plexus—to everywhere except the places where things are actually happening” (508).

The next decade brought yet another tendency in literature and yet another “group” that Orwell identified. Auden, Spender, Day-Lewis, Mac-Neice were, for him, eager-minded individuals who had gone into politics and had leant towards communism. While the previous generation was informed by the tragic sense of life, these young writers saw literature as an instrument or tool of radical change. Emphasizing the fact that “Spain” is “one of few decent things that have been written about the Spanish war” (565), Orwell famously criticized Auden for just two words that the poet used in the following stanza:

To-day the deliberate increase in the chances of death,
 The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder;
 Today the expending of powers
 On the flat ephemeral pamphlet and the boring meeting. (*English* 54)

In his criticism Orwell treats Auden as an inexperienced individual whose understanding of murder is purely theoretical—to talk of murder as part of the schedule in the life of a party man is something to be avoided. “Murder” is not merely a vocabulary item that fits in the given line of a verse. Any mature intellectual writing in the late 1930s should have been familiar with the facts of notorious political purges organized by Hitler and Stalin, and even the dictators did their best substituting the straightforward word with some neutralizing equivalents: “elimination” or “liquidation.” The writer’s control over language should be better, i.e., more nuanced than the machinations of tyrants: “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” (516). This critique *was* a lesson for Auden. The one he was to remember very well. And although generally he did not write about his experience of the Spanish Civil war in a way that would be subservient to the Party’s ideological line, the “blunder” and the response to it demonstrated that the best way for a writer was to keep out of politics.

Much later the redefinition of the most desired relation of the artist to the historical time he lives in led to Auden’s reevaluation of his whole *oeuvre*—the poet purified his private canon of shameful, as he saw them, blotches such as “A Communist to Others,” “Spain,” and “September 1, 1939,” i.e., he condemned to oblivion the verse in which he aspired to

announcing a socio-political diagnosis. The poems are conspicuously absent from the first posthumous edition of *Collected Poems* (1976), which, as its editor Edward Mendelson notes, “includes all the poems that W. H. Auden wished to preserve” (11).

In his foreword to the first edition of his *Collected Poetry* (1945), Auden divided his (or *any* poet's) verse into four classes: the “pure rubbish,” the “fatally injured,” the poems “he has nothing against,” and—virtual rarities—the poems “for which he is honestly grateful.” Twenty-one years later, in another foreword, he admitted to having discarded some of the poems as “they were dishonest, or bad-mannered, or boring” (*Collected* 1976, 15).⁵ And, interestingly, he gave an example of poetic trash—a notorious line from “Spain”: “History to the defeated / May say alas but cannot help nor pardon.” The fault of the lines was double: not only did they equate “goodness with success” (15) but had been written for their mere rhetorical effectiveness. This, for old Auden, was “quite inexcusable” (16).

Interestingly, and contrary to what critics often tend to underscore, the old Auden (in 1965) did not perceive all these authorial alterations and exclusions in his canon as “ideologically significant” (16), but simply as a result of his negative assessment given to the language which the faulty poems employed. And their language testified (especially in the poetry written in the thirties) to the author's “very slovenly verbal habits” (16). Granted, there is a long tradition, from Horace to Valéry to Cavafy, of treating every newly written poem as temporarily abandoned, but by no means finished. And Auden *is* part of this tradition. But something else needs to be seen in his self-censorship: old Auden blurred the distinction between the ethics of thinking and the style of thinking. In retrospect, his ideological naïveté assumed the appearance of language errors.

Auden's emigration to America was a “voluntary exile” (Wright 127), a conscious, deliberate move that accompanied the changes in the poet's views on poetry and society. All the outrage that erupted in England in 1940, accusing the poet of desertion, fundamentally missed the point as in fact he had settled down on the new continent a year earlier, when England was “optimistically convinced that there would be no war” (Osborne 185). Auden must have had a different rationale for this major step—apparently it was the need to walk out of the role that was imposed on him by the

⁵ During his lifetime Auden wrote two forewords to two editions of his collected verse: *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (1945) and *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–1957* (1966). The texts of these authorial remarks are dated 1944 and 1965, respectively, and are reprinted verbatim in the posthumous volume *Collected Poems* (1976) from which I quote in the sentences that follow.

English literary scene. He was escaping not from war but from politics. And that made all the difference.

He was by no means the only target of such slashing attacks at the time: Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard did not remain unsoiled by words of patriotic contempt. The whole group (not a formal one, of course) was deplored for retiring “within the ivory tower” of the American haven.⁶ Auden was not very outspoken about his motives for emigration, and he behaved as if he did not care much about being understood. An insight into the whole affair can be found (where else?) in his writings at the time. At the beginning of his stay in New York he was busy preparing a draft of a kind of philosophical autobiography, “The Prolific and the Devourer,” fashioned in its aphoristic form after William Blake’s “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” where he makes it clear that for him art and politics do not get along any more: “To be forced to be political is to be forced to lead a dual life,” and “If the criterion of art were its power to incite to action, Goebbels would be one of the greatest artists of all time” (*English* 400, 406). Witnessing the crisis of democracy, disillusioned with communist pseudo-solutions and dismayed by fascist drivel, Auden turned his back on the world of politics—not in the gesture of disgust but in the gesture of recognition and understanding that as an artist he stood no chances of effecting any tangible changes in the real world.

It may not be out of place to recall the circumstances surrounding the composition of Auden’s first American poem. On 26 January, 1939, he arrived in New York City and soon learned that General Franco had taken Barcelona and thus sealed his victory in the Civil War. On 28 January, 1939, William Butler Yeats died in France. These events demanded an immediate reaction. And Auden’s growing struggle with himself about his obligations as an artist in the age of anxiety assumed the form of an address to the distinguished old master: “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” and a mock trial account “The Public v. The Late Mr W. B. Yeats.”

“In Memory of W. B. Yeats” is not a sudden, unexpected caesura in his views on political commitment in verse, but rather a significant milestone on the path the poet had consistently been taking for years. In the final stanza of the elegy Auden gives an important footnote to his judgment that “poetry makes nothing happen”:

With the farming of the verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,

⁶ See what Harold Nicolson wrote on 19 April 1940 (qtd. in Osborne 187).

Sing of human unsuccess
In a rupture of distress;

In the desert of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise. (*English* 243)

Putting aside poetry's engagement with praxis as morally doubtful, silly, or perhaps virtually impossible, the stanzas, nevertheless, pointed to its beneficial property of enlivening and enriching our imagination—and only thus being able to broaden our freedom and our capacity to “praise” in the face of adversity. In other words, the lines implied that poetry teaches hope. Restricted didacticism does not have to be perceived as tantamount to political ambitions:

It should be kept in mind . . . that Auden's target is directly political poetry and that he is *not* denying *any* social function to poetry. Indeed, he continued to think of it as having an educative function, albeit in the negative sense of something which can disintoxicate and disenchant. (Perrie 59)

That is, poetry *does* make something happen, but only in the negative sense: it sharpens our ethical sensitivity; it resets our critical aptitudes of the mind.

In early 1939 Auden's misgivings about concessions he occasionally made to political causes were still interspersed with the moments when he felt he had to signal his lack of indifference to the world of great political upheavals. In a letter to Dodds, in March 1939, he wrote:

The real decision came after making a speech at a dinner in New York to get money for Spanish Refugees when I suddenly found I could do it. That I could make a fighting demagogic speech and have the audience roaring. I felt just covered with dirt afterwards. . . . Never, *never* again will I speak at a political meeting. (qtd. in Carpenter 256)

The very term “political poetry” ought to be understood in its double sense: as “party-political” poetry and poetry dedicated to a vision of *polis* (Perrie 63). When it comes to the first understanding of the term, not only can we say that after 1940 Auden was not a political poet but that he never had been one—he never joined the Communist Party, after all, and never in his life did he contribute to drawing any political manifestos. The second, much broader view of politics opens up a new perspective on Auden's late

poetry: if *polis* connotes a community and human endeavors to preserve it, then, paradoxically, late Auden emerges as “the most deeply political of English poets of the twentieth century” (Perrie 63).

The choice of Shakespeare as a patron for what appears, and is more often than not considered as Auden’s greatest poetic achievement in America, was by no means accidental. This poetic meditation on art and mimesis is a virtual offshoot of Shakespeare’s farewell drama, and the Shakespearean story—as intertext—strengthens Auden’s point. Conclusions that can be drawn from “The Sea and the Mirror” go far beyond the slightly simplifying dichotomies of the vatic versus the civil, the defamiliarization versus the at-homeness, or the Ariel-controlled versus the Prospero-controlled. What can be read from the poem, however, is as revelatory as puzzling and paradoxical. How does this poem problematize the all-too-appealing binary divisions? It illustrates a third mode of poetry: let’s call it the “disenchanted” civil one. Shakespeare provides an excellent model for assuming a new attitude to one’s own art:

There’s something a little irritating in the determination of the very greatest artists, like Dante, Joyce, Milton, to create masterpieces and to think themselves important. To be able to devote one’s life to art without forgetting that art is frivolous is a tremendous achievement of personal character. Shakespeare never takes himself too seriously. When art takes itself too seriously, it tries to do more than it can. (Auden, *Lectures* 319)

The opening of this “Commentary on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*” contains fragments virtually stolen from the Bard’s two famous tragedies:

All the rest is silence
On the other side of the wall;
And the silence is ripeness,
And the ripeness all. (*The Sea* 4)

Thus, the stage manager, addressing the “critics,” describes the effects of the play that has just finished. Beyond the boundaries of the fictional world of *The Tempest*, there is silence. The smooth quatrain comprises, of course, the words uttered by the fatally wounded Hamlet and the learning gathered from painful experience by Edgar in *King Lear*. On one level, it is “a conjugation and commendation of the virtue of silence,” on the other, deeper and more significant, “a critique of any claim that poetry . . . might make about its ability to transform the actual” (Corcoran 160).

In Shakespeare's play the transformative and redemptive potential of Prospero's magic is seriously limited—in the end, the two rascals, Antonio and Sebastian, still appear unregenerate. They are *silent*, i.e., immune to the spell that has reformed their companions. They are not forgiven their sins; they are not even asking for it—and Prospero behaves in an ambiguous way as he merely stifles his urge to take revenge on them. He himself, in his capacity as magician-artist, openly corroborates his fiasco in the famous "Epilogue" to the play.

"The Sea and the Mirror" is "bookended by death" (Corcoran 163), and again its thanatology takes numerous forms: death that at last is conceivable by the disillusioned Prospero; symbolic death as a prerequisite for Christian re-birth; death as the fact of the war that is just raging on. Considering this last manifestation of death in the poem that seemingly lacks clear reference to the historical context of its composition, it is needed to highlight a sense of survivor guilt that permeates some passages delivered by Caliban in the third part of the poem. Auden, of course, was spared the danger that paralyzed Europe in the early 1940s and must have felt rather uncomfortable about it (not to mention his withstanding the accusations of desertion and cowardice that were put against him in his native country). His Prospero elects to "go knowing and incompetent into . . . [his] grave" (*The Sea* 9). We need to remember Auden's success upon the publication of "Spain" and George Orwell's slashing condemnation of the infamous line containing the phrase "necessary murder." Both occurrences were meaningful, and both sinisterly signaled a danger. It was as early as in the 1930s that Auden must have become skeptical about the dangers hidden in the catching rhetoric of socially and politically engaged poetry. His "break with England was also therefore his opportunity to fracture the mould in which his earlier poetry was, or appeared to be, set" (Corcoran 167).

The great and illustrative paradox of the poem is that it affirms the limits of art while displaying a captivating virtuoso of technical *tour-de-force*. The used forms include: syllabic verse, terza rima, ballade, sonnet, sestina, villanelle, and a pastiche of the highly mannered late style of Henry James. The formal perfection demonstrates a yawning gap existing between the playful realm of aesthetics and the exigencies of ethics, which of course corresponds to the thinking of Søren Kierkegaard, in whose works Auden was immersed at the time of composing "The Sea and the Mirror."⁷

⁷ In the 1940s Auden openly manifested his fascination with the threefold division into distinct and conflicting modes of living (or existential determinants of human character): the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious, which the Danish philosopher first

The mirror that, as Hamlet asserted, art holds up to the real gives a picture that is distorted, i.e., it shows the world where, for example, pain and death are merely abstract notions. That is probably why in Auden's poem Prospero's books are thrown away to the sea, which in his monologue stands for "what is inimical to human values" (Sharpe 97).

Neil Corcoran sees "The Sea and the Mirror" as a "paradoxical object" (178): a text that, on the one hand, heavily draws on a certain literary tradition, paying homage to it and appropriating it for its own purposes, and, on the other hand, a superb verse that expresses the conviction that all poetry is ultimately futile. And while the author of the poem is an exceptional expert in the whole spectrum of poetic idioms, the poem's two major personae, Prospero and Caliban, leave the reader under no illusion as to the true value of poetry's magic tricks.

In Anglo-American modernism, the act of crossing the sea (or the ocean)—a crucial element of both Shakespeare's drama and Auden's sequel to it—is important on two levels: literal and symbolic. Auden deplored tendencies to construe art as a sanctified ritual and pieces of art as semi-sacred objects as it was the case with, let's say, W. B. Yeats (in "Sailing to Byzantium"). Both Yeats and Auden embarked on a sailing voyage: the former, only vicariously, estranged from the "dying animal" of his physicality, travelled across imaginary seas yearning for the "artifice of eternity" in mythical Byzantium. The latter moved across the Atlantic to effect a "change of heart" and further purify his mind of illusions, or—more precisely—delusions of grandeur. For Yeats, with his Manichean streak, the flesh was fatal, for disillusioned Auden—notably after his re-conversion to Christianity—it was "the means of sacramental transformation" (Corcoran 176). The older poet was captivated by the mirror of art, the younger—virtually obsessed with the sea of forever ungraspable life. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" gives voice to Auden's ambiguity and ambivalence about the Irish modernist. Strangely enough, Yeats is honored and called "silly," but the allegedly offensive character of this epithet vanishes if we remember that the line actually says: "You were silly like us." Nobody is exempt from error. Not even the great ones.

The political edge of Auden's poetry in the 1930s was undoubtedly the result of the current tensions on the international scene; yet it also stemmed from his consistently cherished conviction of the necessity to embrace in his writing the experience of two spheres of life: the private and the public. And as he delighted in interspersing psychoanalytical diagnoses with

outlined in *Either/Or, Fear and Trembling, Repetition*, and then fully expressed in *Stages on Life's Way*.

Marxist prophesies, his poems (and plays and essays) would reach far beyond the horizon of subjective, biased observation in order to depict human beings as simultaneously makers and victims of history. In other words, the archeological examination of social maladies always pointed in the direction of individual psychopathology as their source. Rather than being a sign of despair and withdrawal of the poet from the public world, the claim that poetry is basically futile hinted at the recognition—strengthened by Auden's return to the Anglican Church—that evil of this world is constitutional and thus impossible to eradicate. As such poems of the next decades as “New Year Letter,” “The Shield of Achilles,” or “August 1968” make it clear, the political agendas in his verse did not disappear entirely—but Auden *definitely* renounced his old, naïve ambition to influence the course of history.

In a sense, W. H. Auden *was* a double man, but the perception of his 1939 move to the USA as a fundamental caesura in the quality of his *oeuvre* has to be treated with a degree of caution. His doubleness hid elsewhere and had numerous variations. The distinction between the “English” and the “American” Auden is often extrapolated from a radical valuation, whereupon the former is pigeonholed as the poet dedicated to political diagnoses and ideological causes and the latter as the man who kept himself aloof from any social engagement and was seriously devoted to more abstract, often religious issues. Such reasoning takes it for granted that there can be observed no trace of consistency or continuity in his writing (and thinking) before and after 1939. In general, however, the label “poet-ora-tor” was *never* an adequate term that could be applied to him. Every poet living in times of great upheavals may feel tempted to saturate his work with ideas that are in direct relation to what is happening in the sphere of public life. But it is also a sign of true greatness to be able to retain a staple dose of sobriety and remember that the poet who assumes the role of a political *spieler* takes a precarious step towards compromising the very essence of his vocation. The prerequisite for successful propaganda is to detect the most obvious communal emotions and then shrewdly appeal to them to win plaudits. Propaganda feeds on simplifications and generalizations—its language needs to be easily digestible, straightforward and unequivocal. As for poetry, it is the domain of exceptions and uncertainties; here words are intended to reveal their inherent ambiguities, and the reader, instead of consoling answers, is offered myriad question marks.

It is by all means far-fetched to assert that Auden's renunciation of Marxism and left-wing sympathies after his arrival in America was an act of *apostasy* that in consequence led to a significant deterioration of his verse, if not to its inauthenticity. Equating political ideas that permeate a given

poem with the personal beliefs of its author is, to say the least, rather risky. In the early 1930s, Auden, then an inexperienced young writer, started his literary career in an atmosphere of political and cultural unrest: the economic crisis, scarcity of jobs and indignation of the labor force would all strengthen the already common conviction that a Marxist world revolution was a serious possibility; the expectation of a radical social change was accompanied by the rapid rise of fascism; a new war was already looming on the horizon. No wonder then that English intellectuals and artists were seriously preoccupied with politics, and some of them eagerly sought effective panacea for the malady. That was the context within which Auden was developing his mature identity and his literary style—between the exigencies of the current political ferment, the avant-garde idiom of late modernism, and the desire to find his own, unique, independent voice. Deeply rooted in English and continental literary tradition (Dryden, Pope, Blake, Goethe, Hardy, Eliot), but never willing to eschew his incurably parodist inclinations, he often seemed to draw on received ideas and forms so as to subvert their seriousness and authority, and both his early attempts at an almost *autistic* poetry and his later hortatory experiments are marked by a unique combination of formal virtuosity and intellectual bravura. More importantly, however, the decade of the 1930s, when he would occasionally yield to the temptation of producing some public or semi-political verse, coincided with the time when he developed an ability to maintain detachment from the image of himself as a public persona(lity). Thus, the art of poetry became intertwined with the art of estrangement. America was not the place of Auden's radical volte-face, but only a certain important, logical stage, and not a final one, in his personal and poetic evolution. There, as a consciously double man, Auden—this time fully aware how deceptive and detrimental flirtations with politics can be for the artist—was at last ready to divest himself of undeserved political labels.

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