

INTRODUCTION

THE POEM

“The Sea and the Mirror” represents a diversity of Auden’s intellectual and emotional interests, but as its subtitle indicates, it is first of all “A Commentary on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.” Auden was drawn to *The Tempest* for many reasons. As he told a lecture audience in his course on Shakespeare at the New School for Social Research in 1947, *The Tempest* is a mythopoeic work, an example of a genre that encourages adaptations, including his own, inspiring “people to go on for themselves . . . to make up episodes that [the author] as it were, forgot to tell us.” Auden also, like many critics before and since, understood *The Tempest* as a skeptical work. When he wrote that “The Sea and the Mirror” was his Art of Poetry, “in the same way” he believed *The Tempest* to be Shakespeare’s, he added, “ie I am attempting something which in a way is absurd, to show in a work of art, the limitations of art.” In the concluding lecture of his course at the New School, Auden especially praised Shakespeare for his consciousness of these limitations: “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.” Neither did Auden, and “The Sea and the Mirror,” which he wrote in the shadow of war, is a testament to his own artistic humility.

The central limit of art that Shakespeare deals with in *The Tempest*, and that Auden explores in “The Sea and the Mirror,” is that art is doubly illusory, because it holds the mirror up to nature rather than to the truth that passes human understanding. In *The Tempest*, a play that from first to last presents itself as an illusion of an illusion, Pros-

pero renounces his art, and in the Epilogue his renunciation is associated with the spiritual reality represented in the Lord's Prayer:

Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
And my ending is despair
Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.

After Auden's return in 1940 to the Anglican Church, a spiritual renewal that was intensified in August 1941 by the death of his mother, with whom his faith was deeply intertwined, he immersed himself in the writings of Kierkegaard and other existential religious philosophers, as well as of Saint Augustine and Pascal, and became preoccupied with theological issues. In November 1942 he wrote in the Roman Catholic journal *Commonweal*, "As a writer, who is also a would-be Christian, I cannot help feeling that a satisfactory theory of Art from the standpoint of the Christian faith has yet to be worked out." "The Sea and the Mirror" constitutes Auden's attempt, with the example of Shakespeare, to work out that theory.

The Tempest's exploration of the idea of art is enacted within a dualistic, allegorical structure, with Prospero as well as most of the rest of the cast poised between the animalistic representation of Caliban and the nonhuman figure of Ariel, the former variously interpreted by critics as nature, the flesh, the id, the latter as the immaterial, the spirit, imagination. Auden's interest in Augustine made him especially susceptible to this opposition in the play. He wrote to Stephen Spender in 1942, "I have been reading St Augustine a lot lately who is quite wonderful," and he took notes on *The Confessions* at the end of the notebook in which he drafted "For the Time Being" and parts of "The Sea and the Mirror." *The Confessions* is re-

flected not only in a number of important details in “The Sea and the Mirror,” particularly in Prospero’s speech, but also in Auden’s broader identification in the poem with Augustine’s rejection of the temptations of Manichaeism, as well as of rhetoric. In a 1954 essay on *The Tempest*, Auden wrote:

As a biological organism Man is a natural creature subject to the necessities of nature; as a being with consciousness and will, he is at the same time a historical person with the freedom of the spirit. *The Tempest* seems to me a manichean work, not because it shows the relation of Nature to Spirit as one of conflict and hostility, which in fallen man it is, but because it puts the blame for this upon Nature and makes the Spirit innocent.

He added, “It is unfortunate that the word ‘Flesh,’ set in contrast to ‘Spirit,’ is bound to suggest not what the Gospels and St. Paul intended it to mean, the whole physical-historical nature of fallen man, but his physical nature alone, a suggestion very welcome to our passion for reproofing and improving others instead of examining our own consciences.”

Though Auden objected to what he considered Shakespeare’s Manichean opposition of Ariel and Caliban and its spiritual elevation of Prospero’s art, the schematic dualism itself was nonetheless potent to him and was perhaps the fundamental reason why he chose to adapt *The Tempest*. Caliban is in constant counterpoint with Ariel in *The Tempest*—they cannot exist without each other—and their opposition informs or reflects everything else in the play. Antonio and Sebastian’s unregenerate rapaciousness and desperation contrast throughout with Gonzalo’s beneficence and hopefulness. Venus is counterpointed with Ceres within the wedding masque, and the conspiracy of Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo complements as well as disrupts the performance of the masque, the high artifice and graciousness of which remain in our memory as much as the drunken malice of the conspiracy remains in Prospero’s.

Similarly, Miranda's celebrated lines, "O brave new world / That has such people in't," coexist with Prospero's answer, "'Tis new to thee" (5.1.183–84). Neither response takes precedence: innocence and experience, youth and age, are as consubstantial in the play as good and evil.

Auden was deeply preoccupied with dualism throughout his early career. *The Orators* (1932), for example, a long work in a mixture of prose and verse whose structure and themes he revisited in "The Sea and the Mirror," deals with the duality of the one and the many, with "Private faces in public places," with a wounded individual in conflict with himself as well as his society, with a homosexual poet's relation to his vocation and his audience. The poem attempts to find psychological and political ways of understanding these dualities, but with mixed success. "The Sea and the Mirror" places them in a theological context, refocusing and subsuming them in a Christian faith that can at once redeem an individual and constitute his community. But the dualities nonetheless remain, and Auden continued to be concerned with them at the time he composed "The Sea and the Mirror." In 1939 in his unfinished prose work *The Prolific and the Devourer*, as well as in *The Double Man* in 1941, he explored the "dualistic division between either The Whole and its parts, or one part of the whole and another" that characterizes "the false philosophy," and in both works he made distinctions that were essentially the same as those he later used in his criticism of the Manichaeism of *The Tempest*. Auden's hope of transcending such dualities informed his religious epistemology—"credo ut intelligam," he said, quoting Saint Anselm, "I believe in order that I may understand"—but dualistic dichotomies nonetheless abided in his thought. In one of his introductions to his five-volume *Poets of the English Language* in 1950, he wrote that "the dualism inaugurated by Luther, Machiavelli and Descartes has brought us to the end of our tether and we know that either we must discover a unity which can repair the fissures that separate the individual from society,

feeling from intellect, and conscience from both, or we shall surely die by spiritual despair and physical annihilation.” In a celebrated line in “September 1, 1939,” he had said more simply, but analogously, “We must love one another or die.” While he was writing “The Sea and the Mirror,” Auden composed and made available to a seminar he was teaching at Swarthmore an extraordinarily detailed and comprehensive chart of antitheses, in all aspects of human life and thought, defining the “Dualism of Experience” in “This World,” the world that emerged after the Fall and the loss of Eden, and that only charity can redeem. Many of the oppositions and reconciliations of this synoptic chart are reflected in “The Sea and the Mirror.” Several appear directly in Caliban’s speech in Chapter III, and several more are the subject of Alonso’s speech in Chapter II, which was probably composed at the same time as the chart.

There was also a personal focus and urgency for Auden in this kind of antithetical thinking. In April 1939, after his emigration to the United States, Auden met Chester Kallman, an American fourteen years his junior; he fell in love, a love he had sought, he said, since he was a child, and entered into a relationship with Kallman that he regarded as the moral equivalent of a marriage. In July 1941 Kallman revealed that he had betrayed him with another lover, and the effect on Auden was profound. On Christmas Day 1941, he wrote a passionate letter to Kallman, with an extraordinary mixture of erotic and religious imagery, celebrating the sacramental union he still hoped for:

Because it is in you, a Jew, that I, a Gentile, inheriting an O-so-genteel anti-semitism, have found my happiness:

As this morning I think of Bethlehem, I think of you.

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Because, suffering on your account the torments of sexual jealousy, I have had a glimpse of the infinite vileness of masculine conceit;

As this morning, I think of Joseph, I think of you.

Because mothers have much to do with your queerness and mine, because we have both lost ours, and because Mary is a camp name;

As this morning I think of Mary, I think of you.

Because, on account of you, I have been, in intention, and almost in act, a murderer;

As this morning I think of Herod, I think of you.

Because I believe in your creative gift, and because I rely absolutely upon your critical judgement,

As this morning I think of the Magi, I think of you.

Because you alone know the full extent of my human weakness, and because I think I know yours, because of my resentment against being small and your resentment against having a spinal curvature, and because with my body I worship yours;

As this morning I think of the Manhood, I think of you.

Because it is through you that God has chosen to show me my beatitude,

As this morning I think of the Godhead, I think of you.

Because in the eyes of our bohemian friends our relationship is absurd;

As this morning I think of the Paradox of the Incarnation, I think of you.

Because, although our love, beginning Hans Anderson, became Grimm, and there are probably even grimmer tests to come, nevertheless I believe that if only we have faith in God and in each other, we shall be permitted to realize all that love is intended to be;

As this morning I think of the Good Friday and the Easter Sunday implicit in Christmas Day, I think of you.

This remarkable letter is an elegy, however, not an epithalamium. Auden and Kallman remained intimate friends for the rest of their lives and often lived together, but the relationship became more that of parent and child. They were not again lovers, and Auden's hope of achieving the mystical union of flesh and spirit he yearned for remained unfulfilled.

Both the hope and disappointment were intensified for him by his homosexuality. On 20 February 1943, in the midst of writing "The Sea and the Mirror," Auden told Elizabeth Mayer, "Being 'anders wie die Andern' [different from others] has its troubles. There are days when the knowledge that there will never be a place which I can call home, that there will never be a person with whom I shall be one flesh, seems more than I can bear. . . ." Kallman's betrayal, "The Crisis" in "l'affaire C," as Auden later called it, directly underlies Prospero's lyrics in Chapter I of "The Sea and the Mirror": "*In-form my hot heart straight away / Its treasure loves another.*" But Auden's relation to Kallman also affects the representation of Caliban and Ariel in "The Sea and the Mirror," and indeed the whole conception of art that Auden develops. In letters to Christopher Isherwood and Theodore Spencer in 1944, he identified "Caliban (The Prick) as the representative of Nature" and Ariel "as the representative of Spirit," and to Isherwood he also remarked, "It's OK to say that Ariel is Chester, but Chester is also Caliban, 'das lebendigste', ie Ariel is Caliban seen in the mirror." *Das Lebendigste*, the one most loved, is an allusion to the homosexual loved one in Hölderlin's "Sokrates und Alkibiades," a poem to which Auden often referred and that he quoted in full in his lecture on Shakespeare's *Sonnets* at the New School. In 1939, in *The Prolific and the Devourer*, Auden wrote:

At first the baby sees his limbs as belonging to the outside world. When he has learnt to control them, he accepts them as

parts of himself. What we call the “I,” in fact, is the area over which our will is immediately operative. Thus, if we have a toothache, we seem to be two people, the suffering “I” and the hostile outer world of the tooth. His penis never fully belongs to a man.

Auden often repeated this statement and clearly meant it as a Pauline description of a division that exists in all men. Nevertheless, his own sense of division appears to have been emphatic, and his identification of Chester with the *lebendigste*, but ungovernably phallic, Caliban as well as with Ariel, who represented the Muse to Shakespeare as well as to him, also suggests that he saw an intersection between his vocation as a poet and his own sexual nature. The association between the two is made explicit in another letter to Isherwood in which Auden wrote that he expected critics “to jump on the James pastiche” he used to depict Caliban “and think it is unseemly frivolity. Art is like queerness. You may defend it or you may attack it. But people never forgive you if you like it and laugh at it at the same time.”

These emotional and intellectual associations deepened Auden’s dualism as well as his hopes of resolving it, and they inspired many of the themes of “The Sea and the Mirror,” including its vision of the presexual innocence and unity of infancy and childhood, as well as its yearning for the sacramental union of the flesh and spirit in marriage, themes that recur in many of his other poems in the early 1940s. At the same time, though Auden yearned to transcend dualism—he said that “All the striving of life is a striving to transcend duality”—he remained acutely conscious of its contrapuntal manifestations in human existence. He said that in this world “all experience is dualistic,” and insisted that “Man is neither pure spirit nor pure nature—if he were purely either he would have no history—but exists in and as a tension between their two opposing polarities.” He thus praised what he called “binocular vision,” and

said that the “one infallible symptom of greatness is the capacity for double focus.”

Counterpoint and double focus are apparent throughout “The Sea and the Mirror,” including the Preface, a lyric that Auden wrote while he was composing “For the Time Being.” The Preface presents a pervasive opposition between art and religious truth, between “the world of fact we love” and the reality of death, the “silence / On the other side of the wall.” The Stage Manager contrasts the circus audience “wet with sympathy now” for the spectacle they see and the scriptural peril of “the lion’s mouth whose hunger / No metaphors can fill”; and he suggests, as Shakespeare’s Prospero does in his “Our revels now are ended” speech (4.1.148–58) and in his Epilogue, that the illusions of art are like the illusions of human life it imitates. Neither can reveal the process of moral choice “Between Shall-I and I-Will,” and neither can quote the ultimate “smiling / Secret.”

In Chapter I of the poem, in Prospero’s speech to Ariel, which Auden described to Isherwood as “The Artist to his genius,” Prospero presents a similarly divided view of art in a fallen world. He associates the childhood experience of “The gross insult of being a mere one among many” with the development of his magical power, “the power to enchant / That comes from disillusion,” and he says that as we look into Ariel’s “calm eyes, / With their lucid proof of apprehension and disorder, / All we are not stares back at what we are.” Auden sees Prospero’s character as itself paradoxical. In his 1954 essay on *The Tempest*, Auden deprecated Shakespeare’s Prospero. He questioned his treatment of others, especially Caliban, and concluded, “He has the coldness of someone who has come to the conclusion that human nature is not worth much, that human relations are, at their best, pretty sorry affairs. . . . One might excuse him if he included himself in his critical skepticism but he never does; it never occurs to him that he, too, might have erred and be

in need of pardon.” In a list at the very beginning of his draft of “The Sea and the Mirror,” Auden grouped the characters of *The Tempest*, as well as of his poem, with other characters in Shakespeare’s plays they reminded him of—a critical practice he also recommended to students. In this list, he associated Prospero with Hamlet, a character whom he found unsympathetic, and whose self-absorption he criticized in his lectures. In the poem, Auden portrays Prospero as similarly self-absorbed; he also diminishes him by making the natural Caliban rather than the spiritual Ariel the spokesman for art and gracing Caliban with the sophisticated prose style of the later works of Henry James.

At the same time, Auden unquestionably identified profoundly with Prospero as an artist. In his 1947 lecture on *The Tempest*, which is more sympathetic to Shakespeare’s Prospero and in this respect closer in spirit to “The Sea and the Mirror” than his later essays on the play, Auden emphasizes that art

can give people an experience, but it cannot dictate the use they make of that experience. Alonso is reminded of his crime against Prospero, but he repents by himself. Ferdinand and Miranda are tested, but the quality of their love is their own. The bad are exposed and shown that crime doesn’t pay, but they can’t be made to give up their ambition. That art cannot thus transform men grieves Prospero greatly. His anger at Caliban stems from his consciousness of this failure. . . . You can hold the mirror up to a person, but you may make him worse.

The same consciousness of failure, the pained recognition, as he wrote in 1939 in his elegy to Yeats, that “poetry makes nothing happen,” underlies Auden’s depiction of Prospero in “The Sea and the Mirror.” His Prospero also alludes to passages in Augustine and Kierkegaard that Auden particularly valued; his songs, the first especially, directly reflect Auden’s searing experience with Chester Kall-

man; and the whole of his speech, in its poignancy and wit, suggests Auden's own voice. In his draft of "The Sea and the Mirror," as well as in a letter to Isherwood, Auden drew a diagram, derived from his Swarthmore chart and Alonso's speech, placing Prospero (Ego) in the world of Existence between the worlds of Actuality (or Immediacy) and of Possibility, the former represented by the Sea (Nature) and Caliban (Life), the latter by the Mirror (Art) and Ariel (Spirit). Prospero embodies all of these oppositions, and they are reflected in the way in which he talks, in the texture of his speech and songs—"resigning thoughts" and "revelling wishes"; "heavy books" and "words" that "carry no weight"; "A punctual plump judge, a fly-weight hermit"; "*witty angels who / Come only to the beasts*"; "Cold walls, hot spaces, wild mouths, defeated backs"; "moonshine and daylight"; "*this rough world*" and "*a smoother song*."

Comparable oppositions animate the rest of "The Sea and the Mirror" as well. In Chapter II, the members of the supporting cast reveal themselves, on the deck of the ship taking them back to Naples, in a pyrotechnic variety of verse forms. The combination of Auden's own varied descriptions of these characters in the draft; Prospero's, Antonio's, and Caliban's comments on them; and their own speeches suggests that Auden conceived of them from multiple complementary and conflicting perspectives. Antonio, the first speaker, is represented as the intractable opponent of Prospero and his project of reconciliation and renewal. Like Iago, with whom Auden associated him and on whom he is in many respects modeled, he is a representation of the unregenerate will, a demonic outsider. Antonio is similarly significant in *The Tempest*, haunting the play and not speaking a word when Prospero grudgingly forgives him, but Auden's profound interest in the figure of the outsider gives his Antonio an imaginative consciousness that Shakespeare's Antonio does not have. He opens the chapter and punctuates it with responses to the speeches of each of the other characters, and he provides an insistent counterpoint to Prospero. He asserts

his own refractory existence as the necessary precondition of Prospero's art:

as long as I choose

To wear my fashion, whatever you wear
Is a magic robe; while I stand outside
Your circle, the will to charm is still there.

He poses an antithesis between adulthood and the paradisaic possibilities of childhood from which Prospero is excluded:

As I exist so you shall be denied,
Forced to remain our melancholy mentor,
The grown-up man, the adult in his pride,

Never have time to curl up at the centre
Time turns on when completely reconciled,
Never become and therefore never enter
The green occluded pasture as a child.

His speech concludes:

*Your all is partial, Prospero;
My will is all my own:
Your need to love shall never know
Me: I am I, Antonio,
By choice myself alone.*

Antonio speaks a different variation on this final stanza as a coda to the speeches of each of the other characters.

Ferdinand's lyrical sonnet to Miranda, which Auden described in his draft as "mutuality of love begets love," expresses a serious mystical quest for "another tenderness," at the same time, Auden told Isherwood, that it "describes fucking in completely abstract words," as later Caliban, the id, speaks abstractly, in a highly mannered Jamesian style, about art. In both his draft and his letter to Isher-

wood, Auden compared Ferdinand and Miranda, probably with some amusement, to Milton's Adam and Eve: "Ferdinand: Masculine (He for God only)" and "Miranda: Feminine (She for God in him)"; and he grouped Ferdinand with Henry V and Mr. W. H., the presumed young man in the *Sonnets*, both of whom he deplored in his lectures on Shakespeare. Auden also has Caliban remarking, in an early version of his speech, that "Miranda and Ferdinand have spoken themselves to giants / Swooning in Egypt," an ironic allusion to Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, lovers whose poetry Auden admired but whose romantic love he regarded as worldly pretension.

Auden associated Stephano with Falstaff and the "flight from anxiety into unconsciousness." Auden regarded anxiety as the condition of existence, and in his Swarthmore chart he placed it midway between the hell of sensuality on one hand and the hell of pride on the other. In his ballade, Stephano declares to his drinker's belly, which he variously addresses as "a bride," "Dear Daughter," "nanny," "Child," and "Mother," that "Where mind meets matter, both should woo." He hides behind its "skirts . . . / When disappointments bark and boo," and is comforted by it, as by a "Wise nanny" with her "vulgar pooh." But his retreat to drink and childhood reveals the adult division rather than the childhood unity of mind and body:

Though in the long run satisfied,
The will of one by being two
At every moment is denied;
Exhausted glasses wonder who
Is self and sovereign, I or You?
We cannot both be what we claim,
The real Stephano—Which is true?
A lost thing looks for a lost name.

The portrait of Gonzalo is explicitly paradoxical. Auden thought of him as akin to Polonius and as a "man who makes goodness easy by blinding himself to evil." Shakespeare depicts Gonzalo as a

slightly foolish but essentially “good old Lord” (5.1.15), an innocent, the aged counterpart of Miranda. Auden’s Gonzalo is a man who “By his self-reflection made / Consolation an offence,” who “by speculation froze / Vision into an idea” and eventually “stood convicted of / Doubt and insufficient love.” His speech nonetheless ends with another kind of paradox, as he draws upon the memory of the imaginative consolations of his boyhood to redeem his old age. Immediately following is the paradox of Adrian and Francisco’s camp lament: “Good little sunbeams must learn to fly” while “the goldfish die.”

Alonso’s speech is composed entirely of antitheses. He is the most penitent character in *The Tempest* and the one to whom Auden seems to have been most profoundly drawn. Auden grouped him in his draft with Henry IV, a similarly guilt-ridden and grief-stricken father to whom Auden also responded with sympathy. Extending the Stage Manager’s image in the Preface of a couple walking a “tightrope,” Alonso tells Ferdinand that “The Way of Justice is a tightrope / Where no prince is safe for one instant.” On one side of the tightrope is the sea of sensuality and lust, and on the other is the desert of intellect and pride, an antinomy Auden elaborated in the contemporaneous Swarthmore chart as well as in *The Enchafed Flood* in 1950. Alonso describes the opposing perils of the sea and the desert at length and tells Ferdinand that he must find his way as a ruler “Between the watery vagueness and / The triviality of the sand”:

But should you fail to keep your kingdom
And, like your father before you, come
Where thought accuses and feeling mocks,
Believe your pain: praise the scorching rocks
For their desiccation of your lust,
Thank the bitter treatment of the tide
For its dissolution of your pride,
That the whirlwind may arrange your will

And the deluge release it to find
The spring in the desert, the fruitful
Island in the sea, where flesh and mind
Are delivered from mistrust.

The nostalgic song of the Master and Boatswain presents the irresolvable oppositions of a world where “The homeless played at keeping house,” where grown men try to recover maternal love with “nightingales” (the same slang term for prostitutes used by T. S. Eliot in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”):

The nightingales are sobbing in
The orchards of our mothers,
And hearts that we broke long ago
Have long been breaking others;
Tears are round, the sea is deep:
Roll them overboard and sleep.

The speech of Sebastian, whom Auden in a notebook entry initially associated with the character of Roderigo in *Othello*, also embodies an antithesis, though less obviously than Alonso’s, the antithesis of adult and child. In adult consciousness, thought and act are separated in time and by their respective natures. Freud argued that in the animistic, magical thinking of infancy, however, there is no gap between the present intention and the future act, and the thought is equivalent to the deed. Freud considered this state at once an Eden that adults wish to recover and the source of their Oedipal guilt, since residues of infantile belief that the thought and the deed are one, that the wish to murder and the act of murder are the same, persist in adult life. In the speech of Sebastian Auden anatomizes such pre-Oedipal thinking:

What sadness signalled to our children’s day
Where each believed all wishes wear a crown
And anything pretended is alive,

That one by one we plunged into that dream
Of solitude and silence where no sword
Will ever play once it is called a proof?

Sebastian had intended Alonso's death—"To think his death I thought myself alive"—but as Auden wrote in his draft as well as in a letter to Isherwood, he is "redeemed by failure," by the adult consciousness of the difference between thinking and acting. Part of the power of his sestina nonetheless rests in its depiction of a child's mind.

Trinculo's speech too, and more explicitly, depends upon the opposition of child and adult. Trinculo presents himself as "the cold clown / Whose head is in the clouds. . . . The north wind steals my hat," but he says that

On clear days I can see
Green acres far below,
And the red roof where I
Was Little Trinculo.

In the draft, Trinculo's speech focuses entirely on memories of childhood, and Auden grouped him with Shallow, the character in *Henry IV, Part Two* who is wholly defined by memories of his youth, as well as with Jaques's melancholy and the "flight from anxiety into wit."

Auden's interest in what Caliban calls "the green kingdom" of childhood had a religious foundation. Auden related the verse "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19.14) to the most central tenets of his faith. He considered the verse an answer to "those who think of the good life as something contrary to our animal nature, that the flesh is not divine," as well as a statement of the human need, not only the injunction, to "love thy neighbour as thyself," since children, who "do love and trust their neighbour naturally

unless their trust is betrayed,” show that such love is part of our “biological nature.” But Auden’s attraction to childhood was also temperamental. Toward the end of his life he wrote in his commonplace book *A Certain World*, “I was both the youngest child and the youngest grandchild in my family. Being a fairly bright boy, I was generally the youngest in my school class. The result of this was that, until quite recently, I have always assumed that, in any gathering, I was the youngest person present.”

Miranda’s luminous villanelle, which Auden labeled “integrated love” in his draft, presents the joining of the mirror of art and the nature it reflects, the fundamental aesthetic duality of “The Sea and the Mirror,” in a childlike apprehension of love and matrimony. Both Shakespeare’s Prospero and Auden’s are skeptical of the romantic hyperboles of Miranda and Ferdinand. Prospero says dryly to Miranda in *The Tempest* that Ferdinand’s world seems “brave” to her only because of its novelty (5.1.183–84). Auden’s Prospero asks, more pointedly,

Will a Miranda who is
No longer a silly lovesick little goose,
When Ferdinand and his brave world are her profession,
Go into raptures over existing at all?

In his lecture on *The Tempest*, Auden said that both Miranda and Ferdinand “are good but untempted and inexperienced—they think that love can produce Gonzalo’s Utopia here and now.” Miranda’s verse nonetheless clearly celebrates the spiritual innocence of her fairy-tale feelings. She revisits Antonio’s reference to the Eden of childhood, but with the “green pasture” no longer “occluded,” and in the final stanza she speaks of the “changing garden,” in which she and Ferdinand “Are linked as children in a circle dancing.” Auden returned to the idea of children dancing in a ring of agape in a lecture at the New School in which he quoted a passage

from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* that suggests an association of the image with the music of the spheres. The passage describes Alice dancing with Tweedledum and Tweedledee:

. . . she took hold of both hands at once: the next moment they were dancing round in a ring. This seemed quite natural (she remembered afterwards), and she was not even surprised to hear music playing: it seemed to come from the tree under which they were dancing, and it was done (as well as she could make it out) by the branches rubbing one across the other, like fiddles and fiddlesticks. . . . "I don't know when I began it, but somehow I felt as if I had been singing it a long long time!"

Auden's conception of Caliban as well as of Ariel in Chapter III is the most radical expression of dualism in "The Sea and the Mirror." Speaking first on behalf of the audience, Caliban asks Shakespeare whether his definition of art as " 'a mirror held up to nature' " does not indicate the "mutual reversal of value" between the real and the imagined, since on "the far side of the mirror the general will to compose, to form at all costs a felicitous pattern becomes the *necessary cause* of any particular effort to live or act or love or triumph or vary, instead of being as, in so far as it emerges at all, it is on this side, their *accidental effect*." Caliban asks Shakespeare how he could thus "be guilty of the incredible unpardonable treachery" of introducing him into his play, "the one creature" whom the Muse "will not under any circumstances stand," the child of "the unrectored chaos," "the represented principle of *not* sympathising, *not* associating, *not* amusing." He protests also, "Is it possible that, not content with inveigling Caliban into Ariel's kingdom, you have also let loose Ariel in Caliban's?" In the next section of the chapter, Caliban assumes his "officially natural role" to address those in the audience who wish to become writers. He describes how the writers in the audience finally master Ariel only to discover reflected in his eyes

“a gibbering fist-clenched creature with which you are all too unfamiliar . . . the only subject that you have, who is not a dream amenable to magic but the all too solid flesh you must acknowledge as your own; at last you have come face to face with me, and are appalled to learn how far I am from being, in any sense, your dish.” In the final section of Chapter III, Caliban tells the audience that he begins “to feel something of the serio-comic embarrassment of the dedicated dramatist, who, in representing to you your condition of estrangement from the truth, is doomed to fail the more he succeeds, for the more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly can he indicate the truth from which it is estranged.” Caliban finally resolves this paradox by attempting to transcend it, by acknowledging “that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf of which our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch—we understand them at last—are feebly figurative signs.”

The oppositions Caliban describes in his long prose speech are also represented in his style, in the deliberately antithetical juxtaposition of the flesh he embodies with the abstract language he uses. Auden had played Caliban in a school play, he associated him with Falstaff, the character in Shakespeare whom he most admired, and he was particularly proud of the style of Caliban’s speech in “The Sea and the Mirror,” a speech he considered his masterpiece. He wrote to Spencer:

Caliban does disturb me profoundly because he doesn’t fit in; it is exactly as if one of the audience had walked onto the stage and insisted on taking part in the action. I’ve tried to work for this effect in a non-theatrical medium, by allowing the reader for the first two chapters not to think of the theatre (by inversion, therefore, to be witnessing a performance) and then suddenly wake him up in one (again by inversion, introducing ‘real life’ into the imagined.)

This is putting one's head straight into the critics' mouths, for most of them will spot the James pastiche, say this is a piece of virtuosity, which it is, and unseemly levity or meaninglessness, which it isn't.

"Caliban is Ariel's Oracle," Auden continued, since Caliban, "as the personification of Nature, has the power of individuation, but no power of conception," whereas Ariel, "as the personification of Spirit, has the power of conception but not of individuation":

What I was looking for was, therefore, (a) A freak 'original' style (Caliban's contribution), (b) a style as 'spiritual', as far removed from Nature, as possible (Ariel's contribution) and James seemed to fit the bill exactly, and not only for these reasons, but also because he is the great representative in English literature of what Shakespeare certainly was not, the 'dedicated artist' to whom art is religion. You cannot imagine him saying 'The best in this kind are but shadows' or of busting his old wand. In fact Ariel fooled him a little, hence a certain Calibanesque 'monstrosity' about his work.

I have, as you say, a dangerous fondness for 'trucs' [ways around things, poetic tricks]; I've tried to turn this to advantage by selecting a subject where it is precisely the 'truc' that *is* the subject; the serious matter being the fundamental frivolity of art. I hope someone, besides yourself, will see this.

This conception of art is critical to all of Auden's later work, because it enabled him to distinguish and transform his taste for camp as well as "trucs." It helps account for his attraction to Kierkegaard's distinctions of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, and it reflects his own deep religious commitment. In an address on Henry James to the Grolier Club in 1946, Auden remarked that "along with most human activities," art "is, in the profoundest sense, frivolous. For one thing, and one thing only, is serious: loving one's

neighbor as one's self." In the letter to Spencer, Auden also wrote, "I'm extremely pleased and surprised to find that at least one reader feels that the section written in a pastiche of James is more me than the sections written in my own style, because it is the paradox I was trying for, and am afraid hardly anyone will get." In a review in 1944, Auden said that James "was not, like Mallarmé or Yeats, an esthete, but, like Pascal, one to whom, however infinitely various its circumstances, the interest itself of human life was always the single dreadful choice it offers, with no 'second chance,' of either salvation or damnation."

Shakespeare's representation of dualism in *The Tempest* is not governed by the Manichaeism Auden saw, though elements of it may be present, but by the tragicomic idea of *felix culpa*, the paradox of the fortunate fall, where good is consubstantial with evil, and can issue from it. At the outset of the action Prospero tells Miranda when she sees the shipwreck that there is "no harm done . . . No harm," and that he has "done nothing but in care of" her (1.2.14–16). His care culminates in her betrothal but evolves through her suffering as well as his own, and he associates that suffering with the blessing as well as pain of their exile from Milan. They were driven from the city, he tells her, "By foul play . . . / But blessedly holp hither" (1.2.62–64), sighing "To th' winds, whose pity, sighing back again, / Did us but loving wrong" (1.2.150–51). The same motif is expressed by Ferdinand as he submits to Prospero's rule and to the ritual ordeal that Prospero contrives to make him value the love of Miranda: "some kinds of baseness / Are nobly undergone, and most poor matters / Point to rich ends. . . . The mistress which I serve quickens what's dead / And makes my labours pleasures" (3.1.2–7). Gonzalo, summing up the whole action of the play, says that everyone has found himself "When no man was his own" (5.1.213).

Auden hints at a comparable kind of paradox, though more tenuously, in a number of the speeches of the supporting cast in Chapter

II of “The Sea and the Mirror,” especially Sebastian’s, as well as at the end of Caliban’s speech in Chapter III. The sense of resolved, if not fortunate, suffering, however, is most fully developed in the Postscript, where Ariel sings of his love for Caliban’s mortality and of its completion of his own spiritual being. Ariel speaks for the first time in the poem, and is echoed by the Prompter, who suggests the voice of Auden as well as that of Prospero:

Weep no more but pity me,
Fleet persistent shadow cast
By your lameness, caught at last,
Helplessly in love with you,
Elegance, art, fascination,
 Fascinated by
 Drab mortality;
Spare me a humiliation,
 To your faults be true:
I can sing as you reply

... I

Ariel proposes a union of antitheses—“For my company be lonely / For my health be ill: / I will sing if you will cry”—in which he and Caliban will be joined not despite, but because of, the differences between them.

Ariel’s song ends with a reference to death, “One evaporating sigh,” a counterpart of Prospero’s description in *The Tempest* of “our little life . . . rounded with a sleep” (4.1.157–58) as well as of his general preoccupation with last things. Shakespeare may have been thinking of the liturgy of All Souls’ Day when he wrote *The Tempest*, and the play is in significant respects a meditation on death, which may be one reason why many modern critics have found it essentially different from Shakespeare’s other last plays and more perturbing, and why Auden, writing in a time of war, with its “unmentionable odour of death,” should have found it so apposite. Alonso

and Gonzalo are old men; Prospero says starkly, “Every third thought shall be my grave” (5.1.311); and the contrast between youth and age is insistent in the play. Auden responds deeply to this undercurrent in *The Tempest*, and the representation in “The Sea and the Mirror” of old age and death against the perspective of childhood may be the dialectical opposition that moved him most. In the Preface, the Stage Manager begins by observing the aged catching their breath and children laughing, and ends by saying that “the Bard”

Was sober when he wrote
That this world of fact we love
Is unsubstantial stuff:
All the rest is silence
On the other side of the wall;
And the silence ripeness,
And the ripeness all.

“The rest is silence” are Hamlet’s last words (5.2.369); “Ripeness is all” are Edgar’s words of benediction for his dying father Gloucester in *King Lear* (5.2.11); and “unsubstantial stuff” refers to Prospero’s famous speech to Ferdinand describing the ending of the revels of life as well as of the masque in *The Tempest*:

You do look, my son, in a mov’d sort,
As if you were dismay’d. Be cheerful, sir.
Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,

Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

(4.1.146–58)

In Chapter I of “The Sea and the Mirror,” Prospero’s whole speech is that of a man preparing himself for “the time death pounces / His stumping question.” After freeing his Muse Ariel, “So at last I can really believe I shall die,” he looks back on his childhood, youth, and life as an artist. He talks of the journey he must now take “inch by inch, / Alone and on foot,” and dwells on the picture of himself as “an old man / Just like other old men, with eyes that water / Easily in the wind, and a head that nods in the sunshine.” He refers to the Kierkegaardian spiritual voyage over “seventy thousand fathoms” and in his last lyric asks Ariel to sing “*Of separation, / Of bodies and death,*” as “*Trembling he takes / The silent passage / Into discomfort.*”

In Chapter II, Antonio invokes the green pasture of childhood and in his final lines describes

*The figure that Antonio,
The Only One, Creation’s O
Dances for Death alone.*

The subject of Sebastian’s infantile thinking is death, his own as well as his brother Alonso’s, and Trinculo’s insistent memories of his childhood end with the wish for death:

Wild images, come down
Out of your freezing sky,
That I, like shorter men,
May get my joke and die.

The Master and Boatswain oppose the nostalgic memory of their mothers to the oblivion of the sea. In a different key, Gonzalo, also

looking back to childhood, remembers “boyhoods growing and afraid” comforted by “Some ruined tower by the sea” (and by “the improbable stare / Of rocking horse and teddy bear” in the draft) and then turns to the solace of his “rusting flesh”:

A simple locus now, a bell
The Already There can lay
Hands on if at any time
It should feel inclined to say
To the lonely—“Here I am”,
To the anxious—“All is well”.

Alonso, absorbed in the future life of his young son, says he is “now ready to welcome / Death, but rejoicing in a new love, / A new peace.”

The resonance of such a love Auden would also have found in *The Tempest*. At the close of the play, in the Epilogue, Prospero pleads for the audience’s charity as they themselves must pray for God’s charity, and in the body of the play, in a climactic and well-known speech just before he renounces his art, he resolves to forgive his enemies. When Ariel tells him that his “affections” would “become tender” if he beheld the sufferings of the court party, Prospero answers:

And mine shall.
Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art?
Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th’ quick,
Yet with my nobler reason ’gainst my fury
Do I take part. The rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance.

(5.1.18–28)

This speech may not be one to which Auden especially attended in “The Sea and the Mirror,” and he is likely to have found its elevation of reason to be symptomatic of the Manichaeism in *The Tempest* to which he objected, but the impulse to forgive is one that he deeply shared and that was always latent in his dualistic thinking. In his Swarthmore chart, it is the immediate prelude to Paradise. The idea of forgiveness is absent in the Preface by the Stage Manager but is present in muted form in Prospero’s speech in Chapter I. Prospero, in Auden’s presentation, speaks only briefly of forgiveness, and where Shakespeare’s Prospero seems mistaken only about Caliban, not others, and is, arguably, finally charitable even toward Caliban—he “acknowledges” him as a part of himself (5.1.275–76), and Caliban for his part vows to be “wise hereafter, / And seek for grace” (5.1.294–95)—Auden’s Prospero can seem ungenerous in his response to other characters as well. On the other hand, his irony does not exclude sympathy, and his judgments frequently echo Auden’s own astringent labels for those characters in his draft and letters as well as comparable attitudes expressed elsewhere in his writing. Prospero’s speech in “The Sea and the Mirror” depicts the disengagement of a man who is leaving life behind him, not altogether unlike Troilus’s lines (which Auden admired) at the end of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*. His speech, also, is specifically an address to his Muse, and in the draft even the hostile Antonio recognizes, if sarcastically, that the purpose of Prospero’s “conjuring” is gracious: “it’s wonderful / Really, how much you have managed to do. . . . So they / Did want to better themselves after all / All over the ship I hear them pray / As loyal subjects, to be grateful enough, / Trying so hard to believe what you say / About life as a dream in search of grace / And to understand what you mean by the real.” Prospero himself in the final text affirms rightly if dispassionately:

The extravagant children, who lately swaggered
Out of the sea like gods, have, I think, been soundly hunted
By their own devils into their human selves:
To all, then, but me, their pardons.

Prospero may wonder how long Ferdinand and Miranda will remain enraptured, but he says in addition that “Their eyes are big and blue with love; its lighting / Makes even us look new,” and adds, “Probably I over-estimate their difficulties.” In the draft, he says more revealingly, in a line in which Auden is perhaps glancing at his own sexual nature, “I probably over-estimate these difficulties / For natures less indirect than mine.” In the published text, Prospero also says, with the cadence of Auden’s characteristic humor,

Just the same, I am very glad I shall never
Be twenty and have to go through that business again,
The hours of fuss and fury, the conceit, the expense.

If the theme of forgiveness is subdued in the depiction of Prospero, however, it is manifest in the speeches of the supporting cast in Chapter II. Stephano talks explicitly of the “need for pardon” in his attempt to find union with his belly, to join mind and matter, and Sebastian experiences a “proof / Of mercy” that rejuvenates him. In his draft Auden indicated “forgiveness” as the subject of Sebastian’s sestina, and among the six words he initially considered to end the lines in the sestina were “give” and “get,” terms he used in a lecture on *Timon of Athens* to discriminate agape and eros. Gonzalo, in the last stanza of his speech, says, “There is nothing to forgive,” and in the draft Auden added, “There is everything to bless.” In Chapter III, Caliban speaks to the young artist in the audience of “that music which explains and pardons all,” and of the need, “if possible and as soon as possible, to forgive and forget the past.” He closes his speech by saying that in “the Wholly Other Life . . . all our meanings are reversed and it is precisely in its negative image of Judgement that

we can positively envisage Mercy,” a traditional Christian conception of Mercy as the fulfillment of the Law that parallels the idea of the fortunate fall that runs through *The Tempest*. In the Postscript, finally, with its overtones of Auden’s relation with Kallman, the Prompter’s “I” evokes not only Prospero the artist but also all the individual human beings whom Ariel and Caliban allegorically compose, and suggests a marriage of the flesh and spirit in this world, and of Auden himself with his vocation, that is animated by forgiveness and love.

Alonso, perhaps the most moving character in *The Tempest*, speaks in his final lines in “The Sea and the Mirror” not only of his being ready to welcome death but of

having heard the solemn
Music strike and seen the statue move
To forgive our illusion.

The reference is to the coming to life of Hermione’s statue in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* (5.3), which Auden, in his lecture on the play at the New School, saw as the finest of Shakespeare’s reconciliation scenes and a perfect celebration of forgiveness. Auden’s late addition of the line “To forgive our illusion”—it is not in the draft—is the most expansive of the numerous Shakespearean allusions in “The Sea and the Mirror,” comprehending the poem’s deepest religious impulses as well as its deepest inspiration in Shakespeare, radiating both inward to the illusion it creates and outward to the illusion it imitates, a luminous counterpart of Shakespeare’s grave and beautiful epilogue to *The Tempest*, a distillation of the reconciliation of charity and art that Auden sought in the poem and in his life.

THE TEXT

Auden wrote “The Sea and the Mirror” from October 1942 to February 1944, while he was teaching at Swarthmore College. He had written “For the Time Being, A Christmas Oratorio” in the previous

year, and the two poems were published together in the volume *For the Time Being* (New York: Random House, 1944; London: Faber and Faber, 1945), Auden placing “The Sea and the Mirror” first in the volume, though it was written later, because he thought that the secular, if religiously informed, examination of art in the poem should be a prelude to the manifestly religious representation of the Incarnation in “For the Time Being.”

Auden began thinking of “The Sea and the Mirror” in August 1942, when he wrote its Preface, in many respects the germ of the poem. He started writing “The Sea and the Mirror” in October and appears to have completed Chapter I, “Prospero to Ariel,” in November. On 5 January 1943, he sent to Chester Kallman a copy of a greatly extended version of Adrian and Francisco’s couplet, printed in the notes of this edition as well as in the posthumous collection *As I Walked Out One Evening*. On 9 January 1943 Auden wrote Elizabeth Mayer, “My stuff about the Tempest is going quite nicely so far,” and he enclosed “one little bit” for her to read, a copy of “Ferdinand’s Song.” He had more difficulty writing Chapter III, “Caliban to the Audience.” On 17 July 1943 he wrote Mayer, “I struck oil this week on the last part of the Tempest stuff after a fruitless prospecting of 3 months.” A letter written later to Theodore Spencer, probably 24 March 1944, suggests that his statement to Mayer was premature. He told Spencer, “From May to Oct, I was completely stuck with Chap III.” On 17 February 1944, he wrote Mayer, “Yesterday I finished the Tempest book which I want to show you.”

Auden’s drafts of “The Sea and the Mirror” exist in two handwritten manuscripts: one, almost entirely devoted to the poem, in the Poetry and Rare Books Collection of the Library of the State University of New York at Buffalo; the other, a draft of “For the Time Being” that contains material Auden transposed to “The Sea and the Mirror,” in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. The Buffalo MS, a lined folio accountant’s ledger, contains drafts of Prospero’s speech, the speeches of the Supporting

Cast, and many false starts of Caliban's speech. The Berg MS, also a folio ledger, contains drafts of the Preface and Postscript, and of significant sections of both Prospero's and Caliban's speeches, including Prospero's final song, "Sing, Ariel, sing." The Berg Collection also holds the Random House galleys of the final text of "The Sea and the Mirror," with Auden's handwritten revisions on the galleys. The notes to this edition quote significant portions of the MS drafts as well as of the textual changes on the galleys.

"The Sea and the Mirror" was reprinted in *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945) and *Collected Longer Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968; New York: Random House, 1969). The Preface was printed in *Atlantic*, under that title, in August 1944; "Sing Ariel, sing" was reprinted in *W. H. Auden: A Selection by the Author* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958) as "Invocation to Ariel," as well as in *Collected Shorter Poems, 1927–1957* (London: Faber, 1966; New York: Random House, 1967) and *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1968). Alonso's speech, "Alonso to Ferdinand," was first printed in *Partisan Review*, September–October 1943. "Stephano's Song," "Trinculo's Song," "Alonso to Ferdinand," "Song of the Master and the Boatswain," "Miranda's Song," and "Caliban to the Audience" were reprinted in *W. H. Auden: A Selection*; and all of Chapter II was reprinted in *Selected Poems*.

The text of this edition is based on the first edition in *For the Time Being* (1944). The variants in the subsequent printed editions are minor. The present edition alters the American spelling and punctuation of the 1944 text in order to follow the British practice Auden used in his manuscripts: e.g., "honour" and "realise" instead of "honor" and "realize," and punctuation outside of instead of inside quotation marks. In the 1944 edition, as well as in letters he wrote at the time, Auden headed Prospero's, the Supporting Cast's, and Caliban's speeches as, respectively, Chapter I, Chapter II, and Chapter III. Subsequent editions used the Roman numerals only, but Auden's clear intent was to present the sections as narrative "chap-

ters,” as they are printed in this edition. On the galleys, Auden added asterisks in the spaces between the different sections of Caliban’s speech, capitalized all personal pronouns referring to him and to Ariel, and indicated that he wished to italicize the opening section of the speech (Caliban’s address to Shakespeare on behalf of the audience), as it is for the first time in this edition. A number of the proofreaders’ corrections on the galleys, which were incorporated in the first and subsequent editions, contradict Auden’s sometimes eccentric habits of punctuation (he often omitted a comma between consecutive adjectives or adverbs, for example), and Auden’s usage has been restored in the present edition.

Auden’s editor at Random House, Bennett Cerf, advised against the italics for the opening section of Caliban’s speech and prevailed, but Auden continued to protest about another issue, the typography of the chapter headings. He wrote to Cerf on 13 June 1944: “Maybe you are right about the italics, though I think it would be clearer with them. About the chapter headings, however, my opinion is unchanged. It isn’t that I don’t realise that, as such things go, the fount is well designed. It’s a matter of principle. You would never think of using such a fount for, say, ‘The Embryology of the Elasmobranch Liver’, so why use it for poetry? I feel strongly that ‘aesthetic’ books should not be put in a special class.”