

# A Way of Happening

## Auden's American Presence

In May of 1946, a young American poetry critic offered this enthusiastic review of *For the Time Being*, Auden's second published volume since moving to the United States seven years before:

Auden's poetry has always aroused much interest, the more so because Auden's personality and technique and opinions have been so flexible. He has been consistently evolving toward disciplined, responsible utterance, and away from slipshod emotional crisis, overconscious penitence, tender despondency and nostalgia. *Another Time* and *New Year Letter* assume power as statements of transition to mastery of personal sorrow and insight into general terror. The tentative accomplishment of this maturity, in *For the Time Being*, set it apart as one of the few great works of poetry of our time, rivalled only by Eliot's last book of poetry and his plays. A definitive review of *For the Time Being* is impossible; it is the kind of book that reviews the reviewer: it is too intelligent in thought and perfected in technique to allow immediate formal judgment. A full appreciation,

exegesis and criticism must be left to the literary studies which will come.

This admiring assessment is illuminatingly representative of its literary moment, both encapsulating Auden's unquestioned importance in the American postwar poetic landscape, and framing a number of the major critical narratives that had assembled around the famous émigré poet in the years following his arrival in New York in 1939. The case for Auden's poetic "flexibility" and his "transition" from the "emotional crisis" of his 1930s lyrics to the "disciplined, responsible utterance" of his new American mode had been fiercely and influentially argued throughout the decade—often with a sharp edge of disappointment and disapproval—by Auden's most committed critic, Randall Jarrell, whose 1941 essay, "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry," began with a waggish misquoted epigraph from Heraclitus: "We never step twice into the same Auden."<sup>1</sup> The reviewer's assertion of Auden's place as peer and successor to Eliot was similarly by then a critical commonplace, as expressed five years before by Malcolm Cowley, summarizing the literary consensus on the transatlantic trade of the American Eliot for the British Auden: "It's as if we had sent T. S. Eliot to England before the war on a lend-lease arrangement. Now, with Auden, we are being repaid in kind."<sup>2</sup> Louise Bogan had affirmed this ascendancy in the pages of *The New Yorker* in 1945 with the tone of a critic observing the undisputedly obvious: "Auden, it has sometime been apparent, has succeeded Eliot as the strongest influence in American and British poetry."<sup>3</sup> And Karl Shapiro, in his *Essay on Rime* in the same year, noted the same self-evident phenomenon: "The man whose impress on our rhetoric / Has for a decade dominated verse / In London, Sydney and New York is Auden."<sup>4</sup>

Auden's post-immigration "mastery of personal sorrow and insight into general terror," as the 1946 reviewer puts it, further recalls and confirms Delmore Schwartz's hope for Auden's poetic future, anxiously voiced in 1939 just as the world was plunging into war and Auden was embarking on his new American life, that "[I]t may be that with an immense gift for language one can survive social catastrophe, international terror, and the solicitations of the Ego,"<sup>5</sup> while also articulating the mood of the immediate postwar moment in which the terrible "insight into general terror" brought by the war was answered by the fer-

vent wish that its conclusion suggested some larger historical “mastery” over future such horrors. Additionally, the reviewer’s confidence that a “full appreciation” of Auden’s work would depend upon the academic “exegesis” of future “literary studies” tellingly reflects Auden’s prominent place—as critic, contest judge, assigned text, and itinerant faculty member on campuses across the country—in the burgeoning mid-century institutionalization of poetry in the academy, in which a new generation of American students was being introduced to the thorny abstrusities of modern poetry through the rationalizing methodologies and “formal judgment” of the New Critical classroom.

Titled “. . . ‘This Is the Abomination,’” taking its quotation from the introduction to the Christmas oratorio “For the Time Being” (one of the two long poems in the book of that name, “The Sea and the Mirror” being the other) in which the Narrator asserts his age’s collective dread of the existential “Void,” the review’s summation of Auden’s cultural relevance and influence could have appeared in any number of mainstream literary journals of the time, for whom Auden’s importance to the American scene went largely unquestioned. Read through the prism of subsequent literary history, however, the identity of its author acquires a resonant irony. This tribute to Auden wasn’t penned by a poet or critic of the then-presiding literary generation of Jarrell, Bogan, Shapiro, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, or Elizabeth Bishop, each of whom acknowledged in their careers the impact of Auden’s 1930s lyrics in particular on their own poetic sensibilities, but who had come to artistic maturity prior to his arrival in America.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it reflects the perspective of a younger generation, one whose poetic education had begun amid the war and its aftermath, during a crucial moment in American poetic history when Auden was both an essential book on the shelf and a very active and powerful living presence in the American literary establishment. Its author? A nineteen-year-old Columbia undergraduate named Allen Ginsberg.<sup>7</sup>

Reading the young Ginsberg in praise of the American Auden’s “disciplined, responsible utterance” and rejection of “slipshod emotional crisis” provokes a startling—and amusing—clash of literary stereotypes: Ginsberg, the shaggy antiestablishment rebel whose poems would famously bring defiantly undisciplined utterance and emotional crisis firmly into the literary and pop-culture mainstream, exalting Auden, the

high culture, high church, establishment formalist who, in the same year as Ginsberg's review, was telling an audience of Harvard undergraduates to "Read *The New Yorker*, trust in God; / And take short views" [*CP*, 339]. But such disruptions in the settled narratives of literary history, in which presumptively oppositional poles of American poetic culture are seen in surprising alliance, far from being quirks of individual poets like Ginsberg's biography and artistic development, are in fact characteristic—if not definitional—of Auden's role in postwar American poetry. In many ways, Auden served an entire generation of poets like Ginsberg, who grew into their own very distinct voices during his American career, as a "whole climate of opinion," as Auden himself described Freud in one of his earliest American poems. Indeed, it's possible to argue that no writer had as pivotal and wide-ranging an influence on postwar American poetics as Auden. As judge for the Yale Younger Poets contest, Auden shaped national tastes and crowned many of that generation's most important writers. As an openly gay artist of stature, he provided a model for living and writing emulated by many others, including Ginsberg. By critiquing Modernist ideas of the poet's role in society, he forged new ideas about national and individual artistic identity, without which the contemporary American poetic scene, in all its variegated modes and traditions, is almost unimaginable. And his pedagogical and personal connections with countless young poets he encountered in New York, on his summer island home of Ischia, on the lecture circuit, or through his various visiting academic positions at universities across the country, made him a towering, vibrant force throughout American poetic culture from the 1940s through the 1960s. It also illustrates how many of the critical narratives of postwar American poetry—which customarily frame the period in terms of competing camps of formalism versus experiment, establishment versus avant-garde, feminist or gay versus masculinist, West Coast versus East—are complicated by Auden's appearance and influence across all these regional, cultural, stylistic, and gender divides.

When Auden arrived in the United States in 1939, he left behind his public career as activist poet and lyricist of the English Left. The first poem he wrote in America was "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," in which he sounded his famous retraction of an *engagé* and ideological art: "Poetry makes nothing happen." I want to argue that Auden's extensive and largely unexplored impact on the postwar generation of American po-

ets helped not only to define the terms by which these younger poets framed their own work and careers, but also offered a new and influential model for understanding what it meant to write poetry in America after World War II and after Modernism. In particular, Auden's redefinition of his own poetic identity following his emigration from England helped to shape American poetry in terms of what Auden called "the burden of choice": How to select an inheritance from the myriad possibilities opened up in the wake of Modernism's shattering of notions of a unified native tradition. By framing his post-1939 poetry—in the affirmative conclusion of the Yeats elegy—as "a way of happening," Auden inaugurated a poetic vision of post-Modernist America as an open, inclusive text defined not in terms of shared ideals of national, ideological, or historical inheritance, but by the freedom, and necessity, to choose among the kaleidoscopic range of formal, cultural, or transnational poetic identities made available by the collapse of those earlier ideals. Under Auden's influence, both as a maker of poems and as a shaper of careers, the terrain of American poetry expanded to accommodate poetic experiences and voices as diverse as John Ashbery's continental language experiments, James Merrill's Dantean adventures at the Ouija board, and Adrienne Rich's politically engaged insistence on the power of poetry to effect social change, to name just three of Auden's most important and stylistically distinct inheritors, each of whom will be discussed at greater length in later chapters. And as we will see with these three poets, along with Ginsberg and a broad range of other younger American writers who would go on to demarcate the democratic and demotic vistas of American poetry in the second half of the twentieth century, it was with Auden's crucial help that their own individual negotiations with the burden of personal and artistic choice in the wake of Modernism and war allowed them to find their own poetic "ways of happening."<sup>8</sup>



One key to how Auden's influence was felt by younger poets can be found in Ginsberg's description of *For the Time Being* as "the kind of book that reviews the reviewer." Among the most notable aspects of Auden's importance for his American successors was the way in which so many of them saw their own multitudinous, very different American selves reflected back at them in the words of this transplanted Englishman. In

terms similar to those of Auden's Yeats elegy, in which the dead poet's "words are modified in the guts" of his surviving readers and where the poet's identity is surrendered to those who find part of their own identities in his work, countless poets of every cultural and artistic stripe saw in Auden's poems and persona what they needed to see in order to articulate who they themselves would become. To a remarkable extent, Auden "became his admirers" in the sense that so many of those he influenced found him useful in their own efforts to define themselves, often with widely diverging poetic results. Every younger poet's Auden was different. For some he was, as Ginsberg's fellow poet, friend, sometime antagonist, and Columbia classmate John Hollander would describe him, "[A] clever young uncle . . . holding our hands in the dusk,"<sup>9</sup> a friendly teacher and elder master of the craft who could help point them on their own way. For others, he was a more distant enemy, someone whom they could distinctly and defiantly define themselves against. As the young Robert Creeley would write in 1950 to his ally in establishment-razing, Charles Olson, decrying the embrace of Auden by mainstream voices like Jarrell and Bogan: "[T]he intelligence that had touted Auden as being a technical wonder, etc. lacking all grip on the worn and useless character of his essence: thought. An attitude that puts weight, *first*: on form [ . . . ] will never get to content. Never in God's world. Anyhow, form has become so useless a term that I blush to use it."<sup>10</sup> For Hollander, Auden's mastery of form and his notion of poetry's moral function made him an important mentor. For Creeley, it was precisely that emphasis on empty form, as he perceived it, as well as Auden's tweedy Englishness, that made him suspect and an embodiment of everything his poetry would oppose. But for each, Auden was *useful*, an important point of reference in their own poetic self-fashioning.

For Ginsberg himself over the course of his career, Auden performed both roles, uncle and enemy, sometimes simultaneously. In that early review, even as he praises Auden's formal detachment, he offers Auden as a kind of vatic voice for the predicament of the times, who can present to those who will listen "the basic psychological facts of the age." These facts include for Ginsberg a state of "formal cultural decadence" that he sees Auden identifying and analyzing and himself enlisting in battle against:

The problems of modern men have little to do with the rather tiring abstractions of facts of historians, the externalized theories of economists, and the bestial rages of moralists, pedants and returning veterans. All theirs are useless uncontrolled reactions, by-products of ruin; at best they have a superficial descriptive value. Perhaps coherent explanation of all this circumstance would be facilitated through some sort of psychoanalytic-anthropology – a discipline which Auden has followed, to judge from his attitude, his vocabulary, and his notes to *New Year Letter*.

In 1931, the twenty-two-year-old Auden had asked, in *The Orators*, “What do you think about England, this country of ours where nobody is well?” [*EA*, 62]. Fifteen years later, the young Ginsberg is asking the same question of his country, in which he detects a similar national pathology, and employs the older Auden to make the diagnosis. Observing Auden’s characteristic mode of using the individual-focused insights of psychoanalysis to make broader generalizations of cultural malaise, Ginsberg offers his own effort at a clinical “coherent explanation” for the “ruin” of his age, taking particular note of Auden’s first American long poem, “New Year Letter,” whose mode of epic, epistolary self-analysis and questing after an ideal of community would find an American heir in Ginsberg’s own “Howl” a decade later.

The review was written during an eventful time in Ginsberg’s life: He had been suspended from Columbia the previous spring for scrawling obscene slogans on his dorm-room window, though he maintained his editorial position at *The Columbia Review* even while he was no longer officially a student. During that year he had worked as a welder at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, spent a few months as a sailor in the Merchant Marine, experimented with writing under the influence of Benzedrine, and lived and wrote in a chaotic upper Manhattan apartment inhabited off and on by Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and assorted friends and eccentric associates who would form the core of the nascent Beat scene. In language that prefigures the tumbling, ecstatic, and angry rhetoric of “Howl,” and in images that foretell the countercultural rebellion he would go on to publicly personify, Ginsberg sees in “The Sea and the

Mirror” and the oratorio that gives Auden’s book its title, a clear-eyed indictment of the same forces of establishment that had kicked him out of Columbia:

Alas, the question of the hour is not the conflict between classes, nor that of genius versus mediocrity. All have been so completely intimidated into abdication of responsibility and in ways so obvious and in activities so self-destructive that there is no longer any real chance to face strict problems, to take decisive and valid action; in the general mass and imprecision there is no longer an overt question to precipitate an act, no direct course for a moderate sensible person to take as a choice. And as a result all our healthiest citizens are turning into hipsters, hopheads, and poets.

In a move that reflects the tension Ginsberg felt between his admiration of, and immersion in, the poetic tradition he’d learned from his poet father, Louis Ginsberg, and his Columbia teachers like Lionel Trilling and Mark Van Doren, and his desire to break from those same restrictive cultural and social conventions, his call for a countertradition of “hipsters, hopheads, and poets” is framed by an uncited quotation—“in the general mess and imprecision of feeling”—from that icon of the traditionalists, T. S. Eliot.<sup>11</sup> And his assertion that the “question of the hour” is the problem of “choice” further recalls one of Auden’s touchstone poetic themes, articulated in celebrated political poems of the 1930s like “Spain”: “What’s your proposal? To build the just city? I will. / I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic / Death? Very well, I accept, for / I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain” [*SP*, 53]. Ironically, Ginsberg seems to envy the kind of excruciating moral and ideological dilemma faced by Auden’s generation during the 1930s—“We are left alone with our day, and time is short and / History to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon” [*SP*, 55]—in contrast to the state of existential emptiness he sees all around him, where there is not even the possibility of choosing between difficult, or even outrageous, moral options, ideologies, or actions:

We have no Orphic creativeness, juvenescent savagery, primitive abandon, not even decadent Satanism to amuse us; we are



faced with no problem to be solved, no god that we can create or destroy, no ecstasy of our own, no destruction of our own. Worse than tender sorrow, possible sadism, of spiritual battle, is this quivering indecision. We are incapable not only of vision but also of evil, of any authentic emotion. And the complete statement of the ultimate psychological impasse characteristic of our age is given by Auden in *For the Time Being*.

Less than ten months after the end of the war, it seems striking that Ginsberg should be lamenting the impossibility of any “destruction of our own,” suggesting a certain generational anxiety on the part of those who were too young to have directly participated in the grand narrative of the times, the heroic and bloody defeat of international fascism. But Ginsberg’s concern with “quivering indecision” also reflects a specific and new postwar predicament: the precarious and paralyzing stasis of a world entering into the Cold War, where the anxiety of nuclear annihilation keeps agents of cultural change in check and, as Ginsberg sees it, the horrors of Hiroshima are the natural extension of a convention-bound and comfortable citizenry more interested in “remedies for constipation, his refrigerators and toilets” than in ideas of moral responsibility. As he puts it, “The awful consummation of this holocaust of hysterical irresponsibility is the Atom Bomb.” Inheriting a world defined by his own generational belatedness and minoriness, by the ever-expanding culture of soul-deadening consumerism, and by what he calls the “nightmare of repressed anxiety which has culminated in emotional stupidity and spiritual incompetence,” Ginsberg issues—in a college review of a book of Auden poems—his first literary call for “spiritual battle” against this “abomination.” And he sees Auden as a field marshal in the culture war he’s itching to fight. This is the Ginsberg who is introduced in Kerouac’s first novel, *The Town and the City* (1950), as the poet “Leon Levinsky,” whose radicalism and sophistication are signaled to his audience by his bohemian outfit and his ostentatious display of talismanic texts: “He was wearing a strapped raincoat, a Paisley scarf, and dark-rimmed glasses with the air of an intellectual. He carried two slim volumes under his arm, the works of Rimbaud and W. H. Auden.”<sup>12</sup>

Auden was of course not Ginsberg’s only early poetic guide. Ginsberg’s career, from its earliest beginnings, was defined by his search for

elder mentors whose wisdom and influence he could absorb and from whose professional assistance he might benefit, from Kerouac and Burroughs, to his Columbia teacher Trilling, to Ezra Pound, who in 1951 responded from his room in St. Elizabeth's to a letter of inquiry from the twenty-five-year-old Ginsberg with a terse three-sentence rebuff: "Dear Ag / None of yu people have least concept of FATIGUE. / I hv sd it all in print . . . i.e. all answers to yrs. / Cantos no use to people writing shorts."<sup>13</sup> And in 1950 he would begin a correspondence and eventual friendship with William Carlos Williams, whose breath-based metrics and connection to Ginsberg's own hometown of Paterson, NJ would make him his next important influence.<sup>14</sup> But Ginsberg's early poems are shot through with Audenesque language, forms, imagery, and concerns, especially in his first effort at a long poem, never published during his lifetime and written at the same time as his Auden review, called "Death in Violence." Prefaced by an extended quotation from "The Sea and the Mirror" about the revelation to the artist of "the real Word," the poem begins with an address to his fellow poetic questers: "O heroes, hipsters, humanists, Prometheans! / arrange your lives as best you can before the voyage— / sell your mansions of nostalgia, throw away / the playsuits that you frolicked in among the ruins." In the margins of the manuscript of the unpublished poem, next to these lines that both explicitly echo Auden's "Atlantis" and prefigure the efforts of "Howl" at creating through hortatory assertion an ideal community of like-minded outcast artists, Ginsberg has later scribbled an accurate self-critique: "Auden style."<sup>15</sup> Auden would also be one of several dozen friends, allies, enemies, fellow poets, celebrities, and influential tastemakers—including Charlie Chaplin, Pound, Williams, Louis Zukofsky, Jarrell, and Columbia peers and teachers like Hollander, Richard Howard, Trilling, and Van Doren—to whom Ginsberg would send unsolicited promotional copies of *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956.<sup>16</sup> And late into his career, Ginsberg would return in interviews to Auden's double-edged dictum, "Poetry makes nothing happen," as a way of explaining his own "happening"-focused poetics.<sup>17</sup>

But it wasn't just a literary influence that Auden would exert on Ginsberg, and many other poets of his generation. As Ginsberg would recall on the occasion of Auden's death in 1973, the connection was frequently a personal one as well. Ginsberg briskly summarizes his first decade of personal acquaintance with Auden:

We first met at Earl Hall, Columbia, 1945, when he read to students. I accompanied him on the subway to Sheridan Square, wondering if he'd invite me to his Cornelia Street apartment and seduce me. He didn't. Years later in Ischia at a garden table, 1957, I said I thought there was a social revolution at hand, he poo-pooed it, I drunkenly yelled at him, indignant, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself discouraging young hope and energy!" I was outraged, intemperate, tipsy and self-righteous. Oddly, years later, he apologized to me for having been too off-handed with me. Actually I'd made pilgrimage to Ischia to see him and I'd intruded at his restaurant wine leisure dusk.<sup>18</sup>

The Stanford Ginsberg archives include a correspondence in the summer of 1950 between Ginsberg and Auden's secretary (and one-time girlfriend) Rhoda Jaffe, detailing Ginsberg's repeated efforts to get Auden to read his poems, and the two poets would eventually establish a friendly, if occasionally awkward, relationship throughout the rest of Auden's life.<sup>19</sup> Ginsberg succeeded in getting Auden's advice on the manuscript of *Empty Mirror*, and they would meet on many occasions over the years in Auden's messy New York apartment, in Oxford, at international poetry festivals, and—as Ginsberg's brief narrative suggests—an especially memorable encounter in 1957 at Auden's vacation home on Ischia. Flush with notoriety and visionary bravado following his *succès de scandale* with *Howl*, Ginsberg had made the trip to Ischia seeking an audience with his early mentor in the hopes of a poetic communion on more equal footing. He did not get it. Finding Auden and his friends drinking at a bar, Ginsberg descended on the party and began to harangue Auden on questions of social justice, censorship, and the importance of Walt Whitman. Auden, secure in his redoubt and perhaps annoyed at the younger poet's poor manners, rebuffed Ginsberg and, after an evening of fierce and not entirely sober argument, sent the furious pilgrim off into the night, muttering as he left that Auden and his friends were "a bunch of shits."<sup>20</sup>

In light of Auden's documented appreciation for Whitman, his recorded admiration for Ginsberg's own poetry,<sup>21</sup> and the cordial friendship that developed between the two poets not long after this meeting, it is likely that, as Ginsberg's biographer has suggested, this encounter

was more “an example of Auden’s having fun with an uninvited guest than a record of his real opinions.”<sup>22</sup> It is nevertheless illuminating on several counts: First, it shows that as late as 1957, long after Ginsberg’s move toward a radical poetic and political stance, he should still look to Auden for counsel and criticism, suggesting that even in disagreement, Auden exerted a considerable monitory force on younger poets. And second, it serves to illustrate how younger poets took from the older what they needed in order to help forge their own poetic identity. As Ginsberg wrote his father after his unsatisfying Ischia encounter, “All this strengthens the conviction I have had, that the republic of poetry needs a full-scale revolution and upsetting of values (and a return to a kind of imagination of life in Whitman’s *Democratic Vistas* that I’ve been reading in Venice).”<sup>23</sup> For Ginsberg, Auden provided him with a firm springboard from which to leap into what he saw as his own fugitive, anti-traditionalist art. Auden’s were the conservative values he would upset, his the republic that needed a revolution. As poetry’s Prospero, Auden enabled Ginsberg to play Caliban, learning to curse in his master’s language, and gave him the oppositional, yet ultimately civil, role his own poetic vocation required. In his nominal repudiation of Auden, Ginsberg would set the stage for a number of other younger poets whose rejection of Auden’s example would amount to a kind of recognition of his role in forming their own poetics. When Auden died, Ginsberg would spend the afternoon in tears, and wrote in his journal, “The aspen grove lost its yellow leaf roof, ‘tis the end of September, kind Auden’s gone away forever.”<sup>24</sup>

When Ginsberg moved to San Francisco in 1954, he went looking for a poetic community and one of the first young local poets he met was Michael McClure. From this encounter would spring the idea and organization for what would become the primal scene of the San Francisco Beats, the Six Gallery reading that featured the dramatic public debut of “Howl” in 1955. The occasion of the meeting of the two young, ambitious, iconoclastic poets was the opening of the San Francisco Poetry Center, founded by the godmother of the San Francisco poetry scene, Ruth Witt Diamant, and which soon became the institutional heart of both the Beats and influential local poets and allies like Robert Duncan and Kenneth Rexroth. And the poet whose reading marked the inauguration of the Center, and whose presence brought both Ginsberg and

McClure together, was Auden.<sup>25</sup> While never intimate, Auden's relation to the rest of the Beats, besides Ginsberg, was also more than an occasional circumstantial proximity. Back in New York, Ginsberg and Kerouac would run into Auden or his partner Chester Kallman at parties thrown by Bill Cannastra, a Harvard lawyer and bon vivant who was a friend of Auden's and whose manic behavior and lurid death is memorialized in "Howl."<sup>26</sup> Harold Norse, a New York poet who was an early participant in the artistic community that would evolve into the Beats and would go on to be the documentarian of the "Beat Hotel" in Paris, where he and Burroughs would influentially experiment with their "cut-up" method of composition, had been romantically involved with Kallman when both were students at Brooklyn College. He was on hand for the first fateful meeting between Auden and Kallman, and served as Auden's secretary and typist in the early 1940s. Another important point of contact between Auden and the Beats was the poet and critic Alan Ansen. A close friend of Cannastra, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Gregory Corso, and the erudite and cosmopolitan court jester of the Beats, Ansen is memorably fictionalized as the "It"-embodying emblem of the Beat ethos, "Rollo Greb," in Kerouac's *On the Road*, and as the surrealistic joker "A. J." in Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*. Like Norse, Ansen also served as Auden's secretary for a number of years in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and became one of Auden and Kallman's closest friends, eventually serving as Kallman's custodian and companion in Greece following Auden's death—"keeper of the keeper of the flame," as Ansen described himself—and arranging for Kallman's burial in the Jewish Cemetery in Athens in 1975. Auden's 1950 book of essays, *The Enchafed Flood*, is dedicated to Ansen, and in turn Ansen dedicated his first book of poems in 1959 to his dual mentors, Auden and Burroughs. Ansen wrote a number of poems about Auden and Kallman, including one for Auden's sixtieth-birthday festschrift and a lengthy elegy for Kallman, along with publishing in 1990—in his avowed role as Boswell to Auden's Johnson—a collection of Auden's private conversations and witticisms entitled *The Table Talk of W. H. Auden*.<sup>27</sup> Even Corso, among the most prototypically unschooled and rough-edged of the Beats, had an affectionate relation with the icon of formalism, recounting in a 1958 letter to LeRoi Jones a momentous visit he and Ginsberg had spent with Auden in Oxford: "Also saw Auden twice—he acted like my Shelley at

Oxford—leading us to Christ Church—pointing out the Oxford of his youth—very mellow angel, he.”<sup>28</sup> Late in his career, Corso would profess to an interviewer his continued enthusiasm for Auden, along with his notion of the intertwined significance of the poet’s work and his social persona: “The poet and the poetry are inseparable. You got to dig the poet. Otherwise the poetry sucks. If I dug the poet, then automatically the poetry worked for me. . . . Pound makes it, Auden made it for me. I mean, Auden is good. I dig Auden, you see. A lot don’t.” And recalling an early resonant encounter with Auden, he reflected on the elder poet’s capacity to encourage and inspire even the least formally academic of his poet-students: “Auden was reading *The Tempest* to me and it sounded beautiful. I was just a kid. Walking down the street, afterwards, feeling good, I was crossing the street when this fucking taxi driver says, ‘Get out of the way, you dopey fuck.’ Here I am alive with poetry, right? I go home, look in the mirror: am I a dopey fuck? No way!”<sup>29</sup>

Auden expressed a temperamental disdain for the Beats’ anti-establishment theatrics—gently scolding Diana Trilling, “I’m ashamed of you,” when she told him she’d been emotionally moved by a rambunctious reading given by Ginsberg and Corso at Columbia in 1959<sup>30</sup>—and his disapproval of their emphasis on shock, spontaneity, and solipsism over craft helped contribute to a significant cultural and literary schism among a number of Auden’s younger successors, particularly those who knew him as students in New York in the late 1940s and early 1950s. On the one side were Ginsberg and his countercultural allies in what he called “spontaneous bop prosody.” And on the other were fellow Columbia poets like Howard, a student friend of Ginsberg’s who pointedly reserved judgment on the lasting poetic value of Ginsberg’s work in his influential 1969 critical survey of postwar American poetry, *Alone with America*, and Hollander, who was awarded the Yale Younger Poets prize by Auden in 1958 and who notably and negatively reviewed *Howl and Other Poems* in the pages of *Partisan Review* in 1957. For Hollander and Howard and other poets like Louis Simpson (another Columbia student who, despite his poetic differences with the Beats, would end up featured in “Howl” as the man who throws his watch out the window in a rejection of temporality), Anthony Hecht, and Richard Wilbur, Auden offered a model for addressing public themes and private concerns in a form that asserted the implication of the anxious present in

the long literary conversation of the past, and in a style that suggested that the chaos of the times hadn't destroyed—indeed, had made more urgent—the need for what Auden in his Freud elegy called a “rational voice.” Throughout the postwar decades, this split between those who found in Auden a tutor in the moral and artistic value of form and participation in an ongoing poetic tradition, and those who rebelled against what they felt to be repressive and overly academic convention, would have continuing reverberations and provoke further sometimes bitter poetic skirmishes, including a high-profile clash in the pages of *The New York Times* between Howard and Ginsberg over the merits of Mona Van Duyn's 1971 National Book Award, followed by Howard's dismissal of Ginsberg's *Collected Poems* with a single sentence in the *Boston Review* in 1984. But the serious aesthetic differences that would blossom over the years into furious disputes among his inheritors didn't stop Auden from engaging with the rebellious art of the Beats. And it didn't stop them from seeing him, when they needed to, as an ally in their own efforts at establishing an alternative artistic tradition. Burroughs claimed to have been the first person to give Ginsberg a volume of Auden's poems,<sup>31</sup> and when the influential and Beat-friendly avant-garde magazine, *Neurotica*, was founded in 1947, it was Auden's poem “The Age of Anxiety” that provided the inspiration for its title and editorial ethos of angst and cultural unease.<sup>32</sup> In the 1959 film *Pull My Daisy*, which offers a grittily romantic window into the Beat scene, Kerouac narrates a vignette of Ginsberg and Corso drinking beer and reading their poems to one another in a downtown loft by invoking Auden, along with a number of other American contemporaries, to suggest the literary bona fides of the Beats: “All these poets. Struggling to be poets. Kenneth Fearing and Kenneth Rexroth and W. H. Auden and Louise Bogan, and all the poets. But burning in the purple moonlight if they wanna.”<sup>33</sup> And that same year, when Kerouac was trying to market the Beats to a wider public in the pages of *Holiday* magazine, he offered a cinematic catalogue of “the beat night life of New York,” complete with parties in artist's lofts, poetry readings in cafes, “Paul Bowles, natty in a Dacron suit, passing through from Morocco,” and “the ghost of Herman Melville himself followed by Bartleby the Wall Street Scrivener and Pierre the ambiguous hipster of 1848 out on a walk.” And right in the heart of this ecstatic account of avant garde Manhattan, occupying an ambiguous middle ground between the liv-



ing hipsters and their ghostly literary antecedents, is the legendary elder poet, almost a roving landmark of the scene: “W. H. Auden himself may be seen fumbling by in the rain.”<sup>34</sup> Toward the end of his life, walking those same New York streets with a biographer, Ginsberg would echo Kerouac’s vision of Auden as an enduring familiar spirit: Pointing out the spot where he had once met Auden, on the corner of Christopher Street in Greenwich Village, Ginsberg observed of the man whose voice had helped him find his own so many decades before, “He has an eternal presence.”<sup>35</sup>



The symbolic significance of the young Ginsberg’s iconic copies of Auden and Rimbaud may seem hard to parse from the perspective of the familiar narratives of postwar American poetry and Auden’s customary place within them. A more unlikely pairing of influential poets might seem hard to imagine. Rimbaud, the raging, despairing iconoclastic youth who embarked on his systematic derangement of the senses and repudiated poetry by the age of 21, is seen as the patron of a line of literary art defined by its aggressive experimentalism, non-linearity, and resistance to formal and societal convention: an originator of what Marjorie Perloff has termed a “poetics of indeterminacy,” which would include Williams, Pound, Stein, and later poets like Ashbery.<sup>36</sup> Yet in contrast to Jarrell and Bogan’s sense of Auden’s mid-century omnipresence, if he is acknowledged now to have an American influence at all, Auden is often seen as a conservative emblem of Anglicizing formalism, an “insular Englishman” for whom there was a “brief vogue . . . among Americans who came of age in the 1950s [but whose influence] waned rapidly,” in Helen Vendler’s words, as younger poets went looking for more adventurous poetic models.<sup>37</sup> One of the ambitions of this book is to argue that, far from enjoying a passing and insubstantial “vogue,” Auden’s influence was formative and widespread for a startlingly diverse range of poets whose work would go on to define what we talk about when we talk about contemporary American poetry. Part of that project involves suggesting that for many of these poets, as with Ginsberg, the distinctions critics are used to making about competing traditions in American poetry—with often an implied or explicit claim of the superiority of one over another—don’t always add up quite so neatly. And that



in many important and divergent cases, it is in particular Auden's role in their careers, lives, and poetry that helps to muddy those tidy critical narratives of experiment versus form, radicalism versus traditionalism, political versus quiescent, cosmopolitan ventriloquism versus authentic American song.<sup>38</sup>

In the service of this argument, it's worth pointing out that, for Auden's part, he didn't see himself and Rimbaud in such oppositional terms. Despite Auden's notorious and somewhat theatrical distaste for all things French, Rimbaud was in fact a precursor of iconic significance for Auden. From his earliest work, in "The Journal of an Airman" in *The Orators*, whose final pages constitute a melancholic rewriting of Rimbaud's "Adieu" from *A Season in Hell*, and whose choice of fates for the title character Auden summed up at the time as either "suicide or Rimbaud's declination,"<sup>39</sup> the fiery French renunciator had served as an emblem for Auden's ongoing self-debate about the project and purpose of his art, and the possibility that a poet's most eloquent response to his moment might be silence and exile, as the final lines of the epilogue to *The Orators* suggests: "As he left them there, as he left them there" [*EA*, 110]. In the mid-1930s, Auden cited with approval Rimbaud's dictum, "One must be absolutely modern," as he argued for an artistic and political answer to the question, "How shall the self-conscious man be saved?" [*EA*, 320–21]. And in his first long poem in America, 1940's "New Year Letter," Rimbaud is one of only three poets, alongside Dante and Blake, who preside over the poem's enumerated pantheon of poetic influences, where he is described as "the young Rimbaud guilt demands, / The adolescent with red hands, / Skilful, intolerant, and quick, / Who strangled an old rhetoric" [*CP*, 204]. In that poem, and a year earlier in one of the last poems he wrote before arriving in New York, a sonnet titled "Rimbaud," Auden finds in his rebellious French predecessor an inspirational model for the bold leap he was making as he left his British poetic identity behind and began his new career in America, where he "dreamed of a new self . . . / His truth acceptable to lying men" [*CP*, 182]. The old rhetoric that now needed strangling, in Auden's terms, was that of the 1930s, the "low, dishonest decade" in which demagogic speech, either of dictators or of poets like himself, had shown itself to be either horrifically destructive or, at best, politically futile. And the project of his new American self would be to chart a new course in which poetry's moral

and intellectual power would be felt not in its capacity to make something happen but in its ability to allow its readers, in the final lines from Rimbaud's "Adieu," "to possess truth in a single body and soul."<sup>40</sup>

Auden's alliance of himself with Rimbaud's revisionary project was not lost on other younger American poets, including the twenty-three-year-old Frank O'Hara, who in the same year as Kerouac's depiction of Ginsberg flaunting his own devotion to Auden and Rimbaud, would single out for special reverence precisely the same two poets in his poem, "Memorial Day, 1950." In a kind of impressionistic intellectual autobiography, and an ironic commentary on the legacy of the European avant-garde in mid-century America, O'Hara reflects on the impact of painters like Picasso, Klee, and Ernst on his—and by implication, his generation's—imaginative sensibilities, and then lists the poets whose influence was felt with a similar, singular power:

And those of us who thought poetry  
was crap were throttled by Auden or Rimbaud  
when, sent by some compulsive Juno, we tried  
to play with collages or sprechstimme in their bed.  
Poetry didn't tell me not to play with toys  
but alone I could never have figured out that dolls  
meant death.<sup>41</sup>

Echoing Auden's own imagery of Rimbaud as rhetoric-strangler, O'Hara credits both poets with jolting a generation into an awareness that poetry could be more than the "crap" they had been taught to expect, perhaps in comparison to the work of the experimental painters whose creative demolition of artistic convention, the poem suggests, had provided "shining erector sets" for those who followed them in their ambition to create a new art to reflect the new, war-ravaged realities. Auden and Rimbaud are dually figured as emblems of mythic and youthful strength, as the presumptuous would-be-poets who challenge them in their domain of speech-song end up—like the snakes sent by Juno to destroy the infant Hercules in his crib—getting throttled and dismissed as unthreatening playthings by the hero-poets. The daunting knowledge of poetry's seriousness, difficulty, and power, as wielded by intimidating but inspiring examples like Auden and Rimbaud, suggest for O'Hara, as he puts it a few lines later, "a lesson in utility."

O'Hara had first encountered Auden, on the page and in person, while a student at Harvard in the late 1940s, where Auden embodied one of the opposing poles of fashionable poetic taste on campus. Donald Hall, O'Hara's Harvard contemporary, friend, and fellow poet, describes the poetry scene centering around the college literary magazine: "On the *Advocate* we divided between those who looked back to Yeats and those who looked back to Auden. Ashbery, O'Hara, and [Kenneth] Koch were Auden men: [Robert] Bly and I were Yeats. Adrienne [Rich] was eclectic."<sup>42</sup> Auden had delivered the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard ("Under Which Lyre") in 1946, and O'Hara and Ashbery had met him at a university party after a reading the following year. "All I can remember talking about was asking him whether he liked living in England better than living in America," recalls Ashbery of the occasion. "He said he preferred America, though he preferred the English countryside because it was much tidier looking."<sup>43</sup> Ashbery would write his Senior Thesis on Auden in 1949, and he and Koch, along with O'Hara, would maintain cordial, if distant, social relations with him when they all moved to New York, principally through their friendship with James Schuyler, who, like a number of young New York poets, served a period of apprenticeship as Auden's typist and secretary.

Auden's influence upon O'Hara's poetry was one that O'Hara himself was happy to acknowledge over the course of his career, telling his friend and fellow poet Bill Berkson that Auden had showed him "the possibility of writing down one's metropolitan experiences in a manner that was neither sentimental nor drear."<sup>44</sup> And in April, 1952, O'Hara delivered a lecture on Auden's poetry at "The Club," an informal gathering of artists and writers in Greenwich Village. Characterizing the post-emigration Auden specifically as "an American poet," O'Hara echoes the claim of his poem from two years earlier for Auden's convention-throttling poetic vision: "Auden extended our ideas of what poetry could be; his poems saw clearly into obscure areas of modern life and they provided us with obscure and complex insights into areas which had hitherto been banal." And contrasting Auden's "vernacular" style with Eliot, whose own transatlantic journey had exchanged an American identity for a British one, O'Hara approvingly observes Auden's interest in the intimate exploration of "experiences and expressions of what had been looked down upon by the pretentious estheticism and mysticism of the Eliot school."<sup>45</sup>

O'Hara's "Memorial Day 1950" continues its account of generational artistic awakening with a dismissive double allusion to the Yeats he had rejected in favor of Auden, and to his elder contemporary from the prewar generation, Delmore Schwartz, who had used Yeats's words for the title of his famous 1937 story, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities": "Our responsibilities did not begin / In dreams, though they began in bed. Love is first of all / A lesson in utility." Schwartz's narrative of an insecure and neurotic son dreaming about watching a movie of his own parents' courtship—and screaming back at the screen, "Don't do it. It's not too late to change your minds, both of you. Nothing good will come of it. Only remorse, hatred, scandal and two children whose characters are monstrous!"<sup>46</sup>—had come to be seen as a defining expression of the pre-World War II generation's anxious relations with its forebears, but O'Hara refuses to align himself with such anxiety. Instead of Schwartz's horror at an imagined primal scene, or Yeats's notion of a self revealed through an engagement with visionary abstractions, O'Hara offers a different ideal of self-conception: self-generation and discovery through erotic exploration. Responsibilities, and an awareness of the relation of one's self to others, are discovered, in O'Hara's model, through the engagement with self and otherness that comes "in bed," through sex. And this vision of erotic education and illumination is explicitly allied to an analogous process of poetic development. The bed of "Auden or Rimbaud," into which the bold ephebe had dared to venture, becomes an erotic and poetic schoolroom. "Love is first of all a lesson in utility," O'Hara suggests, then concludes ten lines later with an epiphanic revelation: "Poetry is as useful as a machine!" Both love and poetry are defined by O'Hara through their utility and their synonymy.

This perspective on the intimate theoretical relation between poetry and eros is one that would prove crucial not only to O'Hara's poetics but to that of many of O'Hara's contemporaries, including, as we will see in succeeding chapters, Ashbery and Merrill and Rich, in their individually distinct ways. And it's not a coincidence that O'Hara should use Auden as his emblem for this model of poetry in which, as he would notably define it a few years later in his mock-manifesto, "Personism" (1959), "The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages."<sup>47</sup> A "law like love" [*CP*, 262] is the relentless object of Auden's poetic quest, from his earliest poems which "move / Different or with a different love" [*CP*,

29], to the lover of “As I Walked Out One Evening” whose song of eternal love is answered by the cruel facts of time and the fickle heart, to the resonant, doomed assertion of “September 1, 1939” that “We must love one another or die” [*SP*, 97]. And Auden explicitly associated his poems’ obsessive expression of erotic yearning to the desire to connect with a reader through writing, as in his 1939 poem in celebration of his new love with Kallman, “Heavy Date”:

When two lovers meet, then  
 There’s an end of writing  
 Thought and Analytics:  
     Lovers, like the dead,  
 In their loves are equal;  
 Sophomores and peasants,  
 Poets and their critics  
     Are the same in bed. [*CP*, 262]

As in O’Hara’s later poem, love and poetry are expressions of the same desire whose object is a shared experience of connection, commonality, and engagement of self with otherness. And just as the relationship between Ariel and Caliban, figures of the shaping imagination, is depicted in “The Sea and the Mirror” as that of a pair of squabbling lovers, for Auden, as for O’Hara (and Ashbery, whose Harvard thesis would take that relationship as its primary subject), the erotics of poetry are a touch-and-go affair, grounded in an awareness of the doomed and fleeting nature of the relationship—like all human relationships, bounded either by heartbreak, boredom, or death—between the poet and his promiscuous reader/lover. But its very ephemerality makes it that much more precious and endlessly pursued, even in the face of the inevitable failure of that idealized moment of connection on the page or on the bed. “If equal affection cannot be, / Let the more loving one be me” [*CP*, 584], Auden wrote in 1957, long after Kallman’s own promiscuity had crushed Auden’s dreams of faultless love, but he’s writing about poetry as much as he’s lamenting Kallman’s cruelty and absence. The poet goes on writing, just as the spurned lover goes on loving, in the vain but eternal hope that the wandering ideal reader/lover will finally hear his call and love him back.



moon," "unbitting"), and the aggressive alliteration of Auden's earliest saga-inflected verse. The "silence" of the resisting or rejecting lover/reader, "reticent of rapine," explicitly recalls one of Auden's first and best-known poems ("From the very first coming down") in which an elusive beloved is characterized, in words that also describe the poetic mode of both the early evasive Auden and the young, mask-wearing O'Hara, as "never . . . more reticent, / Always afraid to say more than it meant" [*CP*, 29]. And the speaker's "ululant" and elaborately figurative love-song, heard but ignored by the lover "beneath the bulb's electric stain," further associates O'Hara's imagined Auden with the singing lover of "As I Walked Out One Evening," who grandiosely proclaims, from a similarly tawdry locale ("under an arch of the railway"), that "Love has no ending" [*CP*, 133]. O'Hara's short Auden-channeling poem functions on at least four distinct levels: First, it emulates one of Auden's most representative poetic modes, the song of "the more loving one" to the unresponsive ideal. Second, we can read O'Hara's poem, as we read so many of Auden's, as the anxious call of the poet to the reader, whose response—or even existence—is a cause of doubt and authorial angst. Third, in its claim of ventriloquism of Auden, it suggests specific knowledge of his tortured relationship with Kallman, whose wanderings and theatrical cruelty to the long-suffering Auden had become, by the time of O'Hara's poem, a well-known piece of celebrity gossip among those who followed Auden's American career closely. And fourth and most suggestively, we can also see the poem as a kind of poetic love-song from O'Hara to Auden himself. By taking on Auden's voice, O'Hara literalizes the desire expressed in the poem's final lines: "My blood / is blaring to share yours with you." The junior poet takes the part of the abject and devoted lover of the indifferent, aloof object of desire, into whose poetic bed he will claim in "Memorial Day, 1950" to have crept, and in doing so makes the scene of seduction a scene of poetic instruction.

This vision of poetic relations, in which younger poets find their own poetic identity through the effort of sharing the blood, or the metaphorical poetic bed, or the voice, of those influences to whom they are attracted and through an engagement with whom they learn the limits of their own poetic self, is one that a number of Auden's inheritors will find useful and enabling. It is an idea of influence based on acknowledgment, emulation, and creative utility, and it is a model that many of his succes-

sors associate explicitly with Auden. And while this influential notion of influence is not restricted by gender, sexuality, or any particular poetic ideology, as the broad range of poets who make use of Auden in their own projects of poetic self-fashioning makes clear, it does have strong resonances with another specific aspect of Auden's influence, in particular his role as an exemplar for, and champion of, younger gay poets. His private life, or his attitudes toward sex, were not especially attractive to the younger gay poets who knew him: "We did not want to live the way Wystan Auden lived," notes Richard Howard, recalling Auden's unglamorous personal manners and habits, including his fondness for Benzedrine, alcohol, rough trade, and urinating in the sink.<sup>49</sup> But for poets like Howard, O'Hara, Ginsberg, Ashbery, Schuyler, Merrill, and Rich his significance as a publicly gay poet and intellectual was enormous. And the vision of poetic influence as a scene of same-sex erotic and intellectual exchange that one finds in poems like Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* or in Ginsberg's "Supermarket in California," can trace its origins through, if not directly to, Auden's own homosocial poetics and his position as a pioneering figure in the burgeoning American gay artistic subculture in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>50</sup>



The identification of Auden with this particularly utilitarian, assimilative construction of poetic influence was one made explicitly by Randall Jarrell in a major series of lectures on Auden he gave at Princeton in 1951 and 1952. Drawing upon the numerous significant essays he had published on Auden in the previous decade, in his first lecture Jarrell defined Auden's originality specifically in terms of his exploitation of his own influences:

Look into his book at random: there will be, on the first fifty or sixty pages, blues; Calypso songs; nursery rhymes; imitations of sagas, of Gilbert and Sullivan, of Henry James, of Greek choruses, of Lord Byron, Riding, Graves, Joyce, Skelton, Eliot, Yeats, Brecht, Perse, Rilke—many a reader must have murmured wistfully, "I just haven't read enough poetry to know *all* the poets Auden is influenced by." . . . Auden's originality is plainer than his influences, and he is, very obviously, one of the



most original poets alive. An ordinary poet is controlled by influences—he imitates, is possessed, against his own will or without his own knowledge; Auden consciously and actively *uses* influences, borrows them almost [as] he would borrow a word, a stanza-form, or a plot. . . . The affable familiar ghosts who possessed Yeats's wife announced to Yeats that they had “come to bring him metaphors for his poems”; all the poets of the world seem to be saying to Auden, “We have come to bring you techniques for your poems.”<sup>51</sup>

In a later lecture, Jarrell returns to this theme, observing of Auden, “He is unusually skillful at analyzing someone else's work, taking out what he likes, and synthesizing a new style of his own that will include this.”<sup>52</sup> As Stephen Burt summarizes Jarrell's thinking, one of his chief objections to Auden's American writing was its move toward what he perceived as a poetry of rationalism that “made too many concessions to the conscious mind.” So, with his characteristic love–hate ambivalence toward the poet who had been so important to his own critical and poetic development, Jarrell's analysis comes with a double edge: “Technically, Auden is perhaps the most spectacularly and consciously accomplished poet since Swinburne; and this is rather disquieting to us—we know what we think of Swinburne.”<sup>53</sup> But Jarrell makes a telling leap from discussing Auden's own facile use of his influences to speculating on the way Auden's assimilative example could itself influence an imagined younger poet, who might “think of Auden as a Proteus upon whose back he can ride off in all directions.”<sup>54</sup> Despite Jarrell's mixed feelings about Auden's American career, his analysis of Auden's utility for future poets was indeed borne out by the careers of a huge range of different poets who used what they found in Auden to ride off in all directions across the landscape of American poetry. And one of the primary imaginative contributions he made to those poets was a sense that, just as he did, they could consciously and actively use their own influences, including but obviously not limited to Auden's own poems, to help discover and define their own poetic projects and purposes. As in Jarrell's list of Auden's omnivorous utilitarianism, ranging from the blues to Greek choruses to Brecht, those influences could come from any place, any tradition, any time, and need not be limited to some abstract or arbitrary notion of

what the age or national convention demanded. To be a young American poet in the “Age of Auden,” those years during the 1940s and 1950s when Auden presided over the American poetry scene, was to be free—or, as Auden himself would term it, “burdened”—to define oneself in terms of one’s choice of inheritance and influence among a bewildering panoply of possible options opened up by the post-Modernist collapse of the notion of a unified native tradition. And Auden was a crucial guide and teacher and example in the act and art of making that choice.<sup>55</sup>

Two decades earlier, one of Jarrell’s poetic contemporaries, Elizabeth Bishop, in notes for an unfinished 1937 essay on Auden, observed of influential original poets in general that, “By ‘pretending’ the existence of a language appropriate to the ‘things’ it must deal with, the language is forced into being. It is learned by one person, by a few, by all who can become interested in that poet’s poetry.”<sup>56</sup> For Bishop, Auden’s poems are “an excellent example of the power of pretence at work,” in that they embody “the tendency, described by William Empson, of what a poet writes to become *real*; the tendency toward ‘prophecy’; obscurity, and ‘influence,’ are all [departments] of this original act of pretence.” This creative “act of pretence,” as Bishop terms it, whereby a poet’s efforts to respond to reality end up giving a shape, structure, and a name to that reality for those who come after them, is a helpful theoretical formulation for the way Auden’s poetry, and his ideas about the making of poetry and poetic identity, affected his American inheritors, particularly in the generation after Bishop and Jarrell’s own. When Bishop is writing in the late 1930s, she credits him principally with being “the founder of the ‘forsaken factory’ school of literary landscape painting,” but her notes conclude with a quotation from D. H. Lawrence that suggests in broader terms the way Auden offered a model in whom his successors could find their own distinctive and divergent identities usefully reflected: “It provides an emotional experience, and then, if we have the courage of our own feelings, it becomes a mine of practical truth.” It was Auden’s poetic pretensions—in the etymological sense of stretching in order to contain—toward the political, cultural, and private confusions of the 1930s, written from the perspective of a poet anguished but optimistic at the possibility of poetry’s power to diagnose and heal “this country of ours where nobody is well,” that asserted themselves most strongly over the generation of Bishop, Jarrell, Shapiro, Bogan, Berryman, and Roethke,

each of whom adopted in differing ways some of the pre-immigration Auden's rhetorical strategies to help address their own generational experience. But it was Auden's responses to his new American career and life that helped set the terms for those who would come to their artistic maturity after his arrival in the United States. For them he would serve, in Bishop's terms, as "a mine of practical truth" for developing their own poetic identities in the wake of war and international Modernism. James Merrill would pursue Bishop's metaphor—and connect it with Auden's well-known affection for old mining machinery—in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, in which Auden—"our mine of good sense" [*CLS*, 306]—serves as his Virgilian guide in that epic Dantean descent into the underworld of the human psyche, poetic tradition, and the process of achieving poetic originality through exploiting and refining the imaginative ore of one's influences.

Auden's role in postwar American literary culture also went beyond providing a lexicon from which younger poets could quarry their own poetic resources. His practical omnipresence in the lives, educations, and careers of countless poets was another essential aspect of his influence. For the Jarrell/Bishop generation, he was both a celebrity and an elder peer, as suggestively illustrated in the well-known photograph at the Gotham Book Shop on the occasion of a birthday celebration for the Sitwells—showing Auden perched brashly and unselfconsciously on a ladder above a gathering of American poets including Jarrell, Schwartz, and Bishop. Auden wrote Guggenheim recommendations for Bogan, served on prize committees with Lowell, and was the best man at Roethke's wedding and loaned him his Ischia retreat for his honeymoon. For the younger generation of O'Hara and Ginsberg, he was a canonized icon, an enthusiastic teacher, and an institutionally powerful figure in their early careers. Maxine Kumin credits Auden as her greatest influence—"Almost everything I know how to do with the line, I learned from absorbing Auden," she notes—and recalled for an interviewer the significance of both his frequent public readings and the utility of his example for younger women poets in the 1940s and 1950s: "I probably attended a dozen readings he gave, in and around Boston, in his carpet slippers. I worshipped him from afar. Today, it must seem a strange influence—an Anglo-American male. You'd expect I would say—I don't know—some woman role model. There really was no one at that time."<sup>57</sup>

In 1982, years after that early exposure to Auden's personal and textual authority, Kumin would reflect in verse, from her honored position as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (a title renamed three years later as U.S. Poet Laureate) on the lessons learned:

Poetry  
 Makes nothing happen.  
 It survives in the valley of its saying.  
 Auden taught us that.  
 Next year another  
 Consultant will sit  
 under the hand with the arrow  
 that props the door ajar  
 for metaphor.  
 New poets will lie on their backs  
 listening in the valley  
 making nothing happen  
 overhearing history  
 history time  
 personal identity  
 inching toward Armageddon.<sup>58</sup>

A distinguished poet now herself, Kumin reframes her Audenesque inheritance while troubling the same questions that prompted Auden's influential assertion forty-three years before: What can poetry do in a world where history, time, and personal identity are slipping into despair and confusion? Her answer is to dwell in the semantic ambiguity of Auden's phrase, where the "nothing" that poetry "makes happen" is both an acknowledgment of art's political futility and a positive assertion against a tide of darkness. A poet actively makes "nothing" happen; she creates a space of solitude and thought, like her quiet Library of Congress office, and offers at least a dialectical counterweight to the terrifying somethings ("Weeks apart / a president and pope are shot") being made to happen all around us by the same forces that hurt Auden into his American poetry.

Sylvia Plath, like the young Kumin, experienced the impact of the American Auden as a pedagogical, self-defining one. As she records in her college journal on the occasion of Auden's teaching-visit to Smith in

the spring of 1953, it was not only through his books and poems that he made his influence felt:

Auden tossing his big head back with a twist of wide ugly grinning lips, his sandy hair, his coarse tweedy brown jacket, his burlap textured voice and the crackling brilliant utterances—the naughty mischievous boy genius, and the inconsistent white hairless skin of his legs, and the short puffy stubbed fingers—and the carpet slippers—beer he drank, and smoked Lucky Strikes in a black holder, gesticulating with a white new cigarette in his hands, holding matches, talking in a gravelly incisive tone about how Caliban is the natural bestial projection, Ariel the creative imaginative, and all the lyrical abstrusities of their love and cleavage, art and life, the mirror and the sea. God, god, the stature of the man. And next week, in trembling audacity, I approach him with a sheaf of the poems. Oh, god, if this is life, half-heard, glimpsed, smelled, with beer and cheese sandwiches and the god-eyed tall-minded ones, let me never go blind, or get shut off from the agony of learning, the horrible pain of trying to understand.<sup>59</sup>

In the eyes of the twenty-year-old Plath, “the stature of the man” rests on Auden’s human presence, a “god-eyed tall-minded one” with hairless legs and stubby fingers, as much as it does on the greatness of his poems. And it is the human encounter with the benevolent, eccentric genius that sends her into poetic paroxysms and affirms her ambitions to make a life in, and of, poetry. For Plath, as for many of her contemporaries, accounts of Auden’s influence are never simply a matter of recording their appropriation and adaptation—or even repudiation and rejection—of his characteristic poetic modes and forms and ideas. His impact was felt as both person and poet, in both the lives and the poems of young poets. Auden was, to his inheritors as well as to himself, in the words of the title of his first American volume, a “double man.” In a letter home that same spring, Plath reflects this doubleness, pledging fealty to both the charismatic man and his art: “The great W. H. Auden spoke in chapel this week, and I saw him for the first time. He is my conception of the perfect poet: tall, with a big leonine head and a sandy mane of hair, and a lyrically gigantic stride. Needless to say he has a wonder-

fully textured British accent, and I adore him with a big Hero Worship. I would someday like to touch the Hem of his Garment and say in a very small adoring voice: Mr. Auden, I haveapome for you: 'I found my God in Auden.'"<sup>60</sup>

An even younger student poet than Plath, Marilyn Hacker, recalls amusing and inspiring encounters as a teenager with middle-aged Auden in their shared New York neighborhood in the early 1960s. She recounts in a sonnet an early visit to Auden's notoriously disheveled East Village apartment in 1961 in response to an "invitation to tea":

We sit in a cold room. A. pours the tea.  
 A gaudy twilight helps us hide ourselves.  
 I try to read the titles on the shelves  
 and juggle cup and saucer on my knee.  
 A. tells me anecdotes that I have read.  
 I poise a studied ambiguity.  
 A. wonders will I turn my head and see  
 The crumpled blue kimono on the bed.  
 I pick up a crystal ashtray to watch  
 its slow rotation slap a waterfall  
 of iridescent limbs across a wall,  
 fumble with cigarettes. A. strikes a match  
 as the enormity of darkness swells  
 upward in a cacophony of bells.<sup>61</sup>

Auden's double identity as literary celebrity whose small-talk is already familiar from books and interviews, an eccentric occasionally awkward human being, sitting in a cold gloomy room and pouring tea, is manifest in Hacker's poem, as is her projection of the Auden poems she has read upon his living breathing person. As he strikes a match to light a cigarette in his dim apartment, he enacts before her in both literal and humbly quotidian fashion one of his most resonant poetic images, showing an affirming flame in the darkness for a young poet looking for connection and guidance. Auden's willingness to serve as avuncular mentor to younger poets, on college campuses or in his home, was a crucial aspect of his American influence. And the prospect of meeting the powerful yet available literary lion, showing him their work, and learning what they could from him, was an opportunity many younger poets

eagerly pursued. And as Richard Howard remembers, Auden's pedagogical function wasn't limited merely to private encounters or formal readings and lectures:

We were all very aware of him as part of our New York education. . . . I remember [going] to the first performance of "The Cocktail Party" by T. S. Eliot . . . and that moment in the second act when Henry Harcourt Reilly suddenly assumes the aspect of quotation and says those lines from "Prometheus Unbound." The audience rustles plaintively—they know they're hearing something but they don't know what it is . . . And Wystan Auden was sitting maybe six rows in front of us, and he turned around to the whole of the mezzanine and he said, "Shelley, my dears!" He really sort of felt that he was still at Gresham's School and he was telling us things that we ought to know. There was that capacity. He had that quality of educating us.<sup>62</sup>

Anthony Hecht, along with Hollander, Howard, and Richard Wilbur, an avowed inheritor of an Audenesque vision of the aesthetic and ethical value of form, and who would end up spending summers on Ischia with Auden after the war, remembered in particular Auden's frequent book reviews in *The New Republic*, *Partisan Review*, and elsewhere as a crucial part of his and other poets' literary education: "I think I was almost never disappointed in a discovery of Auden's. His taste, his acumen, was as near to infallible as one could want."<sup>63</sup>

Though older than poets like Hecht, Plath, Kumin, or O'Hara, Robert Hayden's early career also evolved under Auden's explicit pedagogical and professional influence, especially during the years Hayden studied with Auden at the University of Michigan in the early 1940s. It was Auden's instruction in formal discipline and the handling of disparate poetic materials that helped Hayden develop the complex polyvocal, transhistorical schematic of his most important early poem, "Middle Passage," along with other crucial poems from his prize-winning *Black Spear* project.<sup>64</sup> "I think he showed me my strengths and weaknesses as a poet in ways no one else had done before," Hayden observed.<sup>65</sup> William Bronk, another poet of Jarrell's generation whose career flowered late, and one not often considered in relation to Auden, reflects on Auden's constructive professional presence in postwar literary culture, even as he

recognized their aesthetic differences: “I don’t know that Auden influenced me at all, but I liked his work, and I had known for a long time someone who has also known Auden. . . . Auden was the judge for the Yale Series, and I guess that was when the personal contact started. . . . I sent him *My Father Photographed with Friends*, and he didn’t choose it, but he wrote me a very nice note and said that if I came to New York sometime, he would be receptive if I wanted to come see him, and I did.”<sup>66</sup> And even a poet like Charles Bukowski, who embodies a certain vivid strain of antiestablishment American poetics, could list Auden among those who helped him do his literary work: “[T]he best of Auden / the best of Jeffers / they helped immensely.”<sup>67</sup>

As Bronk’s recollection suggests, it was probably in his role as judge for the Yale Younger Poets Prize that Auden exerted his most notable institutional influence on the shape of the postwar American poetic canon. From 1946 to 1958, Auden selected ten unpublished poets—in two years of his judgeship he deemed none of the submitted manuscripts worth publication—many of whom would go on to establish distinguished and distinctive careers that would mark out much of the terrain of postwar American verse. Among the innovations of Auden’s tenure was to open up the contest—at that point one of the few major institutional avenues for publication by younger American poets—to poets who wrote in English, regardless of their country of birth, as attested by his first selection, the London-born Joan Murray. His choice of Murray, who had died at age 24 in 1942, marked a break with the kind of poetry published by the series in other ways as well, not least in its aggressive difficulty and interiority, along with pointing up the extent to which Auden’s textual influence intersected with his personal professional influence, since Murray may have been among his students at the New School in New York in the early 1940s.<sup>68</sup> In the succeeding years, Auden published and wrote introductions for the first books of Robert Horan, Rosalie Moore, W. S. Merwin, Adrienne Rich, Edgar Bogardus, Daniel Hoffman, John Ashbery, James Wright, John Hollander, and William Dickey.

Auden’s introductions were characteristically idiosyncratic, often reflecting whatever particular intellectual hobbyhorse he was riding at the moment of its composition, but nonetheless illuminating of both the poets’ general poetic projects and the extent to which they did or did not follow his own personal sense of aesthetics. The extent to which



Auden's choices reflected a startling catholicity of taste can be seen in the juxtaposition, for instance, of Horan's and Moore's ecstatic and Hart Crane-influenced verses (especially in light of Auden's own statements of his distaste for Crane), with the wry understatement of Bogardus. And against the claims, occasionally made, that Auden's selection amounted to an effort to replicate his own formalist mode and stifle divergence from convention, can be placed the careers of poets like Rich and Wright whose poetics would evolve in notable and important ways from the formalism of their early books. Auden's method of selection could itself be somewhat unconventional, including—most famously—his direct solicitation of manuscripts from Ashbery and O'Hara in 1955 when he found the manuscripts from which he had been asked to choose unsatisfactory. As he wrote from Ischia to his editors back in New Haven, "What bothers me particularly is that a young poet (John Ashbery) whom I know personally told me he was submitting a manuscript this year. I have reservations about such of his poems as I have seen, but they are certainly better than any of the manuscripts which have reached me."<sup>69</sup> Auden wrote to both Ashbery and O'Hara to send him their poems, putting the close friends in direct competition with another—a contest that Ashbery eventually won. Auden elaborated avuncularly on his "reservations" about both of the younger poets' work in his letter of gentle rejection to O'Hara, observing, "I think you (and John too, for that matter) must watch what is always the great danger with any 'surrealistic' style, namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue."<sup>70</sup> Auden's contributions to the books he published often went beyond mere selection and admiring introduction. It was his decision to title Ashbery's now-famous first book *Some Trees*, and in letters to Merwin in 1951 about his prize-winning manuscript, he suggests not only which poems could be dropped to make the text a manageable length, but also recommends specific edits of poems: "If you will forgive my saying so, I feel that both the 'Anabasis' poems and 'Rime of the Palmers,' which I like very much, could be improved by extensive cutting. One has to be very careful with lyric stanzas to be certain that every stanza, however good and interesting in itself, is essential to the structure of the poem as a whole. Look how you improved 'Epitaph,' by suddenly reducing the whole thing to four lines!"<sup>71</sup> In quintessential

schoolmaster mode, he even corrects Merwin's prosody ("by the way, 'systole' is a 3 syllable word"), and in another letter he advises cutting "the repetition of 'A dropping stone' which I feel is a rhetorical device without, in this particular instance, an emotional justification." He does eventually drop the pedagogical role, however, expressing his frustration with the formal demands of his job as judge: "As you probably know, the Yale Press idiotically insists on an introduction by me which is embarrassing for both of us. If there are any facts about yourself which would be useful to me in writing the damned thing or anything you would like or not like to have said, please let me know."<sup>72</sup> He also offers to write Merwin a fellowship recommendation and gives him advice on renting a cheap London flat.<sup>73</sup>



Writing from his New York City deathbed in 1935, an elderly Edwin Arlington Robinson advised a friend on new trends in poetry: "I doubt if you would care much for Auden or Spender. They are for the youngsters."<sup>74</sup> Robinson's wry alertness to Auden's appeal and utility to the next generations of American poets, as well as his ambivalence about the value of that influence, suggests a tension that would characterize much of Auden's American critical reception in the years after his arrival in America. While prewar "youngsters" like Jarrell, Bishop, Shapiro, and Bogan found his voice a seductive and sometimes overpowering presence in their own work, and the postwar generation of poets like Ginsberg, O'Hara, Ashbery, and Rich found in him a Proteus, as Jarrell foresaw, upon whose back they could ride off in all directions, Auden's impact on American poetry was by no means an uncontested one. For many younger poets and critics Auden represented an unwanted and negative presence in the American poetic landscape. William Carlos Williams, just twelve years younger than Robinson, was a powerful voice of principled opposition to what he saw as both Auden's "obscurity of purpose"<sup>75</sup> and his rationalist "error" in suggesting "that all writing is an instrument."<sup>76</sup> Using Auden as a foil to articulate his own influential ideas on the relation between living language and poetic form, Williams asks in 1941, "How can an intelligent man say to himself that he will take some line, some arbitrary or convenient stanza, and that he is going to use it and make the words fit? He may even succeed but if he does it will be

only at the cost of missing his MAJOR opportunity, as Auden obviously does and a whole train of copyists in his train. The major imperative is to make the line fit the language, not the language the line, and to discover there the new structural integer, completely new, forged under the hammering of contemporary necessity to make a more comprehensive and significant structure.<sup>77</sup> For Williams, Auden is a misguided inheritor and transmitter of an Eliotic notion of poetic impersonality and formal detachment, leading “a whole train of copyists” into error. And Auden’s original sin, for which no amount of craft and effort can compensate, is his Englishness. In a 1948 lecture that would prove a central text for the students in Williams’s own poetic train, “The Poem as a Field of Action,” he again uses Auden as a cautionary example of what American poetry should not become, and foregrounds Auden’s country of origin as a poetic dead-end from which his departure for America could not save him: “Auden might have gone to France or to Italy or to South America or following Rimbaud to Ceylon or Timbuctoo. No! He came to the United States and became a citizen. Now the crisis, the only crisis which could drive such a man, a distinguished poet, to that would be that he had come to an end of some sort in his poetic means—something that England could no longer supply, and that he came here implicitly to find an answer—in another language. As yet I see no evidence that he has found it.”<sup>78</sup> The exhaustedness of the English poetic well, in contrast to the vigor of the flowing American fountain, is explicitly allied to the issue of Auden’s formal mastery, which, as Williams sees it, betrays an allegiance to a dead and empty conventionalism that keeps true human vitality forever beyond the reach of his art: “Look at his poems with this in view—his very skill seems to defeat him.” Williams nationalizes the question of poetic form: America as the open discursive field of action versus England as a closed and backward-looking island of self-conscious etiolated technique. Auden’s importation of that poetic toxin into the American poetic bloodstream is for Williams an unfortunate sequel to the Anglophilic and cerebral “great catastrophe” of Eliot’s “The Waste Land.”<sup>79</sup>

The harshness of Williams’s polemical rhetoric exceeded any personal animus the two poets actually felt, as Auden allied himself immediately upon his arrival in 1939 with a group of other prominent writers and artists, calling themselves “Les Amis de William Carlos Williams,”

that dedicated itself—on the five occasions it actually met during its brief existence—to advocating on behalf of Williams's under-recognized contributions to American poetry.<sup>80</sup> And in 1946, Williams wrote to the poetry archivist Charles Abbott of the news of being offered an honorary degree, asking in disbelief, "Did you say Auden had something to do with this? Now, I know he's really intent on becoming an American. If true, the situation as it concerns him would be really very touching. It does him also honor."<sup>81</sup> And Williams felt sufficiently admiring of Auden's poetic skill ("more skillful than I am though I feel not the slightest jealousy toward him") to invite him in 1947 to join with him in convening a high-level private summit-meeting on the state of contemporary verse: "[F]our or five men, 'master' poets such as Auden and myself might profitably get together here, at my house, over a week-end to discuss the technical advances that had been made in the writing of poetry in modern times." Through the expert study by these "masters" of a representative group of poetic texts, including Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Pound's *Cantos*, and Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Williams reasoned, "Reams of incompetencies could be wiped out in a day and some sort of basis for a true criticism of poems as technical constructions could be arrived at."<sup>82</sup> Despite pitching the idea to Auden twice, the meeting never happened, though a few years later in 1952, in a letter to Robert Lowell, Williams hinted at the warm personal feelings between the two "master" poets: "I wish I could go to Ischia next year. Auden offered me or us his villa there, but I did not take him up. I am a little afraid of it, but it would be marvelous if we could get ourselves to do it."<sup>83</sup>

But while Williams may have felt himself to be Auden's amicable professional antagonist, the force of his polemic carried considerable weight with other younger poets who saw in Auden an icon to be smashed rather than emulated. In 1950, three days before O'Hara would write worshipfully of Auden in "Memorial Day 1950," Robert Creeley was lamenting Auden's malign influence in a letter to Charles Olson:

Other things: had whacked at [friend and publisher Jacob] Leed this morning abt the biz of the new romanticists, etc., Rule Britannia, etc. I.e., cannot think that they are the ones to bring guts back to the wasteland, etc. Cannot think that anything 'but great clarity can cut thru. . . .' [quoting Pound] Do not think

they have it. To be sure, now&again something to admire & wd that good intentions & a love: cd buildmore than claptrap. To hell with that. Wd make use of what was of use: there anywhere: but wd not 'subscribe' to that out. To hit them: as the 'noo' sav- iors: is to forget that a constant opp has been up against Auden & co etc. For many yrs. If only these: the dr, stevens, moore, ep, etc. THEY carried the weight and useless to shift it at this late date to a bunch of sun daft daisy pickers.<sup>84</sup>

Like Williams—"the dr" in the list of weight-carrying opposers of the "Rule Britannia," along with Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Pound—Creeley sees "Auden & co" as part of an unwanted British invasion of gutlessness and "claptrap" that threatens a more authentic and vigorous native strain of American verse. Creeley's description of Auden and his admirers as "a bunch of sun daft daisy pickers" also evocatively dismisses them in terms that suggest disdain beyond mere national chau- vinism. To be an Audenesque poet is to be feckless, myopic, and effete, in contrast to the weight-lifting far-seeing action-poets of the American opposition. It is tempting, if perhaps a little unfair to read too much into Creeley's offhand remark, to speculate that part of the resistance to Auden's influence on American poetry stemmed for some from an uncomfortable (and perhaps unconscious) association and conflation of Auden's poetic style with his very public sexuality, in which a native American tradition is figured as a field of masculine action and expan- siveness, with fastidious Audenesque craft representing a feminizing threat to that virile self-definition. A narrative that frames the ideologi- cal and formal conflicts in postwar American poetry in terms of sexual anxiety is, of course, complicated not only by Whitman's foundational role in the American tradition championed by Williams and Creeley, but also by a poet like Robert Duncan who, being no fan of Auden's influence on his contemporaries, also found no discordance in his own work between a Williams-derived open form and a gay poetic perspec- tive.<sup>85</sup> But the complex of identities represented by Auden—English, formalist, rationalist, intellectual, gay—certainly seemed to combine into a profile that was seen to be at odds with what some of Auden's an- tagonists felt it authentically meant to be, as Williams influentially put it, "in the American grain."

Auden's Englishness was also a point of professional irritation for some who resented the fashionability of exotic expatriates on the burgeoning poetry-reading circuit, where reputations were made and honorariums earned. As Charles Olson complained to the Canadian poet Irving Layton about having been bumped from a reading at McGill in favor of Auden and two other notional Englishmen: "[B]y god, if you mean what you say abt us Americans (EP WCW & CO, say, not to speak of Creeley etc) how come you find the till empty just now ??? How come the money got spent on Auden (Eng) Campbell (Eng) Viereck (*Eng*)?"<sup>86</sup> Despite Roy Campbell's South African origins, and Peter Viereck being born in New York and educated, like Olson and Creeley, at Harvard, their alienness from the anti-formal tradition of Williams and Pound along with perhaps their unapologetic political conservatism, gets them lumped in with Auden as presumptively "English," taking scarce poetry dollars out of the pockets of "American" poets like Olson ("CO") himself.

The emphatic presence of Pound ("EP") next to Williams in both Olson's and Creeley's genealogies of authentic American poetry (as well as their shared Poundian shorthand epistolary style) points both to his own crucial importance and influence over the development of American poetry, but also to the fascinating parallels between Pound and Auden as perceived icons of rival traditions. In her own study of Pound's American poetic legacy, Marjorie Perloff asks, "What is it in Pound's oeuvre that has made such a difference in the poetry of the later twentieth century, a difference that transcends, in curious ways, the local differences between individual poets?"<sup>87</sup> As this discussion of the huge and diverse range of postwar poets who owe artistic debts to Auden should make clear, we can ask much the same question of Auden as well. And Perloff herself, as she traces the Poundian influence on poets as diverse as Louis Zukofsky, the Black Mountain School, and Robert Lowell, also notes Auden's significance as a contending alternative to the Pound-focused narrative of American poetry, observing that Auden's poetry "represents a variant on the Pound model that has had great influence on such poets as James Merrill and John Ashbery," while further pointing to theoretical affinities between Auden and Pound-identified poets like Zukofsky and Jerome Rothenberg.<sup>88</sup>

Both poetic and biographical ironies surround the cultural positioning of Pound and Auden as American literary antitheses, including the

obvious fact that, as Perloff suggests, many younger poets—like Ginsberg, Hollander, Merrill, and many more—found both elder writers important to the development of their own artistic identities and projects. Richard Howard's *Alone With America*, for instance, prominently announces its dedication, "To Ezra Pound and to W. H. Auden."<sup>89</sup> It's also amusing to note that in his 1936 introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats chastises Auden for his inattention to poetic form and blames Pound as the chief influential source for "that lack of form and consequent obscurity which is the main defect of Auden, Day Lewis, and their school."<sup>90</sup> And though the specifics of their lives and politics couldn't be any more different, in general poetic profile Pound and Auden share a surprising amount in common. They each stand as complementary and representative emblems of a twentieth-century literary economy that saw American poets in the first part of the century traveling to Paris and London to internationalize themselves and establish their reputations, followed by the postwar shift in the centers of the international poetic establishment back across the Atlantic to the United States. Both were seen as the charismatic centers of their literary moments, the namesakes of "The Pound Era" and "The Auden Generation," while employing their vast systematizing erudition to serve, in Gertrude Stein's term, as a "village explainer" for their times. Both were tireless mentors: Auden in New York, on college campuses, and on Ischia; Pound in London, Paris, and later in St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C., where he made himself gruffly available to an enormous range of younger American poets, from Bishop to Zukofsky. The idiosyncratic evolution of their careers, including Pound's slide into ugly racist dementia and Auden's later devout and public embrace of Christianity, proved similarly flummoxing or distressing to some of each poet's most ardent admirers. And at different points in their careers, both saw their art as a way of participating actively in the political world, and each embodied a model of poetic identity achieved through the appropriation of the varied voices of the poetic tradition, making it new through the studied translation of the transnational past.

Their lives and careers intersected in significant and resonant ways as well. After Pound's arrest in Italy in 1945 for treason, Auden's publisher, Random House, wanted to exclude Pound from its anthology of American verse until informed by Auden that if they dropped Pound



he would find a new publisher for his own work.<sup>91</sup> Auden also served as a judge on the committee that awarded the first Bollingen Prize to Pound in 1949, provoking a furious national controversy and echoing in very public fashion the assertion in his first American poem that Yeats's troubling private politics, like that of Kipling and Claudel, stood insignificant next to the poems in the judgment of time, which "Worships language and forgives / Everyone by whom it lives; / Pardons cowardice, conceit, / Lays its honors at their feet" [*SP*, 82]. Further recalling crucial lines from 1940's "New Year Letter"—"Art in intention is mimesis / But, realized, the resemblance ceases; / Art is not and cannot be / A midwife to society" [*CP*, 201]—Auden justified his selection of Pound for the Bollingen in the pages of the *Partisan Review* by pointing to the power of poetry not to shape society through propagandistic rhetoric (like Pound's wartime broadcasts), but to impose an engagement with individual interpretive and moral choice upon the reader: "One may . . . hold . . . [a] theory of art, that, in intention, at least, it is a mirror in which the spectator sees reflected himself and the world, and becomes conscious of his feelings good and bad, and of what their relations to each other are in fact. . . . An art which did not accurately reflect evil would not be good art."<sup>92</sup> Auden would pay tribute to Pound's immense poetic, rather than ideological, legacy in a Yale University radio broadcast in honor of Pound's seventieth birthday in 1955: "There are very few living poets, even if they are not conscious of having been influenced by Pound, who could say, 'My work would be exactly the same if Mr. Pound never lived.'"<sup>93</sup>

The pairing of Auden and Pound, finally and importantly for the purposes of this study, also helps frame some useful questions about the relation between poetic and national identity, and about Auden's complicated place in narratives of American poetry. The paradoxes of Pound's xenophobic internationalism and Auden's American-identified continentalism open up intriguing fissures in the landscape of postwar American verse and suggest both why it has proven so difficult to map coherently and why those efforts at mapping so often divide into contentious factions of critical cartographers screaming at one another. The grounds of these debates are almost always competing visions of what it means to be an "American" poet, with individual poets and poetic traditions conscripted into opposing authenticist camps, or, if a poet doesn't



fit a particular critical framework of artistic nationality, excluded from the anthologies and histories. It's a particular irony of literary canon-making that Pound, whose entire career was predicated upon a rejection of philistine America and the "mass of dolts" who inhabited it, culminating in an embrace of European fascism and anti-semitism, can be held up as an icon of a native American tradition, while Auden, who tried to enlist during the war and eventually served with the United States army on a postwar intelligence mission in Germany, became an enthusiastic citizen in 1946, and spent the second half of his career reinventing his own poetic identity while reshaping the American poetic landscape, can be rejected as insufficiently authentic to qualify for inclusion in most anthologies of modern American poetry.<sup>94</sup> And even when Auden's influence on younger poets is acknowledged, it can still often be derided as ultimately inconsequential, a "brief vogue" as Vendler puts it. Harold Bloom and David Bromwich, whose choice of modern American poetic progenitor is not Pound but Wallace Stevens, sound a characteristically dismissive note: "Poets who had their beginnings in Auden, and whose early work can often be mistaken for Auden's, have by whatever route found a resting place in the native tradition."<sup>95</sup>

Perloff, drawing upon Pound's admonitory *ABC of Reading*, describes Pound's legacy in terms that similarly presuppose a connection between poetic practice and national identity: "[T]he thrust of the Poundian poetic is that poetry *matters*, that it is *important*, that 'if a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays.'<sup>96</sup> Auden's legacy, to the enormous range of poets who learned from him in the 1940s and 1950s, was likewise a lesson in the moral and civic importance of poetry: that it could be, indeed, a "way of happening."

However, unlike that of Pound, Auden's influence was felt not as an effort at defining American poetry in terms of some prescriptive notion of what it should be, or in terms relating poetry to ideals of native authenticity. Rather, Auden's great contribution to his American-born successors was a model of American poetry that eschewed the idea of poetic nationalism entirely. As Nicholas Jenkins has argued, "Almost all critics have overlooked the depth and thoroughness of Auden's critique of that most modern marker of personal identity, nationality."<sup>97</sup>

In his public career, in his private interactions with countless younger poets, and in the verses of post-immigration poems like "In

Memory of W. B. Yeats,” “New Year Letter,” “The Sea and the Mirror,” and “The Age of Anxiety,” Auden provided a vital example in writing poetry that can best be described as “post-national.”<sup>98</sup> The poetry Auden wrote in the shadow of the global catastrophe of World War II offered a new vision of how to write poetry in a world where the idea of nationalism itself had been proven, conclusively it seemed, morally, politically, and artistically bankrupt. Auden’s American legacy is a characteristically paradoxical one, reflecting the difficulty critics seem to have in accounting for Auden’s place in American poetry. Auden defined America, and American poetry, as an absence of—or more constructively, as an escape from—the idea of national identity itself. To be an “American” poet after Auden was to be able—or more dialectically, to be burdened by the necessity—to choose any poetic identity one liked, from any time, any place, or any tradition, unfettered (or unassisted) by notions of native authenticity. Auden helps his inheritors see poetic identity not as an obligation to be defined according to some essentialist national narrative, but as a product of choice, of desire, and of the unanxious assimilation of influences that help the poet say what he or she needs to say. One could be a formally trained Jewish-Buddhist transnational visionary bard, like Ginsberg, or a Francophilic analyst and aesthete of the ephemeral and the urban, like O’Hara. One could be a passionate archivist of cultural history, like Hayden, or a cold-eyed anatomist of the brutal psychic interior, like Plath. Each has an equal claim to American poetic authenticity, and each owes notable debts to Auden’s useful example and assistance. If, as Charles Olson observed in his notebook in 1945, Pound taught American poets to “Write as the fathers to be the father,”<sup>99</sup> I want to argue for Auden’s analogous pedagogical role in American poetry, but with this nuanced but significant difference: Rather than teaching poets to use the past to replace, or triumph over, their predecessors in a notional native tradition, Auden taught American poets to write as their poetic fathers—and mothers and cousins and lovers and friends and fleeting acquaintances and occasionally himself—to become their distinctive and diverse postwar and post-Modernist American poetic selves.