

"THIS UNPOPULAR ART."

"THIS UNPOPULAR ART":  
THE ROLE OF THE URBAN POET  
IN  
THE WRITINGS OF W.H.AUDEN.

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Master of Arts.

McMaster University

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MASTER OF ARTS (1992)  
(English)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: "This Unpopular Art": The Role of the Urban  
Poet in the Writings of W.H.Auden.

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 67.

- ABSTRACT -

This study is an analysis of the complex presentation of the city motif, with its vast range of cultural and psychological connotations, in the poetry and prose of W.H.Auden (1907 - 1973), leading to the troubling question for the poet of his role in this environment, a subject which significantly pre-occupied him throughout his career. The thesis also follows the parallel development of Auden's poetic style from his "Poems" of 1930, through to the highly distinctive verse of his maturity, showing the relationship between altering form and altering content across that time.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many to thank, so little space.

I would like to express specific thanks to Dr. Norman Rosenblood and Jeffrey Donaldson for their invaluable encouragement and advice during the writing of this paper, such as it is.

Thanks are also extended to Messrs. Tim McGrenere and Matthew "Chewie" Trundle for the generous availability of their respective computers.

Appreciation must also be extended to the membership of the Perriclaian Society; G.Fagan (Chair), A.Gregory (Treasurer), A.Bone (Social Secretary), M.Trool (Entertainments), Dr.M.McShane (Public Relations and Legal Council), W.Newbiggin (Goodwill Ambassador), A.Holman (Transport Director), R.T.B.Riddell (Security Officer and Orator) and various other non-portfolio associates. Cheers.

Somewhat less flippantly, I wish to extend thanks to my relatives. On the British end, thanks to my beloved parents and sister for support and frequent 'phone calls. In Canada, the kindness and generosity of Bruce and Elva Johnstone deserve more than this perfunctory mention.

Last but not least, special thanks to Audrey for taking care of me.

To My Father.

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- INTRODUCTION -

It is something of a cliché to describe the twentieth century as a period of artistic "doubt". However, cultural response to the upheavals of the age has certainly led to an innate despair at the root of much artistic endeavour, as in T.S.Eliot's famous exposition of spiritual vacuum:

We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats' feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar.

(CP, 89)

It is inevitable, in this context, that the purpose and role of art and perhaps poetry in particular should come under scrutiny from the very minds that produce it. No new poetic manifesto emerged that could rechannel and re-energize the medium in the way that Wordsworth's Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* was able to. The problem was, of course, more deeply rooted than the stagnation of verse that occurred in the late eighteenth century. In contrast, the early twentieth century must be considered one of the most productive and certainly one of the most progressive eras of English poetry, inspired by the revolutionary thinking of Freud, Marx *et al*, and championed by the likes of Yeats,



Pound and especially T.S.Eliot. The poetic situation seems to have become a curious catch-22 - the dramatic events and sweeping changes they engendered catalysed the poetic community as never before, but at the same time made them singularly aware of the ineffectuality of their poetry in making any kind of social or cultural impact. Essentially, the mythic status of the poet as effective social agitator had lost all validity in an age of unremitting physical change. Eliot presents the problem in "East Coker", not whether there is any poetry of quality, but whether there is any use for poetry itself:

That was a way of putting it - not very satisfactory:  
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,  
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle  
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.

(CP, 198)

Ezra Pound, in the first stanza of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," also characterizes the dilemma with his customary lack of compromise:

For three years, out of key with his time  
He strove to resuscitate the dead art  
Of poetry; to maintain "the sublime"  
In the old sense. Wrong from the start -...

(SP, 98)

As a means of communication, what we understand by poetic expression "in the old sense" is being fundamentally challenged. The resulting attempts to orchestrate a new and definitive poetic voice led to the short-term rise of the Imagist School and various other "fads" of the twenties and early thirties. It also has much to do with the label of

"obscurity" that has clung to so much of this work from its first publication.

\* \* \*

My primary intent in this paper is to analyze the way in which this problem manifests itself and develops in the extensive oeuvre of W.H.Auden, a writer for whom the role of the poet and the poetry he writes in a modern urban society was a constant preoccupation, from his mischievous observation in the early "Letter to Lord Byron" that the poet

Is unobservant, immature and lazy.  
 You must admit, when all is said and done,  
 His sense of other people's very hazy  
 His moral judgements are too often crazy,  
 A slick and easy generalisation  
 Appeals too well to his imagination.

(CP, 83)

to the cryptic stanza in his final published poem, "Archaeology":

Poets have learned us their myths  
 But just how did They take them?  
 That's a stumper.

(CP, 896)

Critics have generally been quick to categorize the stages of Auden's career somewhat arbitrarily, in terms of events in his life or where he happened to be resident when he wrote certain poems. Hence the innumerable references to "The English Auden" or "the New York poetry". My intention in the following pages is to map out the development of Auden's conception of the role of the poet, using such chronological distinctions only as and when they seem necessary, and link that to the parallel development of the

poetry itself, from the youthful confidence of the early work to the parochial withdrawal of the later verse.

My first chapter deals with the poetic construction of the city in Auden's earlier work, leading to a consideration of the problems that Auden saw as resultant for the poet in this urban environment. The subsequent importance of the city motif cannot be underestimated. As one critic puts it,

Throughout...the whole stretch of his career [Auden] conceived the whole name and nature of the human world to be that of the city. (Scott, 145)

Running parallel to this conception, however, are the manifold difficulties that Auden perceived for himself as poet in the city and which he outlines in the poetry I consider, ending the first chapter with a discussion of the seminal "New Year Letter" of 1940.

In the development of my argument, chapter 2 takes the form of a comparison between certain poetry of Auden and Edwin Muir, the Scottish poet and respected critic. From this comparison comes not only further material on the importance of landscape as a means of poetic identification, but also some insight into the psychology of the two poets and their differing perceptions of the artist's significance and motivation. Finally, in chapter 3, I return solely to the work of Auden, contending that his verse after the 1940s represents a sophisticated resolution of the cultural and psychological problems he had initially found inherent in his role as poet. This analysis will then lead to an investigation of the common view of Auden as "social" poet

and some of the negative connotations with which critics have associated this stance.

\* \* \*

Born in 1907, W.H.Auden can be fairly described as the first major English poet to belong strictly to the twentieth century. In this context, it is inevitable that the cultural preconceptions of his poetry differ slightly from those of his immediate predecessors. The despair and discontent that The Great War provoked was an inheritance to Auden, and not the cataclysm that it represented to the previous generation of writers and artists. Rather, it was the political debacle of 1930s Europe that shook him from the assurance of the validity of his poetic genius. Indeed, as the problems of writing poetry became more prevalent in his verse and prose, the very notion of poetic inspiration developed into an ambivalent one at best. What can the man born to be a poet do in a world where his poetry serves no purpose? If such is the case, how is this tragic burden to be borne or alleviated? One of the most notable aspects of Auden's prodigious output is his relentless experimentation with form, from complex sestina to the strictly syllabic *haiku*, borrowed from Oriental poetry. This playful aspect of Auden's poetic, exacerbated by his donnish obsession with words from the dustiest corners of the English language, is an important factor in understanding his construction of a new *raison d'etre*, a new "myth" even, for the poet in an urban society. And this urban setting is a vital factor in the understanding of Auden's challenging new agenda for

contemporary poetics, for it is very much to the city that Auden addresses his poetic message and from that source that it comes. It is vital in this context to appreciate, if not the actual meaning of the word "city" as Auden understood it, at least the vast scope of meaning and significance it held for him. As one critic aptly points out, for Auden, the city is "a state of mind...and has geographical existence only on the map of his emotions." (Ohmann, 176) In trying to decipher the meaning of the city, Auden is asking himself the most difficult of questions, for, as Burton Pike lucidly explains in his book *The Image Of The City In Modern Literature*, the image of the Metropolis is one which is deeply confusing, and at times contradictory:

The myth of the city as corruption, the myth of the city as perfection: This bifocal vision of Western culture is still very much with us. Indeed, the image of the city stands as the great reification of ambivalence, embodying a complex of contradictory forces in both the individual and the collective Western minds. The idea of the city seems to trigger conflicting impulses, positive and negative, conscious and unconscious. At a very deep level, the city seems to express our culture's restless dream about its inner conflicts and its inability to resolve them. On a more conscious level, this ambivalence expresses itself in mixed feelings of pride, guilt, love, fear, and hate towards the city. The fascination people have always felt at the destruction of a city may be partly an expression of satisfaction at the destruction of an emblem of irresolvable conflict.  
(8)

This final point is of particular interest when considering Auden's poem "The Fall Of Rome", which I discuss in chapter 2. By trying to understand and make sense of the city, Auden may have been trying to save it from its own destruction or he may have been trying to conquer it for his own personal

glory, in order to be loved by the multitude that inhabits it. What is clear is that in his attempts to "rationalize an object built by man which...has displaced nature in the natural world" (Pike, 8), Auden was forced into the defensive posture of justifying his own role as poet before he could do anything else.

- CHAPTER 1 -

Rise up, thou monstrous ant-hill on the plain  
Of a too busy world!

So Wordsworth describes London, setting a tone of suspicious contempt towards the motif of the city that was to last for over a century and relegating the pressing concerns of urban development to the realm of "vulgar" prose. To quote one critic on this aspect in the work of Tennyson, Browning and Arnold:

...their responses to industrial and urban growth are so limited that, as compared to the responses of other writers, they seem to deserve the charge that they turned their backs to the contemporary scene. And indeed, if it were not for the novelists and essayists - together with a few minor poets - we would have little or no literary record of the existence of nineteenth-century industrial development and its endless physical, social and psychological ramifications. (Johnston, 86)

The degradation of humanity that the English Romantic movement, with poetry at its forefront, clearly saw as a corollary effect of the growth of the city explains, at least to some extent, the motives for this reluctance. However, the desire and the attempt to maintain a non-urban state on the part of the Romantics and their successors come in the face of the massive and irresistible demographic fluctuations of the nineteenth century. We see this effect clearly in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" by Yeats, a poet who could be considered as bridging the Romantic and Modernist

movements. The poem is a celebration of an Utopian pastoral scene:

I will arise now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay  
and wattles made:  
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the  
honey bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

As becomes clear, however, this fantasy is in response to a very different scene:

And I shall have some peace there...

The implication is that there is no peace wherever the speaker is actually present, that location being

...on the roadway, or on the pavements grey.

Whether Yeats likes it or not (and presumably he does not), he is a man of the city, the Lake Isle being a fantasy nurtured in "the deep heart's core."

It is the poetry of T.S. Eliot that marks the watershed of urban poetic representation, his descriptions of the city marked by an unprecedented aesthetic:

The winter evening settles down  
With smell of steak in passageways.  
Six o'clock.  
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.  
And now a gusty shower wraps  
The grimy scraps  
Of withered leaves about your feet  
And newspapers from vacant lots;  
The showers beat  
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,  
And at the corner of the street  
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.

And then the lighting of the lamps.

(CP, 23)

Eliot's principal achievement was to give the imagery of the city a poetic credibility after the lasting effect of what



we might term Wordsworth's uncompromising pastoralism. The beauty of Eliot's urban vision is a melancholy one, but one validated by an association with images of indisputable literary pedigree, such as the well-known presentation of city life as a Dantesque torment in "The Waste Land:

Unreal City,  
Under a brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

(CP, 65)

What underlies this significant development is a pragmatic appreciation that the poet's relevance can only be limited if he refuses to incorporate the ever-expanding urban sphere into his poetry. In fact there is a sense in "Preludes" that this development is irresistible, in the description of

The conscience of a blackened street  
Impatient to assume the world.

(CP, 24)

To the modern poet there is a pressing challenge to discover the meaning behind Wordsworth's "blank confusion" of millions of apparently unconnected existences:

I am moved by fancies that are curled  
Around these images, and cling:  
The notion of some infinitely gentle  
Infinitely suffering thing.

(CP, 24)

Just as Wordsworth's *Prelude* is an attempt to justify "The Growth of a Poet's Mind" in the context of his rural environment, so Eliot's "Preludes" are a necessary statement

of urban identity.

The influence on Auden of Eliot's key early poetry, especially "The Waste Land", is well documented.<sup>1</sup> It would not be unreasonable to suggest that the young Auden, brought up in the industrial heartland of the Midlands ("My heart has stamped on/ The view from Birmingham to Wolverhampton"), would be particularly receptive to the breadth of Eliot's urban vision. However, in Auden's earliest published poetry, the influence seems diluted and fragmentary. It is mainly masked by the idiomatic obscurity of much of the poetry and a highly un-Eliot-like tone of oracular assurance ("It is time for the destruction of error.") However, there are glimpses of civic concerns to be found, like the interest in the stark urban landscape with which he is familiar:

Metals run  
Burnished or rusty in the sun,  
From town to town,  
And signals all along are down.

(CP, 33)

Also the key motif of entrapment, which certainly develops throughout Auden's poetic career, can be discerned:

There is no change of place:  
No one will ever know  
From what conversion brilliant capital is waiting,  
What ugly feast may village band be celebrating;  
For no one goes  
Further than railhead or the ends of piers,  
Will neither go nor send his son

---

<sup>1</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, in his fine biography of Auden, quotes a conversation he (Auden) had with his tutor at Oxford:

"I have torn up all my poems." Coghill asked why.  
"Because they are no good. You ought to read Eliot. I've been reading Eliot. I now see the way I want to write." (57)

Further through foothills than the rotting stack  
 Where gaitered gamekeeper with dog and gun  
 Will shout 'Turn back.'

(CP, 34)

It is difficult, however, to describe this extract as truly redolent of an urban or city-based perspective, as the images still incorporate rural motifs of "foothills" and "gamekeeper", suggesting the lingering influence of Hardy on the young poet. The combined effect of these early poems lacks a tangible overview of urban existence - rather than the metaphysical bias of Eliot's attempt to unravel civic life, Auden is primarily concerned with topographical phenomena. At this stage, the city is merely a place, a physical entity with an inherent moral pejorative - more than once, the movement to the city is unimaginatively described as a symbolic descent into the "valley." There are many *real* cities and towns in this poetry and not yet the *one* city of the imagination which is to emerge as Auden's urban vision starts to incorporate cultural and psychological phenomena. Perhaps only once at this stage do we see the city beyond its merely geographical status. In the poem Auden eventually titled "Venus Will Now Say a Few Words", we are aware of the town or city in a more abstract light, as a symptom of the culture it houses:

You in the town now call the exile fool  
 That writes home once a year as last leaves fall,  
 Think - Romans had a language in their day  
 And ordered roads with it, but it had to die:  
 Your culture can but leave - forgot as sure  
 As place-name origins in favourite shire -

(CP, 44)

Rather than address the town from outside as elsewhere, we now see it from within, where outsiders are "exiles". The introverted city is under siege from the transience of its own nature. As we shall see, this transience certainly threatens, but it might also hold the secret to a future in the mythical utopia of the "Just City".

It would not be long before these diffuse elements in the early poetry began to merge into a more cogent perspective. By 1933, in an originally untitled poem, we can detect a clear move away from the physical reality of the city to a more imaginative and archetypically significant representation of country and city, enhanced by the echo of the classical sestina that Auden adopts:

Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys,  
 Seeing at end of street the barren mountains,  
 Round corners coming suddenly on water,  
 Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for islands,  
 We honour founders of these starving cities  
 Whose honour is the image of our sorrow.

(CP, 119)

The poem describes human aspiration in terms of the wish for movement away from "cities" in "valleys" to idyllic islands

Where life was innocent, being far from cities.

The effects of this urge to relocate is ultimately self-destructive, however:

So many, doubtful, perished in the mountains,  
 Climbing up crags to get a view of islands,  
 So many, fearful, took with them their sorrow  
 Which stayed them when they reached unhappy cities,  
 So many, careless, dived and drowned in water,  
 So many, wretched, would not leave their valleys.

(CP, 120)

Note how the dirge-like repetition of "so many", which adds to the poem an element of timelessness, is a direct borrowing from the passage from "The Waste Land" I quoted earlier. Significantly, the resolution to the poem is not framed as a resolute answer to the imperfect cycle of the poem, but rather a hopeful question:

It is our sorrow. Shall it melt? Then water  
Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these  
  valleys,  
And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands.

(CP, 120)

Underlying the beautiful lyricism, here we see the vital development in Auden's work towards the realization of an ideal civic structure, a mythical entity which he describes elsewhere in his work as "The Just City". Auden has followed Eliot's lead in accepting the fundamental truth of the city's conspicuous existence, yet in place of the latter's stark resignation to urban malaise, Auden offers a potential for improvement in the suggestion that "we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands." One senses that the pseudo-utilitarian philosophy expounded in this final line is the symptom of Auden's actively political stance at the time of this poem's writing. However, it does not fully detract from the poet's progress towards a distinct imaginative conception of his civic environment. As the title that Auden eventually gave the poem, "*Paysage Moralisé*", illustrates, the landscape of "mountains", "islands", "valleys", "water" and "cities" is not merely a topographical one, but one imbued with psychological (Auden as a young man was greatly

influenced by Freud), social and spiritual meaning. That the symbol of the city includes a multitude of significance is apparent from the diverse adjectives Auden uses in this and other poems - it can be "starving", "unhappy", "learned", "talkative", "unlucky", to name but a few. It is perceptions of the city and not any kind of definitive representation of the city that the poem contains.

Edward Mendelson, in his preface to *The English Auden*, comments on the plethora of placenames, particularly cities from around the world, with which much of Auden's poetry of the mid-to-late 1930s is concerned (xix). In the vignettes of these cities, Auden examines further manifestations of the Protean city, from Macao, "the city of indulgence", where

Churches beside the brothels testify  
That faith can pardon natural behaviour.

(CP, 176)

to "cold" Brussels, likened to a prostitute as

...Fifty francs will earn the stranger right  
To take the heartless city in his arms.

(CP, 178)

Under the weight of this staggering range of civic existence, however, Auden is aware of his inability to correlate it into the single "Infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering thing" that Eliot senses, a confusion mirrored in the imagery of the poem "Winter in Brussels":

Wandering through cold streets, tangled like  
Coming on fountains rigid in the frost, old string,  
Its formula escapes you; it has lost

The certainty that constitutes a thing.

(CP, 178)

This problem of presenting the actual city, the failure of the mirror held up to nature to reveal anything to us, is what lies at the root of Auden's sense of futility for the poet in urban society. This disillusionment with the "real" city as a source of understanding is at the root of what one critic fluently describes as

Auden's attempts to establish the "idea" of a city as something that can be poetically separated from its physical existence. (Johnston, 232)

John H. Johnston, in his book *The Poet and The City*, comments further on this problem for Auden, instructively outlining the methods he uses to redefine the city:

...a system of ideas, a historical perspective, a framework of myth; fixed by formula, or structure or both, the city is never approached in the direct physical sense. (230)

I feel it is necessary for the reader to consider this as a failure on Auden's part to achieve what he set out to do, for within this failure lies the root of Auden's doubt about the efficacy of the poet in this unfathomable world upon which he is unfortunately dependent. One of the products of this gradual alteration in perception away from any notion of truth inherent in the physical city is the way in which Auden chooses to use the city as a symbol for individual humanity and most significantly for the artist, thereby enforcing his (the artist's) relation to this urban environment. For example, Matthew Arnold, in the poem that bears his name, is initially described as a "dark,

disordered city" with a psychological geography of "square and boulevard and slum" (*The English Auden*, 241). It is, however, in the celebrated elegy "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" that the conception of poet as urban landscape reaches its apotheosis:

Far from his illness  
 The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,  
 The peasant river was untempted by the  
fashionable quays;  
 By mourning tongues  
 The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was the last afternoon as himself,  
 An afternoon of nurses and rumours;  
 The provinces of his body revolted,  
 The squares of his mind were empty,  
 Silence invaded the suburbs,  
 The current of his feeling failed; he became  
his admirers.

(CP, 247)

In the poetic imagination, the imagery of the city can be used, as it is here, paradoxically to suggest the mind and body of a single man. Yet within the same poem, Auden resurrects the non-poetic reality of the metropolitan through expressly to imply his vital doubt as to the importance of the artist in the miasma of urban humanity:

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow  
 When the brokers are roaring like beasts  
on the floor of the Bourse,  
 And the poor have the sufferings to which  
they are fairly accustomed,  
 And each in his cell of himself is almost  
convinced of his freedom,  
 A few thousand will think of this day  
 As one thinks of a day when one did something  
slightly unusual.  
 What instruments we have agree  
 The day of his death was a cold dark day.

(CP, 247)





fictional or actual, is clearly being undermined by the inescapable truth of life's disappointment or "the human position" as it is described, where Icarus' failure is just one of many. It seems that with every poem Auden writes, Keats' dictum that

Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

suffers a distinct and irreversible loss of valency. As John Bayley puts it, in an essay on Auden:

Art is ... a frozen world, locked in a series of gestures which, though fascinating and arresting, remains necessarily disconnected with the continuity of living. (65)

Of course, the crisis that this engenders in Auden's work comes from the fact that this argument comes to us in the form of a work of art, and a highly accomplished one at that (as, no less, does Breughel's painting). The difficulties of Auden's position are clear when we bear in mind the well-documented assurance with which he, as a young man, took to poetry as a lifelong vocation. Even with this in mind, Auden felt forced to undermine the social importance of the artist's role with surprising consistency, particularly in relation to the conspicuous political activity that the poetic community of the 'thirties, himself included, indulged in. His uncompromising dismissal of Shelley's romantic poetical philosophy - that poets are "The unacknowledged legislators of the world" - is based chiefly on his own distrust of the artist as a political protagonist. In a modern urban world of relentless advance,

the "mythic" poet is reduced to a quasi-comical, non-functional amusement:

All poets adore explosions, thunderstorms, tornadoes, conflagrations, ruins, scenes of spectacular carnage. The poetic imagination is no desirable quality in a statesman. (*The Dyer's Hand*, 84)

Auden pokes fun at the static nature of "poetic" truth by comparing it to the key image of the city, symbol of perennial change:

A poetic city would always contain exactly the same number of inhabitants doing exactly the same job for ever. (*The Dyer's Hand*, 85)

Similarly, the myth of the artistic community as legislators of any kind is dismissed with a sober warning:

Society has always to beware of the utopias being planned by artists *manqués* over cafeteria tables late at night. (*The Dyer's Hand*, 84)

There looms here a sense in this presentation that for the artist his art is a defense, a means by which he can escape the reality of existence while purporting to face up to it, as in the artist fleeing from the ugly truth in "Journey to Iceland":

Tears fall in all the rivers: again some driver  
pulls on his gloves and in a blinding snowstorm starts  
upon a fatal journey, again some writer  
runs howling to his art.

(CP, 151)

The protection that art offers may be closely related to the fantasies of the artist that Freud characterizes:

An artist is...in rudiments an introvert, not far removed from neurosis. He is oppressed by excessively powerful instinctual needs. He desires to win honour, power, wealth, fame and the love of women; but he lacks the means for achieving these satisfactions. Consequently, like any other

unsatisfied man, he turns away from reality and transfers all his interest...to the wishful constructions of his life of phantasy, whence the path might lead to neurosis. ("The Paths to Symptom Formation," 376)

It is perhaps with this in mind that Auden in "At The Grave Of Henry James" refers to "the vanity of our calling", but note again that it is a calling and as such presumably impossible to ignore. Perhaps in this sense, the poet becomes a martyr to his poetry and the beginnings of a new poetic myth can rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of previous disillusionment. In this context, it is particularly interesting to note the harshness that Auden reserves for poetry as compared to other media. This comes across with notable clarity in two sonnets from the late 'thirties, "The Novelist" and "The Composer". In the former of these two poems, the poet is paradoxically predictable:

Encased in talent like a uniform,  
The rank of every poet is well known;  
They can amaze us like a thunderstorm,  
Or die so young, or live for years alone.

(CP, 180)

Interestingly, Auden suggests a fusion of art and life here, a failure on the part of the poet to distinguish between the two opposite poles of his artistic philosophy and one, of course, linked to the English Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century. Again the notion of inspiration is pejoratively envisaged as being restrictive to the poet "encased" in his own talent. The alternative appeal of the prose writer is curious, but not altogether unfamiliar:

...he  
Must struggle out of his boyish gift and learn

How to be plain and awkward, how to be  
One after whom none think it worth to turn.

For, to achieve his lightest wish, he must  
Become the whole of boredom, subject to  
Vulgar complaints like love, among the Just

Be just, among the Filthy filthy too,  
And in his own weak person, if he can,  
Dully put up with all the wrongs of man.

(CP, 180)

The novelist is the successful artist of Breughel's *Icarus* -

One after whom none think it worth to turn.

- a persona, in the mould of Woody Allen's creation *Zelig*,  
that can merge into the everyday "real" world with the  
anonymity classic to the urban myth. The concept of struggle  
referred to is also in contrast to the problematic "talent"  
of the poet.

At the opposite end of the aesthetic scale lies the  
world of music, as characterised by Auden in the companion  
sonnet, "The Composer." Again, the eponymous artist is  
compared with the poet, who

...fetches  
The images out that hurt and connect,  
From Life to Art by painstaking adaption,  
Relying on us to cover the rift;...

(CP, 181)

The process of poetry is the reverse of the novelist's  
procedure of transforming Art into Life, and the poet gives  
us an insight into the trauma of creation, with images that  
"hurt" and "painstaking" work. Yet paradoxically, Auden  
numbers himself apart from the generic poet and along with

the other "us". This intellectual schizophrenia is clear proof of Auden's personal problems with the issue. Despite the title of the poem, the final sestet of "The Composer" is directed towards the "pure contraption" of the music itself, which is celebrated for its abstract, intangible, unworldly value, an art entirely independent of life:

You alone, alone, imaginary song,  
 Are unable to say an existence is wrong,  
 And pour out your forgiveness like wine.

(CP, 181)

It is poetry's lot to be caught between the ethereal beauty of music and the basic function of prose, without achieving either goal. The question that then begs to be asked is 'if it is neither beauty nor truth, what exactly is poetry good for?' It is with specific reference to Yeats, in his elegy to the great Irish poet, that we see the exposition of Auden's new philosophy of poetics:

Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.  
 Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,  
 For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
 In the valley of its making where executives  
 Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
 A way of happening, a mouth.

(CP, 248)

Poetry, then, is a symptom of life and certainly not the cause. Yet the topographical imagery suggests the knowledge that it is a lasting, even eternal force. In the third and final section of the poem, Auden outlines the distinction between reality and art with a new starkness in describing the world Yeats is fortunate enough to leave behind:

In the nightmare of the dark  
 All the dogs of Europe bark,  
 And the living nations wait,  
 Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace  
 Stares from every human face,  
 And the seas of pity lie  
 Locked and frozen in each eye.

(CP, 248)

There is no doubt that "(Auden) wants...to warn us against trusting to the sorceries and enchantments of art for any ultimate redemption" but faced with the "overhanging precipice" left by a "scrambling decade", Auden finds a role for poetry in the imaginative emotional landscape:

Follow, poet, follow right  
 To the bottom of the night,  
 With your unconstraining voice  
 Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse  
 Make a vineyard of the curse,  
 Sing of human unsuccess  
 In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart  
 Let the healing fountain start,  
 In the prison of his days  
 Teach the free man how to praise.

(CP, 249)

Auden inverts the classic image of the body politic and uses the *topos* of landscape as a means of expressing internal human aspiration. Auden reverts to the concept of poetry as a means of expression, as opposed to expression itself. Poetry has once again become a tool to language, a refined medium for the full range of experience. Significantly, the new poet has no preordained right to truth - he must "persuade" and "teach" the unconverted with his art. The

death of Yeats becomes an opportunity to develop a new poetic form from scratch, where the poet must work to regain his place in the "modernity" of the mid-twentieth century. However, lest we imagine Auden has fully resolved the psychological turmoil of the modern urban poet, the concept of "a rapture of distress" that he refers to is a disturbing one, suggesting a strange masochistic tendency, and one which the reader would do well to keep in mind in relation to the unconscious fantasies of the artist that I investigate in my second chapter.

\* \* \*

It is in "New Year Letter", on which Auden began work after his arrival in New York in mid-1939, that the exhaustive ruminations of the 1930s appear to be finally organised into a coherent exposition of the distinction between and the relationship of art and the society that fosters it. The complex notion of meaning is extensively explored, with the clipped couplet of the poem exuding at least an appearance of confident assurance:

To set in order - that's the task  
 Both Eros and Apollo ask;  
 For Art and Life agree in this  
 That each intends a synthesis  
 That order which must be the end  
 That all self-loving things intend  
 Who struggle for their liberty,  
 Who use, that is, their will to be.

(CP, 200)

Auden is surely correct in seeing the fundamental motive behind creative art as an ordering of the evident chaos of reality, especially urban reality. He is keen,



however, to protect readers from the threat of the mirror up to nature becoming nature itself:

Art is not life and cannot be  
A midwife to society...

(CP, 201)

As previously, Auden characterises this vital distinction by defining art as the arbitrary expression of a highly specific phenomenon, without necessarily incorporating any general significance:

For art is a *fait accompli*  
What they should do, or how or when  
Life order comes to living men  
It cannot say, for it presents  
Already lived experience  
Through a convention that creates  
Autonomous completed states.  
Though their particulars are those  
That each particular artist knows,  
Unique events that once took place  
Within a unique time and space,  
In the new field they occupy,  
The unique serves to typify,  
Becomes, though still particular,  
An algebraic formula,  
An abstract model of events  
Derived from past experiments,  
And each life must itself decide  
To what and how it be applied.

(CP, 201)

This self-consciously analytical appraisal is hilariously at odds with the Romantic aesthetic of poetry that speaks directly to the reader through a common bond of humanity. Yet, in what Auden describes as this "true *Gestalt*", he visualizes that which is hinted at the end of "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", an art which does not boast a grand sociological role, but rather the conversational effect of one individual adding to and altering the

perception of another in a recognisably artificial environment, where the act of writing creates the falsity of an "autonomous completed state." Note how the word "life" has been altered to describe a single existence and not the abstract "life" of the multitude.

Should the reader become carried away and wish to hail Auden as some artistic Messiah, he is quick not to number himself among the

Great masters who have shown mankind  
An order it has yet to find

(CP, 201)

if indeed any have been thought to have existed. On the contrary, Auden shows an empathetic awareness of society's perception of the artist as outsider, although any trace of soft-focus romanticism is eradicated in favour of a somewhat brutal reality:

If, weaker than some other men,  
You had the courage that survives  
Soiled, shabby, egotistic lives,  
If poverty or ugliness,  
Ill-health or social unsuccess  
Hunted you out of life to play  
At living in another way;...

(CP, 201)

Here again we see at best an ambivalent vision of the poet as pariah, distinct from the rest of "normal" society. Auden's resulting duplicity is what lies at the root of his poetic problem; his outsider's suspicion of the poet is presented in his own poetry, his own expression of himself as poet. This even leads to a critical self-examination within the "New Year Letter":

For I relapse into my crimes,

Time and again have slubbed through  
 With slip and slapdash what I do,  
 Adopted what I would disown,  
 The preacher's loose immodest tone.

(CP, 204)

Despite this, there is no suggestion from Auden that the flow of poetry will cease as it did for other poets of the thirties stifled by disillusionment. Poetry is "what I do" and, as such, a clear vocation for Auden, whether he likes it or not. The use of the word "crimes" in the first line of the extract goes at least some way to suggesting that he does not. The only solution, then, is to redefine the poet, to create a new poetic myth. Without wishing to engage in the vexed question of Auden's motives for emigrating to America in mid-1939, there is certainly a sense in which the novelty of the New World suited his purpose, well away from the "dreadful figure" of a second European war. New York, in particular, Auden saw as a place "ablaze with light" as compared to the symbolic darkness of what he had left behind. It is an equivalent light-heartedness in which Auden sees a new potential for poetry:

Though language may be useless, for  
 No words men write can stop the war  
 Or measure up to the relief  
 Of its immeasurable grief,  
 Yet truth, like love and sleep, resents  
 Approaches that are too intense,  
 And often when the searcher stood  
 Before the Oracle it would  
 Ignore his grown-up earnestness  
 But not the child of his distress,  
 For through the Janus of a joke  
 The candid psychopompos spoke.  
 May such heart and intelligence  
 As huddle now in conference  
 Whenever an impasse occurs  
 Use the Good Offices of verse;  
 May an Accord be reached, and may

This *aide-memoire* on what they say,  
 This private minute for a friend,  
 Be the dispatch that I intend.

(CP, 206)

The expectation of rhyme that the couplet affords seems well-suited to the comic bathos of this passage, more so than the deliberately static effect it produces earlier. The resolution of the difficulty is a double one, the philosophical completion matched by its consummate blending with the form of the poem. Yet, as we have already seen, in his reference to the "relief" of "grief", there is a disturbing psychological overtone which I again urge the reader to recall when reading the next chapter.

Many critics have been led to devalue Auden's work after his departure from England as descending into a "joke" or a "game". Auden himself describes poetry as a game, where a pre-ordained set of rules must be obeyed. However, with an image Auden borrows directly from Freud, the joke in "New Year Letter" is a Janus, a two-headed creature looking both forward and backward. The parallel with Shakespeare's Fool is pronounced - many a true word is indeed spoken in jest. This use of the word "joke" is perhaps unfortunate in its negative connotations, but is equally convenient in its associations with Freud's work *Jokes And Their Relation To The Unconscious*, in which the following idea is postulated:

The process in the joke's first person produces pleasure by lifting inhibition...but it seems not to come to rest until, through the intermediary of the interpolated third person, it achieves general relief through discharge. (158)

The joke, then, is a wholly social form, a form that relies on its audience, the form that corresponds most closely to

- CHAPTER 2 -

In analyzing the poetry from the first phase of Auden's career, certain factors have been distilled which help to explain at least some elements of his complex artistic standpoint. As we have seen, Auden's responses to the urban environment, which is in the manner of a birthright to him, is vital in his developing theory and practice of poetry as a valid means of modern communication. Auden's attitude towards the perception of the artistic myth is also striking - in particular the poet as an outsider, defending himself through his art and yet simultaneously stigmatized by it. Another important factor to be aware of is the play within Auden's work - the plethora of form all apparently handled with consummate skill, the fascination with obscure words and the blending of serious issues with frivolous humour, these are all important components of the poet's self-presentation and what I maintain to be his constant attempt to alter the perceived myth of the poet in society.

However, thus far I have viewed Auden in what is to all intents and purposes a vacuum, presenting his work outside the context of English poetry after Eliot's "The Waste Land" of 1922. With this point in mind it seems sensible to portray Auden against the backdrop of some alternative poetry, especially in the light of his new approach of the late '30s and early '40s. Due to limitations of space, I am

forced to choose only one poet and that poet is Edwin Muir, whose career roughly corresponds to Auden's. His selection is purely personal but not strictly arbitrary, for I feel there are both important correspondences with and divergences from Auden in certain of his works that may help us appreciate and understand the latter's endeavour more fully. I wish to start with a comparison of two of their best known poems, Auden's "The Fall of Rome" and Muir's "The Horses".

Both of these poems register scenes of urban demise, Muir's the result of the instantaneous violence of nuclear destruction, Auden's the gradual deterioration of a once great culture. "The Horses" begins memorably, with a mythic vagueness:

Barely a twelvemonth after  
The seven days' war that put the world to sleep,  
Late in the evening the strange horses came.

(SP, 85)

Massive destruction is of course implied in the deliberate perversion of the Christian myth of the seven days of creation. Muir's wish to express an immediacy in the poem comes from the conspicuous references to modern technology. In contrast to what we have already seen in Auden's work, Muir gives a dimension of mundane reality to his imaginative world:

On the second day  
The radios failed; we turned the knobs; no answer.  
On the third day a warship passed us, heading north,  
Dead bodies piled on the deck. On the sixth day  
A plane plunged over us into the sea. Thereafter  
Nothing. The radios dumb;  
And still they stand in corners of our kitchens,  
And stand, perhaps, turned on, in a million rooms

All over the world.

(SP, 85)

For the purposes of his poem, Muir gives us an extreme image of urban technological influence; the symbol of the universal radio suggests a vision of an all-encompassing network of communication by which all peoples are linked. Yet Muir skilfully, through the word "perhaps" wrapped in commas, also expresses the ultimately ignorant isolation of such a world. In the ruins of apocalyptic destruction, the seeds of a new order emerge from elsewhere, with what went before, as crystallized by the symbol of the radio voices, rejected:

But now if they should speak,  
If on a sudden they should speak again,  
If on the stroke of noon a voice should speak,  
We would not listen, we would not let it bring  
That old bad world that swallowed up its children quick  
At one great gulp. We would not have it again.

(SP, 85)

The new hope is realised in the rejection of technology:

The tractors lie about our fields; at evening  
They look like dank sea-monsters couched and waiting.  
We leave them where they are and let them rust:  
'They'll moulder away and be like other loam'.  
We make our oxen drag our rusty ploughs,  
Long laid aside.

(SP, 86)

This apparently Luddite philosophy is, of course, grounded in the Romantic wish to progress/regress to the pastoral bliss of pre-industrial world, the paradox beautifully captured in the central line of the poem:

We have gone back  
Far past our fathers' land.

(SP, 86)

\* \* \*

The key to Roman civilization as it appears in Auden's poem "The Fall Of Rome" lies primarily in the myth of society self-destructing, often, as in this case, in a flagrant exhibition of decadent wealth:

...Fantastic grow the evening gowns.

(CP, 332)

Importantly, the poem suggests it is the very machinery of organized urban existence that lies at the root of inevitable demise, by being a vehicle of dissent:

As an unimportant clerk  
Writes I DO NOT LIKE MY WORK  
On a pink official form.

(CP, 333)

As in Muir's poem, then, the abhorrent vacuum left behind by a failed society must be filled. Unlike Auden, Muir finds solace in the simplicity of a mystical, fantastic image of nature:

We had sold our horses in our fathers' time  
To buy new tractors. Now they were strange to us  
As fabulous steeds set on an ancient shield  
Or illustrations in a book of knights.  
We did not dare go near them.

(SP, 86)

Muir chooses his symbol well; the connotations of the four horseman of the apocalypse and of the mythical steed Pegasus are strong, as is the ironically Swiftian role of the horses in proving mankind's folly:

In the first moment we had never thought  
That they were creatures to be owned and used.

(SP, 86)



The horses signifying the simplicity and dignity of Muir's new anti-urban utopia, the poem ends in almost glib satisfaction:

Since then they have pulled our ploughs and borne our  
loads,  
But that free servitude still can pierce our hearts.  
Our life has changed; their coming our beginning.

(SP, 86)

In contrast to the sincerity of Muir's blank verse, Auden presents his vision in a basic doggerel. This rhythmic bathos of "The Fall Of Rome" lies at the source of the dissolute and mischievous pleasure with which Auden presents the downhill momentum of the city towards a willing self-destruction, a pleasure which is strongest in the comic vignette of Cato, described by the florid adjective "cerebrotonic", which according to *Webster's English Dictionary* means showing a "temperament typical of the ectomorphic individual marked by predominance of intellectual over social or physical factors and by exhibition of introversion and shyness." Hence the damning continuation, on the city's artistic community:

All the literati keep  
An imaginary friend.

(CP, 332)

Both poets agree then, not surprisingly in the post-war cultural environment, that the ideal lies well away from the influence of the so-called intelligentsia. With Muir, the imaginative alternative is apparent, that man's salvation lies in a re-affirmation of his natural state, but with

Auden this is not the case. At this point, it is worth stating Auden's chronological status as a man born into a significantly urbanised world, as opposed to the older Muir, whose formative years were spent in the rural isolation of the outer Hebrides in the late nineteenth century. Subsequently, Auden envisages the relation between the decaying *civitas* and the world of nature somewhat differently:

Unendowed with wealth or pity,  
 Little birds with scarlet legs,  
 Sitting on their speckled eggs,  
 Eye each flu-infected city.

Altogether elsewhere, vast  
 Herds of reindeer move across  
 Miles and miles of golden moss,  
 Silently and very fast.

(CP, 333)

The distance of the pitiless birds and the oblivious reindeer emphasize the parochial isolation of the urban mass, trapped in a descending spiral and totally failing to make connection with the "altogether elsewhere" as Muir supposes possible. In this context, Auden's use of the city-state motif of Roman history is inspired, presenting the walled city, self-absorbed to the point of destruction, the process metaphorically linked to the irresistible spread of a viral epidemic. This image of the city as organism, however, is significant in offering a possible future where the call to "rebuild our cities, not dream of islands" can be upheld. For, as Auden states in the slightly later poem "Memorial for a City", written in 1949, there may be a future:

It has no image to admire,  
 No age, no sex, no memory, no creed, no name,  
 It can be counted, multiplied, employed  
 In any place, at any time destroyed.

Is it our friend?  
 No; that is our hope; that we weep and It does not  
 That for It the wire and the ruins are not the end: <sup>grieve,</sup>  
 This is the flesh we are but never would believe,  
 The flesh we die but it is death to pity;  
 This is Adam waiting for His City.

(CP, 595)

The imaginative quest, then, for the "just city" has been an eternal one, ever since Adam's expulsion from the pastoral bliss of Eden. As each manifestation proves imperfect, so it self-destructs to be replaced by the next. Yet underlying the quest is the tragic knowledge that the goal is unattainable, that the cycle is a tormenting wheel of fire. This problem explains the complex attempt on Auden's part to disassociate humanity from the city while fully appreciating their mutual dependence. There is a sense, then, of a psychological entrapment within the city in Auden's poetry which can be likened to the notorious paralysis of the inhabitants of Joyce's Dublin.

In these contrasting backgrounds, urban malaise in Auden's poetry and natural Utopia in Muir's, it is not surprising that these two poets envisage the role of the artist in a different light. Indeed, it would be fair to say that the question is one that Muir broaches little in comparison to Auden and there is no sense of the latter's manifest insecurity about his position. In a poem such as "The Island", Muir swaps the true urban background for a

pastoral scene redolent of Keatsian romanticism, with the present linked through tradition to the past:

Your arms will clasp the gathered grain  
 For your good time, and wield the flail  
 In merry fire and summer hail.  
 There stand the golden hills of corn  
 Which all the heroic clans have borne,  
 And bear the herdsmen of the plain,  
 The horseman in the mountain pass,  
 The archaic goat with silver horn,  
 Man dog and flock and fruitful hearth.  
 Harvests of men to men give birth.

(SP, 87)

This myth of a constant eternal cycle of creation is the antithesis of Auden's urban vision as seen in "The Fall of Rome" and "Memorial For a City". Importantly, it is in this setting that Muir chooses to justify the significance of the artist:

Though come a different destiny,  
 Though fall a universal wrong  
 More stern than simple savagery,  
 Men are made of what is made,  
 The meat, the drink, the life, the corn,  
 Laid up by them, in them reborn.  
 And self-begotten cycles close  
 About our way; indigenous art  
 And simple spells make unafraid  
 The haunted labyrinths of the heart,  
 And with our wild succession braid  
 The resurrection of the rose.

(SP, 87)

This passage is highly significant; this poem flagrantly ignores, from the title onwards, Auden's advice to "rebuild our cities, not dream of islands" and within his dream of a pastoral Utopia, Muir reaffirms the Orphic myth of poetry, emphasizing the power of art in soothing what he describes as "The haunted labyrinths of the heart." Yet these "haunted labyrinths" imply a darker side to humanity,

one which Muir clearly sees in his own contemporary vision of "The Good Town":

...evil is restless  
 And gives no rest to the cruel or the kind.  
 How could our town go wicked in a distance?  
 What is the answer?...

...when evil comes  
 All things turn adverse, and we must begin  
 At the beginning, heave the groaning world  
 Back in its place again, and clamp it there.

∴∴∴  
 '...This was a good town once.'

(SP, 70)

Here, an important factor in Muir's work as compared to Auden's emerges. Muir's poetry contains a manifest spirituality, as exhibited by the descent of evil upon "The Good Town", as opposed to Auden's cynical secularity in "The Fall of Rome" where

Private rites of magic send  
 The temple prostitutes to sleep.

(CP, 332)

The reference to "resurrection" at the end of "The Island" is therefore highly significant, with art being one of the "braids" in its achievement. The use of the adjective "indigenous" to describe the art of this resurrection is interesting. There would certainly be an argument for describing Auden's poetry as "indigenous" since it is borne of the urbanity it seeks to explain. Subsequently, the notion of landscape becomes essential. It would appear that the landscape of "The Island" is one of manifest faith, where Auden's is definitely not, with each poet's indiginity seeking a different goal.

An apparent outpouring of his Christian faith comes in Muir's poem "The Killing", the manifest content of which is a description by an anonymous bystander of Christ's crucifixion on Good Friday:

That was the day they killed the Son of God  
On a squat hill-top by Jerusalem.

(SP, 79)

The most striking element of the poem on a first reading is the violence of the poem's manifest content:<sup>1</sup>

After the ceremonial preparation,  
The scourging, nailing, nailing against the wood,  
Erection of the main-trees with their burden,  
While from the hill rose an orchestral wailing,  
They were there at last, high up in the soft spring  
day.

We watched the writhings, heard the moanings, saw  
The three heads turning on their separate axles  
Like broken wheels left spinning. Round *his* head  
Was loosely bound a crown of plaited thorn  
That hurt at random, stinging temple and brow  
As the pain swung into its envious circle.  
In front the wreath was gathered in a knot  
That as he gazed looked like the last stump left  
Of a death wounded deer's great antlers.

(SP, 79)

This extract, however, becomes more significant to our interests when we consider it in tandem with a dream Muir describes in his own autobiography. I quote the dream and Muir's response in full because it helps us to widen our understanding of Muir's latent psychological perception of himself as poet and introduces a method of analysis which can also bear fruit in the study of Auden.

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of "manifest content" is that of what appears at face value in a text, as opposed to the "latent content", which refers to a work's underlying significance as deduced by the psychoanalytic critic.

...when I was being psychoanalysed, I had a dream about Nietzsche which contained a curious criticism of him and my infatuation with him. I dreamt I was in a crowd watching a crucifixion. I expected the crucified man to be bearded like Christ, but saw with surprise that he was clean-shaven except for a heavy moustache. It was undoubtedly Nietzsche; he looked as if he had usurped the Cross, though like many a usurper he appeared simultaneously to be perfectly at home on it. He stared round him with an air of defiant possession, as if this were the place he had always been seeking, and had now, with deep astonishment, found - or rather, conquered - at last; for he was like a man who had violently seized a position which belonged to someone else. His temples were so racked with pain that I could see the nerves twitching and jangling under the thin skin; his thick eyebrows were drawn down in a scowl, but in his eyes there was a look of triumph. I was bewildered by this dream, which seemed at such odds with Nietzsche's philosophy; yet it had the profound naturalness of a dream, the cross seemed to fit the man and the man the cross; and I slowly began to realize that Nietzsche's life had been a curious kind of self-crucifixion, out of pride, not out of love. This dream brought a dream of Nietzsche's own to my mind; I had found it described in Halévy's life. Nietzsche once dreamt that his hand had turned to glass, and in it was sitting a little frog which for some reason he had to swallow. He tried to swallow it several times, convulsed with nausea, but could not. As if I had now completely identified myself with him, I dreamt a little later, while I was still in Glasgow, a similar dream. I thought I was looking at my hand, when it grew transparent, so that I could see all the veins running and branching through it. As I looked I saw, writhing among the veins, a black devouring worm. I woke in a sick sweat. The dream was a horrible indication of my state at a time when I considered myself beyond good and evil. (*An Autobiography*, 128)

It is justifiable to go beyond Muir's analysis of the connection between himself and Nietzsche and say that the great German philosopher is in fact Muir's unconscious representation of himself. As Freud wrote in *The Interpretation Of Dreams*:

It is my experience, and one to which I have found no exception, that every dream deals with the dreamer himself. Dreams are completely egoistic. Whenever my own ego does not appear in the content of the dream, but only some extraneous person, I may safely assume that my own ego lies concealed, by identification, behind this other person; I can insert my ego into the context. (332-3)

Subsequently, Muir's reference to "self-crucifixion" becomes important. If we accept a link between the dream and the poem "The Killing", we perceive a strong masochistic link in Muir's psyche between pleasure and pain through his identification with Christ. Equally, the importance of the crucifixion topos as the source for artistic fantasy lies in its public nature - the victim is seen to be punishing himself. Here we see the ultimate wish-fulfilment of the artist, as characterised by Freud.<sup>1</sup> The Christian myth is, of course, that of a man who achieved resurrection via crucifixion and so the linking of the artist to the Christian martyr incorporates in the fantasy the wish for immortality through art. Freud, in his key paper "Beyond The Pleasure Principle", postulates upon "the aim of all life" being the achievement of death in a way prescribed by fantasy, thereby asserting power over one's existence in the return to the state of "pre-existence" (p.38). This theory would certainly account for the strange "triumph" in the eyes of the crucified man of the dream. Despite the manifest content, then, what lies beneath the surface of the dream is the mythic fantasy of the artist's wish, to suffer through

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 1, p.21.



guilt,<sup>1</sup> to be admired, to be loved. However, what strikes the reader of the dream and poem, in which this latent material is manifested, is that an orthodox Christian writer should produce such a curious rendition of the crucifixion story. For, as Freud once again wrote:

...(religions) require the individual to sacrifice his instinctual pleasure to the deity: Vengeance is mine saith the Lord. ("Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices", 117)

In one sense, Muir achieves this by transferring his masochistic fantasies onto a Christ figure of sorts. But, equally, our awareness of the latent material is a testament to the transparency of the displacement, not least in the final attempt by the speaker of "The Killing" to distinguish himself from the crucified man:

I was a stranger, could not read these people  
Or this outlandish deity. Did a God  
Indeed in dying cross my life that day  
By chance, he on his road and I on mine?

(SP, 80)

The striking ambiguity of the word "cross", with its various meanings of meeting and anger, but also with the connotation of partaking in the act of crucifixion illustrates the idea of self-crucifixion emerging even where the manifest material explicitly avoids it. Freud, however, is able to see a method in this apparent anomaly, in his analysis of a crucifixion etching by the Flemish artist Felicien Rops:

An ascetic monk has fled, no doubt from the temptations of the world, to the image of the crucified Saviour. And now the cross sinks down

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<sup>1</sup> The importance of hands in Muir's dream suggests that linked to the act of writing is a masturbatory guilt. I am indebted to Dr. Rosenblood for this observation.

like a shadow, and in its place, radiant, there rises instead the image of a voluptuous, naked woman, in the same crucified attitude. Other artists with less psychological insight, have in similar representations of temptation, shown Sin, insolent and triumphant, in some position alongside the Saviour on the cross. Only Rops has placed Sin in the very place of the Saviour on the cross. He seems to have known that, when what has been repressed returns, it emerges from the repressing force itself. ("Jensen's 'Gradiva'", 35)

This extraordinary insight accounts for the word "usurper" from Muir to describe himself on the cross, for he has indeed hijacked the myth of a repressing religion for the purposes of his own unconscious fantasy and substituted the revered hero of that myth with himself. In this sense, religion is both the cause and effect of Muir's poetic vision, one in which the poet has almost Christ-like powers of healing "the haunted labyrinths of the heart".

In contrast to the manifest religiosity of Muir's poetry, Auden's urban backdrop, despite his own personal beliefs, is very much a godless place. Perhaps the bleakest of his visions comes in one of his undoubtedly great poems, "The Shield of Achilles", in which the dichotomy between art and nature, Beauty and Truth in the city, is exposed with ruthless honesty, in what Monroe K. Spears accurately describes as "a grim picture of the complete breakdown of the ideal of community and civilized society, the most extreme contrast of ancient and modern" (*Dionysus and the City*, p 84). The scene is one Auden borrows from *The Iliad* of Homer - Thetis' request from Haephestos, the crippled armourer, for a shield to protect her son Achilles. Auden

does not reveal these characters until the final stanza, allowing us to see merely a woman looking for Utopia and having contemporary horror thrust at her instead:

She looked over her shoulder  
 For vines and olive trees,  
 Marble well-governed cities  
 And ships upon untamed seas,  
 But there on the shining metal  
 His hands had put instead  
 An artificial wilderness  
 And a sky like lead.

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,  
 No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood,  
 Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,  
 Yet congregated on its blankness, stood  
 An unintelligible multitude,  
 A million eyes, a million boots in line,  
 Without expression, waiting for a sign.

(CP, 596-7)

Auden presents art in this new situation as the active spoiler of society's self-perception, where beauty is a figment of imagination and the truth various degrees of barbarism. When Thetis, representing urban society's wish to see itself spiritually healthy ("She looked over his shoulder/ For ritual pieties/ White flowered garden heifers,/ Libation and sacrifice"), the artist answers with a scene familiar to us:

Barbed wire enclosed an arbitrary spot  
 Where bored officials lounged (one cracked a joke)  
 And sentries sweated for the day was hot:  
 A crowd of ordinary decent folk  
 Watched from without and neither moved nor spoke  
 As three pale figures were led forth and bound  
 To three posts driven upright in the ground.

(CP, 597)

There is no glimmer of resurrection in this art, simply the movement of events towards Christ's crucifixion, silently

collaborated in by the "ordinary decent folk" that we have seen romanticised by Muir in his Utopian and personal fantasy, a fantasy identical to that of Thetis in the poem. Even less is there any sense of identification, neither latent nor manifest, with the Christ figure, who is significantly not distinguished from his two fellow victims.

It is in the last image upon the shield, a "weed-choked field", however, that Auden offers us his darkest vision, for it is one of the present and also of their future:

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,  
 Loitered about that vacancy; a bird  
 Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:  
 That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,  
 Were axioms to him, who'd never heard  
 Of any world where promises were kept  
 Or one could weep because another wept.

(CP, 598)

The ironic power of the word "axioms" shows Auden at his most misanthropic. In shattering the civic myth of urban existence, Auden's poem, like the shield, is a vehicle of revenge on society for the itinerant artist, a figure represented by the "thin-lipped" Haephestos who, in the final stanza, walks away from the dismayed Thetis. The notion of the artist being able to "hobble away", being able to turn his back on urban society is a crucial shift in Auden's perception of the role of the artist, who until this point has been a prisoner of his environment. This ability to escape provides a new-found objectivity about the city:

As for Metropolis, that too-great city; her  
 delusions are not mine. Her speeches impress me  
 little, her statistics less; to all who dwell on



narcissistically before the figure of the dominant mother. The point is made more forcefully when considering the original version of this section, as it appears in *Nones*, which Auden later revised for the *Collected Poems*, where the "flirtatious male" replaced a "nude young male who lounges/ Against a rock displaying his dildo..." (p. 13) This wish is the unconscious motivation behind the artist's "works", the need to "charm" the mother into adoration of the son:

From weathered outcrop  
To hill-top temple, from appearing waters to  
Conspicuous fountains, from a wild to  
a formal vineyard,  
Are ingenious but short steps that a child's wish  
To receive more attention than his brothers, whether  
By pleasing or teasing, can easily take.

(CP, 540)

There seems a clear parallel with Muir's self-crucifixion topos in this unconscious fantasy of the artist to parade himself. Yet there is a deeper and more important correlation between the two fantasies of "The Killing" and "In Praise Of Limestone." For Muir's self-crucifixion, dependant for his exhibitionist fantasy on those who witness it, is an anti-climax:

Yet all grew stale at last,  
Spite, curiosity, envy, hate itself.  
They waited for death and death was slow  
And came so quietly they scarce could mark it.  
They were angry then with death and death's deceit.

(SP, 80)

As a fantasy of sexual abandon, death fails to bring orgasm or joy, this being its "deceit". This pessimism is reminiscent of nothing so much as the dour close of Eliot's "The Hollow Men":

*This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

(Eliot, CP, 92)

Similarly, for Auden there is a disappointment in the fantastic limestone landscape. Divorced from his imaginative investment

                  this land is not the sweet home  
  that it looks,  
          Nor its peace the historical calm of a site  
Where something was settled once and for all:  
  A backward  
          And dilapidated province, connected  
To the big busy world by a tunnel, with a certain  
          Seedy appeal, is that all it is now?

(CP, 542)

With Auden, as with Muir, the encroachment of reality upon the unconscious wish is too powerful to resist and particularly in Auden's case the fantasy cannot be sustained on its own. To quote Frederick Buell:

...the mythic world of the limestone landscape in "In Praise Of Limestone" yields at points to a vision of a more serious surrounding world, one in which "the meaning of life" is something more than "a mad camp." (76)

The ultimate importance of Auden's limestone landscape, as becomes clear, is rather that of unsympathetic bedfellow to reality, questioning the basic tenets of civic order as it actually does exist:

          It has a worldly duty which in spite of itself  
          It does not neglect, but calls into question  
All the Great Powers assume; it disturbs our rights.

(CP, 542)

Not surprisingly, top of the list to have his assumptions revoked is

The poet,  
Admired for his earnest habit of calling  
The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle, ... made uneasy  
By these marble statues which so obviously doubt  
His antimythological myth;

(CP, 542)

Here then is the very issue at the core of Auden's view of the poetic myth: the "antimythological myth" is the myth that the poet has any effect on tangible reality. Essentially it is the apparently paradoxical myth that the poet is not a myth. In keeping with Freud's perception of the artist, Auden points out that the motives behind poetry are internal and even unconscious, as in the wish to attract the mother or the wish for revenge on society in "The Shield of Achilles" and have little or nothing to do with the vague "externals" of Beauty and Truth. The question remains, however, of what purpose Auden's subsequent writings serve and how successful he is in his secession from the "antimythological myth."



- CHAPTER 3 -

So far we have traced Auden's development through his initial intention of poetically representing the real city and his subsequent and perhaps inevitable retreat into the notion of the city as an intellectual phenomenon, a place whose only *Gestalt* is in the mind. Simultaneously, there is an equal and opposite reaction in Auden's response towards the role of art, his view a movement away from the Romantic conception of poet as intellectual truth-bearer towards a practically-minded position for the poet among the ranks of the artisans, as proposed in the seminal "New Year Letter".

These two philosophies meet head-on, as it were, in the poetry of the early-to-mid-1940s, a period where two distinct poetic sensibilities appear to be at work. On one hand there is Auden the self-appointed Laureate, displaying a wide range of social poses. As G.S.Fraser points out,

...he can be back-slapping, ominous, port-winy, or abstruse, as the occasion demands. (103)

It is this concept of the "occasional" poet that is most striking. We see Auden marking moments of import in his elegies for Yeats, Freud and Ernst Toller and gently proffering advice as in his cosy birthday poem "Many Happy Returns", dedicated to his friend John Rettger:

Happy Birthday, Johnny,  
Live beyond your income,  
Travel for enjoyment,

Follow your own nose.

(CP, 324)

It is difficult not to detect the influence of "horrible and old" Kipling in this whimsy which is certainly typical of later Auden. Yet equally this period in particular is marked by most of Auden's longer poems - "New Year Letter", "For The Time Being", "The Sea And The Mirror" and "The Age Of Anxiety" - mammoth works of incredible poetic and intellectual ambition. The reader could certainly be forgiven for questioning the author of "New Year Letter" for producing these later gargantuan works, particularly in the light of the contradictory poems of the same period, and perhaps accuse him of the very faults he finds distasteful in others. "The Sea And The Mirror", for example, comes in the form of a continuation of Shakespeare's "The Tempest" after the curtain has fallen (some would consider this a presumption in itself) and is a lengthy and difficult consideration of the relationship between Art and Nature. There is a strong sense in the poem of Auden's attempting to make an intellectual mark, to stamp his authority upon the world of letters, for in their length and density these poems forfeit any kind of popular readership, as Auden must have known.

In many respects the most interesting and challenging of these longer poems is the highly ambitious "The Age Of Anxiety" which Auden wrote during the years 1944 to 1946. Described ironically as "A Baroque Eclogue", the poem is Auden's ultimate urban gesture, an attempt at the definitive

presentation of city life. The poem is a fascinating microcosm of the issues I have tried to engage in this essay, for the realism of character and setting is juxtaposed against an overwhelming poeticism and flexing of intellectual muscle on Auden's part. The welding together of these two heterogenous factors has a curious effect, perhaps best encapsulated by Delmore Schwartz's acerbic comment that "there is no real anxiety in the poem, but merely the discussion of anxiety" (369). Still deeply rooted in the city of Auden's imagination, the poem lacks the immediacy of real events and "anxieties". At the poem's prosaic close, however, Auden displays an awareness of this problem as the narrative leaves the last character behind:

...he returned to duty, reclaimed by the actual world where time is real and in which, therefore, poetry can take no interest.

(CP, 535)

There is, then, a clearly marked barrier between reality and imagination. In this sense, "The Age Of Anxiety" and the other longer poems seem to become monuments to Auden's imagined city, giving it an architecture in lines of verse. Indeed, the critic Edward Callan has referred in an essay on Auden to the "architectural method" of "New Year Letter." (153)

It is my contention that it is the poetry of the late 'forties, of which I have already discussed "In Praise Of Limestone" and "The Shield Of Achilles" in detail, that sees a further and most important shift in Auden's concept of civic poetics. It is this shift that leads us into the

developmental "third" phase of his career, a phase of what we can loosely term "resolution", for in it Auden blends what were previously opposed positions into the sublime achievement of his later poetry. As we have already seen, the intransigence that existed in the mutual exclusivity of imagination and reality at the end of "The Age Of Anxiety" has gone, replaced by a belief that it is through the imaginary that we may fully understand the actual world, as expressed in "In Praise Of Limestone." The new goal is that of understanding what Auden himself describes as "the Authentic City". Significantly, this expression comes from a poem sequence entitled "Bucolics", where the symbols of natural beauty are the starting point for civic conjecture:

A small grove massacred to the last ash  
 An oak with heart-rot, give away the show:  
 This great society is going smash;  
 They cannot fool us with how fast they go,  
 How much they cost each other and the gods.  
 A culture is no better than its woods.

(CP, 560)

Underlying this ironic use of the pastoral, the new blend between real and imaginary landscapes manifests itself in an interesting way. The poems, entitled "Winds", "Woods", "Mountains", "Lakes", "Islands", "Plains" and "Streams", instead of being mere topographical descriptions, are interior works, displaying the psychological effects of landscape on the individual with his own idiomatic perspectives. "I know a retired dentist who only paints mountains" starts the third poem. Indeed, as with "In Praise Of Limestone", it is the pronoun "I" that dominates the

"Bucolics", as in the opening to "Plains":

I can imagine quite easily ending up  
 In a decaying port on a desolate coast,  
 Cadging drinks from the unwary, a quarrelsome,  
 Disreputable old man; I can picture  
 A second childhood in a valley, scribbling  
 Reams of edifying and unreadable verse;  
 But I cannot see a plain without a shudder:  
 "Oh God, please, please, don't ever make me  
 live there!"

(CP, 565)

Because the idiom is Auden's own, it is not surprising to find reference here to the act of poetic creation, for there is no sense in which this pre-occupation lessens its grip on his thinking. What is clear, however, is that as the focus of the poetry has changed, so does the attitude towards poetry itself. As previously, society is warned to be vigilant:

Beware of him, poet,  
 Lest, reading over  
 Your shoulder, he find  
 What makes him glad,  
 The manner arch,  
 The meaning blurred,  
 The poem bad.

(CP, 547)

Despite the message to "beware", the tone of the warning is less than menacing - the threat of the poet has now been limited to his poems and has no bearing on what goes on outside his experience. For, as Auden points out in "Homage to Clio", the Muse of history pays no attention to his work:

Approachable as you seem  
 I dare not ask you if you bless the poets,  
 For you do not look as if you ever read them,  
 Nor can I see a reason why you should.

(CP, 613)

A further important concession regarding the role of poetry is made by Auden almost by accident at the close of the Bucolic "Plains":

Though I can't pretend  
To think these flats poetic, it's as well at times  
To be reminded that nothing is lovely,  
Not even in poetry, which is not the case.

(CP, 567)

In this rather convoluted statement, Auden, in trying to enforce an anti-Romantic perspective, actually, through the final caveat, admits to the aesthetic quality of poetry independent of any other significance. Equally, however, Auden's advice is directed towards the poet, who he advises to

Be subtle, various, ornamental, clever,  
And do not listen to those critics ever  
Whose crude provincial gullets crave in books  
Plain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks,  
As though the Muse preferred her half-wit sons,  
Good poets have a weakness for bad puns.

(CP, 619)

For the modern urban poet, writing among the curious scrutiny of contemporary literary criticism, this advice has a peculiar immediacy. Indeed, Auden's advice to the poet is amusing in its shameless expediency, as when writing laudatory verse to a figure of state:

If half-way through such praises of your dear,  
Riot and shooting fill the streets with fear,  
And overnight as in some terror dream  
Poets are suspect with the New Regime,  
Stick at your desk and hold your panic in,  
What you are writing may still save your skin:  
Re-sex the pronouns, add a few details,  
And, lo, a panegyric ode which hails  
(How is the Censor, bless his heart, to know?)

The new pot-bellied Generalissimo.

(CP, 620)

The poem from which the last two quotations have come Auden entitled "The Truest Poetry Is The Most Feigning", a quotation from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. In one sense, it embodies Auden's revised approach. Faced with his own futility, the poet should fall back on his talent for the sincere purpose of his own well-being. In Auden's case the "power to charm" lies in the exercising of "wit", in both the Renaissance and contemporary senses of the word. One corollary effect of this change is an altered view of the wider civic structure to which he belongs. As its exploiter now, Auden feels no duty towards the society that was the catalyst of much of his previous consideration. The focus of Auden's poetry has shifted completely from the outward-looking to the insular, with most of the poetry based directly on the poet's personal experience, however mundane:

On a mid-December day,  
 Frying sausages  
 for myself, I abruptly  
 felt under fingers  
 thirty years younger the rim  
 of a steering-wheel,  
 on my cheek the parching wind  
 of an August noon,  
 as passenger beside me  
 You as you then were.

(CP, 777)

It is clear what John Bayley means when he describes Auden as "a symbolist of the common fate, the humdrum situation." (p79).

The most impressive example of this intensely personal oeuvre is the series of poems "Thanksgiving For A Habitat", in which Auden explores every room of his beloved summer home in Kirchstetten, Austria. As earlier, with "Bucolics", the settings are the foundation for personal and idiomatic thoughts. Again, due to limited space, I will concentrate on only one of these poems, but it is a highly significant one. "The Cave Of Making", dedicated to the late Louis MacNeice, is the poem about Auden's workplace:

an antre  
more private than a bedroom even, for neither  
lovers nor  
maids are welcome, but without a  
bedroom's secrets: from the Olivetti portable,  
the dictionaries (the very  
best money can buy), the heaps of paper, it is evident  
what must go on.

(CP, 691)

The room is described with a clinical air, its functionalism stressed as a kind of purity. In this setting, poetry becomes very much a personal, secret, clean exercise, a world away from the public forum of the poet earlier in his career and especially from the debacle of 'thirties, that "low, dishonest, decade", and the self-doubt it generated:

More than ever  
Life-out-there is goodly, miraculous, lovable,  
but we shan't, not since Stalin and Hitler,  
trust ourselves ever again: we know that, subjectively,  
all is possible.

(CP, 692)

Inevitably, in his elegy to MacNeice, wistfully described as "a visitor/ who needn't be met at the station", the topic of poetry and its creators re-emerges:

Who would, for preference,



be a bard in an oral culture,  
 obliged at drunken feasts to improvise an eulogy  
     of some beefy illiterate burner,  
 giver of rings, or depend for bread on the moods of a  
     Baroque Prince, expected,  
 like his dwarf, to amuse? After all,  
                                     it's rather a privilege  
     amid the affluent traffic  
 to serve this unpopular art which cannot be turned into  
     background noise for study  
 or hung as a status-trophy by rising executives,  
     cannot be "done" like Venice  
 or abridged like Tolstoy, but stubbornly  
                                     still insists upon  
     being read or ignored: our handful  
 of clients at least can rune.

(CP, 693)

It seems that, for Auden now, the appeal of poetry lies precisely in its singular intransigence in the face of popular culture (how true this is is highly debatable, particularly when discussing Auden and his relationship with "beat poetry"). This hint of elitism is qualified with the mischievous overtone of the poet as troublemaker, revelling in the status of poetry as a luxury and a highly unfashionable one at that. Essential to this new credo is the idea that the poetry can exist despite being "ignored", suggesting an increased awareness of the importance of poetry *to the poet* as opposed to any potential readership. Indeed, the whole purpose of the comparison between oral and written verse is to rejoice in the "privilege" of the latter, that is the privilege of the "making", the private moment of creation, irrespective perhaps of the quality of the final work, for, as in this case, Auden frequently expresses dissatisfaction with the finished product:

                    dear Shade, for your elegy  
             I should have been able to manage  
 something more like you than this egocentric monologue,

but accept it for friendship's sake.

(CP, 694)

Despite the imperfection, there is a philosophical resignation and contentment underlying the poem which affords it this touching closing sentiment.

What strikes the reader of "Thanksgiving For A Habitat" most pointedly is that, even in this highly parochial context, these and the other poems of this period are considerably more "social" than anything written in the earlier stages of Auden's career, for they are poems of direct communication from one individual to another (all the poems, and most of Auden's poems after 1950, are dedicated to specific persons). At the heart of what I see as this "resolution" in Auden's work is the concentration and refinement of landscape down to what Auden is most familiar with. To quote Monroe K. Spears on "Thanksgiving For A Habitat":

These poems celebrate the House, and in that obvious sense the ideal has become very much more personal, the symbol shrunk from civil to domestic. (*Dionysus and the City*, 87)

This is only partly true. There is no doubt that the domestic is vital to Auden's new vision, but the civil quality still remains, for it is in the shrunken symbol that he finds the true essence of urban reality:

Of what, then, should I complain  
 pottering about  
 a neat suburban kitchen?  
 Solitude? Rubbish!  
 It's social enough with real  
 faces and landscapes  
 for whose friendly countenance  
 I at least can learn  
 to live with obesity

and a little fame.

(CP, 778)

It is extraordinary to think quite how far Auden is removed from the abstract, oracular quality of his earlier work. The desire for "The destruction of error" has been replaced by a need for "neat suburban kitchen", suggesting a wish for cloistering on Auden's part, a display of what is fashionably known as "anality". The new landscape is different, but it is still recognisably (sub)urban, "this intimate city, the microcosm of his privacy" as one critic describes it (Updike, 424). For want of a better word the new landscape is "home" with all the notions of security that it carries.

Perhaps Auden's ultimate achievement in these later poems, albeit an incidental one, is the comprehensive demystification of poetry, the disabling of the Orphic myth by reducing the poet's sphere of influence to the four walls he inhabits. In its place, however, Auden orchestrates a new myth: a myth of personality. For it is Auden himself who dominates the later work, the poet as it were overpowering his own verse. The forms that Auden adopts at this advanced stage of his career are concrete evidence of this: the mischievous Clerihews of "Academic Graffiti" and especially the highly epigrammatic *haiku*, just long enough at seventeen syllables to get a pithy message across:

Under a sovereign  
 who despised culture  
 Arts and Letters improved.

(CP, 793)

The show of ironic wit has become the main purpose of the poetry, with the oracular and epic pretensions of the younger Auden forgotten. There is a strong sense in the later work of Auden recreating himself through his poetry, using it as the autobiography he never wrote. Yet within this presentation a distinct element of self-caricature exists, with Auden displaying himself as a rather grumpy old man, full of a crotchety *contemptus mundi* (the reader will note the classic pun on the word "sun", suggesting an element of guilt on Auden's part for his own failure):

No summer sun will ever  
dismantle the global gloom  
cast by the Daily Papers,  
vomiting in slip-shod prose  
the facts of filth and violence  
that we're too dumb to prevent:

(CP, 887)

anticipating death in a witty dialogue between body and soul,

Time, we both know, will decay You, and already  
I'm scared of our divorce: I've seen some horrid ones.  
Remember: when *Le Bon Dieu* says to You *Leave him!*,  
please, please, for His sake and mine,  
pay no attention to  
my piteous *Dont's*, but bugger off quickly.

(CP, 872)

but also keen to be a nuisance while still with us:

Each year brings new problems of Form and Content,  
new foes to tug with: at Twenty I tried to  
vex my elders, past Sixty it's the young whom  
I hope to bother.

(CP, 717)

In short, Auden plays the role of the senior citizen *par excellence* through his poetry, allowing his verse to

become a kind of autobiographical screen through which he can recreate himself to his own satisfaction. It is not, however, my intention to undermine the quality of Auden's mature poetry for in it he captures a unique intimacy and philosophical calm. I make this point specifically in the light of the received critical thinking on Auden's later verse, which is at best ambivalent, at worst curiously derogatory. Perhaps it is proof of the effective personality expressed in these poems that critics feel the need to denigrate Auden personally; at various points he is described as "happily, sloppily, self-indulgent", "baggy-pants Auden" (McDiarmid, 157) a "disappointing backslider" (Scott, 135), even as a "frenzied figure" (Toynbee, 487). There is a sense of sour grapes in this personal criticism, especially when considering that three of these four examples exhibit the graceless habit of speaking ill of the dead. Lucy McDiarmid, in her book *Auden's Apologies For Poetry*, rather more properly accuses Auden's later poetry of being too much in the manner of a Medieval *retractio* (her expression), with Auden defending himself from society's contempt via a retreat into self-trivialisation (p.166). The notion of retreat is, however, highly debatable, for on matters of culture, there is no way in which he could be accused of going out with a whimper, as in this salvo:

Wild horses could not drag me to debates on  
*Art and Society*: critics with credos,  
 Christian or Marxist, should keep their trap shut,  
 lest they spout nonsense.

(CP, 845)

Maybe here is our explanation of the critical distaste: Auden dares to stick two fingers up and he pays the price. The pleasure of reading (and, presumably, writing) this poetry is the pleasure of hearing (and being) the unencumbered "free man". To read these poems is to experience the joy of meeting a new friend who, despite his pretensions and vagaries, talks honestly about life, as in the deceptively artless poem "A Contrast", written in 1973, the last year of his life:

How broad-minded were Nature and My parents  
in appointing to My Personal City  
exactly the sort of *Censor* I would have  
Myself elected,

Who bans from recall any painful image:  
foul behaviour, whether by Myself or Others,  
days of dejection, breakages, poor cooking,  
are suppressed promptly.

I do wish, though, They had assigned Me a less hostile  
*Public Prosecutor*, Who in the early morning  
cross-questions Me with unrelenting venom  
about my Future

"How will You ever pay your taxes?" "Where will You  
find a cab?" "Won't Your Speech be a flop?"  
- and greets My  
answers with sarcastic silence. Well, well, I  
must grin and bear it.

(CP, 845)

Auden never loses his awareness of and insight into the psychological processes that motivate him. Here, finally, after a lifetime of struggle, Auden has finally gleaned the "Just City" in which his poetry can be effective. Auden, like Adam, the first person, in "Memorial For A City" has been "waiting for his City". Now the wait has ended and the city has been found. It is a "Personal" city, as stressed by

the capitalization, based on his home, his friends, but most importantly, his own understanding of himself. Significantly, in this choice of the city for self-presentation, Auden uses the images of "Censor" and "Public Prosecutor" to represent his psyche. Auden's personal city, then, is one of law, order and restraint. Tired of being one of its Discontents, in his final years he chooses to embrace Civilization to the full.

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