

Introduction to *Early Auden*

In childhood, before he wrote a line of poetry, Auden imagined himself an architect and engineer, the maker of a fictional landscape. Between the ages of six and twelve he devoted much of his waking thought to what he later called “the construction and elaboration of a private sacred world, the basic elements of which were a landscape, northern and limestone, and an industry, lead mining.” This world was a fantasy, its fabrication a game, but the principles that gave it order were among those that governed the material world. “I decided,” he recalled, “or rather, without conscious decision, I instinctively felt that I must impose two restrictions upon my freedom of fantasy.” In choosing the objects that might go into his private world he must choose, he said, among objects that really exist; and “In deciding how my world was to function, I could choose between two practical possibilities—a mine can be drained either by an adit or a pump—but physical impossibilities and magic means were forbidden.” He felt, “in some obscure way, that they were morally forbidden,” that the rules of his game must represent both the laws of nature and the laws of ethics. Eventually, still during childhood, “there came a day when the moral issue became quite conscious.” Among the equipment he needed for his imaginary mines was a device, used for washing the ore, which was available in two different designs. “One type I found more sacred or ‘beautiful,’ but the other type was, as I knew from my reading, the more efficient. At this point I realized that it was my moral duty to sacrifice my aesthetic preference to reality or truth.”

Auden recounted these childhood decisions in later years as a way of characterizing his work as a poet. Mines were places of symbolic depths and hidden meaning, passages to a dark source of mystery and power. But even as a child he knew them also to be functioning artifacts, made for practical mundane reasons, and causing real and possibly dangerous effects. As an adult he wrote poems that found richness of meaning in the moral complexities of fact. He had no wish to achieve an imaginative triumph over common reality; he used his poetry to comprehend the world he shared with his audience, and he wrote his poems as public acts of homage to the truths he perceived. His truth-telling never led him to prefer in literature what he called “Plain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks.” As in childhood he delighted in the elaborate machinery of mines, in his adult years he indulged

his love of poetic artifice: “Riddles and all other ways of not calling a spade a spade,” “Complicated verse forms of great technical difficulty,” “Conscious theatrical exaggeration.” Yet he put his dazzlingly irresponsible virtuosity to responsible use. Through it, he insisted that his poems were connected to the ordinary world by their craftsmanship, just as they were connected to it by their dedication to fact. His poems were not visionary autonomous objects, exempt from the practical and ethical standards appropriate to all other human works. They were made to be judged both for their art and for their truth.

These elements from Auden’s childhood fantasy, its commitment to fact and its deliberate artifice, were present in his poetry almost from the start of his career. But in his earliest poems they were subordinate to a different element of his fantasy. “It is no doubt psychologically significant,” he wrote, “that my sacred world was autistic, that is to say, I had no wish to share it with others nor could I have done so.” In the same way, his first adult poetry, the work of a young man of twenty, was overwhelmingly concerned with his own emotional isolation, rather than with truths he could share with his audience. In contrast to the complex stanzaic contraptions of his later years, he wrote many of his first poems in irregular free verse. During the first twelve years of his career, the years that are the subject of this book, Auden made the difficult passage from a private poetry to a public one, from apparent formal disorder to manifest artifice, and from lonely severity to a community of meaning. When he began writing he found in his personal psychology the condition of the age. As he grew older, he sought in science and history a range and variety of knowledge that he knew no individual could hope to organize on personal or aesthetic principles alone. He began as the deliberate inventor of the new poetic language he felt his isolation required. Then he refused the imprisonment of a reflexive personal voice and chose to write in stanzaic forms that, as he said later, “forbid automatic responses, / force us to have second thoughts, free from the fetters of Self.”

Two kinds of poetry, two ideas of the poet’s task, two poetic traditions contend against each other in Auden’s early years. Because his work, from the start, was large in its sympathies and powers, and densely linked to the traditions of poetry, the issues dividing it were those that perennially divide literature and show no signs of ever being resolved. The same tension between two kinds of art in Auden’s work may also be found in the earliest poetry of Europe. Homer knew the distinction, and portrayed it in precise and vivid detail. In the *Odyssey* he tells of the poets Phemius and Demodocus who compose their songs at the command of their listeners. It never occurs to them to sing for the sake of singing. They so love their art that, when danger threatens, they protect their lyre before themselves, yet their instrument and their voice are in service to their audience, and their art responds to a specific

social occasion. When Odysseus tells his story to the Phaeacians he follows their example. He chooses his words with his listeners in mind, for he needs their help to get home. Hoping to affect his audience, as he himself was affected by the songs of Demodocus, he adds some perhaps legendary embellishments—tales of one-eyed giants and man-eating whirlpools—for the urgent practical purpose of gaining sympathy and aid. All the poets in the *Odyssey* are suppliants like Odysseus or servants like Demodocus. Such a poet, surely, was Homer himself. His heirs are all poets who write as citizens, whose purpose is to entertain and instruct, and who choose subjects that would interest an audience even if a poet were not there to transform them into art.

In the *Iliad* matters are very different. Here the one person who recites poetry is Achilles when he sits in his tent singing of heroes and taking pleasure in his lyre, after withdrawing in anger from the society of his fellows. Homer specifies that Achilles has no audience for his songs; Patroclus is with him, but sits off to the side, waiting for his friend to finish. Achilles is the one Homeric hero who questions his obligations, is servant to no one and is no one's fellow citizen; he sings for himself alone. His literary heirs are all poets whose first law is the law of their genius, seers who live in voluntary or psychological exile, at home only in their art. These are poets who, as T. S. Eliot wrote, "have won their own discipline in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end." When they address an audience, it is no finite class or existing category of readers. It is either, on one hand, the universe or all mankind or things that don't listen, like mountains or skylarks; or, on the other hand, the poet himself, or someone like a sister whom he treasures as a version of himself, or the ideal reader imagined by W. B. Yeats, "A man who does not exist, / A man who is but a dream." Poets of this sort know themselves to be unacknowledged legislators, and their works reign, in Ezra Pound's words, as "lords over fact, over race-long recurrent moods, and over to-morrow."

The first critic who judged between these two kinds of poet, the civil and the vatic, was the god Dionysus. In Aristophanes' *The Frogs* Dionysus is the god of wine, but he is also a god of Athens, and he seeks a poet who can save his city from political and military disaster. Descending into the underworld, he presides over a contest between the shades of Aeschylus and Euripides, and weighs in his scales the art of civil responsibility against the art of inner vision. Aeschylus prays to the traditional gods, invokes the ancient tradition of the poet as moral teacher, and condemns the self-centeredness encouraged by his rival. Euripides prays to a private pantheon of the sky and his own tongue and senses, claims that when he writes his extravagant modern fictions he does no harm to society, and praises the doubt and questioning his work provokes in Athens. Dionysus finds he loves both poets equally, but at

last he must select one of them for his city. He chooses Aeschylus. So, in effect, did Auden.



Civil poetry and vatic poetry have separate traditions that move side by side through literary history, each giving strength to the other, and merging at times in the work of a few very great writers. During the eighteenth century the balance between them shifted. Poetry's civil purposes came to be felt as restraints on the free personal voice. The romantics inverted the ancient poetic hierarchy that saw dramatic and epic poetry as superior to lyric, poetry of action and relationship more consequential than poetic expressions of feeling. Romanticism, hearing epic resonance in the personal voice, glorified the lyric as the highest mode of poetry, and made it the vessel for philosophical and historical subjects few earlier ages would have tried to force into it. The large forms of literature and the arts left the service of specific audiences and social occasions, and became their own sufficient reason for being. Art declared its independence from local settings, and established itself instead in the neutral international context of the museums and concert halls that sprang up as its temples, bastions of its newly won autonomy.

This change in context was accompanied by changes in meaning, most strikingly in the large form of the quest. Formerly an allegory of civil obligation, the quest now became the allegory of inner discontent. In civil literature a quest hero ventured forth to seek a real goal that needed his presence, and that promised marriage and prosperity as a reward for his sufferings. But in literature that lacked external purpose, that had no audience who wanted it written, the quest, too, lost its tangible goals, and became compulsive and irresolute. The mad comic journey of Don Quixote was pursued in fatal earnest by the romantics. The price art paid for its autonomy was its desperate isolation.

Literary modernism brought the vatic tradition into the twentieth century. The lyric personal voice that predominated in the poetry of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot became the voice of prose fiction as well in the novels of Lawrence, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf. Like romantic heroes lost upon the earth, the writers of modernism felt lost in historical time: to be modern was to be disfranchised from a significant past. Vatic writing had always given credence to a lost mythical arcadia, a distant time when society was hierarchically secure and the grand manner still a natural tone of voice. Now the modernists translated this myth into a serious interpretation of history. They looked back to a recent European cataclysm that left society and art in exhausted disorder. Eliot saw the moment of change in a seventeenth-century "dissociation of sensibility . . . from which we have never recovered." For Lawrence it occurred when the explorers of America brought syphilis to

Europe. Yeats, convinced he lived in a debased century, dated the unbroken age in 1450, when the gyres of his historical cycles were in balance.

The poets of modernism devised their characteristic free verse as a response to the European disaster. Pound's familiar insistence on the need to "break the pentameter," and the delight with which he broke it, make it easy to forget that he and Eliot began using free verse because they were convinced the modern world was too catastrophically disordered to allow the use of older, more regular metres for any other purpose than satire. Eliot would have used formal metres if he could; "a formless age" prevented him. In British poetry of the 1920s free verse was not seen as the fluent, almost casual form it became later, and was already becoming in America. Free verse was *difficult*, and was meant to be. Eliot wrote that poets in our time are difficult by necessity, that they must "force, . . . dislocate if necessary," their language to suit their meaning. The hesitations, false starts, and broken repetitions in the free verse of Eliot and others in the 1920s—as in Auden's poetry at this time—are meant as signs of a resistance made by the poetic subject against the poet's effort to write about it. Among the historical crises faced, and in part invented, by modernism was a breakdown in what might be called the symbolic contract, the common frame of reference and expectation that joins a poet with a finite audience, and joins both with the subjects of his poems.

The modernist literary revolution hoped to clear the wreckage left by this disaster, what Mallarmé called the "*Crise de Vers*." This was a romantic revolution, intent on purifying the diction of the tribe, freeing poetry from its dependence on dead principles of form and meaning. The more naïve branches of modernism hoped that free verse might become the unencumbered vehicle of direct personal utterance, ruled only by the laws of breathing. More sophisticated writers, deriding such provincial efforts, sought to let their verse express the autonomous, even visionary order of poetic language itself. Their poetry would no longer obey the rules of allegory or the standards of mimesis, would ignore even the imaginative will of its author. The voice of poetry is not the chosen voice of the poet, said Rimbaud, because the verbal "*JE est un autre*," is an event in language's separate disembodied world. The poet, having abandoned civil responsibility toward an audience, now sought to abandon responsibility for his poems. "The pure work," said Mallarmé, "implies the disappearance as a speaker of the poet who abandons the initiative to words"—words set in motion by the internal disorder of language, "mobilized by the shock of their inequality." But as Mallarmé added, pure poetry still finds its existence "*chez le Poète*": the liberation of language results not in shared truths but in a new ordering of private vision within the self. In later generations this line of modernism understood the self to be constituted *by* language, and the wordless

unconscious to be organized *like* a language. No community seemed possible except the centerless, contradictory, unstable community of language itself.

As modernism worked to release the inner powers of imagination, to break the pentameter and disorder all the senses, it also, notoriously, longed for a rigid and unchanging order in the realm of politics. Modernism celebrated inner freedom as it called for outer restraint. At the same time that it pursued continuous restless innovation in literary form, it saw history ruled by unchanging historical cycles, by the eternal silence of the infinite spaces, immune from the effects of human choice. There was nothing new in this. One of Balzac's characters reports in *Illusions Perdues* that in literary Paris in the 1820s, "by a singular oddity, the Royalist romantics demand literary freedom and the repeal of the laws that give our literature conventional form; while the Liberals want to maintain the unities, the inflection of the alexandrine line, and classic themes. Thus in each faction literary opinion is at variance with political opinion." Vatican poetry praises the unique powers of heroic individuality and longs for a past when heroism was unconstrained. Its freedom from conventional form is one manifestation of its wish; romantic Royalism, like the vague fascist sympathies of modernism, is another. The heroes of civil poetry are more cunning than volcanic, more intent on finding their way back to their city than on dying gloriously and far away; and a civil poet similarly finds his artistic challenge in demands made by existing poetic forms, forms that could be completed satisfactorily rather than left in deliberate fragments. In *The Frogs* it is didactic Aeschylus who rejects vers libre for stanzaic complexity, but accepts a flawed political leader in preference to chaos and defeat. It is questioning Euripides who will cooperate only with an ideal statesman, but claims to speak the language really used by men.



Auden began writing poems in 1922, at the age of fifteen, and for the next few years he wrote mostly in the shadow of Hardy the lyricist—a poet whose early years as an architect were a distant parallel to Auden's childhood as an imaginary engineer. But in 1926, when he was at Oxford, Auden began saturating himself in the recent triumphs of modernism, which at the time was unrivalled among literary movements for its formal complexity and emotional strength. While other styles of writing seemed content to rest on the sad margins of a conventional past, modernism alone seemed to look toward a difficult and inexorable future. Its procession of landmarks stands as imposingly now as it did then: 1920 saw the publication of *Women in Love*; 1921, Yeats's *Four Plays for Dancers*; 1922, *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*; 1923, *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*; 1925, *A Draft of XVI Cantos* and Eliot's *Poems*

1909–1925; 1926, *Personae*; 1927, *To the Lighthouse*; 1928, *Anna Livia Plurabelle* and *The Tower*. And in 1927–28 Auden wrote the first of the intensely modernist verse he gathered in his 1930 *Poems*. For a young poet whose early ambition was to write the great poems of his generation, there seemed no turning back.

And Auden did not turn back. He was the first English writer who absorbed all the lessons of modernism, but also understood its limits, and chose to turn elsewhere. He successfully challenged the vatic dynasty after more than a century of uncontested rule. When he renounced the goals of his immediate predecessors he made no effort to revive the native lyric tradition of Hardy—now sometimes proposed as the alternative to international modernism, but in fact another branch of the same vatic line, equally lonely and nostalgic, equally in exile from the shared life of the city. Instead he retained from Hardy the vast historical perspectives of *The Dynasts*, its conjunction of great aeons and distances with minute local detail, and put it to different use. Where Hardy stood ironically aloof from a brute mechanistic history, Auden saw an obligation to bring knowledge to the service of responsibility. He placed Hardy's perspectives in the context of a civil tradition of poetry that extended from Chaucer through Shakespeare, Dryden, and Pope. In the modernist era the chief representative of this tradition was Kipling, whose attitudes seemed to many readers to be adequate proof that his mode of writing had grown moribund or outdated. But its potential was as large as it had ever been. George Orwell did not realize when he dismissed Auden as “a sort of gutless Kipling” (a phrase he soon retracted) that he was in fact honoring him; it was precisely Kipling's “guts” that were most damaging to Kipling's genius. In 1929 Auden wrote of doomed violent heroes, “Fighters for no one's sake / Who died beyond the border.” Ten years later he chose a different tone, celebrating those like Freud “who were doing us some good, / And knew it was never enough but / Hoped to improve a little by living.”

In the same year, 1939, Eliot looked sadly back at the triumphs of modernism, and saw in them “rather the last efforts of an old world, than the first struggles of a new.” In the midst of these triumphs, before modernism began its manifest decline, Auden was exuberantly at work, writing in ways that modernism insisted were impossible. Eliot had written of the “great labour” and “continual self-sacrifice” a writer must endure to find a tradition. Auden made tradition his ordinary experience, his daily means of perception. The poets of modernism felt they could bring tradition into the present only as battered ironic fragments, or by heroic efforts to make it new. For Auden it had never grown old.

Had Auden been alone in the course he pursued in his poetry, his career might now seem a historical dead end, offering few prospects for later writers

to explore. But he was following in the same direction taken by the greatest of his near-contemporaries in Europe, Bertolt Brecht. Auden and Brecht both began as romantic anarchists, violently amoral, but matured into a chastened public orthodoxy, Christian in Auden's case, Communist in Brecht's. Renouncing the brash menacing styles of their early work, both chose didactic manners suitable for irony and celebration. Both taught through parables. Where modernism had used innovative forms to speak of historical necessity, Auden and Brecht adopted traditional forms to speak of freedom and choice. They both enlarged the genres they adopted by restoring to literary language the content and manner of historical analysis, public oratory, moral philosophy, social and literary criticism, even gossip, and they restored to poetry an encyclopedic fullness of subject matter and style; yet they never pretended that what they wrote was sufficient unto itself or that it gave order to the world. Rejecting the romantic premise that individual vision was the true source of poetry, each willingly submerged his personality in collaborations with other writers. (When their paths crossed in the 1940s they collaborated on an adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi*.) Both kept themselves open to the full range of literature and diction, taking influences where they found them. Unlike the modernists, they used popular forms without the disclaimer of an ironic tone. Each preferred mixed styles to lyric intensity, imperfect truth to pure resonance. Neither would entrust serious issues to the inflation of the grand manner, and neither was afraid to be vulgar. Each dreamed for a time of a perfect society; each woke to the recognition that an ideal order imposed on a recalcitrant citizenry, which included themselves, would be an arid despotism.

Auden never forgot that his art could give him no privileged status. He knew he was a product of the professional bourgeoisie, that his distant ancestors "probably / were among those plentiful subjects / it cost less money to murder." The climate of his family was one of religious observance and public obligation. Both his grandfathers were Anglican clergymen. His father, George Augustus Auden, studied the natural sciences at Cambridge, then trained as a physician and was working as a general practitioner in York when his third son, Wystan Hugh Auden, was born on 21 February 1907. The next year the family moved to Birmingham when Dr. Auden became the city's first School Medical Officer; after the first World War he was also appointed Professor of Public Health at Birmingham University.

Dr. Auden had a gentle and stable character and exceptionally wide learning. He was one of the first public health officials in England to make use of psychoanalytic theory and technique, and the young Wystan Auden impressed his schoolmates with Freudian secrets discovered in his father's library. Auden's father was deeply learned in classical and Northern literature and archaeology, and published scholarly essays on fields as varied as mad-

ness in Greek tragedy, Norse antiquities, mathematical prodigies, and the psychology of juvenile delinquency. He traced his ancestry to Iceland, and transmitted to his son a lifelong love for Norse sagas, folktales, and myths.

During the first World War he served with the Royal Army Medical Corps in Egypt, Gallipoli, and France, and for more than four years, from Wystan Auden's seventh through eleventh years, the family saw almost nothing of him. The eldest son, Bernard, became a farmer and spent fifteen years in Canada, and Wystan had little to do with him in childhood or after. He was closer to the middle brother, John, who had a distinguished scientific career with the Geological Survey of India, where he was also an accomplished mountaineer, and later with the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization. There are signs that Wystan saw John and himself as pursuing lives that were parallel but mirror-opposites, in their careers in science and literature as well as in their emotions. Much later he saw John's two daughters almost as the children he never had.

Auden's mother had the greatest effect on his early emotional life, and her influence persisted. Constance Rosalie Bicknell Auden, whose family had grand London connections that the prosperous Midlands Auden family did not, was among the first generation of women to receive a university degree in Britain—she won a gold medal in French—and when she met her husband she was training to become a missionary nurse. She planned to join a Protestant mission in Africa, but gave this up when she married Dr. Auden. Wystan recognized early on that he had more in common with his mother's emotional and imaginative character than with his father's more phlegmatic one. When Jungian terminology briefly invaded his vocabulary in later years he described himself and his mother as thinking-intuitive types, in contrast with his father, whose type was feeling-sensation. Mrs. Auden was devoutly High Anglican, conducted daily prayers at home, and saw to it that her family followed the liturgical calendar in holiday seasons. She had a firm sense of her authority within the family and tended to resent the independent lives her husband and children led outside it. She reserved her fiercest anger for the modernizing Bishop Barnes of Birmingham, a mathematician and scientist who tried to suppress the High Church ceremonies she favored. "My first religious memories," Auden wrote later, "are of exciting magical rites."

Auden's modernist poems were the work of his youthful *Wanderjahre* of exile and revolt, but by 1933, when he was twenty-six, he adopted in his political and didactic writings a socialist version of his parents' service ethic, and by 1940 he returned to their faith.

One of the last modernists, Vladimir Nabokov, wrote that art is "a game of intricate enchantment and deception." Auden wrote that "In so far as poetry, or any of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate." He knew that poetry, for all its

formal excitement and elaboration, could never be independent, and could never adequately be understood in terms of its internal or linguistic order. The emotional power of poetry leads readers to sympathize, however subtly or unknowingly, with the attitudes it embodies. Attitudes such as nostalgia or hero-worship eventually translate into action, with results less beautiful than any poem. Knowing this, Auden found himself in the curious position of taking poetry far more seriously than his critics did who regretted his apparent lack of High Seriousness—critics who accepted the vatic principle that art was its own reason for being and who, therefore, lacked any standard of judgment that could distinguish seriousness of tone from seriousness of meaning.

When Auden wrote in opposition to the canons of modernism, he did so in the understanding that came of accepting them earlier. He explored all the fields of poetry familiar to his age, and discovered rich fields his age had neglected or abandoned. Isolated, intense, and severe in his earliest writings, he came to write poetry that, more than any other, contributed to the understanding of his time. He became the most inclusive poet of the twentieth century, its most technically skilled, and its most truthful.