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Edited by Edward Mendelson:

W. H. Auden: Prose, Volume III, 1949-1955

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INTRODUCTION

AUDEN wrote his prose so that he would be able to write his poems, and the benefits of writing prose were both financial and intellectual. In a letter written from Italy in 1955, he explained: “The winter months are those in which I earn enough dollars to allow me to live here in the summer and devote myself to the unprofitable occupation of writing poetry.” During his winters in New York, punctuated by lecture tours and visiting professorships in American college towns, he wrote the commissioned essays and reviews that paid for his summers in Ischia. No matter what the nominal subject of those essays might be, he used them as exercises in which he explored whatever moral, intellectual, literary, or prosodic issues concerned him most in the poems he was writing or planning. During the late 1940s and early 1950s he wrote a sequence of poems largely about history, “*Horae Canonicae*”, and another sequence largely about nature, “*Bucolics*”. He developed the structure of ideas that holds them together by writing essays and reviews on the theme indicated by the title of one of them: “Nature, History and Poetry”.

Auden enjoyed deflating romantic images of inspired poets driven only by their genius. He made a point of praising the bourgeois virtues—directly in his essays, indirectly in poems such as “Under Sirius”, “Cattivo Tempo”, “Sext”, and “Mountains”. He also made a point of practicing those virtues. After agreeing to write an introduction or essay or review, he typically finished the job weeks or months ahead of his deadline. For an anthology of English poetry and a collection of Elizabethan verse and music he used original texts rather than later reprints, and was impatient with collaborators who were less responsible and punctual than he was. As a public lecturer he gave value for money with his lucid and substantial talks. During the early 1950s he finally outgrew his intermittent temptation to pose before academic audiences as a severe philosopher, and his prose style achieved the urbane, inclusive ease that it maintained for the rest of his career.

Before this, during Auden’s first years in America from 1939 to around 1947, his work and thought had focused on lonely inward crises and existential choices of the kind he wrote about in his longer poems from “New Year Letter” in 1940 through *The Age of Anxiety* in 1944–46. In the later 1940s he began to seek a less narrow and intense approach to experience, and explored ways of thinking that were more social and collective, and more aware of the common world of the body. In the early 1940s he had found the structure of his thought in the work of Søren Kierkegaard. In 1955, while still acknowledging his debt to Kierkegaard, he pointed toward “what seems to be

his great limitation, a limitation which characterizes Protestantism generally. A planetary visitor could read through the whole of his voluminous works without discovering that human beings are not ghosts but have bodies of flesh and blood.”

Auden first visited Italy in 1948. For the next ten years he settled into a routine of summers in a rented house in Ischia and winters in an apartment in New York. He countered the urgent and severe Protestantism of his thought in the earlier 1940s with what he half-seriously called a “counter-Reformationary” Catholicism. His poem “In Praise of Limestone,” written in 1948, was an emphatic hymn of praise to the human body and the Mediterranean landscapes in which it was most at home. During the next few years he wrote sympathetically about the differences between Italian and northern European societies and cultures, especially about the lucid fatalism of Giovanni Verga’s fiction and the operas based on Verga’s stories. Also in 1948 he resumed his earlier practice of collaboration with other writers and artists by inviting Chester Kallman to join him in writing the libretto for Igor Stravinsky’s opera *The Rake’s Progress*.

In the summer of 1948 he was invited by the University of Virginia to deliver the 1949 Page-Barbour Lectures, an endowed annual series that required the lecturer to publish his lectures as a book. (T. S. Eliot’s Page-Barbour lectures for 1933 were published as *After Strange Gods*.)* Auden chose for his subject the romantic and nineteenth-century image of the sea, and the contrary image of isolation, the desert, illustrated by examples from Wordsworth to Rimbaud. He titled the series (and the resulting book) *The Enchafèd Flood: The Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, after a fragment from *Othello*: “I never did like molestation view / On the enchafèd flood.” The underlying theme of his lectures was the myth of the heroic artist as a solitary voyager in the realm of consciousness, a potentially redemptive figure who finds new territories of experience that he reveals to an audience too timidly bourgeois to make such explorations for themselves. Auden had repeatedly been tempted by this myth in earlier years; his lectures served as a final exorcism of it.

The Enchafèd Flood is a backward-looking book, both in its implicit renunciations and in its explicit themes. Auden’s survey of literary images of the

* The first lecture series that Auden gave in America seems to have been the Turnbull Lectures in poetry at Johns Hopkins in January 1940. When Harvard invited him to lecture in December 1948, he may or may not have been told that the faculty intended to decide afterward whether to offer him the Charles Eliot Norton Chair in Poetry for 1950–51, a series of six lectures intended for publication as a book. He gave his talk on *Don Quixote*, “The Ironic Hero”, perhaps the most probing and sympathetic reading of the book ever written in English (a published version appears in *Prose II*), but he began by joking that, like everyone else in the room, he had never finished reading it. The contents of the lecture proved the joke to be untrue, but Harry Levin and others took offense, and Thornton Wilder was chosen instead. Auden was eventually offered the Norton chair in the 1960s but declined; he told friends that he had nothing to say.

sea and the desert arranges in systematic form the imagery of "The Sea and the Mirror", the long poem he wrote in 1942–44. All the sentences in the book are new, but the content restates much that Auden had written in essays and reviews earlier in the 1940s, notably his Kierkegaardian account of aesthetic, ethical, and religious authority and his readings of Don Quixote as a religious hero and of Melville's Ishmael as an explorer of possibility. The last pages of the book turn away from all that: "We live in a new age," he wrote, and his phrase refers both to public culture and to his private interests. This new age is one in which

the necessity of dogma is once more recognised, not as the contradiction of reason and feeling but as their ground and foundation, in which the heroic image is not the nomad wanderer through the desert or over the ocean, but the less exciting figure of the builder, who renews the ruined walls of the city. . . . We are less likely to be tempted by solitude into Promethean pride: we are far more likely to become cowards in the face of the tyrant who would compel us to lie in the service of the False City. It is not madness we need to flee but prostitution.

These new temptations became a recurring theme. Later in 1949 he contrasted the situation of nineteenth-century poets and that of his contemporaries: "The former were either admired or left alone; the latter are suspect, and the campaign to control them by bribes or threats is likely to intensify." He now began to write systematically about the ways in which poetry allowed itself to be tempted by these bribes and threats and the ways in which it might learn to resist them.

At the center of his thinking was his idea of history, a word he began using in 1949 in a special idiosyncratic sense. History, as he described it, was the realm of unique, voluntary, irreversible events that occur in linear time. Nature, in contrast, was the realm of recurring, involuntary, reversible events that occur in cyclical time. Human experience occurs in both these realms. Sexual desire is historical to the degree that it focuses on a unique person to the exclusion of all others, and natural to the degree that the instincts that drive it could equally be satisfied by almost anyone else.

The moral point of the distinction between nature and history was that public life, especially in a world increasingly dominated by the machine, tends to treat human beings in statistical and generalizing ways, as if they were predictable elements of the realm of nature. The impersonal power of government or the machine operates in the realm of nature, not history, and the reason that modern governments distrust the arts is that the arts are products of personal, historical choices. A work of art, no matter how much it owes to an anonymous cultural climate or literary tradition, bears witness to the historical realm of individual choices.

In 1951, when Auden was helping to prepare *The Rake's Progress* for its pre-

mière, he applied these ideas in a series of essays on music. Music was the purest expression of “irreversible historicity” and of all that historicity implies about freedom and self-determination. “Every high C accurately struck utterly demolishes the theory that we are the irresponsible puppets of fate or chance.” Auden’s interest in music had always been inseparable from his curiosity about historical changes in theme and style. He and Kallman had adopted an eighteenth-century style for the libretto of *The Rake’s Progress*; in 1952 they wrote another libretto in an even more archaic Tudor style, *Delia, or A Masque of Night* (which Stravinsky declined to set, having been introduced to the twelve-tone scale whose enthusiasts had declared it the style of the future). In 1953 Auden began collaborating with an early-music group, the New York Pro Musica, founded by Noah Greenberg, and at some of their concerts read the Tudor verses that the group then sang. These concerts issued in an anthology of words and music, *An Elizabethan Song Book*, with an introduction by Auden and Kallman and Greenberg’s musical transcriptions.

For Auden, in many essays and reviews from the early 1950s, the great prophet of individual history was Sigmund Freud. Freud’s greatness, Auden wrote, did not depend on the validity or cohesiveness of his theories—whose revolutionary significance Freud himself often failed to understand. “In fact, if every one of his theories should turn out to be false, Freud would still tower up as the genius who perceived that psychological events are not natural events but historical and that, therefore, psychology as distinct from neurology, must be based on the pre-suppositions and methodology, not of the biologist but of the historian.”

Another name for individual historicity was the human face, the visible sign of uniqueness that was never exactly the same from one moment to the next, but was always a sign for the same individual person. In 1950 Auden wrote a poem, “Numbers and Faces”, about the madness of those who prefer the statistical, anonymous world of numbers to the personal world of faces. The title and much of the content derived from a book written in 1919 by the Austrian thinker Rudolf Kassner, *Zahl und Gesicht*, which became central to Auden’s thinking around 1950, although he seems to have encountered the book a few years earlier. (As a phrase, Kassner’s title means quantity and quality; as separate words, *die Zahl* means number and *das Gesicht* means face or physiognomy.) As Kassner’s “face” corresponded to Auden’s “history”, so Kassner’s “number” corresponded to Auden’s “nature”.

Kassner used the term “Physiognomik” for his whole intellectual and moral enterprise, in which he contrasted, on one hand, unique individuality, finite human flesh, truth as something to be witnessed or exemplified, and, on the other, collective identity, indifferent fate, and truth as something impersonal that can be taught like a method. For Kassner this was the contrast between the Christian and classical worldviews, and Auden’s poem “The Shield of

Achilles” in 1952 portrayed a modern world of statistical impersonality shaped by the same worldview that shaped the fated cruelties of the *Iliad*.

Faces and persons are characterized by their uniqueness as themselves; they are not sets of more or less widely distributed qualities such as beauty, strength, intelligence, or wit. Only a person has a physiognomy; a set of qualities has none. The classical gods have qualities such as shrewdness or strength; the Christian God has a face. The distinction between persons and qualities is a theme that pervades Auden’s poems in the early 1950s, and he spelled out the distinction in a review of George Santayana, who, he suggested, sometimes lost sight of the difference:

The natural human, or at least masculine, tendency, both in love and friendship, is to be attracted by qualities rather than persons. We like people not for what they are in themselves but because they are beautiful or rich or amusing, so if they lose their looks or their money or their wit, we lose our interest. . . .

Plato, if I understand him rightly, took our romantic interest in qualities as his starting point and sought to show, by analysis, that on the temporal level it was self-defeating; if qualities, not persons, are what we want, then the proper place to look for them is in Heaven, among the Universals.

This is perhaps a generous reading of Socrates’ report in the *Symposium* of what Diotima had told him about love; Auden privately referred to Plato as “a man of genius who’s always wrong”—a view that emerged more visibly in Auden’s later work.

To the degree that the modern artist resists the faceless impersonality of the machine, he is right to do so, but if his resistance is merely nostalgic, he may embrace the error that he hopes to escape. Auden borrowed from Henry Adams’s *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* the distinction between the Dynamo and the Virgin, between the natural world of involuntary recurrent events and the historical world of voluntary unique events; but, Auden wrote, for Adams himself, and for many who shared Adams’s nostalgia, the Virgin was not the source and protector of individual lives but another name for the anonymous and impersonal nature-goddess. As Auden wrote in his poem “Nocturne” around 1951, this goddess was not the unique historical Mary but the cyclical lunar Venus, “Whose majesty is but the mask / That hides a faceless dynamo.” And in a paragraph published in 1962 but probably first written in the early 1950s:

Henry Adams thought that Venus and the Virgin of Chartres were the same persons. Actually, Venus is the Dynamo in disguise, a symbol for an impersonal natural force, and Adams’ nostalgic preference for Chartres

to Chicago was nothing but aestheticism; he thought the disguise was prettier than the reality, but it was the Dynamo he worshiped, not the Virgin.

Starting from the idea of historical uniqueness, Auden developed an elaborate vocabulary for different kinds of social order and for the analogous kinds of formal order that give shape to poems. Unique persons create different kinds of social order from those generated by impersonal forces. Historical individuals, Auden wrote, join into communities united by their shared voluntary love of something; a community is historical because it has no bureaucratic impersonal structure. Communities tend to create societies that can carry out their purposes; societies are natural, not historical, because they have a bureaucratic structure in which individual members have roles distinct from their unique personalities. A group of music-lovers is a community but its love accomplishes nothing; a string quartet is a society that puts into effect the community's love.

A crowd, unlike a society or community, is a mere plurality of things that happen to be together. "The subject matter of poetry", Auden wrote in 1949, "is a crowd of past historic occasions of feeling", some portion of which the poet hopes to convert into a community; but the poem in which that community is embodied is a society, something that the poet must assume will remain unchanged and eternal once it is written. Crowds of feelings are not especially dangerous; but in the real world the extreme version of the crowd was the Public, that faceless purposeless mass that anyone can join when one is no one in particular.

The Public has always existed, but one effect of the mass media is to make it easier than ever to be faceless and impersonal. The culture of celebrity is one result of the growth of the Public: "the public instinctively worships not great men of action or thought but actors, individuals who by profession are not themselves." The moral consequences are all too clear: "The public, therefore, can be persuaded to do or believe anything by those who know how to manage it. It will subscribe thousands of dollars to a cancer research fund or massacre Jews with equal readiness, not because it wants to do either, but because it has no alternative game to suggest."

Auden had included sweeping historical summaries in his poems and prose from the start of his career, and since 1946 he had borrowed the Swiss-American historian Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's outline of the past thousand years as a series of revolutions against local and sectarian authority. In 1949 he wrote the introductions to a five-volume anthology, *Poets of the English Language*, which he was editing for the Viking Portable Library in collaboration with an American professor, Norman Holmes Pearson. The introductions took the form of a history of English poetry that was also a compressed his-

tory of the revolutionary changes in literary, psychological, and political presuppositions over five centuries. Auden's four-part poem "Memorial for the City", written around the same time, retold much of this history in allusive verse. Also around this time, Auden began writing the sequence "Horae Canonicae", in which the events of a single Good Friday echo the historical events from birth to death, from the rise to the fall of a civilization, and from the Creation to the Apocalypse.

In 1951 Auden published *Nones*, one of the mostly quinquennial volumes of verse in which he collected his recent shorter poems. The book took its title from the central poem in "Horae Canonicae" (he had at this point finished only two of the seven poems in the sequence). Auden tended to organize his collections of shorter poems and volumes of longer poems with numerological precision, and the exact center of *Nones* was the historical survey in "Memorial for the City".

Historical intelligence, in Auden's criticism and reviews, was analogous to moral intelligence. His review of Isaiah Berlin's *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, a book built on the distinction between those whose historical understanding is based on a unified vision and those who perceive multiple purposes and ends, proposed a deeper, more morally unsettling distinction between two kinds of contemporary intellect. Borrowing from *Alice in Wonderland*—Auden wrote repeatedly about the moral seriousness of Lewis Carroll's fantasies—he distinguished between tough-minded Alices, who have nerves and courage but are tempted to imagine themselves the Queen of Heaven, and the weak-minded Mabels, increasingly common in intellectual life, who adopt "a grotesquely tough, grotesquely 'realist' attitude" as a mask over their weakness and terror.

Auden's exasperation at Albert Camus's well-meant confusions in *The Stranger* (in a review titled "Fog in the Mediterranean") was prompted largely by Camus' idea of history in which the only significant events occurred in France and revolutionary changes elsewhere were ignored. His pleasure in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* arose largely from its historical imagination. "If a feigned history is to seem real," Auden said in a broadcast about Tolkien's trilogy, "it must be shown as the joint product of individual character and circumstances, neither, that is, as the operation of a few great men nor as the inevitable result of the play of impersonal forces. The present must have an intelligible relation to the past, neither inevitable nor arbitrary, and the future must appear open; that is, characters in this history may make guesses about what will happen which will turn out to be correct, but, in general, the outcome of their actions will be different from what they either hope or fear." Auden especially praised Tolkien's invention of the many plausible and varied languages and verse-forms that were essential to his invented history. Tolkien, in effect, had written an imaginary version of Auden's

historical accounts of English metre in his *Poets of the English Language* and his lengthy, detailed, and politely devastating review of the historical account in *Rhythm and Tempo*, by the musicologist Curt Sachs.

Some of the most vexing literary questions that Auden was obliged to confront during the 1940s and 1950s were raised by the case of Ezra Pound. In 1946, after Pound was charged with high treason for his broadcasts from Italy during the Second World War, Auden's American publisher, Bennett Cerf at Random House, announced that Pound's work would be dropped from an anthology of American poetry. Auden severed relations with Random House until Cerf reversed this policy: "Begin by banning his poems not because you object to them but because you object to him, and you will end, as the Nazis did, by slaughtering his wife and children." Auden's view had nothing to do with his opinion of Pound's poems; "I do not care for them myself particularly," he told Cerf. He again acted against his literary opinions in 1948 when he defended the award of the first Bollingen Prize to Pound's *Cantos* by a committee of which he himself had been a member. (He seems to have preferred William Carlos Williams for the prize, but finally voted with the majority for Pound.) In the next few years Auden found occasions to praise Pound, not for his poems, but for the knowledge of literary history through which he introduced English poetry to styles and techniques that had not been available to it before: "it might be said of his translation of *The Seafarer* that its effect was to make the spondee respectable in English verse".

Auden focused on revolutionary changes whenever he wrote about large-scale history, but he refused the temptation to think of himself and his art as revolutionary, or to think of his own era as a unique moment of crisis when the moral and aesthetic concerns of calmer eras must be suspended or abandoned. "Revolutionary changes in sensibility or style are rare", he wrote at the start of *The Enchafèd Flood*; he cited only the twelfth-century conception of "amor", the sixteenth-century abandonment of allegory as a common literary genre, and the eighteenth-century rise of Romanticism. Elsewhere, he emphasized that the current artistic climate was invented by an earlier generation of revolutionaries, not by himself and his contemporaries, about whom he made an elaborate show of modesty. He listed the birth years of great modernists from W. B. Yeats (1865) to T. S. Eliot (1888), the youngest of them almost twenty years older than himself, and observed:

These are the figures whom we still think of as the creators and masters of the "modern style": none of them seems old-fashioned. . . . It is clear, then, that so far as the arts are concerned we are not . . . living at the beginning of a new era but in the middle of one. Poets of my generation and of the next, therefore, are in the position, whether we like it or not, of being colonisers rather than explorers. It would be as wrong-headed for us to attempt to make a radical break with the style of our immedi-

unique and historical, so that any individual who discusses the Faith is compelled to begin with autobiography." The essay weaves together a personal interpretation of Christian doctrines and a history of Auden's changing attitudes toward them. After losing his childhood faith based on magical rituals, he went through a period of indifference, until, in his thirties, he discovered an adult faith that combined Protestant doctrines of man as "a spirit, a conscious person endowed with free will," who has "a unique 'existential' relation to God" and Catholic doctrines that "stress the physical reality of the flesh into which the Word was made." The closing paragraph sidesteps the problem of choosing between these two sets of doctrines: "Into the question of why I should have returned to Canterbury instead of proceeding to Rome, I have no wish to go in print. The scandal of Christian disunity is too serious." The unwritten answer to this question seems to have had something to do with his understanding of Anglicanism as a unique combination of Catholicism and Protestantism, his memory of the Anglo-Catholicism of his childhood, and his continuing sense that the most dangerous temptations of his age were the temptations to accept authority.

Around the same time, Auden wrote a seriously comic counterpart to this essay in the form of a questionnaire—to which he supplied his own answers—on the nature of one's private image of Eden; he published it in the magazine of the prep school he had attended in his teens. The title of the questionnaire was a fragment from the *Purgatorio*: "*Qui è l'uom' felice*" ("here man is happy"); its double subtitle was "Everyman in His Eden: A Psychological Parlour-Game for a Wet Sunday Afternoon". The questionnaire asked, "In your Eden what is its . . .", followed by a list of twenty-six items, including landscape, climate, methods of lighting and heating, forms of public entertainment, and much else. Auden's answers resembled the account he gave of his private Eden in "Vespers"; to his final question, "Any feature, important to you, not covered by your answers to the preceding questions", his answer was "*Censored.*"

In August 1955, not long after writing these two pieces, he received a letter from Enid Starkie, whose biography of Rimbaud he had reviewed in 1939 but whom he seems never to have met, asking whether he would agree to be nominated for the chair of Professor of Poetry at Oxford, the only professorship chosen by an election in which all Oxford M.A.'s were eligible to vote. The winner would be obliged to give three lectures during each of the five years of his term. Auden at first refused. His American citizenship, he said, would prevent his election either on statutory or political grounds; and he could not afford to give up his winters writing for money in New York in order to be in Oxford during all three academic terms. Starkie persisted, and in November Auden finally agreed to be nominated for the election scheduled for February 1956, which he won by a small margin. His mixed feelings about

