

**Speech, Voice and Parable: Reading and Writing through Auden
(Letters to Auden, a Reading of His Poems,
and a Serial Poem of Barack Hussein Obama)**

by

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Abstract

This thesis comprises three main components: firstly, close readings and critical analyses of four major poetical works by W.H. Auden—"The Watershed", *The Sea and the Mirror*, "New Year Letter", and "In Time of War"; secondly, ten semi-informal letters addressed to W.H. Auden; and thirdly, a serial poem consisting of short and long poems based on the speeches of the public figure, Barack Obama. The thesis proposes a creative writing discipline founded on the productive and intensive exchange between reading and writing poetry, and reflection through letter writing. The chapters of critical analysis argue the following: firstly, that through his idiosyncratic handling of syntax and voice in poems like "The Watershed", Auden introduced a new element of the uncanny into English poetry; secondly, that in *The Sea and the Mirror*, Auden re-evaluated his poetics and altered his poetic voice in response to a new reading public; thirdly, that in the "New Year Letter," Auden uses tone to expand the range of his poetic voice; and fourthly, that in the sonnet sequence "In Time of War", Auden uses parable to combine lyric and narrative elements in order to universalise the Sino-Japanese War. Some of the issues raised in the chapters of critical analysis, such as poetic truth, poetic voice, the lyric subject, and parabolic writing, are elaborated on in the letters to W.H. Auden. Finally, the Serial Poem presents 74 short and long poems produced using appropriative writing procedures. The idea that runs through all parts of this thesis is that speech, voice, and parable are

crucial elements in the poetic practice of W.H. Auden, and that close attention to these three elements through all stages of this project—critical reading and writing, letter writing, and creative writing—has contributed to the development of a rich and productive poetic writing practice.

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Introduction

This creative writing thesis began with the proposal to produce a collection of 30-40 short and long poems based on a poetics that combined a regionalist and cosmopolitan rhetoric. For the research component of this thesis, I decided to examine the poetry and critical writings of W.H. Auden. At a fairly early stage, I had an intuitive sense that the example of Auden's trans-cultural and cosmopolitan rhetoric would give me a better understanding of the theoretical and practical components that would be needed for the successful completion of a creative writing project in poetry. I admired the poetry he had written throughout the 1930s during his English years, when he constructed a public profile as a poet of the left. But after his immigration to the United States, he somehow managed to re-invent himself and his poetics and maintain his role as a public poet. I wanted to understand how Auden had achieved this change and to what degree it was necessary for the continued development of his poetic identity. Of course, his move to America had attracted criticism; many critics accused him of abandoning his audience, and the native idiom and concerns he shared with that audience, by adopting a cosmopolitan rhetoric. In the early stages of this research project, I carefully considered the validity of these criticisms.

As I progressed with my close reading of and my writing about Auden, I got a better understanding of the direction I would be taking with the creative component of this thesis. Originally, I had wanted to find a

poetic medium that would give me the scope to address personal themes of a confessional nature and broader social, historical, and cultural themes. I also wanted a medium that would reflect my experiences travelling and living in different parts of the world. From an early stage, I was committed to a writing process that involved a recursive discipline of intensive reading, reflection, and writing. About two years into my studies, I came across a book containing the lectures of the San Francisco poet, Jack Spicer. I was intrigued by his poetic practice of “dictation” and his metaphor of the poet as a wireless receiver receiving transmissions from “aliens” or outside presences. I was inspired by Spicer’s example to envisage Auden as my mentor and begin writing a series of letters to him. Over a period of time, the letters formed an important part of my creative project. Additionally, I developed an interest in Conceptual Poetry writing procedures.

Writing about Auden’s *The Sea and the Mirror* and then writing a follow-up letter to Auden about the lyric voice gave me a better sense of the importance of voice and tone in Auden’s poetics. These aspects of poetry also had a decisive influence on my conception of my creative writing project. Finding my own lyric voice, I discovered, would not necessarily be answered through the cultivation of my own unique voice expressing my own unique experiences. My lyric voice could also be achieved through liberating myself from the bottomless void of my own

self (the “lyrical *moi*”, as Derek Walcott once called it).¹ I now realised that I wanted to write about the U.S. President Barack Obama, and that I wanted to use his speeches as the medium with which to address public issues while also projecting my own personal concerns, without the necessity to write confessional poetry. Both my research and critical writing about W.H. Auden and my own creative writing had now acquired much more focus. I knew which poems of Auden I needed to read and analyse, and I knew how I needed to go about writing the poems of my creative project. Eventually, I produced 74 poems for a serial poem I gave the title “Barack Hussein Obama: A Serial Poem”.

The basic conceptual assumption underlying this thesis is the notion of writing as an intensively reflective and recursive process. The organisation of the chapters in this thesis is based on this principle. It demonstrates the emergence of my creative writing poetry project through a productive exchange between intensive reading, close critical analysis, letter writing, and poetry writing. In effect, the chapters depict a seven-year-long conversation—between W.H. Auden, other poets, and me—that has resulted in the production of “Barack Hussein Obama: A Serial Poem”.

The thesis is divided into ten chapters. My first chapter—“On the Threshold: Looking over the Poet’s Shoulder”—introduces the recursive reading and writing approach I have adopted and modified from Mary Kinzie. I present a close reading of Auden’s poem “The Watershed”.

¹ Derek Walcott, “Derek Walcott with Glyn Maxwell,” Lannan Foundation, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 20 Nov. 2002. Accessed online at <http://www.lannan.org/events/derek-walcott-with-glyn-maxwell>

The second chapter consists of Letters #1 and #2 to my mentor, W.H. Auden. In Letter #1, I discuss the ideas in his essay “The Poet and the City”. I relate these ideas to my creative concerns, and I begin to outline the dictation poetic practice that I have learned from Jack Spicer. In Letter #2, meanwhile, I take issue with Auden’s ideas about poetic creation and “truth” in his two essays titled “Writing”. I argue that poetic truth is fundamentally different in kind from factual truth.

In my third chapter—“The Only Subject that You Have’: Poetic Voice in *The Sea and the Mirror*”— I argue that Auden’s arrival in America seems to have provoked him into adopting multiple voices and a new, disenchanted poetics in order to create a new public of readers for himself.

My fourth chapter consists of Letters #3, #4, and #5 to Auden. In Letter #3, I discuss Auden’s 1956 lecture “Making, Knowing and Judging”, in which he presents an account of how a poet transforms himself into a poet. I disagree with his reading of Coleridge’s concepts of the Primary and Secondary Imaginations, and I present the reasons why Coleridge’s concept of imagination is relevant to poetry writing today. In Letter #4, I discuss Christopher Nealon’s book *The Matter of Capital* and its description of Auden’s camp tone, combining high and low rhetorical styles. I also introduce my plan to appropriate large parts of the life and career of Barack Obama. In Letter #5, I discuss some of the complexities surrounding the lyric subject in poetry, and I refute Sam Ladkin’s restrictive ideas about the topic.

My fifth chapter—“‘Upon Our Sense of Style’: ‘New Year Letter’ and Catastrophe”—argues that Auden’s ostensibly neo-classical poem, “New Year Letter”, through its camp, many-levelled tone as well as its many discontinuities, contradictions, and points of tension, forces his readers to take a much more active role in constructing a coherent reading of the poem.

My sixth chapter presents my Letters # 6, #7, and #8 to Auden. In Letter #6, I argue that the “uncreative” writing methods of Conceptual poets present interesting new ways of bringing lyricism back to poetry. In Letter #7, I argue that although “uncreative writing” procedures have some practical benefits for contemporary poets they seem to reflect the rather disjointed aesthetic standards of the present times. In Letter #8, I briefly state the basic principles guiding the writing procedures I adopted to compose my serial poem.

In my seventh chapter—“‘The Mountains of Our Choice’: *Journey to a War*”—I present a defence of Auden’s sonnet sequence “In Time of War”. I argue that it deserves recognition for its brilliant use of parable to combine lyric and narrative elements.

My eighth chapter presents Letters #9 and #10 to Auden. In Letter #9, I explain that “In Time of War” was the major poetic influence in the composition of my serial poem because of its use of parable. In Letter #10, I consider Auden’s uprooted, trans-national identity and the problems such an identity seems to pose for a stable poetics. In contrast, Derek Walcott’s

autobiographical poem *Another Life* provides a signal example of some of the advantages of home and poetic rootedness. I relate the issues of poetic rootedness and poetic *rootlessness* to my own poetic practice.

In my ninth chapter, I present my serial poem. In my tenth and final chapter, I present a commentary on my creative writing poetry project and my critical reading and writing project.

The ordering of the chapters in this thesis is not meant to be a chronological account of Auden's poetic work. It instead reflects the development of my own thematic concerns and my increasing understanding of my personal poetics and goals. The chapters are arranged in such a way as to highlight the gradual stages by which this creative writing poetry project was brought to a successful completion.

**CHAPTER ONE: ON THE THRESHOLD:
LOOKING OVER THE POET'S SHOULDER**

On the Threshold: Looking over the Poet's Shoulder

For a person interested in understanding the stature and importance of W.H. Auden in twentieth-century letters and his continued relevance (if any) to contemporary poetry and cultural discourse, the work and biographical trajectory of this poet poses some serious problems. Firstly, there is his dauntingly prolific output and the fact that he experimented with virtually every poetic form (and may even have invented several), so that it becomes difficult to identify his characteristic form and outlook. In addition to this baffling prolixity, there's the fact that throughout his long career Auden adopted a variety of poetic outlooks and methods: his poetic rhetoric never seems to settle into a repeated and familiar pattern. It was as if, in order to avoid being pigeonholed by his admirers and critics alike, he adopted a conscious strategy of Protean change. A third level of paradox is manifested in Auden's intellectual development and the intellectual identities he shaped for himself. Throughout the 1930s the potent concatenation of political, psychological and personal symbolical elements in his poetry propelled him to the forefront of an exciting politically engaged literary movement, indeed of an entire generation—the *Auden Generation*, as it became known. And yet after his emigration to the United States Auden steadily distanced himself from his earlier political stances, and he denied the possibility that poetry, and art in general, can ever make meaningful interventions in the public world of politics and history. In fact, Auden eventually went so far as to

excise from his body of work not just certain lines that did not accord with his new chastened view but entire poems. From about 1939 Auden rediscovered his Anglican Christianity, and this fundamental change in outlook is reflected in his increased poetic recourse to Christian imagery and liturgical rhetoric.

For all of the above reasons, therefore, the prospect of turning towards W.H. Auden and using his poetic works and practice as a model for my own poetic practice is an especially daunting task. It is not just a matter deciding whether I should simply follow his own example of self-tutorship with the works of Thomas Hardy—selecting favourite works and then writing imitations. The task also involves making decisions about the orientation of my work—whether it should be directed towards public issues, such as history, social concerns, and the big political issues of the day, or whether it should be directed towards more personal concerns, such as the dynamics in my family, my love relationships, or my friendships. Auden also presents a signal example of a writer of high intellect who took religious and spiritual matters quite seriously, and who viewed a variety of phenomena through that prism. Would this at all be an option for me? As I contemplated the choices before me, I often felt as if, compared to Auden's wide range of concerns, my own concerns were quite paltry.

I am certain, however, that Auden is the right poet to adopt as my writing mentor: like me, for many years he led a fairly restless, unsettled

existence. He lived in five different continents and travelled widely. He was born in England and became an American. His sensibility was at once cosmopolitan, urbane, and boyishly waggish. But I did not really choose him as my mentor because I think that we are similar: in many very crucial areas, such as sexuality, religious commitment, and class attitudes, I feel we are very different. However, the crucial criteria for me were, first of all, Auden's professional skill as poetic craftsman—he really regarded his poetry writing as a vocation—and secondly, the fact that Auden was committed to passing on what he had learned. In all his non-poetical writings one detects an amiable disposition to be understood and to make ideas clear. Occasionally, he could adopt a perversely heterodox stance—maybe it irked him at times to be too complaisant—but most often he seemed kindly disposed to share the bounty of his vast reading and knowledge. Throughout his numerous articles, reviews, and non-poetical books one finds Auden willingly opening up his poetic workshop and sharing some of the secrets of his craft.

The qualifying sub-title of my thesis is “Reading and Writing through Auden”. This describes the approach that I have taken in this Creative Writing thesis. My writing involved a careful and disciplined course of close reading of some of Auden's major poetical works. My reading was not chronological in approach; instead it was guided by certain thematic concerns I had and the skills that I believed I needed to learn at the time. I wrote my own poems partly in response to my close reading of poems like

“The Watershed”, *The Sea and the Mirror*, “New Year Letter”, and “In Time of War”. I was guided to this method by the poet, editor, critic, and teacher of poetry, Professor Mary Kinzie. She states,

I believe poets read poetry differently than non-poets do. When some readers talk, I am amazed by the appetite for paraphrase. When critics talk, I am amazed by how completely they hear poetry as a function of culture (another sort of paraphrase). But when I hear poets, I hear the enchantment of the work. Their ideas about a poem are always borne by some conception of intimacy or distance of voice, rigor or looseness of attitude, delicacy or directness of treatment. Above all, poets always seem to listen, even as they compose, to the voice of that something that decides the rightness of their designs.²

The sound sense in her pronouncement convinced me that the productive exchange between reading and writing poetry would be the most indispensable course of self-instruction for me.

In her book *A Poet's Guide to Poetry*, Mary Kinzie invites “writers and would-be writers” as well as “those who wish to get closer to reading” to a way of reading that is not at all new, but which attempts to recover the threshold of uncertainty upon which poems take shape:

Imagine that period in the life of a poem when the words left behind on the page start to record an intellectual and imaginative game, a kind of hide-and-seek with the always elusive picture of the poem's whole. This picture of the poem's whole increasingly

² Mary Kinzie, *A Poet's Guide to Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago P., 1999), p. 1. Subsequent references in parentheses are to this edition.

draws us, as it drew the poet, across many thresholds of choice, always going one way rather than any of the others that crowded up at the time. (1999, p. 21)

Underlying her approach is an awareness of the provisionality of the poem—the sense that each poem takes shape out of a background of past poems and conventions about what is possible, and that each poem is formed out of recombining these past elements into something new and can therefore be changed at a later date: “Even after a poem has hardened into print, it may continue to represent a risk, a chance, a surmise, or a hypothesis about itself” (p. 2). Of course, she is not outlining an approach to reading that would attempt to reclaim poems from the writer’s perspective. We are not being invited to indulge ourselves in the delusion that we can get inside writers’ heads or that we can understand their innermost motivations. She reminds us, moreover, that once a poem is finished even the poet him or herself is alienated from the process of uncertainty, wrong turnings, and gradual discovery through which the poem is birthed: “the work viewed in hindsight by the writer is always the perfectly visible unfolding of a success story in which certainty and completion overcame doubt. The *poet’s* poem is, in a sense, dead” (p. 15).

Neither is she much interested in understanding the poet’s biography or the steps that he or she went through in order to complete their poems: “for the issue of intention can best be discovered from within an art rather than within a biographical subject” (p. 2). It is the poems themselves which hold Kinzie’s attention—how they are addressed to

specific tasks and occasions, poetic missions, that is, missions which are expressed most intensely (but not only) when responding to a poetic tradition (p. 14).³ In the approach Kinzie advocates, the reader is encouraged to *work through* a poem, attuned to what is on the page, the information about the author and his or her times, and most importantly to the poem's medium, as patterned words on a page, and the poet's imaginative scope—the extent to which he or she takes us beyond the familiar world (p. 14).

Because of its focus on the poem, Kinzie's approach may bear a very superficial resemblance to New Criticism. But in reality it is far removed from the approach of New Criticism. Where New Criticism assigns a role for the reader that is distanced from the poem—the finished cultural artefact, in Kinzie's approach the reader and the writer share analogous positions with regard to the emerging, provisional poem. Writing, she says, is “a model not only for making art but also for making sense of art [through reading]. At the core of both enterprises is a series of thresholds into the unwritten and the unknown” (p. 3).

When we read “through a poem from the inside,” as Kinzie urges us to, we sympathetically attune ourselves to the unknown horizon of stylistic possibilities opening up before the writer as he or she tests out a tentative

³ Like Kinzie, the Russian poet and critic, Joseph Brodsky also argues that the poet's relationship with poetic convention plays a more crucial role in his or her work than does the poet's biography: “The poet composes because of the language, not because ‘she left.’ The material the poet utilizes has its own history. It, the material, if you like, is the history, and frequently it absolutely does not coincide with the private life, because it has already outrun it. Even while striving perfectly consciously to be realistic, an author catches himself every minute, for instance, at ‘Stop. This has already been said.’” (In Solomon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky: A Poet's Journey through the Twentieth Century*, trans. Marian Schwartz [New York: The Free Press, 1998], p. 139).

beginning and confronts the range of choices and opportunities available to them as they strive to attain a glimpse of the unarticulated whole (p. 24). In effect, we *write the poem we read*; that is, in trying to understand the writer's work, we take upon ourselves in part the imaginative consciousness of the poet. We attempt to get into a poet's work by trying to imagine how artistic intention grew through the work (p. 34) Of course, we know we cannot actually know what the poet was thinking, but our reading will inevitably involve speculation about the poet's thought process. Kinzie explains that "By imagining the opportunities they had to make certain choices rather than others, we can estimate the values of the choices the poets actually made" (24). We are able to understand how a poem's themes, energies, and techniques move out into surprising divagations from the expectations and "climates of viewpoint and desire" built into it by the conventions inherent in its form.

I think by now it should have become apparent why Kinzie's method seems so appealing to me and apposite to the purposes of this research project. Her approach presents at once a guide to the critical reading of poetry, an *ars poetica* of sorts, and a writing guide. Her book outlines an approach designed to teach people how to read in order to write. Her method emphasises the provisionality of poems, their sense of risk, their progression through the poet's choices, the sense of surprise evoked as a result of these choices, and my involvement and experience of the poem as I *write* the poem through reading and charting its

digressions from the path I might have taken. Kinzie's method opens up a method of reading that may look a little bit different from the traditional literary critical approach to poetry, but it is a method that permits an approach and response to the work of W. H. Auden that is both critical and most importantly *creative*:

This approach asks the reader to depart from processes of reading that may have become habitual. We reach the threshold of this change when we accept that we can no longer read as if the poem were reaching out to us and manipulating us; instead, we can think of how we are moving inside the growing poem. But we are not imposing our meaning on the poem—we are actively remaking the work's own meaning, tracking the path of the poem from among the tangle of possible routes it might have taken but did not. In effect, we accompany the poet through the ambiguous emergence of the eventual artistic pattern. (p. 34)

We turn to the oft-cited Poem III in Auden's *Poems* of 1928 (the poem which was later given the title "The Watershed"), for example, and find ourselves seemingly invited to witness a setting and situation that has been made familiar to us from Romantic poetry—a speaker's relationship with nature. The poem begins with what seems like a question—"Who stands, the crux left of the watershed...,"⁴—and then continues with a fairly detailed description in iambic pentameter of a decayed industrial landscape looked upon from on high:

⁴ W.H. Auden, "Poem III", in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 22.

Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,
 On the wet road between the chafing grass
 Below him sees dismantled washing-floors,
 Snatches of tramline running to a wood,
 An industry already comatose,
 Yet sparsely living. A ramshackle engine
 At Cashwell raises water; for ten years
 It lay in flooded workings until this,
 Its latter office, grudgingly performed.
 And, further, here and there, though many dead
 Lie under the poor soil, some acts are chosen,
 Taken from recent winters; two there were
 Cleaned out a damaged shaft by hand, clutching
 The winch a gale would tear them from; one died
 During a storm, the fells impassable,
 Not at his village, but in wooden shape
 Through long abandoned levels nosed his way
 And in his final valley went to ground.

Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,
 Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:
 This land, cut off, will not communicate,
 Be no accessory content to one
 Aimless for faces rather there than here.
 Beams from your car may cross a bedroom wall,
 They wake no sleeper; you may hear the wind
 Arriving driven from the ignorant sea
 To hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm
 Where sap un baffled rises, being spring;
 But seldom this. Near you, taller than the grass,
 Ears poise before decision, scenting danger.⁵

Interestingly, the description in the first five lines does not merely conjoin abstract and concrete words; it inserts the abstraction—*industry*—within a concrete context and personifies it. And then the speaker animates the landscape further by launching into a sombre narrative: “for ten years/ It lay in flooded workings until this...”⁶ The speaker tells of a miner’s death: “one died /During a storm, the fells impassable, / Not at his

⁵ Auden, “Poem VI”, p. 22.

⁶ Auden, “Poem III”, p. 22.

village, but in wooden shape / Through long abandoned levels nosed his way / And in his final valley went to ground.”⁷ In this bleak and remote landscape, the miner dies a lonely death.

Afterwards, there is a break between the stanzas and the poem seems to lurch into a more disturbing direction. Instead of an intimation of understanding or insight into this bleak landscape, the speaker seems to explicitly spurn his addressee and spurns the possibility of understanding or communion with this natural scene: “Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock, / Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed : / This land, cut off, will not communicate...”⁸ As we read this passage, it seems only reasonable to identify the “Stranger” as the addressee. But then, why would the speaker tell the person being addressed to “Go home”? We know from the biographies of the young Auden’s fascinated celebration of lead mines and the decaying relics of Britain’s industrial North.⁹ Up until the second stanza, the poem seems to be an interesting and skilful rendering of this preoccupation. Moreover, the poem has echoes of the landscapes of Hardy and also of the meditative contemplation of nature found in Wordsworth. It has a trace of the eerie, speculation about nature found in Hardy’s “Nature’s Questioning” (“When I look forth at dawning, pool,/ Field, flock, and lonely tree,/ All seem to look at me...”).¹⁰ At the

⁷ Auden, “Poem III”, p. 22.

⁸ Auden, “Poem VI”, p. 22.

⁹ See Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 72; and Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (London: Heinemann, 1995), p. 17.

¹⁰ Thomas Hardy, “Nature’s Questioning,” *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, (New York: Harper, 1898), p. 42.

same time, much as in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey, quoted below," there is a sense of a retreat into and profound communion with nature:

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur. Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.¹¹

Yet, it is the second stanza "The Watershed's" audacious turning away from the temptation of following these stylistic directions of Hardy and Wordsworth that allows us a glimpse into Auden's originality and also a hint of the risk he took in swerving away from expectation.

This bold move into the unknown makes possible further, more shocking risks. The second stanza continues its rejection of its addressee and all that this person seems to represent: "This land, cut off, will not communicate, / Be no accessory content to one / Aimless for faces rather there than here." There has been an earlier condemnation of the addressee—"proud of your young stock."¹² The standard critical line is that the addressee is a young bourgeois, a member of the stock holding, English, metropolitan privileged classes out for a jaunt in the countryside.¹³

¹¹ William Wordsworth, "Lines: Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," *Lyrical Ballads* [1798] (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 241.

¹² Auden, "Poem III", p. 22.

¹³ Carpenter, p. 73.

But from its very beginning the poem is marked by indirection and ambiguity in its diction and the structure of its syntaxes that makes the identity of this addressee highly uncertain. The poem's addressee presumably is the person "Who stands" in the first stanza. The verb "sees" in line three connecting to the predicate "dismantled washing-floors..." and completing the poem's initial thought-unit allows us to recognise the "Who stands" as a declarative phrase. However, the parenthetical information we get before the verb—"the crux left of the watershed, /On the wet road between the chafing grass..."—permits the opening phrase to be misread as an interrogative.¹⁴ In fact, the entire sentence which begins the poem (stretching across almost six lines) may be seen as an example of *periphrasis*. Auden's roundabout style means that he never directly spells out who this addressee is. Moreover, when we consider the apparent grammatical incoherence of having the first stanza address an indeterminate addressee—"Who stands" and then having the second stanza address a definite "stranger," we are forced to recognise that the addressee in the first stanza may not even be identical with the addressee in the second stanza.

The indirection in the poem's language strikes an undertone of crisis and risk. Rainer Emig points out that the word "crux" in the first line suggests a crossroads and a dilemma, but it may also be a verb or a direction.¹⁵ The anthropomorphised landscape undercuts any sense of

¹⁴ Auden, "Poem", p. 22.

¹⁵ Rainer Emig, *Towards a Postmodern Poetics* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press,

realism in the description and also serves to connote uneasiness.¹⁶ The doomed miner perishes alone “Not at his village, but in wooden shape / Through long abandoned levels...”¹⁷ And the stranger mentioned in the second stanza seems equally isolated and under threat due to his “Aimless” condition. The speaker admonishes the stranger to “Go home,” but, as Emig states, that “home” is never described in the poem. So, does this “home” really exist?¹⁸

And there are other features of Auden’s writing style which seem strange and risky. I have already hinted at the tortured and unclear syntax in the first six lines of the poem. The entire poem is characterised by an almost un-English fragmentation of syntax. His use of pentameter is not the elaborate Latinate kind used by Milton and later on by Romantics, which T. S. Eliot so much deplored, but, as several critics have pointed out, has much more in common with Anglo-Saxon. Randall Jarrell, most notably, has catalogued the various linguistic peculiarities of Auden’s early poetic style, many of which can be seen in operation in this poem: they include Auden’s omission of conjunctions and relative pronouns, his use of normally uncoordinated elements as coordinates, his substitution of verb forms for adjectives or adverbs, his use of dangling modifiers, his wide separation of modifiers from what they modify, his frequent jumps in logic, his ellipses, and his frequent placing of abstract words into concrete

2000), p. 12.

¹⁶ Emig, p. 12.

¹⁷ Auden, “Poem III”, p. 22.

¹⁸ Emig, p. 13.

contexts.¹⁹ Interestingly, Jarrell painstakingly enumerates these and a plethora of other stylistic features found in Auden's poetry in the context of a highly negative analysis of what he regarded as the *decline* in Auden's work. It is as if in itemising Auden's stylistic features Jarrell had fixed a unified image of Auden, to which he could then append a multitude of poetic vices.²⁰

Using Mary Kinzie's method, we must sympathetically attune ourselves to the unfolding horizon of possible choices that open in the poem. We resist the impulse to impose a meaning, our meaning on the poem. Our task is to be attentive to the way the author joins meaning to the stylistic means of its expression: "When we appreciate style as the subtle medium of sense, we can see how the way works are written also discloses the meanings these works of art [possibly] intend. Meaning in poetry is imbedded in the saying" (p. 34).

We move inside the strangeness of this growing poem uncertain of who the speaker and addressee are, unsettled from its very opening line, sharing the vantage point of the addressee looking down upon a blighted landscape, invited to engage imaginatively with the pathos of a miner's lonely death, but just at that moment at the end of the first stanza when the poem seems to have unveiled to us the tragic essence of that

¹⁹ Randall Jarrell, *The Third Book of Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 132-135.

²⁰ In *The Third Book of Criticism*, Randall Jarrell has presented some of the most suggestive and insightful close readings of W. H. Auden's poetry ever written. Yet, in some respects they are also the most wrong-headed. In his essay "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry," for example, he purports to present a summation and analysis of the poet's shifting ideologies—or "attitudes" as he dubs them—from his early poetry up to his late poetry. What emerges in this adumbrated version of Auden is little more than a caricatured allegory of the poet and his development.

landscape, the poem unsettles us more profoundly by hinting that all communication, all understanding is, in fact, impossible.

The word “Stranger” is repeated, as if to emphasise the addressee’s estrangement from this landscape. The equivocation between declaration and interrogation at the poem’s opening as well as the periphrasis in the evocation of the addressee make possible another reading in which the addressee is none other than the young, metropolitan poet himself, proud of his “stock” of words and images, yet still “frustrate and vexed” by the stubborn landscape of this poem.

However, as we continue our progress through the poem’s dislocating syntactical structures, we gradually recognise our own position as “frustrate and vexed.” Once more it is the ambiguity created by periphrasis which makes this identification or misidentification possible: “This land ... will not communicate, / Be no accessory content to one / Aimless for faces rather there than here.”²¹

Moving inside Auden’s growing poem, attuned to the disruptive and unsettling landscape, reminded that we are, in fact, cut off from what we have experienced, accused of not even being interested in this landscape, we are forced to realise that we are in border country, the frontier of the unknown. And it is Auden’s shaping of this unfamiliar landscape through the conscious stylistic choices he has made that allows us to reach the threshold of this frontier.

²¹ Auden, “Poem”, p. 22.

The addressee may hear the wind driven across the “ignorant sea” but the speaker announces, “seldom this.” Again, there is uncertainty: what does the word “this” refer to? The poem’s tangled syntax makes it unclear. But the last two lines reveal suggestive fragments: “Ears poise before decision, scenting danger.”²² The lines work as synecdochic symbol—the ears standing for some kind of alert wild animal perhaps, sensing danger. But might this also be an evocation of a threat to the addressee and to the natural scene? At the same time, the image amounts to a further accusation of the addressee/reader whose world, consciousness, and/or efforts to understand the reality of the natural landscape, the last line hints, may also pose a mortal threat to it.

We have recognised some of the risks the young poet Auden has taken through his stylistic choices. They amount to his refusal to honour time-sanctioned codes and expectations in poetic form and content, the breaching of the decorum between poet and audience in the stern note of accusation he adopts, and a denial of the natural relations between self and reality.

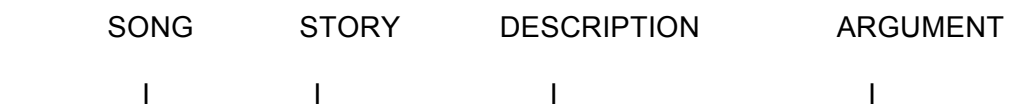
What we recognise here is the consolidation of a singular style—that is, an unusual way of patterning syntax and language—Auden’s confident delineation of his new and uncharted border terrain, and his surprised discovery of the unique preoccupations and themes which inhabit it—the doomed Hero, homelessness, the Quest, alienation, and loneliness. Auden’s early poetry, represented by “The Watershed,” has

²² Auden, “Poem III”, p. 22.

expanded the scope of what is possible in a poem and our understanding of what a poem can do. His early poems have, in fact, taught us a new way of reading.

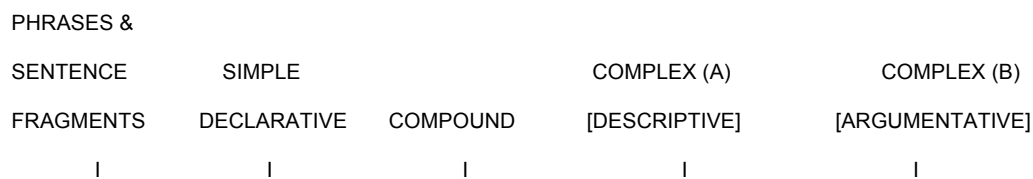
In writing the poem we read, Kinzie states, we are reminded that “all poems are mysterious territory at the start, even long after they have been written and reread” (p. 45). She recommends the use of three working concepts to help us in our reading of poetry: the continuum, which can be seen as a “constant line expressing some feature or relation, on which we can display the range from one extreme to the other,” variations in a poet’s or a poem’s use of different elements, and what she calls thresholds of choice, meaning the different standards that different cultures or even different writers will have for the use of certain poetic elements (pp. 46-48).

We can look a little more closely at each one of these concepts. We would use the continuum, for instance, to look at the characteristic features and their frequency within a particular century or a particular poetic form. “For example,” explains Kinzie, “at its extremes, the voice of the poem will either be singing or logically arguing, with other stages in between:



All poems can be placed on the line close to one of these stylistic options or midway between two of them” (p. 46). A classical epic poem, for example, would most likely be placed at a midway point on the line between “SONG” and “STORY.”

Each of the separate elements in a poem—line, syntax (or sentence frame), diction, trope, rhetoric (or argumentative shaping), and rhythm—could also be mapped on their own continuums. “The more points named on the continuum, the more comprehensive the account of stylistic mode” (p. 46). If we were to map the syntactical features of Auden’s poetic style (both early and late) on such a continuum, for example, it might look like this:



Recognising these characteristic syntactic features of Auden’s early and late poetic styles, the above continuum allows for fragments and incomplete phrases at one end and at the same time discriminates between two forms of subordinate sentences at the other end—the descriptive and argumentative subordination found in Auden’s later poetry. A continuum used to map the syntax of Auden’s poetry would be quite different from a continuum designed to map the syntactical features of Tennyson’s poetry, in which complete sentences dominated.

The continua can be used to examine the differences between individual poets, by placing two or more poets along such a line of relation. Kinzie explains that continua can also be used to examine groups of poems by a single poet: “Lines of relation, or continua, can be imagined for the voices and themes within the complete works of single individuals, too, with groups of more songlike poems during one period, more argumentative poems at another” (p. 47).

The third of Kinzie’s working concepts—thresholds of choice—refers to the different notions of what is an acceptable level of tension between or coincidence of poetic elements: “With regard to the rhythms of the poetic line, for example, poets in the eighteenth century had a fairly narrow set of ideas about acceptable variations. Slight liberties were felt as more significant than they are in our own time. Their notion of experimental threshold was highly circumscribed; ours is more open” (p. 49). There may also be different standards or thresholds for experimentation within each stylistic element, within different poetic genre, and each poet’s body of work.

Kinzie introduces us to another, more particular sense of threshold, however. This sense of threshold refers to the borderline between line and the sentence. In poetry, sentences work against the line. Some sentences in poetry take just one line to say; some lines may in fact contain two sentences. However, there are many occasions when more than one line is needed to complete a thought: “When the line ends before the sentence

does, we can say that the threshold of the line is in tension with that of the sentence. In cases of such tension, the line can provide a partial or temporary meaning or suggestion that is at odds with the meaning of the completed" (p. 49). Kinzie calls these provisional meanings before moving off the line "half-meanings." The example of Auden's "Watershed" has shown the way in which these half-meanings can be used to powerful effect in order to create ambiguity and unsettlement: "The half-meanings of lines that run on would be in tension with the whole meaning that emerges when the sentence has come to its end" (p. 49).

The final sense of the term "threshold" we have already encountered; it refers to a poem's encounter with the unknown, an encounter which Kinzie, in order to underline its importance, calls "comprehensive and repeating": "Every poem tries to cross *some* kind of boundary so as to push off from what poems have already been and start laying claim to something different. Sometimes difference is achieved by returning to older forms now fallen into disuse" (p. 49). This latter point is, of course, attested to by the example of W. H. Auden. Much of the strangeness and shock of his early poetry can be attributed to his reintroduction into English poetry of features reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon verse and some its syntactic structures. But Kinzie also points out this crossing of boundaries can also be achieved by introducing something into poetry that is genuinely new. She cites the examples of the early

proponents of idiosyncratic versions of English blank verse in the mid-seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries—Milton and Wordsworth.

I have mapped out the general conceptual framework and assumptions of Mary Kinzie because I believe them to be most applicable to approach the work of W. H. Auden, a poet who can be said to have introduced something new into poetry in English at the same time he displayed a thorough mastery of past forms. Kinzie's approach is most useful to me because to account for the process and provisionality of poems. It acquaints us with the risk of putting into words and into poetic form what needed to be said.

CHAPTER TWO: LETTERS TO MR. AUDEN

#1 AND #2

LETTER TO MR. AUDEN #1

Dear Mr. Auden,

I hope you will excuse my presumption in addressing this letter to you. Yet I have it upon good authority that you are even now as much interested in modern developments in poetry, new poets, and the new intellectual currents as you had been when you were here among us. For this reason, therefore, I feel emboldened to solicit your generosity in beginning a correspondence with me, an apprentice poet. I hope you don't mind if I press my presumption even further and ask you to read and offer your commentary on the unsolicited manuscript that accompanies these letters. In this, I presume upon the same spirit of generosity and goodwill you showed Robert Hayden, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery, and other poets, all far more accomplished than me. I'm glad that I've found this public yet intimate channel with which to communicate with you. I know that through such a medium I can speak openly and safely to you, as I could to no one else, of poetry and the things that matter most to me.

I write this abroad, in the midst of news reports from back home in England of widespread riots and looting. The trouble began several days ago in Tottenham and has now spread to other districts in London and to Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol, and other cities in Britain. Several dreadful fires have been set off, destroying millions of pounds worth of property.

I mention all this in order to reacquaint you with a world you were well acquainted with and its same inchoate, creeping resentments, hatreds, tensions, sullen evasions, and at the back of them all, the same destructive impersonal economic forces. You in your timeless underworld always knew these human, social elements so well; you know that there is no escape; writing poetry can never be a retreat from the world and no lyric interiority can shield us from the social order's whims and sicknesses. Like you, I can't really entertain any delusions about poetry serving a social function, or by extension a politically engaged function. The days when poets had a widely acknowledged public status are, of course, long-gone. More than ever, poetry is an impractical and gratuitous pastime. And I cannot believe the obverse notion shared by poets like Mallarmé and Rilke, that the gratuitous has a special, deeper utility, that the visible material world is nothing, and that, as you put it, the poet is "the god who creates his own subjective universe out of nothing".¹

I remember you writing in your essay "The Poet and the City" that there are four main aspects of modern life which have made the poet's vocation more difficult than ever before. The first, you write, is the loss of belief in eternity and the sacred. The second is the loss of the belief in the significance of the reality of sensory phenomena and the resultant smashing of the concept of art as a mimetic mirroring of nature. The third aspect is the loss of belief in a norm of human nature needing some kind of man-made world to live in. Technology has not only transformed the

material reality of human life it has made human nature itself truly plastic, capable of almost any behaviour. The result is that the poet has no assurance that what he depicts as human nature or reality will be recognisable as such by later generations.

A key feature of this third aspect that you mentioned is the modern poet's changed relationship to tradition. As you said, "It no longer means a way of working handed down from one generation to the next".² The poet in previous epochs expressed *originality* through slight modifications of tradition, whereas the modern poet is burdened with the task of finding his "authentic voice" and forging an original poetic identity through engagement with "any work of any date or place".³

The fourth aspect of modern life, which has made the poet's vocation more difficult than ever before, is what you described as the "loss of the "Public Realm as the sphere of revelatory personal deeds".⁴ In ancient Classical culture, you argued that men expressed their freedom in the Public Realm, by revealing themselves through their public actions and decisions. But now in modern capitalist society the meaning of the terms *public* and *private* has been reversed. We experience our freedom and the fullest expression of who we are in the private realm. The public sphere is the realm where our self-expression is constrained and impersonal. And this is the basis of your claim that literature no longer has access to its traditional human subjects – the great public figures performing public actions.

For me, one of the most suggestive points you raise about the modern period is the development of mass media and its creation of the new phenomenon of the Public. And you quote Kierkegaard as saying, “A public is a kind of gigantic something, an abstract and deserted void which is everything and nothing”.⁵

To become a part of this “gigantic something” nowadays, all a man has to do is browse online on our vast, globally connected computer system, open up a newspaper, or turn on the television. Your statement that what the mass media offer is not popular art, but “entertainment which is intended to be consumed like food, forgotten, and replaced by a new dish”,⁶ is it seems to me irrefutable.

And your argument about all of these changes, particularly the development of mass media, having had a shaping influence on the characteristic style of expression in modern poetry and on its common notion of the modern hero is still an accurate description of poetry as it is being written nowadays. It’s clear that the “characteristic style of ‘Modern’ poetry is an intimate tone of voice, the speech of one person addressing one person, not a large audience”, and that whenever one of our contemporary poets raises his voice he does sound “phoney”.⁷ And our “characteristic hero,” is not a ‘Great Man’, a romantic rebel, or someone who does great deeds, but instead a man or a woman in any walk of life.

But while I acknowledge that much of your diagnosis of the position of the modern poet still holds true, I disagree with some of your

conclusions. In this series of letters to you I'll outline my major disagreements and the main strategies I've adopted in my own poetry. Hopefully, the manuscript I've enclosed with these letters will provide convincing specific instances to give flesh to my arguments.

Let me begin by expressing my agreement with your contemporary, Erich Heller, that modern poetry is ultimately addressed to the question of the relevance and the value of the world and of human experience.⁸ But even as I write this, I'm also slightly incredulous: in the face of poetry's current diminishment, what I've written above seems to be an overstatement, an inflated and unrealistic assertion. The statement sounds a lot more assured about what poetry is and about what poetry can do than I'd ever pretend to be. No, it seems to me that, before I start making any manifesto-like pronouncements about what poetry is or isn't, I need to go back farther and talk about what it is about poetry that draws me to it as a listener, reader, and as a writer.

When I think of my favourite poetic works, the deep impression they made on me each time I read them stemmed partly from the sense of being aware that I'd encountered a text which was using language in a special and unique way. I had a sense that I was experiencing a verbal event that existed outside of time, in which lines and words were being marshalled through rhythm, repetition, and subtle variation. Language was being used in a different way than normal. Here was a verbal architecture that had some secret code. I often never quite managed to decode these

verbal structures, but yet they still stirred me. And indeed that was perhaps the very reason why they stirred me. But the deep impression each of these poetic works made on me stemmed mainly from my sense of awe at entering a different and yet self-sustaining order or world. There was a feeling of having been beguiled by some sorcerer's spell.

I still find it hard to talk about the mysterious beginnings of writing poetry. The general, clichéd conception of how a poet comes to write poetry is that he or she is some lonely, sensitive person who undergoes several formative experiences and turns to writing poetry as a kind of emotional outlet for the powerful feelings that have accumulated after these experiences. A more intellectual variant of this poet's biography would involve a passionately intellectual young man or woman who has "something to say". They carefully plot out their ideas and then programmatically write them out in a series of scrupulous poems. It's true, there is a *decision*, but the reality ever after is much messier. I am often fired up with indignation over some experience and sit down to compose these experiences into some poem only to find that I simply cannot produce an intelligible poem about this experience. It's as if a poem does not *want* to be written on these terms. At other times, I'll sit down, take notes, and prepare to write a poem expressing cogent ideas, but will finish with a poem which is flat and almost unreadable. Whatever the bright spark was that first inspired my writing session by writing's end it had long fled. Of course, all of this does not mean that when I write a poem that my

internal Censor allows me to accept as a poem I do not channel my emotions and experiences, or that I am not articulating ideas. No, but what it does suggest to me is that the place from where poems come is so mysterious that it cannot be reduced to powerful emotions or ideas. It seems to me that my poetry writing—from the first childish attempts at epics until now—strikes me as being more akin to a compulsion than anything willed.

It was partly compulsion also which led me to choose you as my writing mentor, for I confess, you were not one of those poets for whom I felt an immediate and instinctive attraction since childhood. It has taken me a while to learn to admire your poetry the way I've loved certain works by Shakespeare, Blake, Coleridge, Homer, Virgil, Dante, Marlowe, Milton, or even Eliot for decades. And yet I've had a powerful and intuitive understanding that you *should be* very important to me. It had to do with the authoritative modernity of your voice, your mastery of forms, and your direct connection through these forms with the legacy of English poetic tradition. But these were only part of the explanation. Most of all, I think it was because of the scope of your ambition. It seemed to me that with the body of your work you'd built a kind of city. Your city was vast, and in it I heard the voices and jostling of other times and cities and poets, as if you'd had the audacity to erect your modern city right on top of the other still living edifices of other cities and other times.

I began my PhD project by turning to your poems, but then turning away to attempt to write my own. I read your essay on poetic mentorship, “Making, Knowing and Judging,” I wrote, I rehearsed my themes—relationships between fathers and sons, mythic patterns, the tension between private and public selves, notions of home—and wondered why there was still a disconnect between you and me. For a long time I didn’t really have the language to diagnose my needs, until I came across the lectures of your contemporary, the San Francisco poet, Jack Spicer. He was the one who helped me realise that I must actually enter your city, wander alone through its haunted streets, and then try to build another, coterminous city on top of it.

In the book containing his lectures from the 1950s and 1960s, *The House that Jack Built* (1998), Spicer speaks of the writing of poetry as dictation, in which the poet serves as a ‘medium’ for outside presences, or higher forces which dictate his best work. At other points he speaks of these outside presences as Martians. He also uses the metaphor of the radio receiving a transmission. I remember reading this with surprise because for years I’d considered the process of writing a poem as being like the delicate task of tuning into a station on a shortwave radio: it can’t be forced but must be tuned just right if one is to get the best reception and write good poetry.

In another of his lectures, Spicer talks about his notion of a serial poem and one of his own serial poems, *The Holy Grail*. The books in this

series of poems were dictated; that is, Spicer wrote these poems without any foreknowledge or awareness of what they were about, or in which direction they were taking him. The individual poems and the overall structure into which they were eventually formed were all unknown to Spicer, all seemingly dictated to him. What made the poems 'serial' was Spicer's gradual awareness, as he left off one poem and started on another that the poems seemed to be about the same subject or connected in some other way. The important thing was that Spicer was at pains to relinquish all control over the emergence of the poems: "When the poet gets some idea this is going to amount to this or it's going to amount to that and he starts steering the poem himself, then he's lost".⁹

What's striking to me is the seriousness with which Spicer elucidates his ideas about the poet's writing of the poems which are dictated to him by "Martians" and his doing what the poems and not what he as a poet wants. The poet is merely the "receiver", relaying an outside power's message. Spicer explains how to abide by the terms of the 'dictation' as scrupulously as possible, never trusting any line which seems pleasing to himself: "When a line comes up and it's beautiful and I really like it and it says exactly what I want, then I stop and wait and wait and wait and wait".¹⁰

Spicer believed that what the poet wants is not legitimate; it's not what *he* wants but what the poem wants that's most important. He describes the process of writing a poem almost as a spiritual exercise, a

kind of meditation, in which the poet empties out his personality in order to let the outside forces that will “dictate” to him come in. All of the poet’s knowledge and ideas amount to merely “furniture” which the outside forces, the “Martians”, will arrange at will in order to form their message.

If all of this sounds a bit outlandish, I ask for your indulgence.

Beyond Spicer’s use of bizarre terms like “Martians” and “spooks”, I believe that his ideas about the poet “emptying himself out”, being passive, and not imposing his will on the poem are quite similar to John Keats’s notion of “negative capability”. And I’m sure you can identify with the anti-Romantic impulse which rejects the poet’s exhausting yet self-aggrandizing role as a “beautiful perpetual motion machine of emotion”, manufacturing a current for itself, doing everything for itself until, as Spicer puts it, “the poet’s heart broke or it was burned on the beach like Shelley’s”.¹¹

Spicer’s account strikes me, in fact, as one of the best and most detailed accounts of the mysterious beginnings of a poem, for wouldn’t you agree that, when it comes to writing poetry, there is clearly something—apart from the lonely, grunt-like drudgery of it—that is beyond our will, emotions, and reason? Don’t you agree with me that there is some kind of force outside of us to which, if our inchoate feelings and ideas are ever to find coherent shape, we must submit?

I’m sure now that you’ll recognise the ancient pedigree of dictation, going back to the Greeks. Isn’t this just another form of the process of

substitution— displacing myself as stable poetic subject with something beyond my own experience? I began my project with the delusion that I had something to say and that I must express myself, but I now realise that it is precisely this impulse I must act against. Poetic composition begins not with my self-expression but with listening, not with an overflow of autobiographical content but with emptiness. I must empty myself, step outside my own work so that the unknown—that force outside myself—can enter and use strangely the words I have put at its disposal.

You'll remember, no doubt, the sad circumstances of Spicer's death: he was an alcoholic and collapsed one day in an elevator. His friends visiting him in hospital reported that his speech had become a garble. On his deathbed, his last words were, "My vocabulary did this to me."¹² His words were strangely apt because few poets, other than you, were as aware as he was of the power and violence of language. Language both holds and makes visible our identity. It can be said to *perform* our humanity. As Spicer's friend, Robin Blaser, puts it, language "is so much older than oneself, so much a speaking beyond and outside oneself, that a man's entrance to it becomes at once new and old, spoken and speaking, a self and some other".¹³ By virtue of its priorness and its otherness, language makes our visibility as individual identities fall away. Instead we have what seems to be language talking to itself.¹⁴ It contains a *doubleness*: "On the one hand, a belief [the breadth and distance of what that language perceives] is met by a disbelief, on the other, a

visibility, a piece of ourselves, by an invisibility”.¹⁵ Spicer’s “spooks” and his poetic practice of dictation have helped to reacquaint me, therefore, with the sublimity and terror of language: “the sublime returns to a public place—the terror, the uncanny, the bestial and the beautiful”.¹⁶

I think I can now respond to some of the conclusions you reach about the position of the modern poet. It’s true, as you say, that we no longer have access to a confident belief in eternity and the sacred. But we do have the Outside, the unknown force that exists beyond ourselves. What is this Outside? It is a field which includes the Other and “‘a topography’ that is a folding and unfolding”, through language, of a reality that contains us.¹⁷ It is our consciousness of ourselves as part of something that is out there and non-human, and which renders us invisible, and is changing and infinite and real.

The concept of poetic art as the mimetic mirroring of nature—the second aspect you mention—has long been smashed. And, you yourself re-enact and then celebrate the smashing of that mirroring in your plays and most effectively in your great poem, *The Sea and the Mirror*. Art, you show, is *not* the mirror of life, but rather it is representative of a general falsifying human tendency to try and impose artistic pattern or meaning on life. In this poem of disenchantment, you break the mimetic spell and give us instead the fragments of individual voices. I, in my turn, offer to you these letters; you may consider them as oblique mirrors, unveiling my practice and revealing me, but also, I believe, revealing you, their recipient.

And I offer you as well my poems as mirrors. You will find in them refractions of your own poems. I have tried to keep myself outside these poems, for the poet must remain outside his city if he is to entice the ghosts to enter. But, astute as you are, you will still suspect the presence of my own autobiography, deflected through the biographies of prominent public figures (most notably the current U.S. President). And you will even find faint refractions of your own preoccupations and practice within the various themes and methods that I've adopted. But above all, consider my letters and my poems as forms of transport to facilitate your passage and the passage of the others from the underworld. I summon your voice and the voices of others to enter through these mediums of transmission and make your strange presences felt.

Having outlined for you the nature of my mirroring, I don't wish to give the impression that I've planned and worked out everything. Far from it: I entered this project without knowing where I was going. Long before I realised that I was in fact writing a serial poem or that the Spicerian approach was a possibility that was open to me, I found myself being led, in frustration, off the path I'd mapped out for myself and taken into the woods by my own poems. I'd set out with the intention of producing a collection of poems influenced by your work yet clearly addressed to my own preoccupations and autobiographical themes, but instead my writing was divagating into unexpected topics and themes. I suddenly found myself writing poems that were obviously about the current U.S. President,

and something new and interesting seemed to be taking shape. After I started reading Jack Spicer's lectures about dictation, I began to realise that rather than trying to steer the poems myself I should give in to the poems' sense of direction. "There's no such thing as a single poem" and "a book isn't a collection of poems," Spicer said.¹⁸ My poem moves chronologically forward; as the poem moves me forward, like Orpheus, I must resist the urge to look back and impose a unity on it. Nevertheless, the poem itself will structure itself into the larger unit of the book, and establish the poetic relations with each of its units and with my other poems, the poems of other poets—my peers and the models of tradition, the community of poets.

There is definitely a power one gains once one realises that one is working on something as solid as a *serial poem* rather than a *collection* of individual poems. All of a sudden, it seems as if the poems which make up each unit have a sort of safety in numbers; there's the sense that their words, images, lines are much more fruitful, that they have echoes, resonances, and substance which they didn't have before when they were merely individual poems gathered together as part of a 'collection'. And, as I've suggested above, my serialism gives me the link to a space where the dead and living perform and act out their community.

It's true, as you say, that the modern poet apprentice can no longer assuredly find his "authentic voice" through his secure relation to a tradition. The modern poet, you argue, is burdened with the task of

discovering his unique voice through an engagement with “any work of any date or place”.¹⁹ But what really is “tradition”? Is it a long, linear procession of poets, stretching far back for a millennium or more, which oppresses the modern poet with anxiety about measuring up to the titans of the past? Or is it not rather as Spicer imagines it, “generations of different poets in different countries [like scribes] patiently telling the same story, writing the same poem, gaining and losing something with each transformation—but, of course, never really losing anything”?²⁰ And as Spicer states, “tradition” has surely nothing to do with calmness, classicism, or the like, for isn’t invention the enemy of poetry? Doesn’t the city you composed exist outside of time? Most assuredly, the city of poetry is *not* an eternal city; it most assuredly exists in all ages at once. It is a community of the dead and the living, like me, who are already posthumous.

And though you lament the loss of the “Public Realm as the sphere of revelatory personal deeds” and name it the fourth aspect of modern life that threatens the modern poet,²¹ the poem itself is a public realm. The poem is the space where I as a poet freely surrender the notion of clearly delineated public and private realms. My poem is a shared space in which the circuitry between the living and the dead has been opened up. My poem involves commerce between the living and the dead.

Our modern poetry must confront the displacement of poetry and imagination from the public realm, from what is regarded as the ‘real’ in

everyday life and thought. For Jack Spicer, the main job of every poet, therefore, is to replace what is made-up and false in public thought and everyday life with the magic of language. I said above that the deep impression that my favourite poetic works first made on me each time I read them was due mainly to the sense of primal awe which they evoked. It is the beguilement of magical language. Spicer had the basic intuition that language is always tied to magic with its renaming and its secret names. The real is not what it seems. This is poetry's fundamental task—to rename and rediscover the hidden Otherness of reality. As Erich Heller said, modern poetry is ultimately addressed to the question of the relevance and the value of the world and of human experience.²²

I think I'll end this, the first of my letters to you, now. In my next letter, I'll comment a bit more on mirrors and related topics. Of course, I know you'll appreciate that our simple, private exchange is in fact quite public, but I hope to wear a convincingly intimate and confiding public mask.

Respectfully,

Dennis L. M. Lewis

Notes

- ¹ “The Poet and the City”, in *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* [1962] (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 76.
- ² Auden, “The Poet and the City” p. 79.
- ³ Auden, “The Poet and the City” p. 80.
- ⁴ Auden, “The Poet and the City” p. 80.
- ⁵ Auden, “The Poet and the City” p. 80.
- ⁶ Auden, “The Poet and the City” p. 83.
- ⁷ Auden, “The Poet and the City” p. 84.
- ⁸ *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in German Literature and Thought* [1952] (San Diego: Harvest, 1975), p. 272.
- ⁹ Jack Spicer, *The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan U. P., 1998), p. 54.
- ¹⁰ Spicer, *The House that Jack Built* p. 76.
- ¹¹ Spicer, *The House that Jack Built* p. 5.
- ¹² Robin Blaser, “The Practice of Outside”, in *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1975), p. 326.
- ¹³ “The Practice of Outside” p. 289.
- ¹⁴ Blaser, “The Practice of Outside” p. 289.
- ¹⁵ Blaser, “The Practice of Outside” p. 289.
- ¹⁶ Blaser, “The Practice of Outside” p. 290.
- ¹⁷ Blaser, “The Practice of Outside” p. 286.
- ¹⁸ Blaser, “The Practice of Outside” p. 288.
- ¹⁹ Auden, “The Poet and the City” p. 80.
- ²⁰ Spicer, *The House that Jack Built* p. 182.

²¹ Auden, "The Poet and the City" p. 80.

²² *The Disinherited Mind* p. 272.

LETTER TO MR. AUDEN #2

Dear Mr. Auden,

Thank you for your kind response to my last letter and for your helpful comments on the last poem I sent. Yes, I do agree that at times I'm a little too "wordy" and that sometimes my diction is quite "mannered". I confess that in my efforts to emulate the sort of authority you have in your poetic voice and in your characteristic tone, I often err towards the verbose. Obviously, I will need to gain more confidence with my diction.

Thank you once more for sending me your 1962 essay, "Writing". As usual, I find what you have to say in your prose illuminating and challenging. You requested that I should not be reserved about giving you some feedback. I hope that you find that in my frankness I am also courteous.

Though I appreciate the demanding circumstances under which you wrote the piece, I must admit that I found it somewhat rambling and fragmented. Nevertheless, I found your attempt to address the nature of artistic writing, specifically poetic writing, and what sets it apart—in terms of the poet's methods and his medium—from other types of writing, absolutely riveting. I notice that you preface your discussion with two quotations by Thoreau and A. N. Whitehead, respectively. Their statements seem to suggest that the two essential qualities which help to make artistic writing unique as *artistic* writing are its economy and its

denotative capacity; that is, its capacity to point to and at the same time to symbolically embody the thing it seeks to represent: “The art of literature, vocal or written, is to adjust the language so that it embodies what it indicates,” Whitehead writes.¹ Yet, in your opinion, it is these unique properties of the poet’s language which give to his vocation a shady, pejorative connotation. His use of language requires him to be “inspired” in order to create these deeply personal and subjective usages in language. You write that there’s an element of the gambler or the supernatural medium about the poet’s generation of meanings from within himself: “Lawyers and doctors can entertain each other with stories about interesting cases, about experiences, that is to say, related to their professional interests but yet impersonal and outside themselves. Writers have no impersonal professional interests”.²

Unlike doctors and the practitioners of other professions, you say, the poet cannot be so deluded as to believe that he is actually helping other people through his manipulation of language. Even though you make it clear that writers enjoy any popularity or wealth that their writing may bring them, I certainly agree with you that it is ultimately the reassurance from people whose judgement they respect that writers crave.³

You say that the crucial arena in which poets differ from other kinds of artists is that of language: the medium of poets, language, “is not, like the paint of the painter or the notes of the composer, reserved for their use

but is the common property of the linguistic group to which they belong”.⁴

This connects poets to their public in a way that no painters, composers or practitioners in other fields are connected to their publics. It also renders poets more vulnerable because familiarity with language allows the public to imagine that it has access to an intuitive understanding of poetry. I have to admit that I chuckled when I read your contrast of the poet’s situation to that of the mathematician:

How happy the lot of the mathematician! He is judged solely by his peers, and the standard is so high that no colleague or rival can ever win a reputation he does not deserve. No cashier writes a letter to the press complaining about the incomprehensibility of Modern Mathematics and comparing it unfavourably with the good old days when mathematicians were content to paper irregularly shaped rooms and fill bathtubs without closing the waste pipe.⁵

You then move on to probe the nature of poetic creation. You are quick to shatter any exalted notions of poetic inspiration—“To say that a work is inspired means that, in the judgment of its author or his readers, it is better than they could reasonably hope it would be, and nothing else”.⁶ Though a poet is obliged to wait for ‘inspiration’, that is until a good idea “comes” to him, you point out that many of “these self-commissioned works” are failures. I notice here how you’ve diminished the notion of poetic inspiration to an act of ‘self-commissioning’—the poet’s creation of work not through an act of will but through the intercession of an ‘outside force’ within the self. Though the poet may be excited at being “inspired”

during the process of composition, his excitement offers no indication of the worth of what he's writing.⁷

Throughout the essay you have recourse to such terms as "inspiration" and "Muse"—terms conventionally attached to discussions of poetry. Yet you dispense with the assumptions traditionally attached to these terms. Poetry, you argue, is not written "in a trance", as Coleridge seems to claim in his account of the writing of "Kubla Khan". It's true, you suggest, that while writing it seems to the poet like he's writing with the help of another person, but this process is more akin to a dialectical struggle than the straightforward transcription of the Muse's message:

[A]s in an ordinary wooing or wrestling match, [the poet's] role is as important as Hers. The Muse, like Beatrice in *Much Ado*, is a spirited girl who has as little use for an abject suitor as she has for a vulgar brute. She appreciates chivalry and good manners, but she despises those who will not stand up to her...⁸

This conception of the poetic inspiration seems, at face value, to be at odds with Jack Spicer's notions of "alien" *transmission* and poetic *dictation*. Yet while in Spicer's method the poet seems passive and must seem to surrender all initiative to the outside force, the rigorous, ascetic self-discipline, the dialectical struggle between self and *non-self*, the shutting off of all superfluous internal chatter, and the physical tedium to which the poet must subject himself in order to properly receive the 'alien transmissions' are all in fact compatible with your ideas about poetic composition. Just like you, Spicer debunks the myth of the superhuman

vatic poet. And Spicer, again much like you, recognises that there is little difference between what the ancient poet did and what the modern poet does: ultimately, writing poetry is still very much hard, manual work.

As you've noted, Spicer says that the poet cannot create by a simple act of will; neither can he delude himself that in order to write he merely needs to enter into some sort of mindless 'trance'. If there is a difference between your account of the compositional process and Spicer's, it's in Spicer's emphasis on the poet's preparation for reception of the transmission and on the moment of transmission and in your more general focus on the overall process of composition.

I found it significant that when you write about the quality control to which all poets must subject their works in progress you conceive of it as a "Censorate": "It should include, for instance, a sensitive only child, a practical housewife, a logician, a monk, an irreverent buffoon and even, perhaps, hated by all the others and returning their dislike, a brutal, foul-mouthed drill sergeant who considers all poetry rubbish".⁹ While Spicer's terms are somewhat different, he nevertheless, much like you, conceives of the poet's internal censor as a consciousness that is most often opposed to what is comfortable and flattering to the actual poet.

From discussing the physical tedium of copying out poems you jump to the topic of sincerity in poetic composition. "Most artists are sincere," you write, quoting your old friend Stravinsky, "and most sincere art is bad, though some insincere (sincerely insincere) works can be quite

good”.¹⁰ Even though I think you’re being a bit flippant with your clever word play here, I recognise that you’re touching upon a very important issue in poetics, a debate that has been a major preoccupation in poetic theory at least since the Romantics. Sincerity, which in Romantic poetic theory had been made almost synonymous with ‘truth’, became by the early nineteenth century the main criterion of excellence in poetry.¹¹ You yourself define a poet’s sincerity as “authenticity”—“a writer’s chief preoccupation” (15).¹² According to Romantic theory, a poet is judged to be ‘sincere’ when he expresses with spontaneity and “genuine earnestness the thought, the emotion, the actual condition of his own heart...”¹³ In Romantic theory, the poet’s ‘sincerity’ was conventionally diametrically opposed to artifice and affectation.

Yet the implication of the Stravinsky quotation is that by expressing his real feelings so earnestly and nakedly in his art the poet has weakened his art—“Most artists are sincere and most art is bad”. Of course, you say, we should normally and readily assume that all poets are being sincere, but in your next paragraph you make it quite clear that without artifice and affectation as constraints unchecked sincerity results in bad poetry: “In literature, as in life, affectation, passionately adopted and loyally persevered in, is one of the chief forms of self-discipline by which mankind has raised itself by its own bootstraps”.¹⁴ Affectation or artifice, you imply, is a marker of civilisation. “Affectation, passionately adopted and loyally persevered in” seems to be your gloss on Stravinsky’s “sincerely

insincere". You assert that the poet avidly adopts artifice as the vehicle for poetic expression and points of view which are affected, and in doing so, produces successful works of art. Now, I can see why you professed an admiration for masters of artifice like Gongora and Henry James.

But I find these to be strange paragraphs because you seem to waver indefinitely on the sharp edge of a paradox—that sincerity can often be most convincingly conveyed through *insincerity* or affectation.

From this discussion of poetic inauthenticity, you move on to the issue of poetic forgery—a poet's misrepresentation of another's work as his own. "The most painful of all experiences to a poet," you write, "is to find that a poem of his which he knows to be a forgery has pleased the public and got into the anthologies. For all he knows or cares, the poem may be quite good, but that is not the point; *he* should not have written it".¹⁵ There are three points I'd like to make here. First, I found your claim that it is not critical rejection or abject artistic failure but forgery or inauthenticity which is the "most painful of all experiences" quite striking.¹⁶ Secondly, you seem to have very strict ethical scruples about the issues of poetic truth and authenticity. I think you'll agree with me when I say that these are the same sort of strict ethical scruples that played a definitive and shaping role in the development of your poetics, especially when you addressed yourself to political or public issues. And thirdly, I find it really quite odd that in an essay that is addressed to poetic composition you

should be so inordinately interested in notions of forgery, falsehood and inauthenticity.

It is strange that you would speak now of a “forgery” so shortly after you’ve extolled the virtues of insincerity and affectation. By “forgery” I sense that you’re also referring to those poems written by a poet which bear far too strong a stamp of the influence of other poets, or in which the poet may be espousing a doctrine which may not, in fact, be his heartfelt belief. Yet wouldn’t you say that to a large extent this is characteristic of much poetry: it could be argued that the work of most poets is the working out of each poet’s system—via imitations, or perhaps ‘forgeries’—of the burdensome influence of his predecessors or his contemporaries and their doctrines. (I dread to think what you’d say about my “Return to Iceland” or some of my other attempts to write ‘Audenesque’ poems). And so, if you don’t mind me asking you, exactly why should a poet *not* have written the poem you’ve identified as a “forgery”? Because, I guess you’d answer, it’s not *true*; that is, it’s not a genuine reflection of what Carlyle would call the “thought, the emotion, [and] the actual condition of his own heart”.¹⁷

Throughout your essay I think I can hear echoes of the poetics debate which preoccupied John Stuart Mill, the Romantics, Sir Philip Sidney, and which stretches all the way back to Plato’s discussion of poetry and truth. In I. A. Richards’ influential discussion of the issue (profoundly apt in considering your position), he distinguishes between scientific statements, “where truth is ultimately a matter of verification,”

and the poet's "emotive utterance," composed of sentences which look like statements, but are actually 'pseudo statements'.¹⁸ According to Richards, the poet, therefore, is not in fact concerned with making "true statements".¹⁹

Richards' discussion is reminiscent of and no doubt draws upon Coleridge's separation, in *Biographia Literaria*, of 'illusion' from 'delusion,' "that *negative* faith, which simply permits the images presented to work by their own forces, without their either denial or affirmation of their real existence by the judgment".²⁰ What Coleridge calls a "willing suspension of disbelief" allows audiences to enjoy theatrical representations, the characters and events presented in narrative poetry, and even poetic expression of generalising philosophical or religious doctrines "without either denial or affirmation".²¹ Richards, therefore, cites Coleridge's "doctrine of the willing suspension of disbelief" in support of his belief that the issue of truth or falsity is irrelevant in the consideration of poetic statements.

All of this, I believe, is pertinent to your discussion in this essay and intimately relevant to your poetic practice because of your famous condemnation of your own inauthenticity—in poems like "Spain 1937" and "September 1, 1939"—and your purging of these 'inauthentic' poems from the body of your poetic work. In my opinion, they're deeply relevant to a consideration of your achievements in your overtly political and public poetry.

As you move on to discuss the use some young poets make of poetry for therapeutic purposes and the example of the young Goethe, I could recognise your subtle variation on the theme of the poet's search for authenticity:

He finds himself obsessed by certain ways of feeling and thinking of which his instinct tells him he must be rid before he can discover his authentic interests and sympathies, and the only way by which he can be rid of them forever is by surrendering to them.²²

In your opinion, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was Goethe's way of inoculating himself from the "spiritual malaise" of his generation. But Goethe's example shows the danger of this step, for the young poet's audience takes what for him was merely a therapeutic gesture as the genuine voicing of *its own* concerns; the poet is adopted as the spokesman of a generation. When later, the poet finally turns to his true interests, his early admirers accuse him of betraying their cause. I suspect that this may have reminded you of your own situation.

I hope you don't mind me saying that your description of young Goethe's example reminds me a lot your own career. I remember your early preoccupation with psychic and social division—symbolised by your frequent recourse to symbols such as borders, barriers, armed bands, and rebellions—and how your increasing interest in leftist rhetoric and the Marxist vision of history was eventually adopted by a generation of poets and intellectuals. By the end of the 1930s, I think you'd agree that quite a

lot of people took you for the spokesman for a generation of leftist and politically engaged intellectuals. Yet as early as 1934, the contradictions surrounding your position and your ambivalence about this began to affect your poetry.²³ I think you could already tell that there was something inauthentic about your writing. Mendelson, for instance, writes of how you tried—in “Spain, 1937” and in your “Commentary” on the 1938 sonnet sequence “In Time of War”—to join the realm of private will with public event. Mendelson dubs these efforts as “utopian poems” and describes how in these poems you voice your wish for socialist victory in the future and yet you also, as if aware this were fantasy (his words, not mine) contradict yourself.²⁴ The accusations of betrayal against you began shortly after; that is, after your steady move towards a more civic-minded notion of poetry and your committed return to Christianity.

I found what you had to say about the threats to a poet’s conscience posed by his political and religious convictions, therefore, very poignant:

The integrity of a writer is more threatened by appeals to his social conscience, his political or religious convictions, than by appeals to his cupidity. It is morally less confusing to be goosed by a travelling salesman than by a bishop.²⁵

In “Spain, 1937” your narrator appears to equate the murders committed by the leftist people’s army during the Spanish Civil War with the unconscious natural processes of purposive history—“The conscious

acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder”.²⁶ And in “September 1, 1939” your narrator concludes the poem with what seems like an affirmation—“We must love one another or die”. Later on, if you recall, you removed the lines I’ve mentioned from both poems, denouncing the sentiments they expressed as *falsehoods*. But even after that, they still seemed to you so infected with falsehood that you later went on to excise both poems from your poetic canon.

Yet, I hope you don’t mind me saying, that in arguing for *truth* in your poetry, and in condemning your own *inauthenticity*, haven’t you, in fact, forgotten your own principles as expressed in this very essay, to wit that poetry’s *immediate object* is *not* truth or falsehood but pleasure—“in poetry, all facts and all beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting possibilities. The reader does not have to share the beliefs expressed in a poem in order to enjoy it”.²⁷ What you seem to be doing here, I’m afraid to say, in condemning your own poems for dishonesty, is what Coleridge once accused Wordsworth of doing—“destroying the fundamental distinction, in some of his poems, ‘not only between a poem and prose, but even between philosophy and works of fiction’ by proposing truth for his immediate object, instead of pleasure”.²⁸

Interestingly, in this essay you express a much more permissive and tolerant view of the poet’s relationship with truth: “a poet is constantly tempted to make use of an idea or a belief, not because he believes it to be true, but because he sees it has interesting poetic possibilities”.²⁹

Although the poet may not necessarily believe in a certain idea, you maintain that he should, however, take it as something much more serious than a mere poetic device. Yet I don't think anyone would really claim that the Marxist interpretation of history was a mere poetic device for you when you were young, would he?

Because of its connection with the poet's spontaneous self-expression of what is uniquely his, authenticity in poetry, you warn, can easily be confused with "originality".³⁰ You don't think originality is worth a poet's concern. You seem to equate the search for an original identifying style with a needy person's vulgar "desire to be loved for himself alone".³¹ You identify the desire for originality with avant-garde art and the hunger for attention: rather than being an expression of freedom, for you it amounts to "slavery".³² Later in the essay, you argue that the sure proof that a beginner writer has talent is whether he eschews all interest in *expressing himself* or saying something original and is more interested in playing with words and poetic forms.³³

You go on to divide writers and poets into two separate classes (derived from *Alice in Wonderland*)—Alices and Mabels. Alices are those writers who have strict ideas about what is acceptable subject matter for poetry and how it should be presented. Mabels, on the other hand, are those who believe that no subject matter and no method of treating this subject matter should be excluded from poetry. Essentially, this seems to be a division between the Aristotelian party and the "Democratic" party—

parties “which have always existed and to one of which every writer belongs, though he may switch his party allegiance”.³⁴ One could also identify these separate parties with the classical and romantic principles respectively, given that the Aristotelian approach involves a restrictive subject matter and precise constraints on the formal treatment of the subject matter, and the Democratic its opposite. It doesn’t seem to me to be a very convincing system of classification—it’s certainly one that you yourself flout in your own poetic work by combining elements of both parties. But I suppose it’s interesting because of the high value you give to the balance between formal constraint and the imagination:

Rhymes, meters, stanza forms, etc., are like servants. If the master is fair enough to win their affection and firm enough to command their respect, the result is an orderly happy household. If he is too tyrannical, they give notice; if he lacks authority, they become slovenly, impertinent, drunk and dishonest.³⁵

The source of poetry’s vulnerability, you say, when compared with other arts, is its composition out of language; that is, “its medium is not its private property”.³⁶ The poet cannot make up his own words; his words are the product of human society. This means that the poet is protected from what you call “solipsist subjectivity”—a purely private subjective verbal world, cut off from the outside world.³⁷ No matter how private, how inscrutable or rarefied, all poetry, you maintain, contains elements that are translatable; that is, communicable to other humans. All of those parts of a poem not based on verbal experience—similes, images, and metaphors—

are based on sensory experience, and can therefore be translated. Even the poet's unique human perspective is ultimately translatable: "one characteristic that all men, whatever their culture, have in common is uniqueness—every man is a member of a class of one—the unique perspective on the world which every genuine poet has survives translation".³⁸ For all these reasons, therefore, you dispute Frost's definition of poetry—in contradistinction from prose—as "the untranslatable element in language".³⁹

There are three points I'd like to make here. First, your understanding of poetry as a product of human society means that it is implicitly a *public* medium, addressed to the community at large, even when it may seem most private. Secondly, you seem to oppose the notion—adopted by some modernists—of poetry as purely aesthetic activity: "In English verse, even in Shakespeare's grandest rhetorical passages, the ear is always aware of its relation to everyday speech".⁴⁰ Thirdly, the ideas about poetry and language that you articulate here stand in marked contrast to the ideas you expressed in another essay also titled "Writing", which you wrote for a children's encyclopaedia in 1932.

Do you remember this one? I thought it was quite brilliant, especially considering it was written so long ago. In that essay you describe the emergence of self-consciousness and the sense of alienation in human individuals—from other humans and from nature. Language, you assert, emerged as an effort to "bridge over the gulf" dividing humans from

other humans and to restore wholeness.⁴¹ But written language rises from a slightly different source: “while speech begins with the feeling of separateness in space, ...writing begins from the sense of separateness in time, of ‘I’m here to-day, but I shall be dead to-morrow, and you will be active in my place, and how can I speak to you?’”⁴² Writing attempts to do the impossible—join the living with the dead.⁴³ By the end of the essay you portray a fragmented society in which the dream of wholeness is defeated:

Since the underlying reason for writing is to bridge the gulf between one person and another, as the sense of loneliness increases, more and more books are written by more and more people.... Forests are cut down, rivers of ink absorbed, but the lust to write is still unsatisfied. What is going to happen? If it were only a question of writing, it wouldn’t matter; but it is an index of our health. It’s not only books, but our lives, that are going to pot.⁴⁴

In the earlier essay, you say that the separation of language from the world, and the isolation and division which characterises human society are the “ultimate subject” to which all writing refers, and which must finally defeat all writing.⁴⁵ But in the essay that you just sent from 1962, you accept language’s separation from the world as an inevitability, but you treat it as one which the language of poetry can help humans to build and share understanding.

Poetry, you say, is “superior to prose as a medium for didactic instruction”, and it is equally as capable as prose “as a medium for the

lucid exposition of ideas".⁴⁶ But unlike prose, poetry by dint of its formal attributes cannot help but convey a note of scepticism about any doctrine or idea. Poetry's power lies not in its ability to tell *factual* truths. Yet neither, you believe, is it concerned with weaving communal fantasies or vehicles for communal catharsis on command: "Poetry is not magic. In so far as poetry, or any other of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate".⁴⁷ I think by "truth" here you mean the reality which the social consensus, enforced by ideological representation and social convention, has concealed from everyday human perception. I can certainly recognise the operation of what you might call the 'disintoxicating principle' in much of the poetry you wrote after 1939. And I really enjoy some of this poetry.

I'll bring this to an end now. I hope you found my comments useful. I hope you didn't mind my forthrightness, especially on "Spain 1937" and "September 1, 1939", both of which I know are still rather touchy topics for you. I hope you'll accept that for many people these are still fine poems even though you've officially disowned them.

Please accept my fond regards. I look forward to writing again.

Yours truly,

Dennis Lewis

Notes

- ¹ *Science and Philosophy* [1964, p. 115], qtd. in W.H. Auden, "Writing", in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* [1962] (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 13.
- ² Auden, "Writing" pp. 13–14.
- ³ Auden, "Writing" p. 14.
- ⁴ Auden, "Writing" p. 15.
- ⁵ Auden, "Writing" p. 15.
- ⁶ Auden, "Writing" p. 15.
- ⁷ Auden, "Writing" p. 15.
- ⁸ Auden, "Writing" p. 16.
- ⁹ Auden, "Writing" pp. 16–17.
- ¹⁰ Auden, "Writing" p. 17.
- ¹¹ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, (New York: Oxford U.P., 1953), p. 318.
- ¹² Auden, "Writing" p. 15.
- ¹³ Thomas Carlyle, "Burns", *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, [1887, pp. 267-268], quoted in Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* p. 319.
- ¹⁴ Auden, "Writing" p. 18.
- ¹⁵ Auden, "Writing" p. 18.
- ¹⁶ Auden, "Writing" p. 18.
- ¹⁷ "Burns," in *Thomas Carlyle's Works: Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, London: Chapman and Hall, 1887), p. 241.
- ¹⁸ *Science and Poetry*, (London: Haskell House, 1926), p. 67.
- ¹⁹ Richards, *Science and Poetry* p. 67.

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- ²⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, Vol. I*, (1852, XXII), p. 562. Accessed online at [http: books.google.com/](http://books.google.com/)
- ²¹ *Biographia Literaria, Vol. I* p. 562.
- ²² Auden, "Writing" p. 18.
- ²³ Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 246.
- ²⁴ Mendelson, *Early Auden* p. 202.
- ²⁵ Auden, "Writing" p. 19.
- ²⁶ Mendelson, *Early Auden* p. 322.
- ²⁷ Auden, "Writing" p. 19.
- ²⁸ *Biographia Literaria, Vol. I* p. 479.
- ²⁹ Auden, "Writing" p. 19.
- ³⁰ Auden, "Writing" p. 19.
- ³¹ Auden, "Writing" p. 19.
- ³² Auden, "Writing" p. 20.
- ³³ Auden, "Writing" p. 22.
- ³⁴ Auden, "Writing" p. 21.
- ³⁵ Auden, "Writing" p. 22.
- ³⁶ Auden, "Writing" p. 23.
- ³⁷ Auden, "Writing" p. 22.
- ³⁸ Auden, "Writing" pp. 23–24.
- ³⁹ Auden, "Writing" p. 22.
- ⁴⁰ Auden, "Writing" p. 24.
- ⁴¹ Mendelson, *Early Auden* p. 16.

⁴² W.H. Auden, "Writing", in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 305-306.

⁴³ Mendelson, *Early Auden* p. 18.

⁴⁴ W.H. Auden, "Writing", in *The English Auden* p. 306.

⁴⁵ Mendelson, *Early Auden* p. 21.

⁴⁶ Auden, "Writing" p. 26.

⁴⁷ Auden, "Writing" p. 27.

**CHAPTER THREE: “THE ONLY SUBJECT
THAT YOU HAVE”: POETIC VOICE IN *THE SEA*
*AND THE MIRROR***

“The Only Subject That You Have”: Poetic Voice in *The Sea and the Mirror*

After W.H. Auden emigrated to the United States in 1938, he steadily distanced himself from his earlier political stances that had helped place him at the forefront of an excitingly politically engaged, leftist literary movement in Britain. He went on to deny the possibility that poetry, and art in general, can ever make meaningful interventions in the public world of politics and history.

Some critics have raised serious questions about Auden’s poetic stature after his move to the U.S. They have argued that with his move and his re-conversion to the Christian faith there was a noticeable decline in Auden’s poetic powers. “What happened to Wystan?” Philip Larkin asked in his famous 1962 article. And this question has been repeated by hosts of former Auden admirers. Auden lost his “original voice,” was the answer offered by Seamus Heaney in his 1988 essay on the poet.¹ Heaney laments the passing from Auden’s poetry “of an element of the uncanny, a trace of ... language’s original ‘chief woe, world-sorrow.’”² Behind this notion that Auden lost his ‘original’ or ‘authentic voice’ is the sense that, in abandoning England, Auden had abandoned both his native imaginary homeland and his native rhetoric. Taking this assumption to its logical conclusion, the poet Tom Paulin calls Auden “an important failure,”

¹ Seamus Heaney, “Sounding Auden,” in *The Government of the Tongue* [1979] (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 126.

² Heaney, p. 126.

“writing poems in a glossy, metropolitan, intellectually inflected language that read rather like chirpy opinion pieces in the *New Yorker*.³

When we talk about ‘voice’ in poetry, what do we mean?

Conventionally, it implies the vocal sounds of the words and rhythms of the poems produced by a poet. T.S. Eliot writes of the “three voices of poetry”—the voice of the actual poet in silent meditation, that of the poet speaking to his audience, and finally that of the persona created by the poet.⁴ But when we talk about these various levels of voice, we assume that behind all of them we can hear the poet’s original voice—his ethos, as Aristotle would put it.⁵ It is this original voice of the poet, which is believed to express his intentions and direct the organization of the various personae in his poem. When we speak more generally of a poet’s entire corpus of work, we seek to evoke the words he seems to be obsessed by, the tones he gives those words, the characteristic shape of his sentences, the style this gives to his thinking, the rhythm and use of metres, the kinds of personae that we typically find in his poems, the moods he typically evokes, the kinds of allusions he favours, and the general atmosphere of his poems.

In this chapter, I take issue with the assumption of Auden’s post-1938 decline and I dispute the stable and unitary notion of poetic ‘voice’. I believe that part of the answer to the conundrum of Auden’s loss of

³ Tom Paulin, *The Secret Life of Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 174).

⁴ “Voice”, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1993), p. 1366.

⁵ “Voice”, p. 1366.

'original voice', or at least his *change* of voice, has to do with the thorough re-evaluation of his poetics, of his understanding of poetry's relationship to politics, and of his poetic identity that he conducted throughout the years 1938 to 1945. *The Sea and the Mirror*, written at the tail end of this transitional and immensely prolific period, offered Auden an occasion to directly address these issues as well as the questions of poetic voice and the poet's relation to the public. It marks a pivotal point in Auden's transition of voice. In discussing the poem, I will be making generous use of the aesthetic analyses that Jacques Rancière develops in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. I think that Rancière's ideas about the relationship between artistic forms and procedures and politics offer useful insights into the work of W.H. Auden and questions about voice and politics in contemporary poetry. In addition, I will be drawing upon the ideas of Michael Warner and Joseph Brodsky in order to explicate Auden's attempt in *The Sea and the Mirror* to dismantle the Romantic symbolism and thought structures, which still haunt our contemporary poetics, in favour of an ironically-inflected, civic-minded "poetics of disenchantment".

Auden describes *The Sea and the Mirror* in his subtitle as a "Commentary on Shakespeare's romance, *The Tempest*," but it is clearly much more than a work of literary criticism. It is a quasi-dramatic poem in which each of the play's characters—from the most eminent such as Prospero, his usurping brother, Antonio, and the King of Naples, to the

lowest such as the Master and the Boatswain—take their turn to speak their soliloquies—in no particular order—to the surrounding silence in a rich panoply of different verse forms.

We are to imagine the scene on Shakespeare’s stage after a performance of *The Tempest*. Prospero – the seemingly all-powerful magus who has orchestrated all of the events that have taken place on the island-stage—has just finished his direct address to the audience:

Now I want
Spirits to enforce, Art to enchant;
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be reliev’d by prayer,
Which pierces so, that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
(Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Epilogue, ll. 2334-
2339)⁶

This is the moment of Prospero’s dismantling of theatrical illusion. His final request of the audience is, of course, a kind of visual pun asking the audience for its applause.

Yet the play’s conclusion was one that left Auden profoundly dissatisfied. He complained that Shakespeare had left his play “in a mess”.⁷ Its conclusion, he felt, was “inadequate for its themes ... Both the repentance of the guilty and the pardon of the injured seems more formal than real”.⁸ As he explains in the essay “Balaam and his Ass,” none of the wrongdoers in the play other than Alonso, King of Naples, seems sincerely

⁶ Eds. Brent Whitted and Paul Yachnin, *Internet Shakespeare Editions*, U. of Victoria, Web, date accessed, 5 Jan., 2016, http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Tmp_M/scene/Epilogue/

⁷ John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* [1998], (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 357.

⁸ Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 325.

sorry for what he has done, and Prospero's forgiveness is little more than an expression of triumphalism: "more the contemptuous pardon of a man who knows that he has his enemies completely at his mercy than a heartfelt reconciliation".⁹

Auden's poem, therefore, was intended to serve as an epilogue to and "complete" the Shakespeare play. Yet it is also, by dint of its display of the psychological state of each member of the supporting cast, in a virtuoso sequence of soliloquies in different verse forms, a kind of meditation upon the poem as a *provisional public space* across which strangely isolated presences fitfully emerge and then ebb from public consciousness. I am put in mind of the contemporary Irish poet John Redmond's instructive comments about a poem's power to *make* worlds that seem to be "touched by independent life".¹⁰ Redmond's comments here are instructive and apt because, like Auden, he disputes prevailing "default" assumptions about what a poem can be. Against "default" Romantic notions of poems as open windows onto a poet's 'inner personality' and expressive of his unique, inspired, lyric voice, Redmond proposes the notion of a multi-voiced poem as a "provisional space through which presences other than [the poet's] may pass—and occasionally have a say".¹¹

⁹ W.H. Auden, "Balaam and His Ass," in *The Dyer's Hand* [1962] (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 129.

¹⁰ John Redmond, *How to Write a Poem*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 42.

¹¹ Redmond, p. 36.

The Sea and Mirror's ebb and flow of voices, with the multiple complementary and conflicting perspectives that they display in the poem's three chapters, remind us that we are no longer in exactly the same fictive space as Shakespeare's drama *The Tempest*. Although Auden has adopted the characters of the Shakespeare play, his *Commentary* belongs to what may be termed a new and separate aesthetic *regime*.

The association of aesthetics with the notion of a *regime* is Jacques Rancière's. In his book *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, he applies the term *regime* to aesthetics in order to suggest the comprehensiveness with which artistic practices infer and are implicated with not merely social, cultural, and political structures but also with the fundamental systems of sensory forms which determine different societies' perceptions of reality. Rancière's concept of a regime of art consists of three factors: first, there are the actual arts themselves, which he describes as "ways of doing and making".¹² Then, there are the forms with which these arts are made visible as works of art. And then finally, a regime of art involves the way in which people conceptualise the ways in which art is produced and recognise art as art.

Crucial to the concept of regimes of art is Rancière's notion of the "distribution of the sensible". He describes this as "the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the

¹² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* [2000], trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 91.

existence of something in common [by the community] and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it”.¹³ Rancière is referring to the “common knowledge” that is shared by and that helps to make up the coordinates of a community’s consciousness and perception of reality. This shared sense of what constitutes reality or what is visible and sensible as reality also makes us aware of those who do not belong or are left out of a community: “The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed”.¹⁴

There are three main systems or *regimes* of art outlined by Rancière: the ethical regime, the representative or poetic regime, and the aesthetic regime. The ethical regime considers art images from their relationship with “truth”. It asks of art the sorts of questions Plato asked of artistic images—“where do these images come from?” “Are these images ‘true’ or are they simulacra—that is, lies?” “Can they serve the community?” For Plato, there was no distinction between art and politics: art was for him a way of making or doing things with discourse or bodily practices designed for the purpose of educating citizens according to their occupations and stations within the community.¹⁵

Rancière names the second regime the poetic or representative regime. Here, the order is guided mainly by the principle that isolates

¹³ Rancière, p. 12.

¹⁴ Rancière, p. 12.

¹⁵ Rancière, p. 21.

particular forms of art that produce imitations. This regime emerged out of Aristotle's defence of poetic mimesis against the moral, religious, and ethical criteria of the ethical age. In this regime it is not "truth" that is important but the fabrication and arrangement of actions representing the activities of people in the real world (the artistic "mirror held up to nature"). The main thing was whether or not the poem meets the norms of mimetic representation described by Aristotle. The *Poetics* makes poetical fabrication into what Rancière calls the "play of knowledge" carried out in "determined space-time".¹⁶ Here we may think of the mimetic norms of verisimilitude that had become solidified by Shakespeare's time and which would have allowed his plays like *Hamlet* or *The Tempest* to be judged as successes or failures according to these norms. According to Rancière, the representative regime of mimesis became formally codified in the Classical Age—that period stretching from the Renaissance to the early 18th century and encompassing Renaissance as well as neo-classical tragedy and poetry.

But Rancière emphasises that what conditions the approach to the arts in the representative regime is not mimesis per se; it is the pragmatic distribution and identification of social occupations. This distribution or "regime of visibility" makes the arts recognisable as arts. At the same time, the "regime of visibility" gives the arts and their respective forms and genres their autonomy, and links this autonomy to the hierarchy of the

¹⁶ Rancière, p. 36.

social and political world.¹⁷ The hierarchy of genres and the primacy given to speech in the representative regime have their analogy in the social ordering of society.¹⁸

The third regime, meanwhile, which Rancière calls the *aesthetic*, emerged with Romanticism during the advent of the Modern Age. It is a revolutionary regime which overturns the values and norms of both the ethical and representative regimes. The aesthetic regime assaulted the mimetic norms of the representative regime by revoking Aristotle's dividing line between reality and fiction, between the logic of facts and the logic of stories. Aristotle had erected the mimetic barrier to separate art's ways of doing and making from the ways of doing and making found in ordinary occupations. But the aesthetic revolution proclaimed the autonomy of art and simultaneously recognised the immanence of meaning in things themselves.¹⁹ Romanticism declared that the principle of poetry was not in fiction but in the arrangement of the signs of language. Romanticism thereby "plunged language" into the materiality of history and the social world. The new fictionality of the aesthetic regime is defined by the circulation of signs which have the capacity to assign meaning to "lowly actions" and ordinary objects in the empirical world.²⁰

The three regimes of art which Rancière outlines have different artistic forms associated with them. But it is important to note that they do

¹⁷ Rancière, p. 22.

¹⁸ Rancière, p. 22.

¹⁹ Rancière, p. 23.

²⁰ Rancière, p. 36.

not merely follow each other in a simple chronological succession. Rancière points out that they often intermingle or conflict with each other in different social, political, and cultural contexts. All three are still active in Western artistic practice. Plato identified three forms in which discursive and bodily practices suggested the community: they were writing—a “surface of the mute signs that are...like paintings”, the theatre, and a dancing chorus.²¹ In the ethical age, its best spokesperson, Plato, identified the dancing chorus as the *healthiest* form of art. In the representative age, it was to drama that Aristotle looked in order to establish the norms of mimetic representation. In the aesthetic regime it is writing which is held to be the quintessential art form of the Modern Age. But even though the different art forms are expressive of the different values of different aesthetic regimes, what they share in common is the fact that they are public activities. It was this fact, the fact that poets’ productions—writing, theatre, and chorus—were *public* communal activities; that is, produced for the stage, which is simultaneously a “locus of public activity and the exhibition space for ‘fantasies’”, which makes them especially dangerous for Plato.²² As we will see, however, the *public* face of all art forms—and their link to particular systems for the distribution of the sensible—is a pivotal aspect of art’s potential for political intervention.

²¹ Rancière, p. 14.

²² Rancière, p. 14.

So how does this discussion of Rancière's regimes of art relate to Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*? It is relevant to the poem because we may recognise in Auden's self-conscious juxtaposition of the codes and norms of the Classical Age in Shakespeare's work with the poetic codes and norms of his own, Modern regime, a re-enactment of the overturning of the poetic codes and values of the representative regime and the transformation of Shakespeare's stage into a provisional, ontological space.

There can be little doubt that of all the things that disturbed Auden about *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's representation of the bestial savage named Caliban disturbed him the most profoundly. He writes, "We cannot help feeling that Prospero is largely responsible for [Caliban's] corruption and that, in the debate between them, Caliban has the best of the argument".²³ Nevertheless, at the end of Shakespeare's play, in the midst of all the reconciliations, when all of the other characters are preparing to embark for Europe, there's no place for Caliban: Prospero will not permit this savage "Thing of darkness," as he calls him, to stay on the island and we are not sure whether he will allow him on board ship to partake of the new life.²⁴ Caliban remains in limbo.

Caliban's position "in limbo" seems to have excited Auden's imagination. However, It is this aspect of his representation in the Shakespeare drama which proved the most taxing challenge to Auden's

²³ Auden, "Balaam and His Ass" p. 129.

²⁴ Fuller, p. 364.

imaginative and poetic skills, and it was the challenge which once surmounted gave the poet the most pleasure. Caliban also intrigued Auden because of his status as a “natural man.” Auden describes him as the embodiment of what he terms “the whole physical-historical nature of fallen man.” In terms of his conception of the Shakespearean play as a whole, Auden seems to have endorsed, or at least found most fruitful, the traditional nineteenth-century literary conception of the play as a kind of psychomachia in which Prospero symbolized the artist, Ariel his imagination, and Caliban the man in the flesh, animal, or a part of Nature. *The Tempest*, according to Auden, was flawed because it is what he terms “a Manichean work.” It is Manichean, Auden explains, “not because it shows the relation of Nature to Spirit as one of conflict and hostility, which in fallen man it is, but because it puts the blame for this upon Nature and makes the Spirit innocent”.²⁵ Moreover, the idea of this same natural man rejected by Prospero in favour of Ariel and “stuck in limbo” is richly suggestive of the traditional division in Western discourse between the Mind and the Body or the Flesh and the Spirit. Throughout his later poetic career Auden had an inner debate about the mind and the body. The body he conceived to be trapped in history and “the world of necessity” while the mind, “until recalled by the senses to a world of necessity imagines itself “Unhindered, unrebuked, unwatched, Self-known, self-praising, self-attached”.²⁶ Indeed this Manicheanism may be seen as a fundamental

²⁵ Auden, “Balaam and His Ass” p. 130.

²⁶ Mendelson, *Later Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999) p. xiv.

attribute of the representative or mimetic regime, which functions through its system of generative dualities—fact versus fiction, nature versus *artifice*, visible versus *invisible*, Logos versus *Pathos*, Flesh versus Spirit.

What Auden seems to be doing quite consciously, through the figure of Caliban, is critiquing and deconstructing the mimetic codes, values, and political logic of the representative regime. Caliban opens his monologue, for instance, by speaking on behalf of the audience and giving voice to its confusion over the presence of a figure like Caliban himself in the play. Caliban, as the audience's "echo", demands to know from Shakespeare why he would dare to violate the Classical principles of verisimilitude by allowing a savage brute like himself into the hallowed world of art:

How *could* you, you who are one of the oldest habitués at these delightful functions, one possibly the closest, of [the Muse's] trusted inner circle, how could you be guilty of the incredible unpardonable treachery of bringing along the one creature, as you above all men must have known, whom she cannot and will not under any circumstances stand, the solitary exception she is not at any hour of the day or night at home to, the unique case that her attendant spirits have absolute instructions never, neither at the front door nor at the back, to admit?²⁷

Caliban's presence, the audience complains, has the effect of exposing the "chaos" and fleshly origin of art. The audience expresses the fear that

²⁷ W.H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror*, *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems*, [1976], ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Modern Library, 2007), p. 424. Subsequent references in parentheses are to this edition.

if Caliban has been let in then Ariel, the spirit of abstract aesthetic order could also be let loose into ordinary, everyday reality.

Caliban, as the audience's "echo", also reminds Shakespeare that in the representative regime poetical fabrication is a "play of knowledge" in determined "space-time". The arts are isolated from ordinary modes of production: "Must we—it seems oddly that we must—remind you that our existence does not, like [Art's], enjoy an infinitely indicative mood, an eternally present tense, a limitlessly active voice..." (p. 426). Additionally, Caliban underlines the analogy between the hierarchy of genres and subject matter and the social ordering of society in the representative regime:

What river and railroad did for the grosser instance,
lawn and corridor do for the more refined, dividing the
tender who value from the tough who measure...For
without these prohibitive frontiers we should never
know who we were or what we wanted. (p. 427)

At another point Caliban even goes so far as to remind Shakespeare of the oft-quoted fundamental mimetic rule of the representative regime: "You yourself, we seem to remember, have spoken of the conjured spectacle as 'a mirror held up to nature'" (p. 428). The mirror is, of course, a familiar Shakespearean metaphor for art as mimesis. It is clearly linked with the antithetical images in the poem's title—*The Sea and the Mirror*. On a basic level, the "sea" may be seen as the sea of nature, or more broadly the flux of reality. In his 1950 critical study, *The*

Enchaféd Flood, Auden identifies the sea as a Romantic symbol of the sublime or primitive imaginative power and prophetic inspiration. But Caliban goes on to ask Shakespeare whether the definition of art as “a mirror held up to nature” is not in fact a “mutual reversal of value” between the real and the imagined: “for isn’t the essential artistic strangeness... just this: that on the far side of the mirror the general will to compose, to form at all costs a felicitous pattern becomes the *necessary cause* of any particular effort to live or act or love or triumph or vary, instead of being as, in so far as it emerges at all, it is on this side, their *accidental effect*?” (p. 428). In other words, art is *not* in fact the mirror of life, but rather it is representative of a general human tendency to impose artistic pattern or meaning on experience. When we consider the poem’s title in the light of this remarkable passage, it becomes clear that Auden is taking aim not merely at the shortcomings and contradictions of a particular regime of the arts but at those of Art writ large.

Caliban, still speaking as the audience’s “echo”, condemns his own appearance in the play and then goes on to wonder if Shakespeare has not also let loose Ariel—the shy, modest spirit who represents the imagination—into the real, ordinary world:

Where is He now? For if the intrusion of the real has disconcerted and incommoded the poetic, that is a mere bagatelle compared to the damage which the poetic would inflict if it ever succeeded in intruding upon the real. We want no Ariel here, breaking down our picket fences in the name of fraternity, seducing our wives in the name of romance, and robbing us of

our sacred pecuniary deposits in the name of justice. Where is Ariel? What have you done with Him? For we won't, we daren't leave until you give us a satisfactory answer. (p. 249)

There is an impression here of the complete divorce of the spiritual from the fleshly. We find this echoed later when Caliban voices Shakespeare's message to young poets. Caliban summarises the career of the writer (or Auden himself). He presents the writer's calling to his vocation, the first visitation of Ariel (Imagination), and the successes of his career; of course, Shakespeare makes it clear that it is Ariel who is doing most of the work. Then he describes the decline in the relationship between the writer and Ariel. The writer desires normal human love and when the writer tries, finally, to dismiss Ariel, the spirit refuses to leave. The writer—much like Prospero—discovers that after a lifetime of service he cannot merely discard his imagination. When the writer confronts the spirit of inspiration, he finds himself with shock looking into the wild eyes of the enraged id:

Striding up to Him in fury, you glare into His unblinking eyes and stop dead, transfixed with horror at seeing reflected there, not what you had always expected to see, a conqueror smiling at a conqueror, both promising mountains and marvels, but a gibbering fist-clenched creature with which you are all too unfamiliar, for this is the first time indeed that you have met the only subject that you have, who is not a dream amenable to magic but the all too solid flesh you must acknowledge as your own; at last you come face to face with me, and are appalled to learn how far I am from being, in any sense, your dish. (p. 432)

It is as if there is a strange, complete and irrevocable disjunction between the poetic voice cultivated by the artist and his “only subject”, his fleshly, human self: “completely lacking in that poise and calm and all-forgiving because all-understanding good nature which to the critical eyes is so wonderfully and domestically present on every page of your published inventions” (p. 432).

In the next section of Caliban’s performance, he adopts the voice of Shakespeare and addresses the two traditional divisions of the public: the “general popular type” and the “important persons at the top of the ladder.” Caliban dismisses the complaints of the first group about the presence of Caliban: “All your clamour signifies is this: that this is your first big crisis, the breaking of the childish spell...” [of mimetic representation] (434). What this public wants is linked to a romantic nostalgia for a childhood that never was. The other group does not fare much better: its members are the more refined and elite supporters of Modernism or the aesthetic regime.

Under the aesthetic regime, according to Rancière, the arts are identified as such by a “sensible mode of being” specific to artistic products. What makes art, according to this regime, is its lack of connection to ordinary things, the distinctive power it has by dint of its lack of connection with any ordinary thing that is produced.²⁸ Art becomes a form of thought that is *not thought*, thought that “has become foreign to

²⁸ Rancière, p. 23.

itself”, as Rancière puts it.²⁹ It becomes a product in which *Logos* is paradoxically embodied as *Pathos*. But by declaring itself separate from all other human occupations and at the same time asserting that art and meaning can be immanent in everything; that is, by destroying the mimetic barrier that separated its rules from the rules of other occupations, art undermines the possibility of considering itself as a singular activity. It plunges itself into an “interminable contradiction”: it “can only isolate art’s specificity at the expense of losing it”.³⁰

And so Caliban speaks of the loss of identity and certainty and the ability to articulate meaning:

Everything, in short, suggests Mind but, surrounded by an infinite extension of the adolescent difficulty, a rising of the subjective and subjunctive to ever steeper, stormier heights, the panting frozen expressive gift has collapsed under the strain of its communicative anxiety, and contributes nothing by way of meaning but a series of staccato barks or a delirious gush of glossolalia. (p. 440)

The true goal of art, Caliban explains, is “to make you unforgettably conscious of the ungarnished offended gap between what you so questionably are and what you are commanded without any question to become” (p. 441). To Caliban, the more successful the artist is in creating a coherent and harmonious work, the more he has diverted attention away from the true chaotic nature of the world. The artist must devote all of her

²⁹ Rancière, p. 23.

³⁰ Rancière, p. 81.

efforts to achieving perfect mimesis, while at the same time hoping for some sort of mishap to destroy the mimetic spell.

What we see here, therefore, at the end of Caliban's address in Chapter 3 of *The Sea and the Mirror* is Auden's conscious dissolving of the mimetic spell of poetry and his adoption of what may be termed a poetics of disenchantment. By "poetics of disenchantment", I am referring to an effort on Auden's part to dismantle the mimetic machinery of his poetics and invite his public into his 'workshop', so to speak, in order, like Prospero, to undo the poetic spell used to create the illusion that there was ever a unitary, 'authentic' voice speaking the poem. It is clear that the notion of the 'voice' in poetry is related both to notions of mimetic representation—faith in fabricating a complete, self-sufficient world in the perfect mimetic spell—and to Romanticism—faith in the public's access to the authentic, unitary, inner personality of the poet. In Auden's poem, as Caliban shows, the unitary voice of the poet/artist breaks down in the image of the poet confronting his fleshly double, Caliban.

Both Michael Warner (2002) and Jacques Rancière write of literature's imaginative projection of a social world through their address to publics. For Warner, this projective aspect of public discourse—the fact that it continually strives to reach new strangers and thereby continually remakes its public—is public discourse's "engine for social mutation".³¹ All public discourse, Warner argues, is *poetic*: "all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterize the world in which it attempts to

³¹ Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture*, 14, 1, 81.

circulate, projecting for that world a concrete and livable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address”.³²

When critics speak of poetry’s creative and performative dimension, they usually speak of poets’ ability to marshal the repertoire of language features in order to render certain mimetic effects—such as a unitary voice. But for the most part they do not recognise it as public discourse. There are two main reasons why poetry is not recognized as public discourse, Warner states: first, because poetry must be conducted as if the public was already out there—it cannot openly proclaim that it is in the process of creating this public. The second reason why poetry is misrecognised is that the circulation of poetry is imagined as a dialogue between two real persons, and this notion obscures the importance of the poetic functions of language and “corporeal expressivity” which give publics their particular shapes.³³ For Warner, publics are not “dyadic author-reader interactions” in which the author tries to persuade his reader but acts of creation, acts of “multigeneric circulation”.³⁴

Rancière’s discussion of the public hinges on the term “literarity”. He uses this to describe the “condition and effect of the circulation of ‘actual’ literary locutions”.³⁵ He then goes on to articulate a notion of literary effects which not only evokes Warner’s idea of the power of the “public” but actually transforms it into something far more radical and

³² Warner, p. 81.

³³ Warner, p. 82.

³⁴ Warner, p. 82.

³⁵ Rancière, p. 39.

powerful: he argues that these locutions have the power to take hold of “bodies” and divert them from their end. This power is caused by the fact that literary locutions are not bodies in the sense of organisms but “quasi-bodies”, blocks of speech circulating without a legitimate father to accompany them toward their unauthorized addressee” (p. 39). They take hold of “unspecified groups of people”.³⁶

Here, Rancière’s formulation of literarity clearly alludes to the publicness of these locutions, the sense that they are produced for strangers. Rancière goes on to suggest the power of literary locutions to shape “collective bodies”, but unlike Warner he does not claim that these literary locutions form or consolidate collective bodies or publics. Rancière instead emphasises the power of these locutions to fragment and break up uniformities and bodies. They do not produce “collective bodies”; they “introduce lines of fracture and disincorporation”.³⁷ This fragmenting power of literary locutions is one of the reasons why the authorities and those in power have worried about the circulation of writing.

The circulation of the “quasi-bodies” of literary locutions causes modifications of language and what Rancière calls the “sensible distribution of spaces and occupations”.³⁸ The quasi-bodies form “uncertain communities” that challenge the existing distribution of the sensible”. They become “channels for subjectivation”; that is, the process by which individuals or groups challenge what seems to be the natural order or

³⁶ Rancière, p. 39.

³⁷ Rancière, p. 39.

³⁸ Rancière, p. 40.

distribution of the sensible.³⁹ But these channels are not those of identification through the imagination but “literary disincorporation”.⁴⁰ The idea of reconfiguring the community’s shared sensible order raises the idea of utopia. But for Rancière ‘fictions’ of art and politics are *heterotopias*—“reconfigurations of the visible, the thinkable, and the possible”.⁴¹

Viewed in this light, pronouncements about poets’ “original voices” seem remarkably naïve and simplistic. *The Sea and the Mirror* presents a powerful parable of the connection between poetic voice and the public. It suggests both the potency and the vulnerability of the public power of the poet’s voice. Perhaps the best way for us to understand this paradoxical power and vulnerability is to turn to a remarkable essay by the Russian-American poet and friend of W.H. Auden, Joseph Brodsky. In his essay “On ‘September 1, 1939’ by W. H. Auden”, Brodsky makes us aware, as few critics or interpreters have, of the complexities of word choices, rhymes, the many subtle shifts in Auden’s pitch, tone, and perspective and the ramifications those changes had for the poet’s ‘voice’ in this poem.⁴² He describes how the poet shifts from an authoritative, confident public voice to a more intimate, vulnerable and lyrical voice.

Brodsky talks about the very private nature of Auden’s decision to move to the United States in 1939. The move, Brodsky asserts, had very

³⁹ Rancière, p. 40.

⁴⁰ Rancière, p. 40.

⁴¹ Rancière, p. 40.

⁴² Joseph Brodsky, “On ‘September 1, 1939’ by W. H. Auden”, in *Less Than One: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1987), pp. 304-356.

little to do with world politics. Auden emigrated to the United States because of language:

what Auden had in mind from the very outset of his poetic career was the sense that the language in which he wrote was transatlantic or, better still, imperial: not in the sense of the British Raj but in the sense that it is the language that made an empire.⁴³

I hasten to interject here that Auden was most emphatically not a defender of empire. No, what Brodsky is suggesting here is the scope of Auden's ambition as a poet to master all of the idioms of English and to appeal to a much broader public.

And Brodsky is largely correct: in various articles and in letters to friends throughout the late 1930s Auden spoke of his deep discontent with English literary life and society and discomfort with his public role as the acknowledged literary spokesperson for lib-left politics in England—the “Court Poet of the Left”.⁴⁴

Auden's decision to emigrate was in part an effort to remedy his discontent with his situation in England with a change in lifestyle and an immersion into a vast social landscape in which the role of the poet was more marginalised perhaps but also far less defined, and therefore more open to Auden's reinvention of his poetic identity. Upon his arrival on American shores, Auden would have been conscious for the first time of writing for “two audiences”—those back home in England and his new

⁴³ Brodsky, p. 309.

⁴⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 243.

audience in America. In fact, I think we can go much farther than this: Auden's move to the United States would have brought home to him—perhaps for the first time—the meaning of writing for a *public*—“a kind of social totality,” a foreign, changeable and unknowable entity consisting of dispersed populations in general and containing many subsidiary publics, a public comprised of *strangers*.⁴⁵

It seems to me that Auden—a poet who throughout the early, English stage in his career was obsessed with the tension between personal and public realms, and who was inspired by and thematised this tension—was provoked upon his arrival in America by his consciousness of writing for a public of strangers to change his poetic voice, in fact to adopt multiple voices, in order to create—through poetic discourse—new publics, *heterotopias*—dispersed across the expanse of America and *out there* in the world.

Auden's attempt to move beyond his “original voice” amounts to a very risky effort to hazard or hypothesise, invent new publics, and to thereby reinvent himself as a poet. Auden's move was a scary gesture, an act of transgression— because the rule book seems to state that poets cannot do this—they cannot change their voices, they cannot appear to jettison the voice they have cultivated along with the public that voice has brought into being, and then create a new voice for themselves. Imagine if Orpheus had stopped singing the native song of his familiar world which brought him his first public and first fame, and that he had suddenly shifted

⁴⁵ Warner, p. 50.

his rhetoric, speaking of a wider, less localised world, and that the audience he attracted seemed wilder, stranger, and less familiar. Would we not say that he had abandoned his “original voice” and had somehow lost the authenticity and purity of that first vision in which he was recognisable to us— that he had betrayed his “Muse”? But is not that precisely what happened to Orpheus when he emerged from the underworld? Did his song not become broader and yet stranger, attracting a public consisting of flora and fauna? And was he not torn to pieces for having the audaciousness to do this?

**CHAPTER FOUR: LETTERS TO MR. AUDEN #3,
#4 AND #5**

LETTER TO MR. AUDEN #3

Dear Mr. Auden,

In the lecture you delivered before the University of Oxford in 1956 for your inauguration as the Oxford Professor of Poetry, you at one point spoke about the difference between the poet's attitude towards literature and the critic's. "In judging a work of the past," you said, "the question of the historical critic—'What was the author of this work trying to do? How far did he succeed in doing it?'—important as he knows it to be, will always interest a poet less than the question—'What does this work suggest to living writers now? Will it help or hinder them in what they are trying to do?'"¹

Nowadays, perhaps your characterising of the critical approach of the literary critic or scholar might seem somewhat reductive, especially in the wake of post-structuralism, when an abundance of inter-disciplinary and creative approaches to the literary text have been opened up to the literary scholar. But your notion that there's a fundamental difference between what interests the literary critic/scholar and what interests the apprentice poet is, I believe, essentially and indisputably accurate. If anything, we could state the questions that a poet asks of a poetic work of the past even more bluntly: 'How does this work achieve the effect it does? What does this work suggest for *me* and *my* work now? What use can *I* make of it? How will it profit *me*?'

Your assertion is confirmed by Michael Schmidt in his introduction to Carcanet's *New Poetries V* anthology. Schmidt writes of "plausible" poetry written by "plausible" poets. What he is describing here is the way in which aspiring poets strive to do precisely what you claim they do—that is, puzzle

over the mystery of how successful poets do what they do in their writing and then attempt to do it themselves.² According to Schmidt, these “plausible” poets can only make the leap to true poetic expression, and hence to the status of true poets, when they learn how to overcome and transform their sources. This certainly mirrors my own experience as I struggle to unlock the constraints of form, language, and influence and achieve full expressivity as a poet.

Your main purpose in “Making, Knowing and Judging” seems to be giving an account of how a would-be poet becomes an actual poet, especially in contemporary times. You say that the decisive event in this process is the emergence of the poet’s “critical conscience”, “inner examiner”, or “the Censor”; that is, the critical faculty which enables a poet to determine whether or not his poetry has any merit.³ As your essay unfolds you outline the elements and considerations of an education that will best help the poet to develop this faculty: “How does the Censor get his education? How does his attitude towards the literature of the past differ from that of the scholarly critic?”⁴ The poet’s possession of the Censor makes him similar to the literary critic, but where the critic is concerned with the “already existing works of others,” the poet “is only interested in one author”—himself—and “only concerned with works that do not yet exist”.⁵

Your concern with the mysteries of poetic process and how a poet becomes a poet is one that is shared by numerous creative writing MFAs, creative writing seminars, and popular books on poetic craft. Amongst the books that I’ve read on this topic—such books as Mary Kinzie’s *A Poet’s Guide to Poetry*, Michael Bugeja’s *The Art and Craft of Poetry*, James

Fenton's *The Strength of Poetry*, and Timothy Steele's *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing*—your essay/lecture stands out due to its idiosyncrasy—the fact that it bears the stamp of your characteristic preoccupations and themes—and its fairly consistent candour.⁶ I was touched by the fact that in your lecture you recount your own rather inauspicious beginnings as a poet:

I scarcely knew any poems – *The English Hymnal*, the Psalms, *Struwwelpeter* and the mnemonic rhymes in *Kennedy's Shorter Latin Primer* are about all I remember – and I took little interest in what is called Imaginative Literature. Most of my reading had been related to a private world of Sacred Objects. Aside from a few stories like George Macdonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* and Jules Verne's *The Child of the Cavern*, the subjects of which touched upon my obsessions, my favourite books bore such titles as *Underground Life*, *Machinery for Metalliferous Mines*, *Lead and Zinc Ores of Northumberland and Alston Moor*, and my conscious purpose in reading them had been to gain information about my sacred objects.⁷

Though this reading list would seem to offer little to feed a young poetic imagination, its very idiosyncrasy and oddity is in fact suggestive to me of the peculiar worldview and syntax which characterises your early poetry, with its interest in dreams, riddles, private references, moribund industries, northern landscapes, geology, and imagery drawn from mythology. In fact, your reading list brings to mind Jack Spicer's injunction to young poets to nourish their minds with images and ideas drawn from outside of literature by exposing themselves to as diverse a range of books as possible:

I do think that just the average young poet ought to read as many books as he can and they ought to not be in paperback. They ought to be books that nobody's read and that aren't fashionable, and things which are about animal husbandry or what saline solutions are like with octopuses or something like that. It doesn't really matter

much. But he certainly ought to have more stock in his mind than he has.⁸

I think the point you're making here, though, is to show how your "poetic" enjoyment of language began *long before* you started writing poetry:

Looking back, however, I now realised that I had read the technological prose of my favourite books in a peculiar way. A word like *pyrites*, for example, was for me, not simply an indicative sign; it was the Proper Name of a Sacred Being...⁹

I found your idea that the act of naming is poetry's distinctive inceptive action to be quite suggestive. In the biblical book of Genesis Adam names all living creatures, and in doing so, you say, he adopts the role of the Proto-poet. He chose proper names for the animals that did not merely refer, but referred *aptly* and were publicly recognisable as such. Much like a line of poetry, you maintain, a Proper Name cannot really be translated.¹⁰ You quote Paul Valéry:

The power of verse is derived from an indefinable harmony between what it says and what it *is* ... Indefinable is essential to the definition... The impossibility of defining the relation, together with the impossibility of denying it, constitutes the essence of the poetic line.¹¹ (*Tel Quel, II*, 1944, 637)

Like Valéry, you reject the traditional notion of an imitative harmony between name and thing; poetry assigns an equal importance to name and thing that is not present in prose. You say that the pleasure you took in language when you were a boy was the poetic sensation of intimate union between word and mind long before you became an actual poet.

But your comments about poetry's inception in the act of naming are suggestive to me of the acts of nominalism taking place in other arts, most notably in the visual arts. The poet's characteristic action is initiated by the Proto-poet, Adam's naming. His action of naming is *not* one of mimetically referencing animals and things in the world; he brings poetry into being by giving names to those concepts in *his mind*. And it is Adam, the Proto-poet who projects the apt connection between the word and the animal or thing in the world. I can see an analogy here between this inceptive action in poetry and the inceptive action in the visual arts (at least as formulated by Duchamp and Conceptual Art). Just as the inception of poetry begins in the poet's act of naming the elements of her poetic world so also are the nature and context of art object conceived and determined by the visual artist. (The advent of Conceptual Art was said to have begun in the mid-1910s when Marcel Duchamp inscribed and displayed a series of readymade quotidian objects—such as a porcelain urinal, a suspended snow shovel, and a plank of iron coat hooks nailed to the floor—as art. Duchamp called the naming of these readymade objects “une sorte de nominalisme pictural” [a kind of pictorial nominalism]).¹²

After discussing poetry's origins in naming, you move on to discuss the apprentice poet's first poetic efforts. They cannot be dismissed as bad or imitative, you write, because they are “imaginary”.¹³ They are imaginary in the sense that they're imitations of poetry in general. They represent the poet's first attempts at mastering the metrical qualities in language. I enjoyed your recounting of your own first exposure to the variety of metrical forms and poetical moods via your early reading of Walter de la Mare's anthology *Come*

Hither. It was important, you say, because of the good taste it displayed in its choice of poems. But the anthology's most invaluable lesson for you was that poetry can encompass diverse tones and registers: "Particularly valuable," you write, "was its lack of literary class consciousness, its juxtaposition on terms of equality of unofficial poetry, such as counting-out rhymes, and official poetry such as the odes of Keats".¹⁴ Poetry, you learned, "does not have to be great or even serious to be good".¹⁵

This insight is probably why you reject Matthew Arnold's idea of poetic touchstones by which to judge poems: "A poet who wishes to improve himself should certainly keep good company, but for his profit as well as for his comfort the company should not be too far above his station".¹⁶ Of course, I know that you're no relativist: you're not suggesting that all poetic subjects are equal, or that there's no difference between a *great* poem and a good poem. You're merely arguing that a poet should nourish himself on a diverse range of poetry and on ordinary poetry as well as great and elevated poetry.

This passage is suggestive to me of your characteristic *Audenesque* tone, with its mixing of high and low styles. But more than this, it suggests to me the overall catholic, democratic spirit that pervades your entire oeuvre and that sets it apart from the work of your friends and contemporaries such as Louis MacNeice (most notably). I know you will vigorously defend him, so let me assure you that I do admire him in many ways. But if I may, I'd like to contrast MacNeice's condescending, slightly disdainful treatment of popular culture in poems like "Death of an Actress" with your much more comfortable familiarity with popular metres and pop culture in poems like "Stop all the clocks," "Refugee Blues," and "Calypso." It's true that both of you are skilful

proponents of a pseudo-elegiac tone steeped in neo-classicism. But where MacNeice's poems like "Memoranda to Horace" convey the sense of the poet's haughty and—to me—mean-spirited self-conception as one of the last custodians of white patrician classical culture, contemptuous of the low class or non-white effluvia that surface in the contemporary metropolis—the "niggers' faces," as he terms them, "in [the] dark background" of "Our London world",¹⁷ for you, classicism seems to gain interest by virtue of its stylistic clash and then synthesis with low styles; in fact, I think you show in *The Sea and the Mirror* and "New Year Letter" that this camp mixing of high and low styles constitutes for you the modern. I'd even go so far as to say that this stylistic clash and synthesis seems be the singular characteristic of the textual surface of your poetry.

Thank you for reminding me that above all, it is most essential, however, that the poet develops his Censor. Until that Censor is born, you say, the poet's only recourse is to imitate. As you suggest, in an ideal world—in which poetry "were in great public demand"—an apprenticeship for poets would exist.¹⁸ But in the present-day world a poet's apprenticeship is served in the library and through imitation. And through imitating his 'master', the poet acquires a Censor and learns how a poem is written. I find it interesting that you describe Thomas Hardy as your "first Master"; it's well known, of course, that he was the major influence on your earlier poetry. But what you say also implies that you had several other masters throughout your entire writing career. Hardy, you say, was an excellent choice as a "first Master" because he was a very good poet, but far from flawless.¹⁹ Had he been so, you may

have been intimidated and discouraged. At least he exposed you to many different complicated poetic forms and a lot of metrical variety.

But you make it clear that even though a master may help in the apprentice poet's development of a Censor, it is still down to the apprentice himself to realise his own poetry, or as you put it, "discover what *needs to be written*".²⁰ The young poet can only learn what needs to be written from his own generation of apprentices. I find what you have to say about the criticism that apprentice poets offer other apprentices interesting if debatable. You write that apprentices give each other the kind of attentive personal criticism that they can never get from supposedly "sunder" academic literary critics and professional reviewers. You make it clear why this is so: "A critic's duty is to tell the public what a work is".²¹ But an apprentice poet will tell another "what he should and could have written instead".²² This much more personal criticism offered by poets to other poets is very rare and is the only criticism that truly benefits the poet.

The apprentice, you write, only becomes a true poet when his Censor is finally able to give him full marks for a poem.²³ But the poet always fears that he may never write again. I find it somewhat astonishing that a poet as prolific and accomplished as you would make such an admission. I wonder if in trying to self-deprecate you might not be exaggerating here? But then, by your own admission, you were not a very good student. You make the case that an apprentice poet rarely is. This is because, you say, he is "at the mercy of the immediate moment," and he "has no concrete reason for not yielding to its demands".²⁴ Though what you say here veers close to a kind of romantic cliché, I can recognise a certain truth in it: it's true I always hope these

serendipitous moments may lead to fruitful results. You yourself give a couple of examples from your own life: your decision on a whim to attend a lecture by the scholar of Anglo Saxon, J.R.R. Tolkien, and your accidental discovery of the literary critic, W.P. Ker.

You point to what you call “The Law of mental growth” as the reason for why apprentice poets are less than exemplary students. According to this “Law”, there is little difference in terms of their impact on the young poet’s consciousness between books, walks in the country, and a kiss: “All are equally experiences to store away in his memory”.²⁵ Again, although I find this a rather clichéd romantic view—would this “Law of mental growth” be applicable to reputed ‘brainy’ poets like John Donne, T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, I wonder?—I do appreciate your self-deprecation. I doubt that these others would ever liken their minds, as you do yours, to a “rag and bone shop”.²⁶ I think many poets would recognise, however, the truth in your statement that the images with which a poet stocks his memory do not follow any critical principle other than the personal whims of the poet. The poet certainly isn’t guided by principles of ‘good’ literature in his reading choices.

While you admit the fundamental differences in approach between the literary scholar and the poet, you make it quite clear that you have the highest esteem for literary scholars:

Even a young poet knows or very soon will realise that, but for scholars, he would be at the mercy of the literary taste of a past generation, since, once a book has gone out of print and been forgotten, only the scholar with his unselfish courage to read the unreadable will retrieve the rare prize.²⁷

The apprentice poet is under no illusion about his own ignorance; and it's for this reason—isn't it?—that he has a “sneaking regard” for the role of luck in poetic composition. The poet needs the literary scholar, and his main dilemma is in knowing which learned man or woman to ask. He wants more than good poetry; he wants to get a sense of the literary tastes which have helped shape the critic's judgement.²⁸

Thanks for revealing the questions or ‘touchstones’ you ask of and thereby use to judge a critic:

“Do you like, and by like I really mean like, not approve of on principle:

- 1) Long lists of proper names such as the Old Testament genealogies or the Catalogue of ships in the *Iliad*?
- 2) Riddles and all other ways of not calling a spade a spade?
- 3) Complicated verse forms of great technical difficulty, such as Englyns, Drott-Kvaetts, Sestinas, even if their content is trivial?
- 4) Conscious theatrical exaggeration, pieces of Baroque flattery like Dryden's welcome to the Duchess of Ormond?”²⁹

What I find interesting about your list of poetic prejudices is what I also noticed in your essay 1962 “Writing”—your diminishment of or at least apparent indifference to the presumed hallmarks of post-romantic poetry—the use of metaphor and imagery, the natural and sincere expression of individual style and voice, and referential representation—and your marked preference for poetry's material, highly formalised, impersonal, and artificial elements. The lists of proper names, riddles and other ambiguous textual practices, the complicated verse forms, and the theatrical exaggeration which you cite as your critical touchstones with which to assess the critical acumen of critics are

all elements which emphasise the graphic, artificial, and non-mimetic nature of poetry. Though you make it clear that these are touchstones which you use to judge critics, not poets, I believe that they are instructive in what they have to tell me about the possibilities of poetry writing.

You are very appreciative of the two main advantages you believe a poet has when he plays the role of critic: he writes about work that he truly finds worthwhile reading, and he therefore conveys a sense of the genuine pleasure that the poetic work affords him; and secondly, because he is himself someone who creates poems, he is unlikely to nurture a secret grievance against the poem or poetry in general. You identify some of the errors which you think academic literary critics are particularly susceptible to: never believing that the poem being critiqued is quite good enough, writing a critical analysis that is so complicated it deprives potential readers of all desire to read the poem, or projecting all manner of inscrutable codes and cyphers onto the poem so that the poem's actual words become obscured. "Whatever his defects," you write, "a poet at least thinks a poem more important than anything which can be said about it".³⁰ He will know that the intimate details of a poet's life, personality, and attitudes are ultimately irrelevant to an understanding of his poetry.

Throughout your essay you make it clear that there have been certain critics whose work has opened up entirely new and clear vistas on poetry, or has literally discovered or saved poetry for posterity. But there can be little doubt about the advantage that your own critical work seems to have over even these perceptive and ground-breaking academic critical works: I often feel while reading you as if—in your attempts at candour about the poetic

process and prosody—you were trying to bring me at least partway into the workshop. I admit though that this impression is a fleeting and intermittent one, as your insights into prosody are scattered throughout your essays, commentaries, and reviews rather than argued cogently and systematically.

Even in this essay—though there is much that is insightful and revealing—I still cannot help but feel at certain rare moments that you’re being a little disingenuous about your own motivations. You write, for instance, that there are two questions which interest you most when reading a poem—“The first is technical: ‘Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?’ The second is, in the broadest sense, moral: ‘What kind of guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or the good place? His notion of the Evil One?’”³¹ The first question sounds plausible and reasonable, but do you honestly believe that the second one is true? Are you being totally sincere when you claim to be questioning a poet’s “notion of the good life” or his “notion of the Evil One”? Of course, I wouldn’t presume to question your commitment to your religious beliefs. But I find it hard to believe that someone as sophisticated and with as broad a range of sympathies as you would approach a poem as practically a substitute for Christianity! Is it not more likely that, like myself and many other people, what attracts you to a poem—beyond the technical question you mentioned earlier—is poetry’s world making capacity? Wasn’t it this very capacity (and poetry’s derivation from the verb *poiein*) that prompted Shelley to his notorious overstatement about poets’ relation to the world?

Oddly enough, you seem to be on much surer ground in your description of the poet in the preceding paragraph, when you self-

deprecatingly question his capacity for specialised expertise in any field: “He may have something sensible to say about woods, even about leaves, but you should never trust him on trees”.³² While this more recognisable poet may lack professional expertise, and may often be impressed by books judged by true experts to be “unsound,” he is open to a truly catholic range of influences and tastes derived from his pottering about in different fields and the other arts. The poet, you write, learns from the other arts by analogy. The truth of this is borne out, of course, in your own deep involvement with music. You belong to a very rare company of English poets who was fully conversant with the forms and conventions of opera and of music in general. But what would you say, I wonder, about a poetics which draws on Conceptual Art, say, or contemporary pop music, for its methods and inspiration?

You are also deeply convincing when you detail the continuing evolution of the poet’s Censor throughout the poet’s career. In your account the poet evolves from striving to be himself, and using his own voice, to the stage where he realises he must at all costs avoid imitating himself. The Censor tells him he must stop striving to write a good poem, and must seek uncertainty instead; uncertainty, you say, is a hopeful sign that the poet is doing that most difficult thing—changing himself.³³ It is at this point that the poet will most likely turn towards theories of poetry in order to make sense of the perplexing process he’s going through. You remark, as if ruefully commenting on your own poetic theorising and development, that the poet’s various ideas and theories about the nature of poetry at this point are less important than what they reveal about what the Censor is telling the poet: “The principles he formulates ... are intended to guard himself against

unnecessary mistakes and provide him with a guesswork map of the future”.³⁴ They also seem to serve as the poet’s justification of his poetry writing.

In the light of all you have to say about the twists and turns in the poet’s relationship with his Censor and the poet’s increasing recourse to theories about poetry—theories which you claim are ultimately unimportant—I find the theory that you yourself turn to towards the end of this essay—an adaptation of Coleridge’s notion of Primary and Secondary Imagination—to be quite surprising and significant. You remark that you believe you are “both trying to describe the same phenomena”,³⁵ but the two paragraphs which precede this suggest to me that you are using Coleridge’s terms in a very different way. “Some cultures,” you state, as if beginning an anthropological monograph, “make a social distinction between the sacred and the profane ... a clear division is made between certain actions which are regarded as sacred rites of great importance to the well-being of society, and everyday profane behaviour”.³⁶ Isn’t there a hint of nostalgic yearning in your comment that “In such cultures, if they are advanced enough to recognise poetry as an art, the poet has a public—even a professional status—and his poetry is either public or esoteric”?³⁷

You contrast these imaginary aesthetic primitive cultures with our own modern secular culture: “the distinction between the sacred or profane is not socially recognised. Either the distinction is denied or it is regarded as an individual matter of taste with which society is not and should not be concerned.”³⁸ And of course the poet’s status in our modern secular society is markedly different from that within the aesthetic primitive culture: “the poet has an amateur status and his poetry is neither public nor esoteric but

intimate. That is to say, he writes neither as a citizen nor as a member of a group of professional adepts, but as a single person to be read by other single persons".³⁹ You don't denigrate intimate poetry, for as you say, it's not necessarily obscure nor is it necessarily inferior to other kinds of poetry. But yet, according to the terms you've introduced above, it is crucially deficient in the significance it accords to the sacred. That this is the most significant aspect of the distinction between primitive aesthetic cultures and our own for you is shown in the way you incorporate the idea of the sacred into Coleridge's theory of poetic composition, even though, in enumerating his theory, Coleridge himself had been scrupulously careful about keeping science, poetry, and religion separate within their discrete and appropriate faculties.

The theory of poetic composition that Coleridge describes in *Biographia Literaria* is mainly concerned with repudiating Wordsworth's theories about language and poetic diction, with which Coleridge fundamentally disagreed. In his "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," Wordsworth, you'll remember, champions *plain, everyday language* against the exaggerated language of "outrageous stimulation" found in "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse".⁴⁰ He purports to speak to other men, bringing his language as close as possible "to the very language of men", and ridding his language of the "personifications of abstract ideas" and the stock "phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets".⁴¹

“The Poet,” according to Wordsworth, “writes under one restriction only, namely, the necessity of giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer, or a natural philosopher, but as a Man”.⁴² He should have no need to “trick out or to elevate nature: and, the more industriously he applies this principle, the deeper will be his faith that no words, which *his* fancy or imagination can suggest, will be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth”.⁴³ The poet’s works are judged “defective, in proportion as they deviate from the real language of nature, and are coloured by a diction of the Poet’s own, either peculiar to him as an individual Poet or belonging simply to Poets in general”.⁴⁴

Wordsworth at one point asserts that “the language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good Prose”.⁴⁵ In a sense Wordsworth’s blurring of the distinction between prose and poetry is understandable, since he is at pains to argue that poetry should ideally be composed out of “the language really spoken by men” rather than specialised, elevated ‘poetical’ language and style.⁴⁶ The true division for Wordsworth is not between the rhetorics of poetry and prose but that between poetry and the rhetoric of the “Matter of Fact, or Science”.⁴⁷ Poetry is the image of man and nature, and its object, according to Wordsworth, is truth: “not individual and local, but general and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion”.⁴⁸

“Poetry,” Wordsworth famously wrote, “is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” which have been “recollected in tranquillity”.⁴⁹ The poet begins his successful composition after the tranquillity has faded, and an

emotion arises which is approximate to the original emotion that had been recollected. The poet, according to Wordsworth, by composing in metre helps to temper this powerful emotion, assuaging any painful associations, and giving pleasure to the reader. Poetry's "complex feeling of delight" is derived from the pleasurable tension created by the poet's use of authentic, everyday language and his arrangement of that language into harmonious metre. Metre, in Wordsworth's argument, is merely an element that's "superadded" to the language of ordinary men in order to render that language more harmonious and pleasurable.

Before he begins his cogently argued rebuttal of Wordsworth's doctrine, Coleridge is careful to describe the circumstances under which the two poets first embarked on their ground-breaking collection of poems, *Lyrical Ballads*:

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination.⁵⁰

It quickly becomes apparent that Coleridge has a much more expansive notion of both the "truth of nature" and the "poetry of nature". Where Wordsworth identifies the "poetry of nature" with the image of rural man living in humble, rustic conditions, and the "truth of nature" with the general, representative insights offered by this ordinary man, provoked into humble eloquence by deep emotion, for Coleridge the "poetry of nature" encompasses not just ordinary men's articulated ideas and emotions in response to their natural surroundings but also the perceptions and fleeting

impressions of the imagination: “The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both. These are the poetry of nature”.⁵¹

Interestingly, at this point in the poetic project Coleridge maps out two domains of language within the “poetry of nature”:

The thought suggested itself (to which of us I do not recollect) that a series of poems might be composed of two sorts. In the one, the incidents and agents were to be, in part at least, supernatural; and the excellence aimed at was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real... For the second class, subjects were to be chosen from ordinary life; the characters and incidents were to be such, as will be found in every village and its vicinity, where there is a meditative and feeling mind to seek after them, or to notice them, when they present themselves.⁵²

The two domains of language—the supernatural and the one connected with “ordinary life”—represent Coleridge’s understanding of the scope of the project confronting himself and Wordsworth. Where Wordsworth’s version of the project involves the poet systematically restricting language’s expression to that suitable to a reduced conception of humanity as lowly rustics, Coleridge’s not only embraces much more than subjects “chosen from ordinary life” but also the supernatural. Yet it’s clear that his conception of the supernatural is distinguished from the sort of “outrageous stimulation” characteristic of Gothic romances and German tragedies, the sort of subject matter which Wordsworth would have dismissed out of hand. Coleridge’s interest seems to be stimulated by the mind’s *perception* of the supernatural and the “dramatic truth” of the human emotions aroused by the belief in the

supernatural's reality. It's strange that Wordsworth would have forgotten these conversations in his recounting of their *Lyrical Ballads* project.

Significantly, when it comes to the division of labour for the project, Wordsworth assigns to himself “the charm of novelty to things of every day”.⁵³ Coleridge, meanwhile, takes on “persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith”.⁵⁴ I find Coleridge's choice in this division of poetic labour to be a fascinating one: I'd like to come back and comment on it later on in this letter.

The fundamental nature of his disagreement with Wordsworth can be seen in the fact that Coleridge does not merely take issue with his friend on the traditional poetic elements—medium, subject matter, diction, and purpose—but he also feels it necessary to delineate his basic conceptions of a poem and of poetry as an art. Most significantly, he begins his rebuttal by focusing on the imagination and the psychology of the poet in the act of poetic composition:

The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former . . . differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate...⁵⁵

Coleridge seems here to be drawing a powerful analogy between the poet's act of creation and the primal creative act of cosmogony. “The primary

IMAGINATION” or God’s generative act is mirrored at a lower level by the poet’s act of composition. But there is more to this. The cosmogonic act also has a parallel in the human mind in perception: the “primary IMAGINATION” is the “prime Agent of all human Perception.”⁵⁶ So what Coleridge argues in this dense passage is what M. H. Abrams calls a “triple parallel”.⁵⁷ God’s endless self-proliferation into the sensible universe is reflected in the primary imagination by which all individual human minds develop out into their perception of this universe, and it is mirrored again in the poetic genius’s secondary, or re-creative imagination.

But what exactly does it mean to say that this creative God is ‘self-proliferating’ into the universe? By exploring this notion, I think we can get a better understanding of Coleridge’s conception of the act of poetic composition. The creative God’s identity and consciousness is the unconditional truth, grounding and model for all consciousness. This generative mind—“the SUM or I AM”—becomes conscious of itself through its antithesis as object. In Chapter XII of his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge calls this the “spirit, self, and self-consciousness” which becomes conscious of itself through what he describes as a “perpetual self-duplication of one and the same power into object and subject, which presuppose each other, and can exist only as antitheses”.⁵⁸ The “self” generates and perpetually renews itself through its on-going synthesis of the opposition between subject and object, infinite and finite. This perpetual process of self-renewal through the clash of opposites and then their reconciliation into a newer, higher third element, and then the reoccurrence of contradiction occurs also in the mind of an individual.

This generative system underpins Coleridge's cosmogony, epistemology, his theory of artistic production and his conception of the totality of life itself: "in the existence, in the reconciling, and the reoccurrence of this contradiction consists the process and mystery of production and life".⁵⁹ The poetic genius's secondary, or re-creative imagination allows him to echo, therefore, in the creation of a poem, the dynamic creative principle underlying the universe. Much like the universe, in its continuous generation through the "infinite I AM," and mirroring the repetition of that act in the process of perception by individual human minds, the great poem consists of the synthesis or productive resolution of contrary and disparate elements.

Coleridge rejects Wordsworth's "nature" as the highest criterion of value and puts in its place this notion of the imaginative synthesis of contrary elements into new wholes. In Coleridge's poetics the poem is generated out of this triadic process of thesis, antithesis, and then synthesis into something new and higher. It's nourished on contrary elements—sameness and difference, the general and the concrete, the idea and the image, the individual and the representative, the unusual state of emotion and the usual, and nature and art.

The making of poems does not merely involve, for Coleridge, the "spontaneous overflow of feeling;" it is a deliberate art. The poet's feelings are subordinated to deliberate artistic purpose. And the poem's metre, along with other poetic artifices, is not just a "superadded" charm, as Wordsworth maintains. It is an organic part of the consciously chosen and artfully arranged whole that makes up the poetic composition.

Coleridge takes particular exception to Wordsworth's argument that the proper diction for poetry is that taken from the "natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings" and that this is best exemplified in "low and rustic life."⁶⁰ Coleridge points out that Wordsworth himself contradicts his own precept, for implicitly acknowledging the narrowness and crudeness imposed on their language by their impoverished circumstances, Wordsworth standardises and refines the language and elevates the sentiments of his "lowly rustics" so that they match the expressions and feelings common to people everywhere.⁶¹ And underlining the extent to which Wordsworth subverts his own doctrine, Coleridge demonstrates, moreover, that far from adhering to the actual language of men in nature, Wordsworth's diction seems to him, "next to that of Shakespeare and Milton," of all other poets, "the most *individualised* and characteristic".⁶²

Coleridge makes it clear that he believes in Aristotle's principle that poetry is "essentially ideal"—that is, its language and action avoid the accidental. The poet is not a historian, recording the accidental that has happened and which then becomes fact; the poet instead writes about what *may* happen.⁶³ Again, what Coleridge is stressing here is the extent to which he believed the poem is the product of deliberate artistic intention rather than the poet spontaneously responding to the random incident of nature.

It is significant that when in the later chapters of *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge comes to describe what he deems to be the major defects in Wordsworth's poetry, he singles out a vice he calls a "matter-of-factness." This "matter-of-factness" has a twofold meaning. It first refers to a "laborious

minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects, and their positions, as they appeared to the poet himself".⁶⁴

Secondly, this "matter-of-factness" refers to the "insertion of accidental circumstances, in order to the full explanation of [the poet's] living characters, their dispositions and actions; which circumstances might be necessary to establish the probability of a statement in real life, when nothing is taken for granted by the hearer".⁶⁵

Coleridge is attacking here what he deems to be an excessive concern for verisimilitude: it's as if, with his concern for minute detail, Wordsworth were as obsessed with convincing his readers of the concrete reality of the fictive worlds within his poems as a novelist would be about the reality of her novel. This 'novelistic' tendency can be seen additionally in Wordsworth's insertion of numerous accidental circumstances and in his fleshing out of his characters' dispositions. He seems to need to establish the veracity of every statement in his poem—whether made within his own narration or by the characters that he's created. Is such a stance about one's poetry right or even necessary?

I ask you these questions, Mr. Auden, directly, because—you'll forgive my forthrightness in saying this—because as I read what Coleridge has said of Wordsworth's work, I'm reminded again of your poetry and the controversy surrounding your decision to alter and eventually to purge poems like "Spain, 1937" and "September 1, 1939" from your poetic oeuvre. Should you have been concerned about verisimilitude in your poems? Should you have even bothered to feel remorse for the bold assertion you made in "Spain" or the matter-of-fact claim you made in "September 1, 1939"?

Coleridge says no, and I agree with him. In his estimation, all of Wordsworth's "laborious minuteness" and his numerous accidental circumstances "appear superfluous in poetry, where the reader is willing to believe for his own sake".⁶⁶ "Is *willing to believe for his own sake*!" Yes, this is key, for as Coleridge reminds us at several points in his *Biographia*, the minuteness and the accidental circumstances contravene what Aristotle has identified as the essence of poetry—to relate what *may* happen. In Coleridge's opinion, the major defects in Wordsworth's poetry stem from the poet's fundamentally mistaken belief that poetry's purpose is to convey "truth," truth defined in a very narrow literal sense: "An obligation, which were in poets as foolish and unnecessary, as is the bondage of false martyrs, who lie in chains for a mistaken opinion".⁶⁷

For Coleridge, the effect of a well-managed poem is "a sort of temporary half-faith," a "negative belief," to which the reader voluntarily submits.⁶⁸ The state of mind, he writes, is like what we experience while dreaming, where "we neither believe it, nor disbelieve" since "any act of judgment, whether affirmation or denial, is impossible".⁶⁹ Coleridge applies his phrase, "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith," specifically not only to the reception of poetic characters and events which are "supernatural, or at least romantic" but also to realistic characters and events. For Coleridge, the reader enjoys the relation of fictive events and characters of the poem without the need to affirm or deny their relation to fact.

I'd like to return now to what I said about Coleridge's interest in the language of the supernatural, built on his understanding of poetry as not being

concerned with a restrictive notion of truth, but inviting a more open-minded, accepting response. Coleridge is interested in conveying through language a sense of the uncanny, but more than this, *the mind's perception of the uncanny*. For me, there is a hint here of the deliberate pursuit of the sort of “derangement” of the normal senses in order to achieve an enlarged poetic consciousness that Rimbaud consciously pursued in his poetry. I say this because Coleridge is advocating deliberately pushing poetry into experiential realms where poet and reader must suspend the normal dividing lines between the plausible and implausible, of right and wrong, or of truth and falsehood. Poetic art is deliberate—not founded on *truth*, (or at least not on an empirically verifiable notion of truth) but on a ludic attitude, in which the reader willingly suspends disbelief. Reading poetry becomes an act of poetic faith. Poetic art is a deliberative artifice, not a simplistic and naturalistic mirroring of nature and the accidental circumstances of nature.

It's because of Coleridge's deep investment in *poetic truth*—the ludic attitude towards poetry as an art form devoted primarily to giving pleasure that I'm unconvinced and also a little bit disturbed when you claim poetry to be communicating the “sacred”, etc., making it into almost a substitute for religious experience: “The impulse to create a work of art is felt when, in certain persons, the passive awe provoked by sacred beings or events is transformed into a desire to express that awe in a rite of worship or homage, and to be fit homage, this rite must be beautiful”.⁷⁰

For you, the Primary Imagination is of a passive character and only concerned with “sacred beings and sacred events”,⁷¹ while the Secondary Imagination has an active character and focuses on beautiful and ugly forms.

The realm of your Primary Imagination can only recognise the sacred, and is without freedom, time, or humour. The sacred can be practically anything: “a toothless hag or a fair young child ... historical fact or fiction—a person met on the road or an image encountered in a story”.⁷² But it must speak of universal significance and provoke passive awe. To the imagination, you assert, the sacred is self-sufficient.

Where your Primary Imagination is concerned with the sacred and profane, your Secondary Imagination is focused on form. Seeing the ugly, it wants to fix it. It seeks regularity and order and disapproves of irrelevance and mess. For you, both of these types of imagination are necessary for the mind’s health: “Without the inspiration of sacred awe, its beautiful forms would soon become banal, its rhythms mechanical; without the activity of the Secondary Imagination the passivity of the Primary would be the mind’s undoing; sooner or later its sacred beings would possess it”.⁷³

For you, the poet is prompted to create a poem not, as Coleridge would claim, by an impulse for self-knowing and self-generation through the productive resolution of contrary and disparate elements within and outside himself, but simply by his desire to express his awe for the sacred in a “rite of worship”.⁷⁴ You stop short of saying that the poet is worshipping “Divine Nature” in a devotional Christian sense. That would be “idolatrous,” you say. But what you leave us with is the imperative for the poet to praise the sacred: “there is only one thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being and for happening”.⁷⁵

It’s true you qualify this ultimate imperative, of course: “Poetry can do a hundred and one things,” you write in the clauses which precede it, “delight,

sadden, disturb, amuse, instruct—it may express every possible shade of emotion, and describe every conceivable kind of event”.⁷⁶ But nevertheless I cannot avoid the conclusion that by translating Coleridge’s richly suggestive aesthetic doctrine through a narrow Christian prism you have somehow reduced its productiveness for later poets.

At best, I can acknowledge the usefulness of your doctrine of poetry as sacred rite in the interesting light it sheds on poetry’s possible psychological origins in the poet. Poetry, you assert, is a rite which pays homage to the sacred by naming.⁷⁷ A child looks excitedly at the moon, and the word “moon” is not merely the name of an object “but one of its more important properties and, therefore, numinous”.⁷⁸ That same child could only come to write poetry once he realises that he has made a false identification, and that names and objects are not identical. This realisation essentially involves the recognition that language is social and not some private system of sacred symbolism. But, you suggest, that it is this very false identification on the part of the poet that makes him attach such importance to poetry’s function of naming. The roots of the poetic consciousness, you suggest, lay in the poet’s understanding of the gap between word and thing.

A vast gulf exists between the poet’s words and the things out there in the world. The poet names, brings into being and then posits imagined relations between words and things. His acts of naming—his making of worlds—are proposed for pleasure perhaps, but also as acts of self-knowing or self-creation in the face of a terror of chaos, meaninglessness, and dissolution.

I'd like to conclude my letter on this note, impressed as ever by your seemingly endless capacity to provoke—through your enquiries and assertions— insightful and productive disagreements. Thank you for your generous willingness to share your insights into your beginnings as a poet.

Above all, I'd like to express my sincere appreciation to you for helping me get a clearer glimpse of the nature and scope of my poetic project, which I hope to begin to elucidate in the letters which follow.

Gratefully,

Dennis L. M. Lewis

Notes

- ¹ “Making, Knowing and Judging,” [1956] in *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* [1962](New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 46.
- ² Michael Schmidt, *New Poetries V* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2011), p. xvi.
- ³ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 38.
- ⁴ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 33.
- ⁵ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 33.
- ⁶ See Mary Kinzie, *A Poet’s Guide to Poetry* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1999); Michael Bugeja, *The Art and Craft of Poetry* (Cincinnati: Writers Digest Books, 1994); James Fenton, *The Strength of Poetry* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001); and Timothy Steele, *All the Fun’s in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification* (Athens: Ohio U. P., 1999).
- ⁷ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 34.
- ⁸ Jack Spicer, *The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan U. P., 1998), p. 82.
- ⁹ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 34.
- ¹⁰ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 35.
- ¹¹ *Tel Quel, II*, (1944), 637.
- ¹² *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Oxford U. P., 1973), p. 78.
- ¹³ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 35.
- ¹⁴ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 36.
- ¹⁵ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 36.
- ¹⁶ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 37.
- ¹⁷ *Autumn Journal* (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 66.
- ¹⁸ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 37.
- ¹⁹ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 38.
- ²⁰ Auden, “Making, Knowing and Judging” p. 39.

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- ²¹ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 40.
- ²² Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 40.
- ²³ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 41.
- ²⁴ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 41.
- ²⁵ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 43.
- ²⁶ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 44.
- ²⁷ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 43.
- ²⁸ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 47.
- ²⁹ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" pp. 47-48.
- ³⁰ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 49.
- ³¹ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" pp. 50-51.
- ³² Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 50.
- ³³ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 52.
- ³⁴ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 53.
- ³⁵ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 54.
- ³⁶ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 54.
- ³⁷ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 54.
- ³⁸ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 54.
- ³⁹ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 54.
- ⁴⁰ "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*", in *Criticism: The Major Statements* [1964], ed. Charles Kaplan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), p. 306.
- ⁴¹ Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 307.
- ⁴² Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 311.
- ⁴³ Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 310.
- ⁴⁴ Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 313.

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- ⁴⁵ Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 308.
- ⁴⁶ Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 308.
- ⁴⁷ Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 308.
- ⁴⁸ Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 311.
- ⁴⁹ Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 316.
- ⁵⁰ *Biographia Literaria*, XIV, in Charles Kaplan, ed., *Criticism: The Major Statements* [1964], ed. Charles Kaplan (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), p. 322.
- ⁵¹ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* in *Criticism* p. 322.
- ⁵² Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* in *Criticism* pp. 322-323.
- ⁵³ Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 323.
- ⁵⁴ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* in *Criticism* p. 323.
- ⁵⁵ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* in *Criticism* p. 328.
- ⁵⁶ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* in *Criticism* p. 328.
- ⁵⁷ *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1953), p. 283.
- ⁵⁸ *Biographia Literaria Vol. I*, (1852), p. 357. Accessed online at <http://books.google.com/>
- ⁵⁹ *Biographia Literaria Vol. I* p. 360.
- ⁶⁰ Wordsworth, "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" p. 308.
- ⁶¹ *Biographia Literaria Vol. I* pp. 484-489.
- ⁶² *Biographia Literaria Vol. I* p. 527.
- ⁶³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Chapter IX, in *Criticism: The Major Statements*, ed. Charles Kaplan, p. 30.
- ⁶⁴ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria Vol. I* p. 555.
- ⁶⁵ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria Vol. I* p. 555.
- ⁶⁶ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria Vol. I* p. 555.

⁶⁷ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria Vol. I* p. 555.

⁶⁸ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria Vol. I* p. 562.

⁶⁹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Letter to Daniel Stuart, 13 May 1816," in *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Vol. II*, ed. E. H. Coleridge (1895), p. 663. Accessed online at [http: books.google.com/](http://books.google.com/)

⁷⁰ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 57.

⁷¹ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 54.

⁷² Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 55.

⁷³ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 57.

⁷⁴ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 57.

⁷⁵ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 60.

⁷⁶ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 60.

⁷⁷ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 57.

⁷⁸ Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging" p. 58.

LETTER TO MR. AUDEN #4

Dear Mr Auden,

I must confess that I am not feeling confident about my writing project at all. For the last few months I seem to have lost all sense of focus. But I hope that in writing this, articulating some of my concerns to you, I'll get a better sense of focus. This letter will be a sort of flashlight marking out the way forward.

In terms of my academic study of your work (as opposed to writing my own poems), I've decided to focus my attention on your "New Year Letter" and several other poems (of which I'll speak later). I've been encouraged on this path by the scholar Christopher Nealon's discussion of your response to capitalist crisis.¹ As you can guess, my interest was sparked by the fact that we, living in the second decade of the new century, are right now in the midst of our own capitalist crisis, much more severe even than the one you experienced back in the 1930s. Ours is a financial crisis not merely affecting the economies of the United States and Western Europe but threatening to bring down the entire global financial system. I was intrigued by the fact that Nealon placed poetry at the centre of attempts to diagnose the impact of capitalism. He even devotes an entire chapter to discussing how you tried to address this issue in your poetry.

Nealon analyses your response to capitalist crisis in order to understand how you were able to find a poetic tone that successfully interpellated public events with your personal life. He argues that you

bequeathed to contemporary poets a distinctive camp tone, created out of your combination of high rhetorical styles with a low style.² This tone—linked, he claims, to Gregory of Tours' "sermo humilis" or humble manner—is overlaid with theological meaning signifying humans' cosmological middle status between the angels and the beasts. Your tone, he said, allowed you to integrate the dialectic of history with your own personal experience.

I think it should be clear why this discussion would appeal to me and why, in spite of my initial lack of interest in "New Year Letter", I've read it through several times and am beginning to see it as one of your major poems. After having read through the poem several times, I realised that the long poem offers an excellent basis for a discussion of your overtly political or public poems of the 1930s, most notably "Spain, 1937" and the "In Time of War" sonnet sequence. Why? Well, maybe because "New Year Letter", although it's classified by most critics as belonging to your later period, seems to continue and develop many of the political and historical themes which preoccupied you throughout your public poems in the 1930s, in particular "Spain, 1937" and the "In Time of War" sequence.

Why do these poems interest me and not other poems in your oeuvre, you wonder? Well, the poems and their themes interest me precisely because I can already see that similar themes are emerging in some of my own poetry. My interest in discussing these poems of yours also has a pragmatic purpose. I really don't think it would be realistic for me discuss any other poems in your vast oeuvre. I don't think I can give an account of all of your stylistic changes or your thematic evolution. I think it much more practicable and effective if I

discuss those aspects of your work which are directly relevant to my own work.

Several weeks ago, I read your 1936 poem "Letter to Lord Byron", and it seems to me that this poem offers a very good precursor of the camp tone that Nealon credits you with having developed and presented most fully in "The New Year Letter". "Letter to Lord Byron" offers a truly mixed style, combining low and high elements. But for all of the reasons above, I will not make it part of my discussions. I'll explain some of my reasons for this below.

Some time ago, an idea formed in my mind of taking on; that is, actually appropriating as my own, large elements of the life of the current President of the United States, Barack Obama. I realised that this move would involve me in taking certain risks; most notably the grave risk of people misinterpreting my attitude towards this public figure or how I intended to use him. Most likely many would see my move as a vaguely adulatory, celebratory gesture, invoking somewhat crude populist and inchoate emotional expressions of racial or ethnic identity and pride. Or failing this, some might misread my interest as a kind of political or ideological gesture, expressing progressive liberal hopes and disillusionments.

My interest stems from neither of these impulses. No, I imagined that by appropriating aspects of Obama's biography I'd be able to avoid most of the pitfalls involved in writing about one's own biography in my poetry. At the time I did not have confidence in my ability to write adequately interesting confessional poetry. More importantly, confessional poetry did not and still does not interest me as a writing objective. The main objection to this sort of poetry for me is not just to do with a certain sense of solipsism and self-

absorption, but also to do with a sense of distrust or shamming in relation to the adoption of the guise of the first-person lyric voice. (I'll return to my sense of unease around the first-person lyric voice in my later letters).

How feasible my intentions are as poetry, I'm not really sure. Whether I have the technical skills to pull it off is another key question for which I'll have no answer until I actually try to pull it off. The best way forward then is to simply try and do this and risk failure.

I'll conclude this letter by outlining the key justification for my focus on your "New Year Letter". I believe that the long 1940 poem is a culmination of your decade-long efforts to marry public events with your personal experience and to link these with historical dialectic. It also marks a shift toward the Horatian, neo-classical style of much of your later poetry.

In December 1931, you may remember, you published a review of a novel by David Garnett. In this review you offered a critique of modernist writing. At about the same time you also wrote and published an essay on "Writing" in which you explored what you considered to be the "isolating cowardice" behind modernist writing's tendency towards private meanings (critics as diverse as Adorno and Erich Heller have also noted the subjective turn in modern literature though with different appraisals of its significance).³ This was clearly a problem in your mind because it meant that modern poetry was increasingly unintelligible to its potential audience. In the same essay you explained that the problem could not be solved simply through language because it was largely a social problem stemming from the isolation of writers in an isolating society.⁴

Later, in a 1932 review that you wrote for *Criterion* you praised the mediaeval poet John Skelton for the public nature of his poetry.⁵ I recall how later in your life you were very harsh (in my opinion, unduly so) in your judgement of some of your earlier public poetry. “Spain, 1937” and “September 1, 1939”, for example, were public poems which for you were “infected with an incurable dishonesty” because they implicitly claim to have “joined the realm of the private will to that of the public good, when in fact the union had been made through the force of rhetoric alone”.⁶

The question I hope to answer in my discussion of “New Year Letter” is whether this poem achieves this sort of unity between “the realm of the private will” and the “public good” that you mention above.

Thanks again for your indulgence.

Respectfully,

Dennis Lewis

Notes

¹ Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 2011).

² Nealon, *The Matter of Capital* p. 61.

³ See W.H. Auden, "Writing", in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), pp. 305-306; Theodor W. Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society", in *Notes on Literature Vol. 1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia U. P., 1991), pp. 37 – 54; and Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in German Literature and Thought* [1952] (San Diego: Harvest, 1975).

⁴ Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 118.

⁵ W. H. Auden, Review of the *Complete Poems of John Skelton*, *Criterion*, 11, no. 43 (January, 1932), 318.

⁶ Mendelson, *Early Auden* p. 201.

LETTER TO MR. AUDEN #5

Dear Mr. Auden,

Some time ago I completed a satisfactory draft of a poem about a trip I took last summer to Iceland. It will be obvious to you that it was largely imitative of your 1936 poem, "Journey to Iceland."¹ But it also drew upon several books I'd been reading about the recent global financial crisis, most notably Michael Lewis's *Boomerang*, and several biographical articles about the late American world chess champion, Bobby Fischer.² I'm embarrassed to admit that I'd been working on it, on and off, for almost two months. Of course, there are several lines, phrases, and words with which I'm not at all pleased, but generally it did not provoke my total revulsion. Nevertheless, there are some disquieting considerations. Apart from the length of time it took me to write this poem and produce a satisfactory draft, I also have concerns about the following:

- My compositional method, which consisted of my appropriating and rewriting certain suggestive passages from the Michael Lewis book, the various articles, and from Rupert Davenport-Hines' biography about you. In addition, I freely used some of your lines and phrases from your Iceland poem.
- The great difficulty I seemed to have settling on a lyrical voice and tone for the poem.

Initially, I attempted a voice similar to the one you used in “Journey to Iceland”—a remote, omniscient first-person speaker who evokes images of Iceland’s landscape, fragments of its history and mythic lore, while at the same time intimating your own perspective and psychological motivations. In fact, throughout the poem you seem to be addressing yourself through the first-person speaker, but you do so in a remote and distancing manner, as if you were a third-person character in your own poem.

Your speaker’s propensity for sweeping *obiter dicta*—such as “For Europe is absent”—is what gives him the sense of omniscience.³ And at the same time, you allow your speaker to undercut this impression at about two-thirds of the way through the poem, when after making some assertions that seem to have some autobiographical resonance—“and the pale / From too much passion of kissing feel pure in its deserts”—you have your speaker ask a question—“Can they?”—and by doing so open yourself up to the criticism that you have a flawed and limited understanding.⁴

In my poem a young protagonist visits Iceland, where he meets and travels with an older artist-celebrity figure. As they journey together, the older artist figure gives the younger traveller glimpses into Iceland’s history and folklore as well as into his personal life. Though I tried, I found I simply could not emulate the assuredness and authority of the speaker in your poem. I adopted your diction in my poem, but found that in my poem

those same assured words sounded mannered and self-consciously literary.

As I worked my way through numerous drafts, I changed the poem into a direct-speech dialogue and then into a dialogue using indirect speech. Through these changes, I saw the poem gradually shed the bathos and portentous false authority of the first-person narration. It seemed that the poem was becoming more interesting and allusive. The speaker now functioned more as a sort of interviewer, who merely asked questions and then stayed out of the way while the artist figure at the poem's centre gave his answers. I also liked the fact that the speaker could unobtrusively offer descriptions of landscape and cultural tidbits about Iceland by passing them off as reports on what the artist figure said.

Yet, though I finally seemed to hit upon a writing formula, the struggle I experienced as I tried to find the right writing voice and tone, and the disgust I felt when reading the mannered, self-conscious first-person voice was one I've experienced before while working on other poems. It seems to underscore a deeper problem I have, related to finding a credible, aesthetically pleasing, and authoritative first-person lyric voice and an appropriate tone to that voice. It's, of course, partly a question of my lack of poetic skill. It's a fact that I simply do not feel comfortable when I adopt a direct first-person address.

It seems to me that the occasional bafflement I experience when reading your poetry is attributable only partly to the intimidating effect of

your prodigious output and technical virtuosity. I think that more than anything it is due to the authority that you seem to have achieved in your voice throughout most of your poems.

To a certain extent I wonder if the sort of authority you possessed in your lyric voice as well as the facility and confidence of your diction are truly possible at all right now in poetry. In his book *The Lyric Touch*, John Wilkinson suggests the distance contemporary poetry has travelled from the confident equation of poetry with lyric address and from the romantic association of the lyric with inward emotions and thoughts. Discussing several recent anthologies of modern and contemporary British poetry, Wilkinson remarks on the immensity of the struggle to sustain the illusion of the lyric speaking self:

it can feel as though the lyric poetry of the twentieth-century has been harried past endurance by the problem of the first person singular, the lyric 'I', variously by its pomposity, its frailty, its pretensions and its inadequacy. This cannot be evaded by extirpation of the cursed pronoun, for the depersonalised poem tends to then lay claim to an overweening authority. The first person plural tends to a presumption of common cause or sensibility with the smug or wheedling 'I', and the second person singular or plural to arraign the reader or society from the vantage of the arrogant 'I'.⁵

Over the centuries the notion of the lyric has evolved from its associations with musical and sound elements to the assumption that its main duty is the evocation of emotional states. Lyric, in its modern meaning, is no longer merely a *type* of poetry. It stands for poetry in

general as “mechanically representational of a musical architecture” and is also “thematically representational of the poet’s sensibility as evidenced in a fusion of conception and image”.⁶

But if lyric now stands for the interiority and expressiveness of poetry in general, and is the form in which the poet presents his image in relation to himself and to the wider world, we can understand why the critic Sam Ladkin would go so far as to link it to what he terms a “lyric ontology.” He explains that by lyric ontology he’s referring to “those moments where the strength of love’s bond assumes an accident-free essentialist solipsism, isolating the lyric mode from linguistic detritus and everyday contingencies”.⁷ For the lyric ‘I’ no event or relationship it experiences or perceives in the world is contingent or accidental; all are linked and are relevant to its life, in an ontology in which the life and the ego of the lyric occupy the centre. Whatever is contingent or accidental is in fact excluded or pushed to the margins of this ontology, forming a “deafening background hum” of rejected events and social phenomena.⁸ It’s a world of total fiction, of course, but the lyric love poem is founded on the privilege and power to create and maintain this illusion of “my life” by rejecting contingent relationships.

But Ladkin takes his attack on the lyric even further: the lyric, he writes, helps fulfil the western ideological mandate to pursue pleasure. And pleasure comes at a price: “the price of that freedom from incursion is paid in harm, in accidents and no doubt emergencies, elsewhere”.⁹ Thus

the lyric 'I' amounts to a repression of all those aspects of life that do not fit into its sense of self. This repression involves an ethical blindness that cannot see the "suffering western capitalist identities create in distant places ... harm elsewhere is [often] shown to be subjugated to what is most valuable to us, our desires and most generous feelings".¹⁰ More than this, the lyric 'I' is actually built upon the exploitation and suffering of people elsewhere. The lyric 'I', in Ladkin's account, is in fact a stand-in for the Western consumer identity, seeking always to get whatever there is to be consumed, buttressed by the full array of the West's vast arsenal of economic, political, and military powers, and blind to the catastrophic impact that its unlimited desires have upon people in less-privileged parts of the world.

The lyric subject as alienated, ethically-blind, exploiter—it does all seem more than a little politically over-determined, doesn't it? If all of this is true, and the world is indeed *totally* dominated by Western capital and consumerism (though one would think that the West's recurring susceptibility to financial crises, its increasing vulnerability to the effects of even minimal shifts in global market conditions, as well as the increasingly multilateral nature of political, economic, and military alliances would give Ladkin some pause), and the lyric self can be so indissolubly identified with the Western consumer, one wonders about the prevalence of consumerism and the presence of other subjectivities in so many other

parts of the world. Clearly, consumerism, alienation, exploitation and ethical blindness are not problems that are unique to the West.

The lie behind the lyric subject's "my life" need not merely be understood in this totalising, politically over-determined manner. It could also refer to the general flux of contingencies of everyday life, in which our sense of self and of a coherent group of contingencies under our "life" is continually under threat of dispersal and meaninglessness. Moreover, the interiority, solipsism, repression, and alienation, which Ladkin declares to be the lyric's native attributes, may in fact be transcended in favour of expansiveness and sympathy. "We are dispos'd to sympathy," Wordsworth announces in *The Prelude*; that is, to the perception of the far ranging suffering of other people.¹¹

I find Ladkin is far more persuasive when he drops the guilt-ridden, right-minded Western liberal sanctimony and adopts a more subtle and allusive analysis of the lyric's link to capitalism and consumerism. When, for example, he discusses Theodor Adorno's commentary on Georg Lukacs' concept of reification, I believe it's possible to recognise a way that lyric poetry may overcome the inwardness, solipsism, repression, and alienation that Ladkin attributes to it. Reification could be understood as Georg Lukacs' variation on Marx's theory of alienation. But where Marx's theory of alienation gives a description of the *objective* effects of the process by which, under capitalism, human social relations take on the

character of things, Lukacs' variation maps out the *subjective* effects of this in the consciousness of men and women.¹²

In an essay titled "Gold Assay," Adorno presents a richly suggestive elaboration on Lukacs' theory. He begins the essay with an assault upon the concept that can be seen as the cornerstone of lyric poetry—the concept of *genuineness*. Genuineness is the idea that within each human there resides an incorruptible core identity, his or her true self, to which each person must remain faithful if he or she is to be judged as an authentic human individual: "If nothing else can be bindingly required of man, then at the least he should be wholly and entirely what he is".¹³ Genuineness, linked with the ancillary concepts of authenticity and individuality, has long been heralded as the ideal of human expression and fulfilment. But Adorno convincingly argues that this basic conceptual assumption—generally accepted as an incontrovertible truth throughout most of, what he terms as, "late bourgeois" Western thought and culture—is fundamentally wrong.

For Adorno, the basic falseness surrounding the concept of the genuine resides at the very core of genuineness itself—in the psychological foundations of the individual. In a human's very first conscious childhood experiences, Adorno shows, humans are fundamentally imitative: "the impulses reflected upon are not quite 'genuine'. They always contain an element of imitation, play, wanting to be different".¹⁴ Thus for Adorno, a very primal form of reification, or emotional

identification with something outside the self—a love object—is a vital and necessary part of our childhood development. Far from being a sign of health, genuineness—the individual—is in fact the result of the distortion of property relations or commodification.

Through this emotional identification with another, an “affective empathy”, as Ladkin calls it, our perception develops beyond the egotistical as the objective world exceeds our ego and becomes stable.¹⁵ This form of *alienation*—the primal form of love—teaches us to empathetically re-imagine the outside world from the perspective of those other people whom we seek to imitate. Ours is a mimetic heritage: “a human being only becomes human at all by imitating other human beings”.¹⁶

For Adorno then, the notion of the “truly genuine” is nothing but a sentimental fraud rooted in bourgeois blindness and self-delusion. It is easy, as Ladkin does, to see this as Adorno’s outright condemnation of the notion of lyric voice. But is it? Is it not, rather, a timely reminder of the contingent nature of the individual and of the comprehensive and potentially utopian richness of the lyric? As such, it is the toe-to-head reversal of the received wisdom on the relation of the lyric to the individual and the wider world: where the received wisdom affirms the primacy of the lyric ‘I’ and the self’s interiority over the contingency of society and the outer world, Adorno’s insights tell us that it is in fact the individual and the individual’s self-reflective expressivity which are contingent:

Not only is the self entwined in society; it owes its existence in the most literal sense. All its content comes from society, or at any rate from its relation to the object. It grows richer the more freely it develops and reflects this relation, while it is limited, impoverished and reduced by the separation and hardening that it lays claim to as an origin.¹⁷

What all of this suggests to me is the possibility perhaps of answering my self-consciousness, doubts and hesitations about my authority to use the lyric 'I' with a new understanding of the nature of that lyric self. Adorno makes it clear to me that the solution to the problem of the lyric voice does not reside in looking inward, for it isn't ultimately defined by interiority. It cannot be answered by seeking *true, more genuine* and sincere self-expression, for the lyric doesn't reside in authenticity. It can't be answered through the cultivation of my unique *voice* expressing my *unique experiences*, for the speaker of the lyric is not identified with the poet himself. It doesn't even reside in fictive personae; it is much more than ventriloquizing. The lyric may be located in a *freeing of myself* from the bottomless void of my own self; it involves, it seems to me, a reconnection to the social and the socially symbolic in the production of a phenomenal world through the phenomenalization of the poetic voice.

I'm sure you're probably wondering right now what on earth I mean by the "phenomenalization of the poetic voice". What I'm trying to get at is something similar to what the literary critic Paul De Man proposes in his famous essay on "Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory"—the kind of

poetic force or presence which seems to put the verbal world of the poem in play for the reader.¹⁸ It's the sort of thing that first got me interested in the work of Jack Spicer, with his view of the lyric as wireless transmission, communication with ghosts, or with aliens. Or I think of Eliot and what he termed as his attack upon the theory of the unity of the soul: "the poet has, not a 'personality' to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways".¹⁹ I was intrigued by the sense that the lyric was conditioned less by individual poetic voice than by the activation of poetic presences in language and in the mind of the reader.

My worry over these matters has prompted me to read the ideas of Marjorie Perloff and others about new approaches to the lyric voice. I'm also interested in the strange, almost miraculous process by which words, lines, and language finally coalesce into a poem. It's with these ideas that I'd like to grapple in my next letter.

Thanks once more for your indulgence.

Best regards,

Dennis

Notes

¹ W.H. Auden, "Journey to Iceland", in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 203.

² Michael Lewis, *Boomerang: Travels in the New Third World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); Rene Chun, "Bobby Fischer's Pathetic Endgame", *The Atlantic*, December, 2002, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/12/bobby-fischer-s-pathetic-endgame/302634/>; and Martin Gardner, "Bobby Fischer: Genius and Idiot", *Skeptical Inquirer*, 33, 5, (September/October, 2009), http://www.csicop.org/si/show/bobby_fischer_genius_and_idiot

³ Auden, "Journey to Iceland" p. 203, line 25.

⁴ Auden, "Journey to Iceland" p. 203, lines 28 – 30.

⁵ John Wilkinson, *The Lyric Touch: Essays on the Poetry of Excess* (Cambridge: SALT, 2007), p. 187.

⁶ Joel Weinsheimer, *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1993), p. 715.

⁷ Sam Ladkin, "Problems for Lyric Poetry", in *Complicities: British Poetry 1945–2007*, ed. Robin Purves and Sam Ladkin (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2007), p. 227.

⁸ Ladkin, "Problems for Lyric Poetry" p. 227.

⁹ Ladkin, "Problems for Lyric Poetry" p. 227.

¹⁰ Ladkin, "Problems for Lyric Poetry" p. 227.

¹¹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book IV, [1805-6], ed. Mark L. Reed (2 Vols., Ithaca, NY: 1991), 159 – 60, p. 156.

¹² "Reification," *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: U. of T., 1993), p. 619.

¹³ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, [1951], trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 152.

¹⁴ Adorno, *Minima Moralia* p. 153.

¹⁵ Ladkin, "Problems for Lyric Poetry" p. 305.

¹⁶ Adorno, *Minima Moralia* p. 154.

¹⁷ Adorno, *Minima Moralia* p. 154.

¹⁸ "Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory: Riffaterre and Jauss", in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca, NY: Cornell U.P., 1985), pp. 55–72.

¹⁹ *The Sacred Wood*, (London: Methuen, 1920), p. 56,
https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Sacred_Wood

**CHAPTER FIVE: “UPON OUR SENSE OF
STYLE”: “NEW YEAR LETTER” AND
CATASTROPHE**

“Upon Our Sense of Style”: W. H. Auden’s “New Year Letter” and Catastrophe

Auden began the long poem “New Year Letter” in early January 1940. In its opening the poem’s speaker adopts the conceit that the poem was written during the hours between late New Year’s Eve and the dawn of New Year’s Day. The poem’s early drafts make it clear that the impulse behind the writing of the poem was the familiar New Year’s resolutions to reform one’s character and seek self-knowledge.¹ An epistle written in tetrameter couplets, the poem may be seen as simultaneously ushering in Auden’s later style—characterised by its civic-minded neoclassical forms—and his commitment to Christianity. Although Monroe K. Spears argues that the poem can be more properly considered as hesitating “on the edge of belief”, crucially, it marks the first time in his poetry Auden grapples at length with Christian doctrine and imagery, attempting to amalgamate these with his interests in Freud and Marx.²

When the poem was published in 1941—as *The Double Man* in the U.S. and “New Year Letter” in the U.K.—it received fairly negative reviews. Most reviewers found the poem too classical and too abstract. One of the most notable reviewers, Randall Jarrell, wrote a review that was generally positive, but which still characterised the poem as a “renunciation of modernism” no less:

¹ Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 100.

² Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island* (New York: Oxford U. P., 1963), p. 172.

In 1931 Pope's ghost said to me, 'Ten years from now the leading young poet of the time will publish ... a didactic epistle of about nine hundred tetrameter couplets.' I answered absently, 'You are a fool'; and who on earth would have thought him anything else. But he was right: the decline and fall of modernist poetry ... were nearer than anyone could have believed.³

Jarrell's criticism is largely correct in terms of his assessment of the poem's outward form, but fundamentally wrong in its reading of the deeper levels of the poem's ideas and tone, or what may be termed the poem's 'frostwork'. The term 'frostwork' is used by John Wilkinson to denote the sustained balance between a poem's linguistic surface and its reference to the outside world or even internal world of the poet.⁴ I take this "sustained balance" to encompass not merely the ways in which a poem's form conveys *content* but also the subtleties of poetic voice, this voice's modulation of tone, the relationship which the poem seems to forge with its potential readers, and the texture of the world mapped by the poem. What Jarrell and other reviewers seem to have missed or are unable to account for are the striking oddities in a poem that is ostensibly neo-classical in rhetoric and outlook— its unrestrained, idiosyncratic, almost anarchic ebb and flow of ideas, its reflexivity, and its creation of a *tone*— expansive, worldly, camp, and yet also deeply ethical— that seems unprecedented and unique to Auden. The poem is striking also on the level of ideas for its ambitious scope: it attempts nothing less than to

³ Randall Jarrell, *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Reviews 1935-1964* [1980] (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981), pp. 55-57.

⁴ John Wilkinson, *The Lyric Touch* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), p. 181.

account for the crisis of capitalism, the failure of liberal democracy, the outbreak of world war, and the fate of post-Enlightenment personhood in the late capitalistic era. That a poet would have the *chutzpah* to try and encompass such a huge undertaking within the orderly confines of a rhyming neo-classical epistle is remarkable. The poem also has a dark edge to it, however, conveying a deep sense of modern catastrophe, alienation and uncertainty at the outbreak of world war.

The effort to show the continuities between the 'early Auden' and the 'later Auden' has become a basic gambit of many critics when discussing the trajectory of his work. However, what I hope to show in this chapter is not so much the continuity of preoccupations, framing of ideas, and imagery between the later and early Auden, but some of his conceptual nodes, and how, in spite of his surface 'formalism', Auden seems to be imposing on his reading public a much more demanding and participatory reading regime than is conventionally assumed. What should become apparent is the extent to which Auden is intensely dialectical in his poetic thinking. Such an approach will allow a closer and more precise appreciation of the 'frostwork' of Auden's poetry. Examined up close, that 'frostwork' will display discontinuities, contradictions, and several points of tension where the surface threatens to crack. Yet these very tensions, contradictions, and cracks are precisely what make Auden a continually interesting and productive presence for later poets and readers.

Mendelson describes “New Year Letter” as a modern epic reminiscent of the international and psychological kind introduced by *Faust* and Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*.⁵ It looks back to the emergence of the modern era in the Renaissance—when mediaeval “unity had come to grief / Upon professional belief,” and “Another unity was made / By equal amateurs in trade”.⁶ Yet as in the classic epic, the poem calls the new society and social system of the “Empiric Economic Man” (a radically new conception of man produced by the Renaissance) into question through its rebel artist figures: “*Blake* shouted insults, *Rousseau* wept, / ... While *Baudelaire* went mad protesting / That progress is not interesting” (229-230). Auden reveals that their prophecy has come true: the economic and scientific foundations of the past modern era have been broken:

It is the Mover that is moved.
 Whichever way we turn, we see
 Man captured by his liberty,
 The measurable taking charge
 Of him who measures ...
 old men in love
 With prices they can never get,
 Homes blackmailed by a radio set. (230)

In the capitalist system, the manipulated objects have avenged themselves; man finds *himself* reified as object. Humans and human relationships are only valuable in terms of their surplus value.

⁵ Mendelson, *Later Auden* p. 104.

⁶ W.H. Auden, “New Year Letter”, in *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems* [1976], ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Modern Library, 2007), p. 228. Subsequent references in parentheses are to this edition.

Auden addressed the poem to his friend, Elizabeth Mayer, a German refugee with artistic and literary interests.⁷ It is significant that it is conceived as a letter, dependent on the receptiveness and intellectual generosity of its recipient for its reception. In this poem the lyrical 'I' is speculative, probing, yet still uncertain in its authority.

Goethe's *Faust* is of course one of the poem's main literary models. Elizabeth Mayer takes the place of Gretchen of *Faust Part Two*. Like *Faust*, Auden's poem searches for a "labor that will issue in eternal and unending progress." The poem borrows Mephistopheles, the tempter whose lies, political delusions, and ethical errors serve as the fruitful half-truths which we can synthesise.⁸ "New Year Letter" is also a dialectical poem that contains echoes of the quest chronotope, but which does not want to find stasis. It denies at the same time it affirms the Just City.

Like Faust near the end of Goethe's drama, Auden seeks to learn the conditions under which the Just City can be built. He learns that the art of building must go on forever. As the poem draws to an end, Auden prays not for "A garden and a city" but for a desert and a city. This city is analogous to Faust's "city of unceasing effort," where citizens must strive perpetually to retain their life and freedom.⁹

In the poem's final lines Auden prays to Elizabeth Mayer, whom Auden identified with *Das Ewig-Weibliche* or the eternal feminine. In the final lines of *Faust* Gretchen, the eternal feminine, rises and leads the

⁷ Mendelson, *Later Auden* p. 101.

⁸ Mendelson, *Later Auden* p. 101.

⁹ Mendelson, *Later Auden* p. 102.

transformed Faust and us onward. Likewise, in the last lines of “New Year Letter,” Auden prays to Mayer, asking her to lead him forward: “may the truth / That no one marries lead my youth / Where you already are” (240). He prays to be led to “truth”, but earlier in the poem he has made it clear that he may never reach (“marry”) that which leads him ever forward.

“New Year Letter” features a versified metaphysical argument in which, much as he had in his poetry of the 1930s, Auden attempts to diagnose the psychological and intellectual ills of the West’s crisis. However, unlike “Spain 1937” or some of his other socially oriented poems from that period, in “New Year Letter” Auden resists the urge to prescribe a cure. Auden makes it clear that with the crisis it will be necessary to build a new era, but it is uncertain how this new era will be achieved. He knows that no shortcuts are possible. The poem is filled with an intense distrust of utopia, and this is maintained up to the poem’s very last line, which takes a line from Shelley’s visionary utopian poem, *Hellas*—“The world’s great age”—and transforms it into something potentially darker:

And love illuminates again
The city and the lion’s den,
The world’s great rage, the travels of young men.
(241)

In his article “‘Within a Field That Never Closes’”, Patrick Deane acknowledges the poet’s temperamental affinity with the 18th century, but

also reminds us of the poem's interest in social commentary.¹⁰ In fact, we could push Deane's claim even further and say that Auden's poem is not merely interested in social commentary it is *intensely interested* in social diagnosis, and in dialectically linking this social diagnosis with psychological, economic, historical, and spiritual diagnosis. It is this holistic diagnosis and a psychological/spiritual reorientation of the reader that seems to be the poem's *raison d'être*.¹¹

For Deane, however, the poem's interest in such matters seems to put it at odds with its 18th century neo-classical form. He points to the influence on the poem of the Christian writer, Charles Williams' book *The Descent of the Dove*. In his review of the Auden poem, Williams states that the poem is a "pattern of the Way," and the fact that "it dialectically includes both sides of the Way only shows that it is dealing with a road and not a room".¹² Williams' conception of the poem as a sort of dialectic in action takes it much farther than the neoclassical literary ideal of the "dulce et utile"—the literary text which improves the reader at the same it entertains him—and makes it very distant from a modernist text.

The poem's opening stanzas only add to Deane's sense of the poem's contradiction. "New Year Letter", like *Faust* after its prologue, opens in the speaker's study, with the noise of New Year's Eve revellers outside. It moves from this small stage to one even smaller—Auden's

¹⁰ Patrick Deane, "'Within a Field That Never Closes': The Reader in W. H. Auden's 'New Year Letter,'" *Contemporary Literature*, 32, 2, (Summer, 1991), 173.

¹¹ Deane, 174.

¹² Charles Williams, Review of *New Year Letter*, *Dublin Review*, 209 (1941), in *W.H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul), p. 322.

memories of a very different setting in Brussels, among the hordes of wartime refugees:

Twelve months ago in Brussels, I
 Heard the same wishful-thinking sigh
 As round me, trembling on their beds,
 Or taut with apprehensive dreads,
 The sleepless guests of Europe lay
 Wishing the centuries away (197)

Auden remembers that on the day the war broke out he played Buxtehude with Elizabeth Mayer at her cottage in Long Island:

One of his *passacaglias* made
 Our minds a *civitas* of sound
 Where nothing but assent was found,
 For art had set in order sense
 And feeling and intelligence,
 And from its ideal order grew
 Our local understanding too. (198)

We have a glimpse here of the ideal social order, a foreshadowing of the Just City, which will be one of the poem's recurring preoccupations.

Interestingly, Auden's recollection of this blissful scene rests on the idea of art imposing order on reality. This sets the stage for the discussion of the relation between art and life that follows:

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. (198)

Auden states here a belief that the conscious and unconscious wills have an impulse toward order. Both art and life itself want this. But this synthesis cannot be willed. The impulse to imitate life through art can only produce an “abstract model of events” (199). It presents “Autonomous completed states” (199) but cannot tell people what they should do:

Art in intention is mimesis
 But, realized, the resemblance ceases;
 Art is not life and cannot be
 A midwife to society
 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. (199)

Yet to say that art “creates / Autonomous completed states” is to say something very different from what Williams asserts about the poem above. And later at the end of Part 1, Auden will even seem to contradict what he says above when he speaks of the poem as a “dispatch that I intend; / Although addressed to a Whitehall, / Be under Flying Seal to all / Who wish to read it anywhere” (205). If as a work of art his poem “cannot say,” what’s the use of sending it out to the world as a “dispatch”? And again, how is this compatible with Williams’ conception of the poem as *dialectic in motion*, leading the reader to a reoriented mental state?

Deane speculates that there may be an intended equivocation on the last word in the passage above on the word “states”—“a suggestion of

some persisting connection between [what Auden in his earlier discussion of art in the poem calls] the “true *Gestalt*” of art [199] and the Just City.¹³ Yet Auden himself had already quite famously refuted such a claim on art’s behalf in his 1939 poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”: “poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its saying where executives / Would never want to tamper”.¹⁴ In his 1939 essay “The Public v. the Late William Butler Yeats,” Auden expanded on this idea:

art is the product of history, not a cause. Unlike some other products, technical inventions for example, it does not re-enter history as an effective agent, so that the question whether art should or should not be propaganda is unreal . . . the honest truth, gentlemen, is that, if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged.¹⁵

The question of how poetry could address reality and public issues when it, as an art form, is practically useless, and at a time when the poet has no public status is one that preoccupied Auden throughout his poetic career. In his well-known 1962 essay, “The Poet and the City,” he argued that all literary efforts to use public, historical figures as themes for poetry, as poets used public figures in the past, were doomed to failure because modern poets do not and cannot know public figures on a personal level.¹⁶

¹³ Deane, 175.

¹⁴ W.H. Auden, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 242.

¹⁵ W.H. Auden, “The Public v. the Late William Butler Yeats,” in *The English Auden*, p. 393.

¹⁶ W.H. Auden, “The Poet and the City,” in *The Dyer’s Hand and Other Essays* [1962] (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 80.

At the same time, the contemporary Western poet writes at a time when modern Western society has more or less lost its belief in both the significance of the reality of sensory phenomena and the capacity of art to mimetically represent that reality.¹⁷ In addition, the contemporary Western poet must contend with a world in which technology has transformed the material reality of human life to such an extent that it has made human nature itself seem truly plastic, capable of almost any behaviour. This has resulted, Auden maintains, in the general loss of belief in a norm of human nature needing some kind of man-made world in which to live.¹⁸

All of these factors have had the net effect of nullifying or reducing to futility any effort by a poet to address himself to reality let alone history or any public issue. By 1939 Auden himself had experienced at first hand a sense of poetry's abject futility to change anything in the face of reality. In 1937, he had travelled to Spain to support the Republicans against the fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War, and he had returned deeply shocked and disillusioned. He was shocked and disillusioned partly by the ruinous factionalism and cynicism of the left-wing forces, more generally by the brutality of the war, and perhaps most of all by the futility of his own efforts to affect the struggle against Franco.¹⁹ In 1938, Auden travelled with his friend Christopher Isherwood to Shanghai to witness first-hand the outbreak of the global struggle against Fascism on yet another front, the Sino-Japanese war. If anything, this experience would seem to have

¹⁷ Auden, "The Poet and the City," p. 78.

¹⁸ Auden, "The Poet and the City," p. 79.

¹⁹ Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 215.

intensified his sense of the impossibility of his public role as the “Court Poet of the Left” and of art’s futility in the face of political reality.²⁰

Humphrey Carpenter describes the political, artistic, and personal crisis that Auden was experiencing in the years 1938-1939. It is clear that during this time Auden went through a major re-evaluation of his poetic principles and personal convictions.

For all of the above reasons, therefore, there is something remarkable if not distinctly perverse about Auden’s decision in 1940 to turn to the form of the neoclassical verse epistle in order to address public issues. Auden had of course already experimented with a verse letter in his “Letter to Lord Byron” as part of the 1936 travel book *Letters from Iceland*. But where that long poem had been addressed to a distant historical personage and promiscuously mingled personal with literary and social issues, “New Year Letter” is quite self-consciously addressed to the big public issues of politics, history, economics, aesthetics, and national psychology. The fact that Auden would choose to address these issues in neoclassical form (as opposed to the light-hearted rhyme royal that he used in “Letter to Lord Byron”) suggests to many critics a reactionary turn. As Deane puts it, did Auden’s formalist poetics indicate a turn to reactionary politics?²¹ The Auden letters and a questionnaire that Humphrey Carpenter cites in his biography of the poet reveal that though Auden was doubtful about the effectiveness of his personal involvement in

²⁰ Carpenter, p. 245.

²¹ Deane, 177.

politics, he was still unequivocally committed to Socialism.²² Yet his crisis did indeed trigger a serious re-evaluation of his poetics.

But there is clear evidence that that re-evaluation had begun and had been a continuing project since the early to mid-1930s. Mendelson cites a brilliant essay titled "Writing," which Auden wrote in 1932 for a children's encyclopaedia. According to Mendelson, the essay's argument "subverted every comfortable and familiar idea of language as a means of imitating or communicating".²³ For Auden, language emerged as an effort to "bridge over the gulf" dividing humans from other humans and to restore wholeness.²⁴ Language, therefore, does not begin as imitation or representation, but begins as an attempt to bridge the primordial gulf, to cross a barrier, and restore social unity: "In fact," Auden writes, "most of the power of words comes from their *not* being like what they stand for"²⁵. Yet Auden takes it even further than this: using the example of primordial hunters, he suggests that language is not just separated by a gulf from the hearers it addresses; it is also violently antagonistic towards object and hearer.²⁶

But *written* language as opposed to spoken language rises from a slightly different source: "while speech begins with the feeling of separateness in space, ...writing begins from the sense of separateness in time, of 'I'm here to-day, but I shall be dead to-morrow, and you will be

²² Carpenter, p. 256.

²³ Mendelson, *Early Auden* p. 15.

²⁴ Mendelson, *Early Auden* p. 16.

²⁵ W.H. Auden, "Writing," in *The English Auden* p. 305.

²⁶ Mendelson, *Early Auden* p. 17.

active in my place, and how can I speak to you?"²⁷ Writing, according to Auden, attempts to do the impossible – join the living with the dead. By the end of the essay Auden portrays a fragmented society in which the dream of wholeness is defeated:

Since the underlying reason for writing is to bridge the gulf between one person and another, as the sense of loneliness increases, more and more books are written by more and more people . . . Forests are cut down, rivers of ink absorbed, but the lust to write is still unsatisfied. What is going to happen? If it were only a question of writing, it wouldn't matter; but it is an index of our health. It's not only books, but our lives, that are going to pot.²⁸

With such a dire prognosis of language's possibilities, and with the assumption in his early poems of a basic separation of language from the world as the ultimate subject to which all writing refers, it is small wonder that for Mendelson the young Auden was strikingly poststructuralist 'avant le lettre'.²⁹

But the more mature Auden in a 1962 essay also titled "Writing" accepts language's separation from the world as a *given*, an inevitability; however, he treats it as a given with which the language of poetry can help humans to build and share understanding. It is this latter understanding of language which seems to be the guiding principle of "New Year Letter." In *The Sea and the Mirror*, written just a few years after "New Year Letter," we can recognise Auden's further development and

²⁷ Auden, "Writing," in *The English Auden* pp. 305-306.

²⁸ Auden, "Writing," in *The English Auden* p. 312.

²⁹ Mendelson, *Early Auden* p. 21.

deepening understanding of the implications of his ideas about language. This deepened understanding is reflected in the refining of his poetics. Caliban explains that the goal of art is “to make you [the audience] unforgettably conscious of the ungarnished offended gap between what you so questionably are and what you are commanded without any question to become”.³⁰ We saw that according to Caliban, the artist must ultimately dissolve the mimetic spell of poetry and adopt what may be termed a poetics of disenchantment; that is, a dismantling of the mimetic machinery of his poetics. “New Year Letter” shows evidence of Auden’s steady progress towards this poetics of disenchantment.

When Caliban makes his address in Part 3 of *The Sea and the Mirror*, he addresses his remarks to the audience. It is as if he has let the audience into the poet’s workshop so that they can begin to recognise their role in the art work’s dialogue at the same time they recognise the “misting of the glass,” the “defects in [the artist’s] mirror,” and the sheer impossibility of artistic gestalt: “the regarding of your defects in his mirror, your dialogue, using his words, with yourself about yourself, becomes the one activity which never, like devouring or collecting or spending, lets you down...”³¹ For Deane, Caliban’s description of the relationship between art work and audience here suggests that a fruitful approach to the many seeming contradictions and difficulties of “New Year Letter” is the

³⁰ Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror*, in *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems* p. 441.

³¹ Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror* p. 441.

psychology of reading and the reader's role in the poem.³² The poem seems to hinge on the psychology of reading.

In relation to this point, Deane reminds us of the continuation of Auden's pronouncement on the efficacy of poetry in his elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats":

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives,
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper; it flows 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.³³

The word "survives" and its repetition four lines later in the penultimate line, and the movement of "poetry" over five lines, from "the valley of its saying" to "ranches" and to "Raw towns," make it clear that though it "makes nothing happen," for Auden poetry is clearly *something*, and that that something has power, endurance, and the capacity to be broadly disseminated. Most curious is that last line, in which Auden tells us what poetry is—"A way of happening, a mouth." Stan Smith describes this as a "strange, dehumanizing metonymy".³⁴ This metonymy—the "mouth"—Smith asserts,

insisting on the act of speech while simultaneously
detaching it from any human hinterland in a speaking
subject, catches the paradox . . . [the text's] double
historicity. A poem can be read at any time, and, in

³² Deane, p. 180.

³³ Auden, *The English Auden* p. 242.

³⁴ *W. H. Auden* (London: Blackwell, 1985), p. 4.

reading, it enters into a precise historical moment, the moment of the reader quite distinct from that of the originating author.³⁵

This may be seen perhaps as Auden's last hope for artistic gestalt, across the gulf, in poetry. As Deane puts it,

It is precisely because 'art is a fait accompli,' which is treated on the surface as a matter for grief, that it is able to survive. And surviving, it presents itself to all humanity not as a speaking thing, with a 'meaning,' but as a *means of speaking*. More than that, it provides a *way of speaking*, and *speaking* comes to define *being*, so the poem is 'a way of *happening*'.³⁶

Deane's account here strikes me as being very persuasive because it is precisely this active identification with the voice and tone of the poem's lyric subject or speaker that "New Year Letter" seems to be aiming for. "Poetry as subconscious experience" as opposed to poetry as meaning seems the most apt description of my own experience reading and rereading "New Year Letter." The first and most notable aspects that struck me about the poem were its distinctive voice and tone. The voice is consistently authoritative, worldly, witty, self-aware, and compassionate, encompassing lofty subject matter and yet also capable of low jokes. And the tone is by turns serious, erudite, chatty, flippant, probing, tragic, despairing, prayerful, and also hopeful. In fact, the voice and the tone are so distinct and compelling they seem to impose themselves on the reader so that he begins to identify with them.

³⁵ Smith, p. 4.

³⁶ Deane, p. 181.

Deane reveals that the verse epistle is conventionally “univocal” and writes of the “consistent univocality” achieved by a text’s “intractably individual vocabulary and historical references”.³⁷ The effect in “New Year Letter” is so strong that the ‘translation’ of the text by the reader that normally takes place in the act of reading becomes also the translation of the reader *by the text*.³⁸ As Smith states, the nature of translation that takes place in reading is “a feat of translation,” involving “an exchange of subject positions”.³⁹ In fact, so singular are Auden’s voice and tone in “New Year Letter” that what takes place would be more accurately described as a “mutual modification of subject positions”, as Deane puts it, to the point where I feel that I have been overpowered by and almost remade as Auden’s lyric subject.⁴⁰

The other thing that strikes me as unusual about reading “New Year Letter” is what might best be termed as the “laterality” of the reading experience. I read forward into each of the poem’s three parts, following the ebb and flow of Auden’s dialectical arguments. And yet at the same time, I am reading sideward, investigating the significance of a wide array of quotations, aphorisms, and words and phrases in different languages. I feel the urge to write notes in the margins of the text as I investigate like a detective the intellectual histories behind Auden’s use of certain terms. My sense of a possible marginalia is increased by the actual appearance of

³⁷ Deane, p. 183.

³⁸ Deane, p. 183.

³⁹ Smith, p. 126.

⁴⁰ Deane, p. 183.

the text on the page. As my eyes move across the pages, I am confronted by not so much divisions of stanzas as long bands of text in which the standard typography is frequently broken up with capitalised names and italicised words, phrases, and sentences in Latin, German, French, and other languages.

When the poem was first published it was supplemented with an eighty-one-page compendium of notes and commentaries.⁴¹ The notes expand the poem's range of discussion to philosophy, anthropology, biology, Christian theology, history, parables, and mythology. The notes are back-referenced to lines in the poem, but the poem is not footnoted and at no point is the reader directed to the notes for explanations. Indeed, it really is not necessary to read the notes at all; the poem makes perfect sense without the notes. The reader's experience with this poem, therefore, is altogether different from reading a poem like Eliot's *The Wasteland*, which in its published form is accompanied with extensive notes, clarifying that poem's many oblique allusions, metaphors, and symbolic passages. Auden's text is always quite lucid, and the experience of reading his supplementary notes is an acutely and surprisingly pleasurable one of being immersed in textuality. This sense contributes a large part to the experience of 'laterality' that I mentioned above.

In addition, there are certain moments in the text, when the forward progress of the poem seems to halt, and Auden seems to address me, the

⁴¹ Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 2011), p. 64.

reader, as he makes reflexive comments. It is as if Auden is rehearsing the role he will later give to Caliban in *The Sea and the Mirror*, of opening up his poetic workshop and exposing the terms of his poem's artifice.

There are several moments like these in the poem: Auden's discussion of the relation between art and life that I discussed above, Auden's wish at the end of Part 1 that his poem will be a "dispatch" "to all / Who wish to read it anywhere" (p. 205), and Auden's appearance in the middle of Part 1 at a tribunal of great poets which "In a perpetual session sits" (pp. 201-202). These moments of self-reflexive commentary, or "meta-poetry" as Deane calls them, also contribute to the reader's sense of the laterality of the text. This laterality might best be characterised as the reader's awareness of the poem's existence within the texture and substance of texts.

"New Year Letter" gives the reader the sense of a poetic lyric that has been opened up to and made a part of textuality. In making the effort of following Auden's dialectic through the poem's three parts, winding through history and through the many different texts, the reader must contend with a poem which constantly seems to shift its shape and impressions. The poem itself is an experiential process and, though it has an argumentative meaning that the reader can paraphrase or subject to exegesis, that argumentative meaning does not seem to be its main point. The main point of the poem seems to be the subjective experience of

entering the poem and being acted upon by its voice, tone, and texture, and the dialectical sweep of its rhetoric.

Smith points to Louis Althusser's "interpellation" as a term that can partly account for what the reader experiences in reading "New Year Letter".⁴² Althusser's term describes the process by which humans are "hailed", "recruited," and transformed by ideology into political subjects.⁴³ Is Auden's "New Year Letter" then akin to propaganda? The question takes us to the heart of the major re-evaluation to which Auden subjected his poetics in the 1938–1940 period.

Auden seems to have made the decision to step away from overt public political interventions because he no longer felt comfortable with the inevitable compromises to one's personal values.⁴⁴ In a letter to an English friend Auden recounts the story of a speech he gave at a dinner in New York in order to raise money for Spanish refugees. He made an impassioned speech, which roused his audience. Later, Auden was disgusted with himself: "I suddenly found I could really do it, that I could make a fighting demagogic speech and have the audience roaring, I felt just covered with dirt afterwards".⁴⁵ What disgusted Auden was his sense of having emotionally manipulated his audience, so that, swept away with passion, they enthusiastically endorsed what he asked of them, without thinking. Related to this is Auden's decision to suppress his poem "Spain

⁴² Smith, p. 20.

⁴³ Ross King, "Interpellation," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms*, ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Toronto: U. of Toronto, 1993), p. 567.

⁴⁴ Carpenter, p. 256.

⁴⁵ Carpenter, p. 256.

1937” because “it was infected with an incurable dishonesty”.⁴⁶ The “dishonesty” Auden objected to in his own poem was his willingness as a poet to sway his reader’s opinion by means of poetic rhetoric, which expressed a ringing sentiment of leftist propaganda rather than the poet’s own sincere feeling. In the first instance, we see Auden’s deep ambivalence towards propaganda, but in the second we see that ambivalence now encompassed not just propaganda but also certain hypnotic, incantatory properties within poetic language itself—what Heaney called “the element of the uncanny”—which Auden seemed to associate with emotional manipulation.⁴⁷

Smith cites a passage in Auden’s 1968 collection of lectures, *Secondary Worlds*, in which the poet distinguishes poetry from what he terms the “Black Magic” of the propagandist.⁴⁸ The propagandist uses language as “a way of securing domination over others”.⁴⁹ It does not allow for dissent or even choice. But “Poetry,” Auden writes, “is not magic. In so far as poetry, or any other of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate”.⁵⁰ Auden writes of the knowledge that poetry conveys: it’s the kind “implied by the Biblical phrase—*Then Adam knew Eve his wife*—knowing is inseparable

⁴⁶ W.H. Auden, “Foreword,” in *W. H. Auden: A Bibliography: 1924-1969*, eds. B.C. Bloomfield and Edward Mendelson, cited in Mendelson, *Early Auden*, p. 326.

⁴⁷ Seamus Heaney, “Sounding Auden”, *The Government of the Tongue* [1979](London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 126.

⁴⁸ W.H. Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 130, cited in Smith, p. 20.

⁴⁹ Auden, *Secondary Worlds* p. 128.

⁵⁰ Auden, “Writing,” p. 27.

from being known”.⁵¹ Choice is fundamental to poetry because it is built on dialogue—a translation of subject to subject, or rather, an exchange of subject positions.⁵²

In “New Year Letter” the lyric subject is “the mouth” with which the reader begins to speak, but the historical specificity of the poem underlines the fact that this “mouth” is not detached from the body of historical dialectic. There is little doubt that the form of the octosyllabic couplet exerts a powerfully transforming influence on the “mouth” of Auden’s discourse. It gives an idiosyncrasy and a sense of urgency to “New Year Letter.” Fuller, for example, feels that the octosyllabic couplet is “perhaps too narrow for discursive verse . . . and thus appears to be continually pushing further and further away the decisive statement”, unaware it seems that this is precisely what contributes to the poem’s distinctive voice and tone.⁵³ “New Year Letter’s” self-reflexive commentaries and its pervasive note of self-consciousness make reading the poem an act which is concentrated on the “self” that is constructed by the text and which the reader assumes. In fact, this subject position defined by the poem, Deane maintains, is so precise that, once it is constructed by the reader’s reading of the poem, it becomes “an infinite series of its own self-generating occasions”.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Auden, *Secondary Worlds* pp. 130-131.

⁵² Smith, p. 21.

⁵³ John Fuller, *A Reader’s Guide to W. H. Auden* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p. 131.

⁵⁴ Deane, p. 185.

But I am not entirely convinced that this subject is as stable as Deane maintains. He bases his assertion on Stan Smith's discussion of Auden's 1950 essay "Nature, History and Poetry," in which the poet argues that, "Like an image in the mirror, a poem might be called a pseudo-person".⁵⁵ Smith writes perceptively of Auden's attempt to define the peculiar effect of a literary text: "it is in reality all surface, merely the play of language . . . which at the same time gives an illusion of depth, of concealing and revealing...."⁵⁶

The source of the formulation Deane uses above—"an infinite series of its own self-generating occasions"—is a passage in which Smith outlines Auden's account of how a poem can live beyond its historical occasion. Yet in an earlier passage in the same essay Smith touches upon the volatility surrounding the idea of the text and its vulnerability:

[it] is both a historical product, subject to all the pressures on language of its originating moment, and yet a discourse that floats free of its origins, finding as many moments of meaning as it has readers, in a perpetually open-ended play of history and signification . . . of course what the mirror always offers us, when we look into it, is *our own image* as a 'pseudo-person'. But if each moment of reading this same poem can be exchanged for any other moment of reading, none is privileged, including the author's.⁵⁷

Since "New Year Letter" is essentially an experiential process, and that textual process has potential capacity to infinitely regenerate itself,

⁵⁵ W.H. Auden, "Nature, History and Poetry", *Thought*, September 1950, quoted in Smith, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Smith, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Smith, p. 4.

Deane goes on to assert that “New Year Letter” offers a “complementary account of the status of the reader”.⁵⁸ The constructed subject position, he believes *is* the reader and inseparable from the process of reading. And this, Deane states, is exactly how “New Year Letter” defines the problematic notion of “self”:

each great I
Is but a process in a process
Within a field that never closes. (Part 2, 206)

But surely what this passage does is underline precisely the tenuousness of the lyric subject and the constructed subject position. Indeed, throughout “New Year Letter,” especially in meta-poetic moments like these, Auden displays an awareness of the tenuousness of the lyric subject and the self. In a later passage, for instance, Auden speculates that our knowledge of people and things may be a creation of our dreams and the patterns imposed upon reality by our feelings:

All real perception, it would seem,
Has shifting contours like a dream,
Nor have our feelings ever known
Any discretion but their own.
Suppose we love, not friends or wives,
But certain patterns in our lives (208)

Auden seems unperturbed by this idea because he knows that love takes place in the realm of experience, and is not fixed certainty, and therefore we have no need or desire to distinguish between cause and effect:

⁵⁸ Deane, p. 185.

“Effects that take the cause’s name, / Love cannot part them all the same
 ...” (208)

Interestingly, Auden states that his communication with his addressee—Elizabeth Mayer—is subject to the same fraught nexus of dreams and affective patterning of reality:

If in this letter that I send
 I write “Elizabeth’s my friend,”
 I cannot but express my faith
 That I is Not-Elizabeth.

For though the intellect in each
 Can only think in terms of speech
 We cannot practice what we preach. (208-209)

In this meta-poetic moment Auden seems to be saying that, although he as sender and Elizabeth as recipient of the letter may grasp the grammatical sense of distinction between the two of them, they forget that at the moment of reading language never rests in identity:

every text is a double field, and its doubleness is compounded by the fact that it is *my* experience—an experience of pleasure, satisfaction, delight—at the moment that *I* impute its contents to the subjectivity of *another*—the pseudo-‘I’ who supposedly speaks. This other who addresses me, ‘person to person’, is my own reflection, as reader, speaking back to me out of the mirror of another man’s words.⁵⁹

Thus Auden acknowledges here that the transmission of the lyric subject and the constructed subject position, as well as the ‘message’ of his poem

⁵⁹ Smith, p. 5.

are pervaded by the same kind of tenuousness and uncertainty that affects the phenomena depicted within the poem.

Deane's account of Auden's use of science and mathematical theory is much more persuasive, however. He argues that if Part 1 of "New Year Letter" is taken up with the issue of art and its relation to history, Part 2 is largely concerned with humankind's relation to time and space, or coping with life in a Post-Einsteinian universe. Part 3, finally, deals with practical resolutions based on the world-view that Auden has presented in Part 2.⁶⁰ In the lines which precede his outline of the problematic notion of "self" in Part 2, Auden describes the difficulty humans have in accepting what they are, "The children of a modest star, / Frail, backward, clinging to the granite / ... universe ..." (206).

The Dutch mathematician and physicist, Willem de Sitter's model of an ever-expanding universe (a response to Einstein's general theory of relativity) seems to have a pivotal influence throughout "New Year Letter".⁶¹ All of the Devil's temptations in Part 2 involve false conceptions of stability—whether they are those of Wordsworth and the Socialist Utopian, who projected the "Parousia of liberty" onto the French Revolution," the early Christians, who disappointed in their hopes for the apocalypse, abandon "their early agape" for a "late lunch with Constantine" (213), or modern leftists like Auden himself, who "waited for the day" when Marx's prophecy would come true, and "The State would

⁶⁰ Deane, p. 187.

⁶¹ Deane, p. 185.

wither clean away” (216). All involve the same mistake of the “False Association” of an idea—worthwhile and noble—with a state of permanence and complete truth, or as Smith puts it, they identify the “Word and World”.⁶²

Auden informs us that simply by virtue of being born in the time in which we are born, “we are the conscripts of our age” (227). How can we learn to be “the patriots of the Now?” Auden asks. What he is suggesting here is that the only way we can avoid Mephistopheles’ temptations is by learning to accept historic time as the medium of our lives.⁶³ The poem’s focus on the process confirms Auden’s interest in conveying an Einsteinian world-view. Deane shows how Auden’s use of specific formal techniques serves to evoke in the reader a sense of process. The use of octosyllabic rhyming couplet is probably the most important of these techniques. This couplet is linked to what Deane calls “a grammar and syntax of proliferation”.⁶⁴ He presents a fascinating analysis of a passage about a hundred lines in from the opening of Part 3, which, much like Pope’s *Essay on Man*, describes our middle status in Purgatory. Deane’s analysis shows that at points where the reader would normally expect a syntactical terminus, the sentence’s momentum is carried forward. Deane calls this continual, overflowing of the syntax beyond the poem’s couplets

⁶² Smith, p. 137.

⁶³ Deane, p. 187.

⁶⁴ Deane, p. 188.

the “subversion of stasis”.⁶⁵ The effect of the reading experience is potentially open-ended.

The condensed and subtle passage that begins at the bottom of page 231 in Part 3 of the poem provides a signal example of this “grammar and syntax of proliferation” and its peculiar power. In this passage Auden begins a long stanza, which will culminate 40 lines later with his assertion that each “private citizen”— English, German, and otherwise—is individually culpable for the failed Enlightenment project and its collapse into total war. Each of us as citizens, Auden writes, thinks he is special and exculpates himself from the many failings of the state, instead blaming politicians and hired officials for our inability to lead a fulfilled and loving life (231). Yet each of us fails to see the lack of serious consideration we give to Agapé, the deep force of love responsible for life itself, and its implications:

Even true lovers on some bed
 The graceful god has visited
 Find faults at which to hang the head,
 And know the morphon full of guilt
 Whence all community is built,
 The cryptozoon with two backs
 Whose sensibility that lacks
 True reverence contributes much
 Towards the soldier’s violent touch.
 For, craving language and a myth
 And hands to shape their purpose with,
 In shadow round the fond and warm
 The possible societies swarm,
 Because their freedom as their form
 Upon our sense of style depends,
 Whose eyes alone can seek their ends,

⁶⁵ Deane, p. 189.

And they are impotent if we
Decline responsibility. (232)

There seem to be four places in this passage—“head”, “built”, “swarm”, “depends”—where the reader might expect a logical terminus but where the sentence’s momentum flows onwards beyond that stop. The line “Find faults at which to hang the head,” for example, seems to conclude the idea in the first line about the two lovers. Indeed, its repetition of the end rhyme started with bed adds to that impression. We note also that in this poem consisting of rhyming couplets, in which each end-rhyme has its partner, this end-rhyme head has in fact two partners—bed and visited. Where we would expect the syntactic sense of the sentence to be completed with the rhyme partner visited, it clearly is not but instead runs onto the next line. The line marks a violation of the poem’s couplet rhyme scheme. It’s a triplet, and we see the operation of something similar in Pope’s work, but nevertheless in Auden’s poem it has the effect of confounding our expectations of logical terminus in its lines.

The sentence’s momentum continues past the expected point of closure with the addition of another clause—“And know the morphon full of guilt.” As Deane states, the rhyme scheme contributes to a “subversion of stasis” throughout this passage and numerous others in the poem. The next rhyme-couplet ends on the word “built,” and again this would seem like the natural point for a terminus. But again the sentence’s momentum rolls forward to the next line with additional information containing a

startling modification of the first line's image of the two lovers into "The cryptozoon with two backs."

The last two natural terminus points in the above passage are "swarm" and "depends," and both mark points where Auden has added significant modifications to previous images in the passage. With the clause "The possible societies swarm," the word swarm completes the rhyme couplet started on the previous line with warm, and the sense seems to have reached a syntactical terminus with swarm. But the rhyme scheme has not: once again violating the couplet scheme, the end-rhyme is repeated on a third line with form—"Because their freedom as their form." The significant details added here to the image of societies, which "swarm" in a pre-conscious, hive-like manner, are those of "freedom" and "form."

The sentence continues with the clause, "upon our sense of style depends." Here the syntactical sense seems complete, but the rhyme scheme is not: the end-rhyme depends still needs its rhyme-partner. The sentence's momentum spills over onto the next line—"Whose eyes alone can seek their ends." In the passage, therefore, we have four instances where the momentum of a sentence overflows natural syntactical endpoints. By the time we reach each endpoint we have no confidence in its integrity. Deane calls this composition by "additive units", contributing to a sense of process.⁶⁶ He explains that "New Year Letter"'s couplets are not the heroic couplets used by Pope, which are in pentameter, but in fact

⁶⁶ Deane, p. 190.

have more in common with the mock-heroic Hudibrastic couplets used by the 17th century poet Samuel Butler: “the pointedly crude rhymes and octosyllabic line which typify the Hudibrastic form also contribute strongly to the sense of process as we read”.⁶⁷ However, I would question whether Auden’s rhymes in fact match the crudeness of the Hudibrastic. Also, where Butler relies largely on feminine rhymes—navel, malleable, comment, moment—Auden’s poem mostly uses masculine end-rhymes.

For Stan Smith and Michael Murphy, Auden’s octosyllabic couplets derive from Butler and Andrew Marvell. Stan Smith argues that the crucial difference between the heroic couplet and the octosyllabic is that while the “stately heroic couplet of Pope and Dryden ... is a spacious enough measure to allow for sense to be repeatedly contained within its formal antitheses,” the octosyllabic measure of Marvell and Butler

is constantly in its compactness overflowing its couplets, spawning a syntax that can find its resolution only after a proliferation of sub-clauses and amplifications, which seem to move in a permanent future tenseness. Such a style is flexible enough, but its pace is considerably more urgent and impulsive than a pentameter.⁶⁸

Michael Murphy, meanwhile, finds many commonalities between Auden’s poem and the 17th century octosyllabic verse of Andrew Marvell.⁶⁹

Citing the evidence of such poems as Marvell’s “Upon Appleton House”

⁶⁷ Deane, p. 190.

⁶⁸ Smith, p. 127.

⁶⁹ Michael Murphy, “Neoclassicism, Late Modernism, and W. H. Auden’s ‘New Year Letter,’” *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 33, 2, (2004), 111.

and “An Horatian Ode upon Cromwel’s Return from Ireland,” Murphy argues that the poet’s variation on the familiar 17th century theme of *concordia discors* corresponds to Auden’s use of dialectic. Certainly, Auden’s use of the octosyllabic couplet shows a capacity to combine personal lyrics with more wide-ranging subject matter, as well as convey different emotional states that in many ways puts it more in line with the octosyllabic verse of Marvell than with the stately Augustan heroic couplets of Pope or Johnson.

In line with Smith’s arguments, Auden’s passage above has a brisk, impulsive quality to it. As Deane states, it builds meaning through “additive units,” but more interestingly, with each sub-clause that Auden adds to his clauses in the passage above, he amplifies the significance and range of meanings contained in each line’s image. The lovers in bed who are visited by Eros in the first couplet above, for instance, simultaneously become cognizant of guilt and their status as biological individuals. Auden’s clever choice of “morphon” conveys both the sense of a miniscule portion and morphological structure. There’s a very subtle suggestion being planted here that the guilt (and perhaps the very propensity to err) are as native to us as our morphological form.

The momentum of the line about the lovers’ “morphon of guilt” then spills over to the next line, which adds a new detail, the abstraction “community”: “Whence all community is built.” In a mere four lines Auden has swept us from lovers cavorting in bed to the idea of a primal human

community founded on guilt. We also notice here a characteristic of the entire poem—Auden’s tendency to shift dialectically from images or scenes in the present to the distant past. The message here, reinforced overtly and subliminally, is that of a double focus in all human words and actions—their manifestation in the present—and their development in the dialectic of history, stretching back to humankind’s biological beginnings.

The next “additive unit” modifies the idea of community to the startling image from prehistoric times: “The cryptozoon with two backs.” It is a startling image because on a purely visual level it’s a repetition of the image of the two lovers in bed mentioned five lines above, but now, cast in the form of a double-shaped Pre-Cambrian algae fossil. There may be also a slight echo from *Othello* of Iago’s reduction of human love to “making-the-beast-with-two-backs.” This association gives the primordial and vegetative image a dark, slightly disturbing edge. In the next three lines, this reduction of Eros to primordial Cyanobacterial organism is linked with a Blakean allegorical economy to the rapacity of modern-day soldiers: “Whose sensibility that lacks / True reverence contributes much / Towards the soldier’s violent touch” (232).

“Touch” provides a natural terminus, and the conjunction “For” prepares the reader for new “additive units,” which will amplify the idea of community and synthesise it with the image of the lovers: “For, craving language and a myth.” With this unit, we are forced to adjust our image of the lovers again to the vast arena of the primordial and potential human

community: “In shadow round the fond and warm/ The possible societies swarm” (232). The immediate image that comes to mind here is of innumerable vague, unformed human shapes crowded round the loving couple or perhaps loving family groups. As mentioned above, the end-rhymes “warm” and “swarm” also connote something bestial, herd-like and pre-conscious. Smith reads these lines as the “‘possible societies’ that swarm around our actual one,” which “are denied realization because they lack formulation, ‘craving a language and a myth / And hands to shape their purpose with’”.⁷⁰

But Smith’s reading disregards the function of the rhyming couplets, and of how their form contributes to the passage’s accumulation of meaning through the “additive units” of each successive clause. The “possible societies” are linked sequentially and dialectically with the “true lovers” in the first couplet of the passage. Smith seems right when he says that the “possible societies” swarm around our actual one: the “possible societies” are “shadows” of our actual society. But Auden’s sequence of rhyme couplets makes it clear that our society is the allegorical product of the “true lovers” in the first line. The couple’s “morphon of guilt” is the basis of “all community.” The syntax and rhyme couplets suggest that cryptozoon is a modification or amplification of that “morphon of guilt.” The “possible societies” are, these lines suggest, the unshaped nascent societies, which are still without languages or national myths, which exist

⁷⁰ Smith, p. 148.

in the future subjunctive. What Auden does with a few lines is project into a possible future.

The next lines in the passage, with their rhyme couplets, make it clear that the fate of these “possible societies” in the future is deeply linked with “our” own; that is, with the “true lovers” in the first line of the passage:

Because their freedom as their form
 Upon our sense of style depends,
 Whose eyes alone can seek their ends,
 And they are impotent if we
 Decline responsibility. (232)

“Ends” is the rhyme couplet partner of “depends,” and marks the natural terminus of sense. The couplet returns us to the image of the “true lovers,” linking them with “us”—in the phrase “our sense of style.” “Ends” also suggests the purpose or goal of these lovers. The last couplet completes the meaning of the last transformation wrought by the “additive units”: “they”—the “possible societies” shadowing our own are “impotent” or without force or meaning if we—in the persons of the “true lovers”—“Decline responsibility”—that is, refuse to give serious “effect” to “love’s volition.”

What this remarkably dense and subtle passage communicates, therefore, through its octosyllabic couplets is the following: we who live in the present are the end-point of a vast historical dialectical movement stretching from prehistory into the unmade future, and our “sense of style”

of living now, the ethical choices we choose now or not to take, can help determine the shape of societies in the future as well as the teleology of the dialectic that was begun in the distant past. As the next couplet asks, “O what can love’s intention do / If all his agents are untrue?” (232)

In the passage above I have equated Auden’s phrase “sense of style” with certain ethical choices made at the official level but especially at the individual level—for “The politicians we condemn / Are nothing but our L. C. M: “The average of the average Man” (232). We blame our lack of freedom and the blockage of our love on society and on politicians, but these are only projections of our individual will.⁷¹

What is the basis of linking “style” to ethical choice? “Style’s” more familiar connotations are a mode or manner of living, a characteristic form or technique of producing a thing, such as a work of art, and the characteristic manner of literary expression of a particular writer.⁷² Of course, “style” can also refer to the recognised or correct designation for a person or thing. Auden’s use of the term seems to partake of all the above senses. But it is when we look carefully at the word’s etymology that we get a sense of its importance in this poem. It derives from “stylos,” an ancient implement for incising characters on a writing surface. What Auden seems to be referring to here is how we see our freedom of will, or better still, our understanding of the terms of our freedom of will, that is,

⁷¹ John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) p. 234.

⁷² *Oxford English Dictionary*, (1993).

the nature that has been inscribed upon our human character and our status as human beings.

The question of style—in all of the senses I have outlined above—is a pivotal one in terms of the poem’s octosyllabic verse couplet form, its marshalling of a variety of different texts and languages, its mixing of tones, its distinctive and overpowering voice, and its concern with conveying a sense of history, literary text, lyric subject, and human personhood itself, as dialectical process. In his book *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*, Christopher Nealon argues that the key characteristics of Auden’s poetry—his habit of camp attitude and his desire to try out as many different poetic forms as possible—can be explained by the poet’s “desire to develop a style to meet the historiography of contradiction in modernity—the notion that unleashes energies for the good and ill at once”.⁷³ For Auden, the gathering political, social, and financial crisis that had steadily intensified until it exploded into total war was nothing short of a catastrophe, which threw all of human civilisation into question. He had an acute sense of the “catastrophic wrongness of the human divisions of labour”.⁷⁴

Auden met this catastrophe with a well-considered sense of poetry as a textual experience. Nealon maintains that Auden’s great bequeathal to later poets was the characteristic Audenesque “tone”.⁷⁵ By “tone,”

⁷³ Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 2011) p. 61.

⁷⁴ Nealon, p. 55.

⁷⁵ Nealon, p. 55.

Nealon means not merely Auden's frequent merging of a lofty, heroic rhetorical style with an irreverent and camp "low" style (though this is a strong component of what we regard as his style), but also his mixing of "high" poetic forms with "low" forms, and such secondary textual forms as commentary and notes: "His innovation registers as a tone, most often identified as camp, but Auden's 'camp' has modal and tonal cousins in the mock-heroic, in the burlesque, even ... in the elegiac".⁷⁶

An important though unlikely aspect of Auden's response to modern civilizational catastrophe is his adoption of the 'sermo humilis' (humble manner) of the sixth-century bishop Gregory of Tours. Nealon points to a passage in Auden's commonplace book, *A Certain World*, in which the poet expresses his admiration for Gregory of Tours' direct and unadorned Latin writing style. In the entry, titled "Dark Ages, Thank God for the," Auden cites Eric Auerbach's comparison of the respective Latin styles of the fourth-century historian, Ammianus, and of Gregory. Where the Latin of Ammianus is rigid, "labored, artificial, overstrained ... burdened by the fetters of tyrannical rules and the period style," Gregory's Latin is characterised by its "simple and practical vivacity".⁷⁷

For Auden, it is significant that Gregory wrote in plain, unadorned Latin *after* the fall of Rome:

the catastrophe has occurred, the Empire has fallen, its organization has collapsed, the culture of antiquity has been destroyed. But the tension is over. And it is

⁷⁶ Nealon, p. 62.

⁷⁷ W.H. Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 95.

more freely and directly, no longer burdened by unrealizable pretensions, that Gregory's soul faces living reality, ready to apprehend it as such and to work in it practically.⁷⁸

Now that the catastrophe has occurred, Gregory is able to address reality relieved of the heavy fetters of the Empire's stylistic manners and standards. Deeply conscious of the catastrophe of modernity, Auden draws from Gregory's example the "tacit permission to think about style and historical change together, not only through their relation to social station, as in classical criticism, but through historical changes of station".⁷⁹ Nealon shows that Auden consistently "conceives of these changes as catastrophic and contradictory, unleashing energies for good and for ill at once".⁸⁰ It is Auden's great project, he states, to "concoct a style to meet this historiography of contradiction".⁸¹

How does Auden concoct this "style"? He does it partly by reworking the idea of the hero—an "older literary model of personhood".⁸² This reworking can be detected in Auden's capitalisation of the names of the poets, thinkers, writers, and other famous personages scattered throughout the poem. The capital letters register the vast gap in time and space of our lives from these famous figures. But at the same time the struggles of figures like Luther, Montaigne, Baudelaire, and Rousseau flicker to life in brief melodramatic phrases. Auden assumes that readers

⁷⁸ Auden, *A Certain World* p. 95.

⁷⁹ Nealon, p. 59.

⁸⁰ Nealon, p. 59.

⁸¹ Nealon, p. 59.

⁸² Nealon, p. 62.

are already familiar with the major achievements in these figures' lives. Significantly, major figures like Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Marx are never mentioned by name: Auden merely conveys the sense that each of them was a participant in an epic progression of struggles for human freedom. At the same time within his capsule accounts it is possible to detect traces of the burlesque or mock-heroic in the slightly mocking, flippant manner with which Auden describes them. In addition, there is a sense of a general dispersal of debased, quotidian versions of the heroic throughout the poem:

Each salesman now is the polite
 Adventurer, the landless knight
 Gawaine-Quixote ...
 An unrobust lone FISHER-KING;
 Each subway face the PEQUOD of
 Some Ishmael hunting his lost love (237)

We can detect within these nameless, quotidian mock-heroic figures the presence of Caliban from *The Sea in the Mirror*, "mingling the mongrel and the aesthetic". As Nealon explains, "everyone, the poet included, lives a simulacral or debased existence when measured by the possibility of areté [the ancient Greek expression connoting excellence or perfection in personhood or heroes], authenticity, or wholeness".⁸³ In Auden's reworking of the heroic we recognise the characteristic camp Audenesque tone.

⁸³ Nealon, p. 61.

Auden also creates a style with which to confront modern catastrophe through his overt and subliminal evocation of the middle status of humans in the purgatorial realm of time. In Part 3 of the poem Auden describes what he considers humankind's true status: "Half angel and half *petite bête* ... (221). We belong among the ridges of Purgatory, "however much we grumble, / However painfully we stumble" (221). Indeed, we seem peculiarly adapted to life in Purgatory: "To tell the truth, although we stifle / The feeling, are we not a trifle / Relieved to wake on its damp earth?" (221).

"New Year Letter" itself may be seen as a work in the "middle style" that is appropriate for humankind's fallen, incomplete status in the Purgatory of history. It presents a textual surface comprised of different texts, languages, styles, names, and forms. If the traditional use of the neoclassical heroic couplet had been to uphold the proprieties of social order and authority by denouncing and ridiculing those people and literary works which dared to breach these proprieties, then we may say that Auden's use of the octosyllabic couplet is composed upon the rubble of these same proprieties. For the late-modernist poet Auden, the catastrophe has already occurred; civilisation has crumbled. The old vertical orders—of social classes, of literary genres and forms, and of language have been shattered. Auden offers instead what Nealon calls a "shifting laterality, built out of texts".⁸⁴ In Auden's disenchanting world after the catastrophe, the humble forms mingle with the proud, the heroic, the

⁸⁴ Nealon, p. 72.

burlesque, the mock-heroic, and the elegiac, and the poem's linguistic medium has become a heteroglossia. In "New Year Letter" poetry is revealed to be an "open-ended textual system",⁸⁵ in which lofty primary poetic forms mingle with secondary and tertiary forms, and the reader and future poets are not bequeathed austere and controlled poetic forms, but what Auden elsewhere calls "the total literary glory".⁸⁶

Another way in which Auden can be said to have constructed a style adequate to meet the catastrophe of modern contradiction is through his efforts to represent the poem's argument as a dialectic of progress and catastrophe. Mendelson notes the "convoluted" metaphysical argument that runs throughout most of the poem, connecting Mephistopheles to humankind's psychological and ethical state.⁸⁷ But this argument is less interesting than the *manner* in which Auden's argument ebbs back and forth as dialectic. Auden introduces Mephistopheles, explaining that the Devil's great skill is to fool humans into believing the half-truth, or that part is really whole. He is in a perverse sense an advocate for the very synthesis that Auden advocates. Mephistopheles, in fact, does more than just inspire the wish for unity, however; he is the actual embodiment of the dialectical principle in human history.

The Devil's method is to make humans confuse half-truths with the truth, and then reject truth along with the lie. Auden reveals how throughout history the Devil has encouraged humans to continually pin

⁸⁵ Nealon, p. 62.

⁸⁶ "Letter to Lord Byron" (Part III, stanza 8), in *The English Auden*, p. 183.

⁸⁷ Mendelson, *Later Auden* p. 108.

their hopes for justice on revolutionary change, and then when revolution yields less than satisfactory results, to lose faith in justice. He gives the example of the early Christians, who expected the apocalypse, but when Christ failed to show up on time abandoned “their early agape” for a “late lunch with Constantine” (213). And then there is the idealistic Wordsworth caught up in the early excitement of the French revolution, waiting for the “Parousia of liberty” until “Left by Napoleon in the lurch, / Supporting the Established Church” (214).

Auden reveals how he himself “had the luck to see / A rare discontinuity” (214)—the Russian Revolution of 1917. He describes its impact—the many idealists who imagined the event had “realised the potential Man, / A higher species brought to birth” (214), and how he, like many others, swept up in the excitement, “settled down to read / The theory that forecast the deed” (214). And then in one of the most subtly written passages in the poem Auden outlines the life of Marx, a man whom he ranks along with Galileo, Newton, and Darwin as one of the “Great sedentary Caesars who / ... with a single concept brought / Some ancient rubbish heap of thought / To rational diversity” (216). Like the others, Marx demolished centuries of intellectual errors used to justify oppression. His rebellion is cast in terms of a titanic Oedipal hatred for patriarchal authority: “his animus / Outlawed him from himself; but thus, / And only thus, perhaps, could he / Have come to his discovery”(214-215).

The poet makes it clear that it was despair which gave Marx the courage to “dare / The desperate catabasis / Into the snarl of the abyss” (215). Yet his actions were heroic, and his writings did introduce a method to put in question the basis of all social systems. Nevertheless, Auden, along with the rest of Marx’s disciples, was left disappointed by Marx’s vision of the future: “We hoped; we waited for the day / The State would wither clean away, / Expecting the Millennium / That theory promised us would come. / It didn’t” (216-217). And once again, humans are left disillusioned—Marx’s great theory of economics, politics, science, and history proves to be no better at predicting the future than art is.

But in case, we are tempted by Mephistopheles to once again throw out the proverbial baby with the bath water, dismissing Marx’s revelation of what is required for the just society, Auden makes it clear that, for him, the moral force of the philosopher’s historical vision continues to remain relevant and true. “Loosed from its shroud of temper,” Auden writes, “his / Determinism comes to this: / None shall receive unless they give; / All must cooperate to live” (216). In the poem’s culminating evocation of democracy towards the end of Part 3, Auden reworks Marx’s famous dictum about human ability and need—“From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” Auden translates Marx’s formula as the following: “all have needs to satisfy / And each a power to supply” (239).

The poem's argument represents history as an inescapable progression of half-successes and catastrophic errors—fortuitous and otherwise—and actions to counteract those errors. This dialectic is rooted in humankind's fundamental propensity for error. Mephistopheles' role as the embodiment of history's dialectic is to teach us the lessons that will—inadvertently or otherwise—help us to build the Just City.

The final way in which Auden can be seen to have composed a style capable of confronting the demands of the modern catastrophe is through his meta-poetic representation of the poetic text itself as process. Through his use of the octosyllabic couplet he exposes “New Year Letter” as a site of instability, a textual surface which builds its meaning through “additive units,” and whose proliferating clauses exceed the boundaries of their end-rhymes to create a reading experience that is potentially open-ended. This is a text capable of sweeping us dialectically from the present to the distant past, but which seems to pulsate in a permanent future tenseness. “New Year Letters”'s dynamic use of octosyllabic couplets highlights the poem's pervasive construction out of dialectical relations, and this dialectical construction gives it a consistent double focus.

Auden's original title for the poem—*The Double Man*—perfectly reflects this dualism. According to Mendelson and Fuller, the phrase first appears in Charles Williams' *The Descent of the Dove*.⁸⁸ But it was most likely Montaigne rather than Williams who provided Auden with the sense he seems to attribute to the phrase. In “De la Gloire,” Montaigne writes,

⁸⁸ Mendelson, *Later Auden* p. 124; John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* p. 319.

“We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn”.⁸⁹ The contradiction being described here is that between ‘Kairos’ and ‘Logos’—between, that is, man as a historical being born at a certain time in a certain place, and man as spiritual or eternal being. As Stan Smith puts it, it is the tension caused by the awareness of “The shadow cast by language upon truth, yet knowing that there is no other way than through language that reality can be apprehended and defined”.⁹⁰

This serves to remind us of “New Year Letter” as a text or a body of writing at the same time it reminds us of what Smith calls the “pseudo-person into whose voice and soul we seem to enter, whose suffering becomes, for a while, our own, when we read the poem”.⁹¹ “New Year Letter” as a verse epistle is itself double—an intimate and “private minute for a friend” and a public document under “Flying Seal to all / Who wish to read it anywhere, / And, if they open it, *En Clair*” (205).

The doubleness of the text is of course matched by the slipperiness and ambiguity of language. All these notions of doubleness are suggestive of Auden’s keen awareness of the precariousness of the lyric subject. By representing his verse epistle as process, Auden exposes the lyric subject, the subject position posed by the poem—indeed post-Enlightenment personhood itself—as process. Faced with the catastrophe

⁸⁹ Michel de Montaigne, “On Glory,” in *The Complete Essays* [1991], trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin Books), p. 704.

⁹⁰ Smith, p. 122.

⁹¹ Smith, p. 124.

of modernity, Auden asks himself at the opening of Part 3 the pivotal question that everyone must ask at some point: “Which of these calls to conscience is/ For me the *casus faederis*, / From all the tasks submitted, choose/ The *athlon* I must not refuse? (222)

Hitler, with his “metaphysics of the Crowd (223),” provides an immediate example of the type of appeal to collective action to which it was obvious no self-respecting leftist could ever respond favourably. But Auden seems equally averse to serving the liberal democratic states opposing Hitler. Initially, Auden’s answer echoes the *private-faces-in-public-places* sort of answer he gave in his poems of the early 1930s, emphasising his allegiance to intimate friends over public duties: “We can at least serve other ends, / Can love the *polis* of our friends / And pray that loyalty may come / To serve mankind’s *imperium*” (223).

But, as if aware that in a time of global war and catastrophe such elegant prevarications can no longer pass muster, he defers providing a real answer to the question—“But where to serve and when and how? / O none escape these questions now” (223). It is clear that Auden feels a desperate need to place his high valuation of the private individual’s agency upon much firmer footing. And thirty lines later, Auden comes to admit that he cannot reject nationalism outright: “Yet maps and languages and names / Have meaning and their proper claims” (224).

His description of the “inner space,” opposed to the “public space,” seems at first glance to extol the autonomy experienced in this space—it

is “The landscape of his will and need / Where he is sovereign indeed...”
 But from the beginning of its description this sovereignty is qualified with a strong hint of coercion: “the inner space / That each of us is forced to own, / Like his own life from which it’s grown.../ And even if he find it hell / May neither leave it nor rebel” (224). The impression created here is of an internal space that is less a sovereign realm where a person is free to roam at will than of a kind of indenture imposed by market forces.

But once again Auden has deferred an answer to the question “where to serve and when and how?” As mentioned above, the poet has not completely ruled out a nationalistic answer to this question. As if in acknowledgement of the force of such an argument, Auden begins a lengthy exposition of his attachment to the English language and to those areas of Northern England which make up his England: “England to me is my own tongue, / And what I did when I was young” (224). His goal here, we must remember, is to explain the meaning of his “maps and languages and names” in order to understand their claims on him—for, as he said above, “maps and languages and names/ Have meaning and their proper claims” (224). He hopes that in explaining their meaning and understanding their claims he will finally be in a position to answer his deferred question.

But what we get at this point is not an explanation of England or the English language but yet another deferral: “If now, two aliens in New York, / We meet, Elizabeth, and talk / Of friends who suffer in the torn / Old

Europe where we both were born..." (224). The "language" that Auden evokes is the pain and loss of exile that he shares in common with his German friend, Elizabeth Mayer—"two aliens in New York" (224). He underscores here the significance of the poem as an epistle: "The epistolary underwrites this solidarity in exile, which is the condition of real community too, for "all real unity commences / In consciousness of differences""⁹².

England, or at least his memories of it, provides Auden with the terms of reference with which to judge human vice and error: "Thus, squalid beery BURTON stands/ For shoddy thinking of all brands; / The wreck of the RHONDDA for the mess/ We make when for a short success / We split our symmetry apart, / Deny the Reason or the Heart" (225).

The passage progresses to his "inner space," the private landscape of Auden's childhood in northern England:

Whenever I begin to think
About the human creature we
Must nurse to sense and decency,
An English area comes to mind,
I see the nature of my kind
As a locality I love,
Those limestone moors that stretch from BROUGH
To HEXHAM and the ROMAN WALL,
There is my symbol of us all. (225)

At this point the poem seems to slow down as we enter a lyrical interlude, which seems all the more remarkable for being composed in octosyllabic couplets. It reveals another dimension to the tenor of this

⁹² Smith, p. 145.

neoclassical poem, for here in this passage is a new meditative tone, of a Romantic poet, which seems almost antithetical to the urbane, urgent spirit in the previous parts of the poem. The passage is also striking because, in its evocation of the rugged rock strata and the abandoned industry in this northern landscape, it revisits the tone and spirit of Auden's poetry from the early 1930s. But this is no retreat into the consolations of the past; it is instead cast a sort of quest into the deep sources of Auden's decisions in the future, including the urgent decision he must make about his future commitments:

There
 In ROOKHOPE I was first aware
 Of Self and Not-self, Death and Dread:
 Adits were entrances which led
 Down to the Outlawed, to the Others,
 The Terrible, the Merciful, the Mothers (226)

We have entered a primal mythic realm where Auden first recognised his individuality and his separation from the Other of the feminine, from his mother, and from nature. If anything, the passage reads like an elaborate and much expanded re-enactment of that passage at the opening of Part 2 where Auden speaks of personhood as a process:

each great I
 Is but a process in a process
 Within a field that never closes;
 As proper people find it strange
 That we are changed by what we change ... (206)

In the later passage, however, Auden depicts his personal encounter with primal maternal fear and the fear of the feminine Other, in what seems a moment of sexual as well as personal individuation:

Alone in the hot day I knelt
 Upon the edge of shafts and felt
 The deep *Urmutterfurcht* that drives
 Us into knowledge all our lives,
 The far interior of our fate
 To civilise and to create,
Das Weibliche that bids us come
 To find what we're escaping from. (226)

With its metaphors of the self as strange terrain for exploration and colonisation—"The far interior of our fate / To civilise and to create"—and its evocations of the dangers of travel, the passage reads as a subtle foreshadowing of the disquieting final line of the poem—"The world's great rage, the travel of young men" (241). The passage evokes a self-recognition on Auden's part of the man he has become. Yet if Auden had intended this passage as an illustration of those uniquely English wellsprings of his future self, it is odd to find that he only had recourse to German. And yet this seems again to mark another way in which the poem's style depicts a lateral movement away from what is ostensibly a central concern. The sense here is of a displacement: Auden wishes to evoke through his dialectical verse a dive into the originary abyss that gave birth to self-consciousness, but at the key moment, when he must find words to articulate what he heard in the "reservoir of darkness," his

own words are displaced—Lacan’s ‘lack-of-being’ becomes lack-of-language—and instead we get lines in German adapted from speeches in Wagner’s opera *Siegfried*:

There I dropped pebbles, listened, heard
 The reservoir of darkness stirred:
*“O deine Mutter kehrt dir nicht
 Wieder. Du selbst bin ich, dein’ Pflicht
 Und Liebe. Brach sie nun mein Bild.”*
 And I was conscious of my guilt. (226-227)

The rough English translation of these lines is, “Your mother no longer cares for you: I am yourself, your duty and love. Though my image now is shattered”.⁹³ The poem at this central moment never answers the question which initiated Auden’s quest into his past—“Where to serve and when and how?” Instead of answering the question, the passage suggests that moment of the mirror stage of “dyadic symbiosis,” when the mirror shatters and the mother must be left behind for the child’s entry into the social world.⁹⁴ But the passage is also reminiscent of Auden’s evocation of the symbiotic relationship between the reader and the “pseudo-person” of the poem. We may read the passage as a kind of allegory of the fragility and paradox that connects “New Year Letter”’s lyric subject, the subject position it projects, as well as personhood itself: the poetic act in the face of modern catastrophe is at once an act of creation and a catastrophic act,

⁹³ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, p. 119.

⁹⁴ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, “Strangers to Ourselves,” in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 389.

an upsetting relation to what is deeply upsetting, in being, in the direction of the social and also nothingness.

I began this essay with an intuition that, in spite of its volubility and urbanity, with “New Year Letter” W. H. Auden was imposing on his reading public a much more demanding and participatory reading regime than is conventionally assumed by most critics. The intensely dialectical nature of Auden’s poetic thinking reflects his acute awareness of the problem of the lyric subject in modern and contemporary lyric poetry. I was also aware of Auden as a sort of ‘double man’—a poet who was deeply committed to responding fully and creatively with his art to life-as-given in the here-and-now, yet who had an intimate acquaintance with art’s abject futility in the face of the catastrophe of human life and history. Auden remains a continually productive and interesting poetic presence for later poets and readers because of what he has bequeathed to them. He has bequeathed to later poets and readers a dialectical understanding of style in relation to catastrophe, and a humble yet singular disenchanting tone designed to help them resist the soothing temptations of mimetically rendered poetic epiphanies.

**CHAPTER SIX: LETTERS TO MR. AUDEN #6,
#7 AND #8**

LETTER TO MR. AUDEN #6

Dear Mr. Auden,

In my last letter I mentioned my interest in and puzzlement over the strange, almost miraculous process by which words, lines, and language finally coalesce into a poem. How does a poem become a poem? And what are the steps by which poets come to know that they've reached the end product? I've yet to find a book or article which gives a fully accurate or persuasive account of this process.

About a year ago I came across a suggestive and possibly controversial article by the American poet and critic, Marjorie Perloff, titled "Poetry on the Brink".¹ I'm sure you probably think that the apocalyptic title is somewhat of a cliché: it certainly already gives a strong indication of both the approach the article will take towards its subject matter and the author's position on this subject. I wasn't surprised therefore by the article's repetition of the familiar, well-worn lament about the excessive number of universities and colleges now offering creative writing programmes in which students write poetry. Naturally, Perloff concludes that this has led to a dilution of poetry and "extraordinary uniformity".² She laments the decline of not merely poetic technique but any poetic innovation. The dominant poetry culture of the current moment is one

characterised, according to Perloff, by the “culture of prizes, professorships, and political correctness”.³

But in the midst of this gloomy diagnosis of the contemporary poetry scene Perloff announces the emergence of a group of poets who appear to be doing something quite different. She outlines the “uncreative writing” of these poets, whose true creativity stands paradoxically apart from the predictability and mediocrity of the “creative” writing that passes for poetry in the poetic mainstream. The “uncreative” poets create poetry through “recycling, reframing, grafting, mistranslating, and mashing” other people’s texts, often literary texts, but also diaries, religious scripture, memoir, and other non-literary sources.⁴ Perloff’s discussion reveals that this rising new group of diverse poets have in fact marked a return to the lyric. But this is a new kind of lyricism, formed out of the appropriation and recycling of both earlier poetic and extra-literary material. It is poetic practice of the digital age.

Yet though it might seem new, Perloff shows that this “uncreative” poetry does have a modern pedigree dating back to the Conceptual writing and Conceptual art of the 1960s. She cites the example of John Cage and his “writings-through” texts of the 1970s. These were texts, often lineated as poetry, which were composed entirely out of other writer’s words. Perloff outlines the main objections to Cage’s methods: “the reliance on other people’s words negates the essence of lyric poetry”.⁵ It produces a “bloodless poetry, that, however interesting at the

intellectual level, allows for no unique emotional input. If the words used are not my own, how can I convey the true voice of feeling unique to lyric?"⁶

Of course, if one adheres to the received dogmas about lyric poetry that I outlined in my previous letter—you know, the notion of lyric poetry as a medium for the poet's impassioned expression of his unique and deep inner feelings—one can certainly see that Cage's critics have a point. Yet Perloff presents definitive replies to the above criticisms through the examples of poetry written in the Conceptualist manner that does what the critics claimed it could not do. For Perloff, these poets using Conceptualist methods succeed because they provide precisely what she claims is missing in most contemporary poetry: close attention to poetry as sound structure—that is, poetry's musical elements. For Cage, poetry is poetry by virtue of its musical elements or ambiguity. Its emphasis on poetry's music sets conceptual writing apart from much contemporary poetry: "This attention to musical elements is absent in most contemporary poetry".⁷

Perloff's discussion of Susan Howe's *That This* (2010) and Srikanth Reddy's *Voyager* (2011) reveals the remarkable capacity that the use of other people's words has to convey powerful and profound emotion.⁸ In her analysis of the Howe book, Perloff demonstrates Howe's scrupulous avoidance of the "free verse lyric paradigm (observation—triggering memory—insight)" typical of most contemporary poetry.⁹ Howe combines cited material with her own poetry and prose. In *That This*, How recycles

the letters and diaries of Sarah and Hannah Edwards, the wife and sister, respectively, of the 18th century New England theologian, Jonathan Edwards. Howe weaves the fragments from the Edwards' archive together with the abstract photograms of the artist James Welling.¹⁰ All of these elements are placed in conflict and dialogue with the overarching structure of Howe's own present, in which she presents a three-part elegy for her husband, who'd died suddenly in his sleep.

The effect of Howe's appropriation of other people's words is to create poems which, in Perloff's words "become constellations designed for both the eye and ear".¹¹ The poet, Howe, functions as "arranger, framer, reconstructor, visual and sound artist, and, above all, as the maker of pivotal choices".¹²

In answer then to the sorts of objections levelled at Cage—that the "reliance on other people's words negates the essence of lyric poetry" and that it produces a "bloodless poetry" that allows for no unique emotional impact"¹³— Perloff poses Susan Howe's recycled fragments of other writers' words:

If you set these fragments against their sources, you will see how much has been made of relatively little material, Howe's method being to repeat, re-cut, juxtapose differently, all in the interest of sound, rhythm, and the look of poetry on the page.¹⁴

Howe's book, then, rather than presenting a negation of the unique lyric voice in poetry, represents a remarkable and unique celebration of it.

For Perloff, works such as Howe's *This That*, especially the section of it titled "Frolic Architecture," could only have been written now, in the "digital age," where reproductions as well as instrumentation play a crucial role. Poems such as Howe's, Perloff states, are meant to move expansively, outward beyond their dimensions as print blocks, "both visually and aurally," to encompass the "wider field".¹⁵

However, Perloff outlines the work of another group of poets adopting Conceptualist methods who take the opposite approach. These poets—Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, Caroline Bergvall and Craig Dworkin—foreground their choice of source text: "the very selection of that text and its context generating the methods that determine its 'copy'".¹⁶ Perloff gives the example of Srikanth Reddy's *Voyager*, which uses the memoirs of ex-Nazi and former Austrian President and UN Secretary General, Kurt Waldheim as its source. By deleting words from and reshaping Waldheim's *In the Eye of the Storm* (1985), Reddy created a brilliant political poem. From Waldheim's words Reddy formed a series of propositions and then an elliptical narrative made of short print blocks, and then a long verse sequence using a three-step line reminiscent of William Carlos Williams.

Crossing out whole phrases in the Waldheim memoir, Reddy was able to isolate and emphasise certain "inadvertent relations".¹⁷ Perloff

writes of the “fabric” of Reddy’s book, “generated ... by the digital voyage through source texts,” yet, which somehow remains free of moralising or personal invective on the part of the poet. For Perloff, because of its method of composition and its formal appearance, Reddy’s *Voyager* must be read as a “poetic book” rather than a book of individual poems.¹⁸

At this point I find it hard not to be reminded of Jack Spicer’s notion of the poetic “book;” that is, the idea he developed, while working on his book *Lorca*, that his collections of poems were not collections of individual poems per se so much as single poems which encompassed entire books.

To Perloff, the work of poets like Howe and Reddy represents the return to the short lyric whose effects are achieved through the recycling of earlier texts and poetic materials. To further illustrate her point she gives the example of Charles Bernstein’s *All the Whiskey in Heaven* (2010).¹⁹ Bernstein creates a pseudo-folk ballad that blends motifs from Shakespeare’s “Sigh no more”— “Converting all your sounds of woe/ Into Hey nonny, nonny,” and Goethe’s “Erlkönig” with the bathos of the pop lyric—“Every time you see me, what do you see?”²⁰ The pseudo-ballad, Perloff explains, “tells us nothing about [Bernstein’s] particular situation, but it communicates a sharp sense of anxiety”.²¹

For Perloff, Bernstein’s pseudo-ballads only seem to be easy on the surface. They are in reality elliptical, their tone very difficult to assess. She cites his title poem, *All the Whiskey in Heaven*:

Not for all the whiskey in heaven
 Not for all the flies in Vermont
 Not for all the tears in the basement.

As we're carried away by the poem's playful music, it might momentarily escape us that neither all the flies in Vermont nor tears flowing in the basement are at all desirable. Underneath the playfulness, the poem has a very serious edge to it concerned with human mortality:

No, I'll never stop loving you
 Not till my heart beats its last
 And even then in my words and my songs
 I will love you all over again

But as we can see from these lines, the serious concern with mortality is couched in the terms of pop music bathos. How are we meant to take this sentimental bathos? The poem seems to be asking this very question, according to Perloff. As it incorporates Tin Pan Alley love songs and other types of pop songs, Bernstein's poem seems to be "poised on the edge of irony".²²

You'll recall the process by which I composed my poem about my journey to Iceland—through the phrases, fragments, and words of other texts, such as Michael Lewis' *Boomerang*, John Lanchester's *Whoops! Why Everyone Owes Someone and No one Can Pay*, the biographies written about you by Richard Davenport-Hines and Humphrey Carpenter, and several articles about Bobby Fischer.²³ I remember how I sought refuge from my acute self-consciousness when writing directly of my own

experiences by making poetry out of these other texts. In doing so, I felt free of the mannered tone that seemed to inevitably creep into my poems when I wrote directly in my own voice. I could not summon the sort of authoritative voice and ease that seem so natural and effortless in your poems. I also envied the way in which you seem to distance yourself from and objectify sentiment in your poems. And so I composed my Iceland poem out of these textual fragments and seemed to achieve the distance and cool I wanted. But when I compare my efforts with the methods Perloff describes, I realise that I did not go far enough. I could be a lot more unconstrained in my appropriation and re-purposing of other writers' texts and poetic materials to suit my own needs and interests.

And what Perloff has to say about the ambiguity that pervades the voice and tone would be a welcome antidote to the unfortunate propensity for being "sincere" that seems to afflict me when trying to incorporate my personal experiences into my poems. As I mentioned above, I admire the distance you cast between yourself and emotions in your poems, and of how, later, you dextrously expurgated sentiments from your poetry. What can emerge as a result of these methods is an expansion of the lyric's semantic as well symbolic ground and a richer, more suggestive poetry.

Perloff finishes her discussion with a quotation from Peter Gizzi's "Gray Sail," from his book *Threshold Songs* (2011):

If I were a boat
I would probably roll over
If I were a prayer

If I were a beech stave
Beech bark

If I were a book
I would sing in streets
Alone in traffic

If I had a gown
I could be heroic
With a flowering mane²⁴

In this poem Perloff detects intertextual echoes from various poems and pop songs, but “If I were a bell!” from the musical *Guys and Dolls* seems to be the strongest influence here. Gizzi, Perloff tells us, wrote the poem in response to a series of deaths among family members and friends. His poem, like Howe’s “Frolic Architecture,” avoids stating the poet’s personal pain by appropriating other voices as unstated echo:

If I had a boat
I would eat a sandwich
In broad dazed light

I would come visit
As a holy book
If I were a boat
If I had a prayer²⁵

Perloff explains that Gizzi inverts the song into a series of similes that stretch the “common sense of the Broadway musical to absurd limits”.²⁶ The poem conflates being and having. The inference at the end of the poem is that the poet doesn’t “have a prayer.” And so, with these examples, Perloff argues that through such “uncreative writing”, which

appropriates the words of other writers and texts, poets are increasingly able to articulate the “true voice of feeling.” They often discover this “true voice of feeling” through an inspired click on the Internet.

Of course, it does seem to me that Perloff makes too many unqualified assertions about the alleged degeneration of contemporary mainstream American poetry. But I find what she has to say about the appropriative strategies of Conceptualist or Conceptualist mannered poets very suggestive, especially since (as this and my previous letter demonstrate) I’d already unknowingly begun to take a few tentative steps in this direction with my own poetry. Constantly searching for a liberating poetic method as I am, I was struck by what Perloff had to say about a return to lyric poetry that depends for its effect—not on the poet’s excitation of a profound thought or epiphany from some remembered personal experience—but depends instead on the appropriation or recycling of earlier poetic and/ or non-literary material.

It put me in mind of Christopher Nealon’s discussion of your bequest to contemporary poets of a camp “tone”—which mixes the high and low—and also, of course, Jack Spicer’s idea of the history of poetry as nothing more than generation after generation of poets constantly writing and re-writing the same poem.

Once more, I thank you for your patience and indulgence as I outlined the ideas of Marjorie Perloff and signalled the direction of my own poetry in this project’s collection. I hope you’ll continue to indulge me with

your patience in my next letter, in which I propose to give you more insight into the nature of my poetic project.

Sincerely,

Dennis L. M. Lewis

Notes

¹ *Boston Review* (May/June, 2012), <http://bostonreview.net/forum/poetry-brink>

² Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 1.

³ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 5.

⁴ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 6.

⁵ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 6.

⁶ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 6.

⁷ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 7.

⁸ Susan Howe, *That This* (New York: New Directions, 2010); Srikanth Reddy, *Voyager* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 2011).

⁹ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 7.

¹⁰ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 7.

¹¹ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 8.

¹² Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 8.

¹³ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 6.

¹⁴ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 9.

¹⁵ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 9.

¹⁶ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 9.

¹⁷ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 10.

¹⁸ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 10.

¹⁹ Charles Bernstein, *All the Whiskey in Heaven* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010).

²⁰ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 11.

²¹ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 11.

²² Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 11.

²³ John Lanchester, *Whoops! Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay* (London: Penguin, 2010); Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (London: Vintage, 1995); and Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

²⁴ Peter Gizzi, *Threshold Songs* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan U. P., 2011), p. 23.

²⁵ Peter Gizzi, *Threshold Songs* p. 23.

²⁶ Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink" p. 12.

LETTER TO MR. AUDEN #7

Dear Mr. Auden,

“[T]he catastrophe has occurred,” Erich Auerbach wrote in his commentary on the 6th century historian Gregory of Tours’ Latin prose style.

You quoted Auerbach’s appraisal of Gregory in your commonplace book:

the Empire has fallen, its organization has collapsed, the culture of antiquity has been destroyed. But the tension is over. And it is more freely and directly, no longer haunted by insoluble tasks, no longer burdened by unrealizable pretensions, that Gregory’s soul faces living reality, ready to apprehend it as such and to work in it practically.¹

Why did the Vulgar Latin of this bishop living in the midst of the Dark Ages fascinate you so much, I wonder? A man of cultivation, the inheritor of classical civilisation writing in the midst of barbaric times—the idea definitely seems to have captivated you. Fully conversant in the patrician schemata and stylistic standards of the bygone era, deeply appreciative of those schemata and standards, and yet not at all disdainful of the strange and contradictory standards of your own time—this is what I think you have in common with Gregory of Tours. Was it because you were so deeply conscious of the catastrophic nature of your own times—the low thirties giving way to decades of an even more dishonest character (I doubt that you’d be too impressed with the present times)—that you drew from Gregory’s example permission to think

about stylistic and historical change together, not only through their relation to social status, but through historical changes of station?

The great historical changes for you always imply catastrophe, unleashing contradictory energies of good and evil tendencies at once. Your great project, according to a recent critic, was to “concoct a style to meet this historiography of contradiction”.² Emulating Gregory’s *sermo humilis*, you seemed to frame your camp mixtures of high style and low styles as a way to suggest the catastrophe of the modern epoch. But what kinds of poetic composition and styles are pertinent to the historiography of the present, I wonder? How are the issues you raise in your poetry about the relationship between language, literary style and social status relevant to poetry writing in the present? What light in turn do such issues shed on the questions I raised in my previous letters about the process by which a poem becomes a poem and the relationship between the world, the poet’s identity, and the person who wrote his poetry? And is it possible, finally, that confronting such issues can point a way for poetry out of closure and opacity back to the world and to the object? These are the questions and issues I’d like to explore in this letter.

In my last letter, I wrote about Marjorie Perloff’s discussion of how some poets, partially in response to the proliferation of texts and databases in our digital age, have developed a new kind of lyricism out of the appropriation and recycling of earlier poetic and extra-literary material.³ After reading the provocative manifesto by one of the major “unoriginal geniuses” that she mentions—the poet Kenneth Goldsmith—I found myself feeling obscurely vindicated by much of what he had to say. I think this was in large part due to his interest in the “inauthentic,” his questioning of the “authentic voice,” and

because of his characterisation of the poet's task as that of scrivener or secretary. All of these factors reminded me of Jack Spicer's portrayal of the poet as a scribe, endlessly and fastidiously rewriting the same poem that has been passed down for millennia. Reading Kenneth Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* made me realise that, rather than being vaguely ashamed of my composition method—using words, phrases, and fragments of other writer's texts—I could and should have been a lot bolder in its use. However, in addition to this obscure sense of partial vindication, I also wondered about the deeper nature of what I was doing, and what it implied about the relation of poetry to language, to the world and to my own subjectivity. What did I want to achieve by adopting this approach? I had a ready-made answer to this question, at least: I wanted to achieve a more assured, more authentic sounding voice, and a less mannered tone. This raises further questions. If by my adopting such a procedure my writing about the world, other people, and my personal experience seemed better because it was more assured and authentic sounding, what does this imply about my relation to poetic truth and to the objective world? Must poetic truth necessarily be mediated through my own subjective experience? It was with these sorts of questions buzzing around in my head that I turned to Kenneth Goldsmith's book.

I'd first approached Goldsmith's book with scepticism. Goldsmith is the University of Pennsylvania professor who teaches his students to transcribe whole and exact the books of their favourite writers while these same students resist any inclination to insert their own creativity. Yet surely his argument that contemporary poetry has become formulaic and predictable, and that the best

solution is this form of experimental inauthenticity is too much of a generalisation and far too simplistic? And doesn't the compositional method Goldsmith is invoking as the solution to the vast range of complex aesthetic issues that contemporary poetry faces ultimately amount to little more than an incitement to copy stuff from the Internet?

Goldsmith begins his book with an outline of Marjorie Perloff's notion of "unoriginal genius." Our notion of poetic creativity, of 'genius' that is, has gone far beyond the Romantic image of the poet as an isolated genius giving birth to unique, visionary works of dazzling originality. Due to changes brought about by digital technology and the Internet, poets now think about text and language in a radically different way. Perloff states that the poet of today may be more accurately seen as a programmer, who's involved in "moving information".⁴

Interestingly, Goldsmith traces this vision of the writer/poet as unoriginal genius back through the practices of avant garde artists and writers like Walter Benjamin, Raymond Queneau (and Oulipo), Guy Debord, Andy Warhol, and John Cage. Building on Perloff's insights, Goldsmith argues persuasively that writers are now exploring ways of writing that are expanding our notions of literature and what falls within the boundaries of literature: literature's scope now encompasses word processing, databasing, recycling, appropriation, intentional plagiarism, identity ciphering, construction of listserv inventories, social networking, and intensive computer programming.

Yet, even as I write down this list of the various new writing processes that Goldsmith associates with the moving of information, I find myself wondering if these new processes and new ways of writing are actually

making poetry/writing do something more than it has done before. Do they alter the way we see the poet? Do they alter the kinds of poetic truth that can emerge? And have they in turn altered the way the reader perceives and apprehends poetic truth? More crucially, have they changed those old and fundamental schemata we've inherited for conceiving of poetry's relation to the world and to the object, and to thought and truth?

I'm not trying to raise unnecessary controversies here; I think you'll share my sense that these are highly relevant questions to ask. In fact, if you go back to my Letter No. 2 to you, you'll remember my discussion of your 1962 essay "Writing", in which you yourself raise these sorts of questions.⁵ In that essay you display your very strict ethical scruples about the issues of poetic truth and authenticity, especially when it comes to public issues and politics. You offered a very suggestive discussion of poetic authenticity and its relation to such notions as sincerity, affectation, and artifice in poetry. At one point you seemed to waver on the edge of one of poetry's most puzzling paradoxes—that sincerity can often be most convincingly conveyed through *insincerity* or affectation.

All of these ideas are related to the concept of truth in poetry. Do you remember how I took issue with what I perceived to be your inconsistent attitude towards truth: at one point in your 1962 essay, for example, you argue that poetry's *immediate object* is *not* truth or falsehood but pleasure—"in poetry, all facts and all beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting possibilities. The reader does not have to share the beliefs expressed in a poem in order to enjoy it".⁶ But yet at the same time you argue

for *truth* in your own poetry, and condemn your own artistic *inauthenticity* in poems like “Spain, 1937” and “September 1, 1939.”

Nevertheless, by the essay’s conclusion you adopt a more nuanced position on the nature of truth in poetry. Poetry, you say, is “superior to prose as a medium for didactic instruction”, and it is equally as capable as prose “as a medium for the lucid exposition of ideas”.⁷ But unlike prose, poetry’s power lies not in its ability to tell *factual* truths. Neither, you believe, is it concerned with weaving communal fantasies or vehicles for communal catharsis on command: “Poetry is not magic”.⁸ Poetic truth, you suggest, consists in its power to disenchant and disintoxicate”.⁹ And by “truth” here, don’t you mean the reality that the social consensus enforced by ideological representation and social convention have concealed from everyday human perception? I’m pretty sure that you do.

So what’s clear in all of this, it seems to me, is that for you the idea of truth is a serious concern, related to the identity of the poet and poetry’s relation to the world, the object, objective reality, and to the educational role of poetry. Your concern over these issues serves to remind me that in discussing the new procedures for poetry outlined by Kenneth Goldsmith it’s not enough to summarise his ideas and describe the new procedures. We’ll need to consider the broader implications that these new procedures, as well as Goldsmith’s avant-garde assumptions, have for the ‘global’ situation of poetry and poets. We can’t be satisfied with just an alteration in the representation of the poet’s task and poetry’s scope. What’s at stake here is more than the search for new experimental approaches to contemporary writing. This discussion of Goldsmith’s book can also be seen as a desperate

search for signs of deeper forces at play—a shift perhaps in the conceptual underpinnings of the operations of poetry as an art and the poet's relation not merely to his art, but also to the world, the object, and to truth.

When people like Marjorie Perloff and Kenneth Goldsmith posit the notion of “unoriginal genius,” what they are proposing is incomplete without a consideration of the deeper underpinnings I've mentioned above. In Goldsmith's conception, the new, twenty-first century writing aesthetic and practice, or “uncreative writing,” as he dubs it, is essentially the art of managing information, and processing it, reframing it, and repurposing it as writing. No longer, Goldsmith maintains, is it productive or useful to ask questions about originality, authenticity, or singular authorial genius. Instead we should be focusing on ideas, procedures, relevance, materiality, textual richness, and aesthetic judgement. Over twelve chapters Goldsmith explores the implications of the Internet, computers, and digital technology for literary practices.

However, though he focuses on very suggestive writing methods, he does not designate the real operations of writing and poetry and their relationship to the poetic subject, the object, the world, and to truth. (I believe that his failure to do so or even consider these issues partly explains the controversy into which he stumbled in 2015). And yet traditionally in any discussion of poetic methods and procedures all of these issues would have been normal and necessary considerations in the discussion. This is as true of your own discussion of poetic practice as it is of Coleridge's, Keats', Aristotle's, or Plato's. A discussion of poetic methods implies a discussion of its link with poetic thought and truth, or in other words, philosophy.

In his book, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, Alain Badiou discusses the relationship between art and philosophy and their respective relationship with truth. There are three possible schemata, he writes, that have knit together art and philosophy from the time of Plato up until the present—didacticism, romanticism, and classicism. All three schemata express positions on the status of truth in art.¹⁰

In the didactic schema—the most famous statement of which is found in Plato’s judgement against art in the *Republic*, but which is also present in Stalinist or other versions of state-controlled art—the truth that is found in art is not really the truth but a mere image of the truth, which is in reality external to art.¹¹ Art in this schema displays merely the charm of the appearance of truth, and thus cannot be trusted. To be of any value it must therefore be placed completely at the service of the truth that can only be found outside art. Art’s sole task is to faithfully teach this truth.

Romanticism, on the other hand, proposes that only art produces truth. “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators,” Shelley famously declared, and his *Defence of Poetry* may be seen as the paradigmatic expression of the romantic schema. Art, not science, mathematics, or philosophy, possesses the “real body” of truth.¹² Art is the “absolute subject,” which renders the infinite truth real and concrete through the ecstatic incarnation of form.

Classicism, meanwhile, expressed most fully in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, argues that art does not state the truth. It’s in fact incapable of doing so because it’s fundamentally mimetic in nature. Its purpose is not to reveal knowledge or cognitive truths; it is instead aimed at giving its audience “catharsis,” an emotional purging through its identification with art’s

semblances. Art's semblances are only reflective of the truth in so far as they can be measured against verisimilitude or their likelihood; that is, their resemblance to imaginatively constructed constraints and categories. Under classicism then, art is, by definition, public art, directed towards the therapeutic health of the public.

I'm not sure if you would agree with the three schemata that Badiou has identified. However, I do believe that it would be possible to place you and your work within these schemata. Let's go back to your pronouncement about poetry in the 1962 essay "Writing": poetry, you write, is "superior to prose as a medium for didactic instruction".¹³ Poetry, for you, clearly has a public function. You remind us in the same essay that, unlike the other arts, it's formed out of language, and it is therefore a public medium. The poet's words are the product of human society, so that no matter how private his poetry may be, it will always contain elements that are publicly translatable. At the same time, though, you also place a great deal of importance on poetry as *play*, and you tell us that, while poetry may indeed have a didactic function, it does not present to the public factual truths. The 'truths' it presents are much more likely to be concealed truths that disenchant people from everyday social consensus. It seems to me, therefore, that in general, and especially in your later period, your work can be placed in a synthetic schema that combines both the didactic and the Aristotelian: didactic-classical. Poetry, you say, is semblance, which is manifestly distant from the truth—witness Caliban's concluding words in his address to the audience in *The Sea and the Mirror*. It does not offer communal catharsis on demand, but it nevertheless does offer some measure of catharsis. I believe that, for you, art has both an

ethical *and* a cognitive or theoretical function. But I would add the caveat that, in your mixing of high and low styles and—as in *The Sea and the Mirror*—your occasional submission to the power of language to create the multiple—that is, a presence at the limits of language’s expression, your verbal expression sometimes exceeds the constraints of didactic-classicism and suggests a different order of poetics.

According to Badiou, art of the last century and the present has “saturated” the three schemata—didactic, classical, and romantic—in countless works which have been underpinned by them, but the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have not produced any new schemata, or any new conceptions of the relationship between art and philosophy. This, he believes, has led to the peculiar disjointed artistic predicament of the present, in which the arts seem to have disavowed the link between art and any schemata. This is no doubt what Badiou means when he writes of today’s “desperate dis-relation between art and philosophy”.¹⁴ We can detect this same “dis-relation”, I believe, in the various conceptualist writing methods advocated by Kenneth Goldsmith in *Uncreative Writing*.

As well as today’s “desperate dis-relation between art and philosophy,” Badiou also notes the contemporary abandonment of the pedagogical function of art. Education, he states, had always been an important third term in the discussion of the relation between art and philosophy. In the didactic schema, art’s semblance of truth is highly regulated in order to bring art’s audience to an understanding of the real truth that exists *outside* of art. In classicism, art’s catharsis sparks the transference of powerful emotions to the audience and thus helps in the ethical growth of its audience. And in the

romantic schema, art is the catalyst for the inward educational trajectory that will result in the individual's subjective recognition of sublime and universal truth.

In the new schema that Badiou proposes for the connection between art and philosophy, the pedagogical function of art is given central importance. Art, he asserts, is itself a procedure for producing truth, and its truth is immanent to its effects as art. Additionally, art's truth belongs to it alone; the truths that it produces cannot be reducible to truths in other fields, such as science, maths, or politics. Art is pedagogical, therefore, by its very nature—because it produces truths. Education in art, Badiou explains, consists in arranging its forms of knowledge so that these forms can be experienced: “that some truth may come to pierce a hole in them”.¹⁵ This arrangement of art's forms is art's “truth”: “What art educates for is therefore nothing apart from its own existence.”¹⁶ The actual experiencing of this “existence” is of course the whole point of art—or what Badiou would call “thinking through a form of thought” (unique to art, and in the case of poetry unique to poetry).

The question then, for me, is whether the new schema that Badiou proposes, a fourth type of knot uniting art and philosophy—art as its own truth procedure—is applicable for the uncreative poetic/writing methods outlined by Kenneth Goldsmith. The question is vital because posing an answer to it will help me determine the operations and the methods I adopt in my own poetry writing.

In his first chapter, “Revenge of the Text,” Goldsmith looks at the Web and its effect on writing. He describes the Web as an ecosystem, and develops this metaphor for the new writing environment in the subsequent

chapters. In his next chapter, “Language as Material”, Goldsmith examines words as material objects and the page as material space. He suggestively maps the strategies adopted by the Situationist art and philosophic movement to breathe new life into the mundane landscape of everyday life. *Dérive* or drift involved the artist ‘drifting’ through urban landscapes *without* intention or a predetermined goal other than to open himself up to the “spectacle and theatre” of the city.¹⁷ *Détournement*, re-orientation, or better still *disorientation* involves allowing oneself to be drawn through a city by “intuition and desire, not by obligation and necessity”.¹⁸ In such a way we stumble about, not knowing, and opening ourselves up to confusion and the unexpected and whimsical. *Réorientation* involves re-framing existing objects, words, ideas, artworks, media, etc. and using them in ways they weren’t intended so that they become entirely new experiences.

While the three concepts—*derivé*, *détournement*, and *psychogeography*—were originally applied by Guy Debord to urban ecology, they have an analogical function in the “digital ecology” of the Web. And this is the main thrust of Goldsmith’s discussion: to make us as writers see the applicability of Situationist methods to the Internet. Modern communication technologies, such as mobile phones, and the Internet (including interfaces like RSS newsfeeds, Facebook, and tweets) have dissolved the space between private and public language: “all language is public now”.¹⁹ Poetry is all around us, in the Web and on the street. We must open our eyes and ears to experience it. Using the strategies of the Situationists, writers may be able to reframe, rethink, and “invert standard uses of language for their own work”.²⁰ As I read through this chapter, I found myself thinking of the ubiquity

of the discourse of politics and of finance, and of how this discourse is constantly interlaced with celebrity gossip, entertainment updates, and sports reports. It's a new spin on your notion of "private faces in public places." The words and images of U.S. President Obama, other politicians, sports figures, and celebrities are ubiquitous giving them a seeming intimacy with our own lives and chatter; and in fact the words of these public figures could be considered their self-portraits—delivered intimately to us and intimately interwoven with our own preoccupations.

In the same chapter Goldsmith also discusses concrete poetry, a literary movement I believe you're quite familiar with. You'll remember how from the 1950s through to the 1960s its practitioners tried to render language as visual poetic icons. Though, like you, I'm less sympathetic to this movement—I find its poems in the shape of its subjects or simple commercial slogans a bit puerile and gimmicky—Goldsmith makes a case for this poetic movement's link with the multimedia space of the screen, making it quite ahead of its time. He argues that concrete poetry did not merely make the reader aware of the page as material, its theorists like Mary Ellen Solt and Max Bense in many ways anticipated the Web's use of language in quick, concentrated messages.

Goldsmith's third chapter, "Anticipating Instability" discusses the idea of contextualisation in the digital environment of the computer and the fluidity, instability, and interchangeability of words and images. One of the most interesting aspects in this chapter is his discussion of the artist Lawrence Weiner and of how Weiner explored the tension between the materiality and conceptual proposition of an artwork. In 1968, he started work on an on-going

series called *Statements*, in which he allowed each artwork to appear in a variety of manifestations: each art piece could remain a statement or it could be realised. Goldsmith gives the example of Weiner's proposition: "Two minutes of spray paint directly upon the floor from a standard aerosol spray can".²¹ He then shows how the proposition, couched in language, is ripe with possibilities, whereas the actual realisation of it is much more limited and limiting. Couched in language, an artistic proposition is subject to ambiguity, or "many variables".²²

When applied to digital media files, which may be downloaded from their original contexts and re-circulated in "nude media" and subsequently re-contextualised in a completely new context, this principle of the text's variability has the potential to make artworks "radical again" as "nude media" in a "constant state of flux".²³ The text in the digital media environment, then, is a rich and constant potential source for remixing and re-appropriation.

In his fourth chapter, "Towards a Poetics of Hyperrealism" Goldsmith examines the slipperiness of identity, a problem that's only exacerbated in the online environment. Through the Internet, we're allowed to adopt many identities and the contemporary poet must reflect this. Uncreative writing, Goldsmith argues, is postidentity; that is, due to the digital fragmentation of multimedia, the writer's consciousness has been transformed so that there's no sense of "unified authenticity".²⁴ Multiple and appropriated identities are in many ways our native language. Through the examples of the poets Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place, Goldsmith makes the point that uncreative writing provokes thinking and yet is potentially able to be understood by anyone. Fitterman's poem "Directory," for example, simply presents a

directory list from a shopping mall, which creates a sense of linguistic disorientation by accurately reflecting the bland dullness of a mall directory:

Macy's	Hickory Farms
Circuit City	GNC
Payless ShoeSource	The Body Shop
Sears	Eddie Bauer
Kay Jewelers	Payless ShoeSource
GNC	Circuit City
LensCrafters	Kay Jewelers
Coach	Gymboree
H&M	
RadioShack	
Gymboree	The Body Shop
	Hickory Farms
	Coach
The Body Shop	Macy's
Eddie Bauer	GNC
Crabtree & Evelyn	Circuit City
Gymboree	Sears
Foot Locker	
Land's End	
GNC	H&M
LensCrafters	Kay Jewelers
Coach	Land's End
Famous Footwear	LensCrafters
H&M	Eddie Bauer
	Cinnabon
	LensCrafters
Foot Locker	RadioShack
GNC	GNC
Macy's	Sears
Crabtree & Evelyn	Crabtree & Evelyn
H&M	
Cinnabon	
Kay Jewelers	
Lands's End ²⁵	

Vanessa Place's "Statement of Facts," meanwhile, presents a 400-page appropriation of a legal brief taken from her day job as an appellate lawyer. The cases are of the most sordid nature, involving the crimes of

rapists, child molesters, and violent sex offenders, yet they're rendered in the dry, neutral tones of actual appellate briefs. Place has not altered the original legal documents in any way other than to reframe them as literature. For Goldsmith, "Statement of Facts" interest lies not in its neutral rendering of lurid details but in the matrix of social, moral, political, and ethical apparatuses surrounding it.²⁶ And it is also what happens to the reader as he or she listens or experiences the "Statement" that is its main point. Unconsciously, the reader is transformed from passive listener to active juror. For Place, the disturbing material of her day job is "linguistic compost," which she uses to implicate the reader.²⁷ Her uncreative writing achieves a realism which is almost too much to bear; hence Goldsmith's term "hyperrealism."

At the same time that he extols writing's capacity for variable identities and voices, Goldsmith also admits the power of the authentic story, the "identity-based narratives" so characteristic of an earlier artistic epoch or aesthetic. Interestingly, from my standpoint is his citing of the moving family narrative of the U.S. President Barack Obama, "Surely one of the most inspiring identity-based narratives in recent history".²⁸ Yet he's right to cast such identity-based narratives as (what Mikhail Bakhtin would call) a literary 'chronotope' from a previous epoch because it would now be difficult for us to accept such a narrative rendered straight in contemporary poetry, without an undertone of irony, satire, or subversion.

Ultimately Goldsmith urges the uncreative writer's cooler, rational, oblique, and indirect methodology over the typically and inherently passion-fuelled identity-based discussions: "Uncreative writing is a post-identity literature," he states.²⁹ Fuelled and fragmented by technology, the uncreative

writer does not necessarily shy away from using the first-person, but he uses it strategically as if to raise serious doubts and questions about the relationship between the author's identity and the person who wrote his poems. I think that by now you can already sense that this has been one of the more suggestive chapters of Goldsmith's book for me.

Goldsmith's fifth chapter, "Why Appropriation?" questions why collage and pastiche have been so readily adopted and accepted as methods of writing while appropriation has rarely been tested. He looks at the long history of appropriation in visual arts, the forms it has taken, and suggests ways it can be applied to literature. The chapter is notable for its discussion of the significance of the appropriative technologies of Walter Benjamin in his thousand-page *The Arcades Project*. Goldsmith frames his discussion in the context of the juxtaposed dual approaches to art of Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso. I found his entire discussion here strangely reminiscent of M. H. Abrams' examination of pre-romantic and romantic mimetic theories in his book *The Mirror and the Lamp*.³⁰ Much like artists today, Duchamp and Picasso were both responding in their unique ways to rapid technological innovations and industrial production, especially the camera. Picasso—the master of several mediums and methods—draws us like moths into his compositions, as if he were a candle or a lamp. Duchamp, meanwhile, takes a familiar object—a urinal—flips it over, puts it on a pedestal, and in doing so defamiliarises the object. For Goldsmith, Duchamp is suggestive of the mirror, which reflects both a repellent and reflective object. Duchamp's art is generative of a world of ideas, while Picasso's is absorptive, bringing us up close to his art.

In literary terms, Goldsmith states, Walter Benjamin is to Ezra Pound what Duchamp was to Picasso: where Pound's collage technique in *The Cantos* synthesises ephemera collected from the ages, Benjamin creates a work of literary montage, a disjunctive, rapid-fire juxtaposition of "small fleeting pictures".³¹ There's no attempt to synthesise the bits and pieces into a coherent whole; and, as with Duchamp, we're not invited to admire the author's synthetic skills. We're distracted away from the text by the power of the mirror. For Goldsmith, *The Arcades Project's* significance is that its composition out of refuse and detritus is a proto-hyper-textual work of the type we encounter on the Internet. The book's fragments give it a "constellation-like construction".³² Much like when a page of an online newspaper— which draws from a myriad of servers across the Web to form a "constellation" of that page, consisting of Web servers, ad servers, image servers, AP news feeds, RSS feeds, databases, style sheets, and templates—each of Benjamin's chapters is a "dialectical image," a place where the past and present fuse together for a moment and create an image. As Benjamin says, "It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present casts its light on what is past; rather what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation".³³ Significantly, Benjamin asserts that the place where one encounters the dialectical image is language.³⁴

What then is the significance of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and its emphasis on the power of the mimetic mirror? Goldsmith believes it serves as the "literary roadmap for appropriation".³⁵ It was certainly the roadmap for one of Goldsmith's most notable projects of appropriation, his 2003 book *Day*.

Of course, this is probably *not* the project of appropriation by Kenneth Goldsmith you would have heard of. I'm sure you're more interested in finding out about Goldsmith's *most infamous* appropriation project—his March, 2015 public reading of his poem *The Body of Michael Brown*, based on Brown's autopsy report.³⁶ Brown, of course, was the 18-year-old black man from Ferguson, Missouri, whose fatal shooting by a white police officer set off months of national protests in the U.S. and prompted the launch of a nationwide civil rights movement called Black Lives Matter. I will get to that. But for now, I'd like to focus on a Goldsmith appropriation project that helped to make his name and was also far less controversial. On Friday, September 1, 2000, he began "retyping the day's *New York Times*, word for word, letter for letter, from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner, page by page".³⁷ Where Benjamin's book still contains his own commentary and a great deal of his "original genius," Goldsmith strives to use the least amount of intervention possible: "My goal was to be as uncreative as possible, one of the hardest constraints an artist can muster".³⁸ In converting every word, advertisement, timetables, stock quotes, etc. Goldsmith was engaging in a massive act of reframing or reorientation.

In spite of his work's "valuelessness," its lack of creativity and originality, Goldsmith discovered to his surprise that the exact opposite was true. His act of extreme appropriation involved many authorial decisions—from ethical ones, involving the question of whether or not to include the words of public figures he didn't like, to artistic, formatting, and linguistic ones. He discovered that his supposedly ego-less project was in fact about the projection of Kenneth Goldsmith.

For Goldsmith, appropriation is at the centre of artistic issues in the 21st century: “The candle has blown out, and we’re left with a hall of mirrors”.³⁹ The mythical romantic lamp of “original” creative genius is gone, and in its place is the endless hall of mirrors generated by the Web and digital technology. “The Web,” Goldsmith writes, “has become a mirror for the age of an absent but very present author”.⁴⁰ With the Web and digital technology, the appropriative possibilities have been greatly expanded. Traditional notions of authorship and content have been changed for good. In an age when language increasingly proliferates, and when technology gives writers ever more efficient tools to manage that proliferation of language, appropriation will inevitably become an acceptable and important tool in the writer’s toolbox just as it has been one for artists for decades.

In what was for me the book’s most suggestive chapter, “Infallible Processes: What Writing Can Learn from Visual Art,” Goldsmith looks at the careers and work of Sol LeWitt and Andy Warhol for the lessons they can teach uncreative writers. Both of these artists, Goldsmith claims, eradicated traditional notions of artistic genius, labour, and process. Both artists taught their publics to ask different questions and to look at art and the artist with a different set of expectations than before.

The chapter begins with a delightful description, taken from the *New York Times*, of John Ashbery procrastinating, delaying throughout an entire evening the moment when he must write some poetry. Goldsmith quotes from an interview with Derek Walcott, in which the Nobel laureate admits to feeling terror at the “blank page,” the terror of someone over whether he could ever write a successful poem again.⁴¹ Why must writers consistently insist on this

neurosis called “writer’s block,” Goldsmith is saying, when several contemporary visual artists have announced detailed mechanical process-based strategies which can easily overcome this needless neurosis? Only artists clinging to outmoded romantic ideas of “originality” tend to get stuck, he claims.

Sol LeWitt provides a model for uncreative writing “from its inception to execution, right up to its distribution and reception”.⁴² In his “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1967) and “Sentences on Conceptual Art” (1969) LeWitt calls for a recipe-based art:

To work with a plan that is preset is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It also obviates the necessity of designing each work in turn. The plan would design the work. Some plans would require millions of variations, and some a limited number, but both are finite. Other plans imply infinity. In each case, however, the artist would select the basic form and rules that would govern the solution of the problem. After that the fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better. This eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective as much as possible. This is the reason for using this method.⁴³

Just as when someone shops for ingredients and cooks to a recipe, all of the major artistic decisions in creating a work should be made beforehand. The actual execution of the work shouldn’t require too much thought, improvisation, or even passion; it is merely a matter of duty, in which one follows the directions of the ‘recipe’. Art should not be based on skill, understood in the conventional sense. Theoretically, anyone could realise the work by following instructions. But I emphasise that this is only *theoretically*, because as the career of LeWitt and Goldsmith’s own book make clear, the

uncreative art aesthetic is more than anything based on the elegance of choice and taste, and a balance between keen thought and precise execution.

Yet LeWitt states that a work of art should be made with a minimum of decisions and whimsy; it's best when the artist makes deliberately uninteresting choices, so that the viewer doesn't lose sight of the ideas behind the work. In LeWitt's view, artistic process is of more value than the artwork itself. His idea of producing art according to mechanical process-oriented constraints was his way of urging artists to stop worrying about trying to be original all the time. For Goldsmith, by converting LeWitt's visual recipes into literary ones the uncreative writer can adopt "Paragraphs" and "Sentences" as roadmaps to prolific inspiration. Unfortunately, however, as I will discuss later in this letter, Goldsmith's own recent personal experiences underscore the extent to which Conceptualist Art-based practices also need much more substantial considerations than mere "elegance of choice and taste".

As inspirational as Goldsmith finds Sol LeWitt, it is Andy Warhol whom he hails as the "most important figure for uncreative writing".⁴⁴ Why? It's because Warhol's entire oeuvre—paintings, films, and texts—involved isolating, reframing, recycling, and endlessly reproducing ideas that weren't his, and yet which became completely his by the time he finished with them. In Goldsmith's estimation, Warhol was an "unoriginal genius," who'd mastered the manipulation of information. His artistic practice is shifting identities, "programmatically predicated on deceit, dishonesty, fraudulence, plagiarism, and market manipulation".⁴⁵ It promotes style over substance, mechanical process over touch, boredom over entertainment, and surface over depth. All of Warhol's work, Goldsmith maintains, should be understood as *text*, what

Roland Barthes would call a “tissue of quotations,” or the media detritus derived from “innumerable centres of culture”.⁴⁶

In Chapter 7, Goldsmith shows how uncreative writing has been put into practice by the British writer Simon Morris, who undertook to retype, one page a day, the entire 1951 edition of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Morris documented his daily typing on a blog he set up especially for the project. According to Goldsmith, the project reveals that appropriation is much more than merely passing along information; it inspires in the writer a different sort of creativity. Morris found that as both reader and a writer he produced different versions of the text. He discovered that through replication and mimesis that he was challenging the traditional power dynamic between reading and writing. Morris’ copying, in fact, subjects the Kerouac text to the same sort of “remixing” that a piece of music is subject to in the contemporary musical scene. The fluidity of the digital environment in which Morris documented his copying also plays a key role in bringing these ideas into existence as acts of uncreative writing. Morris found that the same piece of writing typed up in very different circumstances from the Kerouac novel yielded an entirely different work.

The short forms—the telegraph, the newspaper headline, Twitter, and other social network updates which have proliferated on the Internet are Goldsmith’s topic in Chapter Nine, “Seeding the Data Cloud.” Many of these short online forms and even search engines have been appropriated and used successfully by uncreative writers. Goldsmith continually returns to the idea of writing forcing people to “re-evaluate the nature of language”.⁴⁷ Although, disappointingly, he does not discuss the impact on language in a

truly meaningful way, his remarks do suggest that Goldsmith sees this re-evaluative process as poetry's primary function as art. The Web for Goldsmith, in its debased and random form is a wonderfully rich source of material for uncreative writers to reframe, re-mix, and re-programme language.

In "The Inventory and the Ambient," Goldsmith returns to the unique opportunities for the archiving of vast inventories of textual information offered by the Web to uncreative writers. As writers plunder the vast warehouses of text available through the Web, they are using it not so much to craft works of art as to manage and reshape these archives of text. Other writers, Goldsmith states, are exploring the purpose of these archives as they apply to the construction of literary works. These writers produce work which encourages what he calls a sort of "textual immersion"—analogous to the ambient soundscapes produced by Brian Eno in music. At this point I suspect you may be smiling bemusedly because this sort of textually immersive experience of poetry seems to be precisely what you yourself offered to your readers in "New Year Letter," with its octosyllabic Hudibrastic rhyming couplets, extensive use of italicised words and phrases in various foreign languages, and the lengthy and idiosyncratic notes you appended to the poem.

Goldsmith adds that the uncreative writers' management and reshaping of these vast archives allows them to create a new type of writing—oblique autobiography. The writer reveals himself through his archiving of the mundane. With ideas about oblique autobiography, Goldsmith seems to hit on precisely the type of approach I've hoped to adopt in my writing project. As the years of my PhD project have progressed, I've grown steadily convinced

that rather than trying to produce a body of work which is focused directly on my own experiences and on a purportedly “authentic voice,” I should instead use the public figure of the current President of the United States, (whose identity-based narrative Goldsmith acknowledges to be “one of the most inspiring identity-based narratives in recent history”), as a way of obliquely presenting my own autobiographical concerns. In my case, however, I’m not so much interested in the mundane ephemera that Goldsmith extols as I’m interested in the mesh between these ephemera on the Web and the discourse of a public figure like the President and public events on the Web, and the way all of these seem to not merely echo but literally merge with fiction. I’m thinking here specifically of the merging of the language and person of the Obama figure with the language, obsessions, disappointments, betrayals, and fictive persona at the centre of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

With the endless and ever-increasing flow of information, we’ve become expert at meticulously gathering and organising information. Goldsmith maintains that it’s become a way of being in the world. The accumulation and managing of vast storehouses of information has affected the way some uncreative writers look upon the construction of literary works and their potential effects on readers. Goldsmith writes of “ambient stylistics” and of the efforts of some writers to convey to their readers a textual immersion in which there are no ecstatic moments of recognition or epiphanies, but instead a textual environment. This approach seems to be antithetical to everything we expect literature to do. Later in the same chapter Goldsmith will claim that even our digital footprint—the digital trails of our Web searches, comments left on news and Web fan pages, tweets, Facebook

updates, and even the thumbs-up or likes we give on Web news sites and blogs—make compelling literature. If we leave aside the contradiction implicit in this—early in the same chapter Goldsmith equates “good” literature with “boring” literature—his discussion in this chapter opens up within these vast digital storehouses of ephemera fertile new possibilities of inspiration for creative writers.

Goldsmith’s penultimate chapter—“Uncreative Writing in the Classroom”—presents a treatise on his uncreative writing teaching methodology. He outlines five basic exercises he gave his students at the University of Pennsylvania. Here is his course description:

It’s clear that long-cherished notions of creativity are under attack, eroded by file-sharing, media culture, widespread sampling, and digital replication. How does writing respond to this new environment? This workshop will rise to that challenge by employing strategies of appropriation, replication, plagiarism, piracy, sampling, plundering, as compositional methods. Along the way, we’ll trace the rich history of forgery, frauds, hoaxes, avatars, and impersonations spanning the arts, with a particular emphasis on how they employ language.⁴⁸
(201)

I’m struck at full force here by how shocking the idea of Goldsmith’s advocacy of plagiarism is when it’s baldly stated like this. Notice how he moves in gradations of outrageousness from “appropriation”—mildly disreputable—to “replication,” slightly more so, to “piracy” and then to literal “plundering.” And then he reminds us of the long history in the arts of “forgery, frauds, hoaxes, avatars, and impersonations.” Long and rich that history may be, but it is certainly not a venerable or officially sanctioned one.

Goldsmith's strategy seems to me as much about re-positioning literary creation as an activity with subversive, outsider status as it is about opening up creativity per se. He links it with the currents of high modernist avant-garde attitudes and approaches: "We'll see how the modernist notions of chance, procedure, repetition, and the aesthetics of boredom dovetail with popular culture to usurp conventional notions of time, place, and identity, all as expressed linguistically".⁴⁹ As for Goldsmith's advocacy of plagiarism, I'm reminded of your 1962 essay on "Writing," (discussed in my Letter No. 2) in which you seem preoccupied with notions of impersonation, forgery, and "inauthenticity." I find myself half-persuaded that Goldsmith is in fact on to something; that this unacknowledged history of appropriation, or even plagiarism, has a rich pedigree in all of the arts.

The other thing that seems striking to me is Goldsmith's diagnosis of the present particular historical and technological environment, in which ideas of creativity are under assault from "file-sharing, media culture, widespread sampling, and digital replication".⁵⁰ Traditional notions of creativity may be under attack, but it's clear that creativity per se is not. Goldsmith's course seems to be an acknowledgement of the many ways that the explosion of computer technology seems to have unleashed creativity and human agency.

The first exercise he outlines is called Retyping Five Pages, in which students were asked to retype five pages of any text whatsoever—short story, novel, grocery receipt, or even restaurant menu. The exercise affected the students in different yet revealing ways. Some found it unbearable, but others found it had a calming effect. Other students became deeply aware of the role their bodies play in the act of writing. Most importantly for Goldsmith, many of

his students began to see texts not merely as transparent bearers of meaning but also as “opaque objects to be moved around the white space of the page”.⁵¹

Another exercise required students to transcribe a piece of audio, preferably a dry news report or other “dull” audio artefact. The act of transcription is a highly complex task, riddled with subjectivity and involving translation and displacement. Yet more than this, the uncreative writing student discovers art as she navigates her way through transcriptional conventions and shifts frames of reference in words she didn’t write and reveals rich and subtle linguistic, narrative, and emotional complexities.

In another transcription exercise, Goldsmith required all of his students to transcribe every word they hear of the same episode of *Project Runway*, the ‘reality’ TV show about prospective fashion designers. Later, the class edits down the 75 pages it has produced from its group listening into a streamlined and rhythmic poem. The lesson the students learn is that by listening closely to the everyday language spoken around them they’ll be sure to find poetry in it. The use of language in the media is richly multifaceted—transparent at the same time it’s opaque. All we have to do is reframe or repurpose this language in order to find a rich and endless source of inspiration right in front of us.

In another exercise, which Goldsmith dubs Retro Graffiti, he encouraged his students to choose arcane or out-of-date slogans and to write this text as non-permanent graffiti onto public spaces—on the mirrors in public toilets, campus flagpoles, campus walls, and in greeting cards displayed in card stores. These gestures—borrowed from the French situationists of the

1960s—teach the students that language is not merely encountered on the page but is both physical and material. It can be deployed in active and surprising ways in public spaces.

In the exercise called Screenplays the students had to take a film or video that had no screenplay and write a detailed one for it, using the correct film industry screenplay format. Goldsmith reports that by virtue of taking the film out of its original context and introducing another dimension to the film's chain of authorship, the students subverted the generic conventions that are usually unquestioned and transparent. The students' language had the effect of a hall of mirrors, which purposely confounds notions of reality, authenticity, viewership, readership, and authorship.⁵²

At the heart of Goldsmith's uncreative writing methodology is his desire to impart to his students a profound awareness of language's rich multidimensionality and a willingness to exploit and manage this multidimensionality in order to create works of literature. Echoing Derrida, he declares the provisionality of all language in the digitalised world. In a short polemic titled "Provisional Language" that appears towards the end of the book, Goldsmith argues that for him disorientation is the norm and that notions of authenticity or originality are increasingly untraceable:

Words today are bubbles, shape-shifters, empty signifiers, floating on the invisibility of the networks, that great leveller of language, from which we greedily and indiscriminately siphon, stuffing hard drives only to replace them with bigger and cheaper ones.⁵³

The creation of the vast virtual landscape, or the 'cloud'—a kind of amorphous abstract mirror world into which we plug when we log onto the

Internet—has changed language irrevocably: it's created digital text, "the body-double of print, the ghost in the machine".⁵⁴ This ghost-language has become more useful than the real. And in the digital mirror-space the words have become additive, piling up endlessly and without differentiation, and then reforming into discourse "language-constellations" when they appear on the screen opened on a web page, in a word processing document, in a constellation's image, or in a video. And then the words dissolve into undifferentiated shards again: "Words now find themselves in a simultaneous condition of obsolescence and presence, dynamic yet stable".⁵⁵

Words exist in an ecosystem which can be constantly recycled and repurposed. Writers, therefore, find themselves in a new relationship to these words. Writing has become what Goldsmith terms a "transient coupling," "a temporary embrace with a high probability of separation".⁵⁶ Words for the writer now exist for reorientation or reframing, and this reproduces language's provisionality. Globalisation contributes to this provisionality. Writers are now required to have the skills of a secretary and the rapacious mentality of the pirate, replicating, organising, mirroring, archiving, plundering, and file sharing.⁵⁷ The writer's space is now a kind of socially networked laboratory, where textual transference occurs.

Perhaps you remain sceptical about all of this. But I think that in many ways, as I recollect my formal discussions of two of your major works *The Sea and the Mirror* and "New Year Letter", in a sense you yourself anticipate the sense of provisionality that Goldsmith describes. Isn't that part of the reason behind your camp mixing of high and low styles and the way in which your Caliban borrows the high style and language of Henry James in order to

deliver his ironical verdict that your great poetic opus is in fact an abject failure? Don't we hear that same provisionality in Caliban's echoing (and yearningly prayerful) postscript to Ariel?

Never hope to say farewell,
 For our lethargy is such
 Heaven's kindness cannot touch
 Nor earth's frankly brutal drum;
 This was long ago decided,
 Both of us know why,
 Can, alas, foretell,
 When our falsehoods are divided,
 What we shall become,
 One evaporating sigh

... / ⁵⁸

And yet your poem also suggests its own answer to the threat of provisionality and dissolution: at the same time it acknowledges and even emphasises its vulnerability as an “evaporating sigh,” the poem’s language opens itself out, appealing to its “higher power”—the higher power of language itself. In the rhetoric of Christian redemption which you adopt in *The Sea and the Mirror*, God’s grace will close the vast gap between the “failure” of the poem’s words and the communion with presence and truth to which you aspire as a poet.

Alain Badiou reminds us that, contrary to the assertions of the “modern sophists” (read: post-structuralists), not everything is caught up in the indeterminate slippage of language games.⁵⁹ He could be talking about your poem. In spite of the forces of contingency and dissolution, your poem asserts that being and truth still exist. Being and truth can be found precisely in poetic language’s incompleteness and powerlessness. When Badiou writes of the modern poem’s “intelligible vocation,” he is referring to its unique capacities

as a form of thought.⁶⁰ As a form of thought, poetry is inseparable from the sensible. Poetry uses images to create sensory presentations of thought. But Badiou argues, a modern poem like yours is in fact the opposite of a mimesis: “In its operation, it exhibits an Idea of which both the object and objectivity represent nothing but pale copies”.⁶¹

The sensible, in the figure of Caliban, presents itself within the poem as the powerless nostalgia for the idea—Ariel. But the poem itself exceeds in power what the sensible is capable of on its own. Poetry makes the truth out of what Badiou calls the “multiple,” which like Ariel here is thought of as a presence or force come to the limits of language. “What is a Poem?” the chapter heading in Badiou’s *Handbook of Inaesthetics* asks. In answer to him, your poem shows that it is a thought of what there is as a result of the alchemy of language and its powers of subtraction and incitement.⁶² Ariel, the Ideal, is the force that has been removed, and is also the force which through language’s power of incitement has been incited in Caliban’s postscript.

I believe that Kenneth Goldsmith’s uncreative writing methodology offers the contemporary poet some powerful writing procedures. And yet by the time I reached the conclusion of his book I was left with a rather contradictory impression: at the same time that the various new uncreative methods open up new writing possibilities for poets, the ideas and assumptions Goldsmith articulates—about the psychological and social implications of digital technology, the indeterminate status of the poetic subject and the objective world, and language’s provisionality—seem to fetter the poet’s mind within overdetermined and amorphous conceptual bonds.

Additionally, the controversy that surrounded Goldsmith's 2015 "remixing" or appropriation of Michael Brown's autopsy report raises troubling questions about the uncreative methods he champions. When Goldsmith performed the reading before an audience of about a hundred people at Brown University, he stood on a stage beneath an enlarged photograph of Michael Brown in his high school graduation robes.⁶³ Goldsmith concluded his reading with the words from the autopsy report: "the remaining male genitalia system is unremarkable".⁶⁴ Hardly surprisingly, in spite of the small audience present, news of Goldsmith's reading soon spread online, where people were much more vocal and angry than the live audience had been. Many were particularly incensed by Goldsmith's decision to edit the report so that it ended on a doctor's observation about the murdered man's genitals. Goldsmith posted responses to the furore on Facebook, which only seemed to inflame the outrage:

I altered the text for poetic effect; I translated into plain English many obscure medical terms that would have stopped the flow of the text; I narrativized it in ways that made the text less didactic and more literary.⁶⁵

Expressed as they are here, Goldsmith's explanations do little except to justify his power to dismember and then itemise for public consumption the destroyed body of a member of a disenfranchised group. It's clear that he had "narrativized" the autopsy to be as provocative as possible. However, what seems truly shocking to me is *not* the fact that Goldsmith turned the dead victim of a police shooting into a poetic text—clearly, such a topic should not be considered off-limits—but that beyond the desire to prove that his conceptual poetry could handle inflammatory material he had absolutely no

other purpose behind using it. He merely made an announcement before his reading that he'd be reading "a poem about the quantified self," meaning the body of Michael Brown which had been catalogued in the autopsy.⁶⁶ Other than that, he appears to have given no thought to what he was doing when he was creating a literary text out of this inflammatory material. It was simply a text, just like any other text for him. Mind you, his insouciance on this issue is not at all surprising given his pronouncements on art's purported freedom from all ethical considerations:

I really have trouble with poethics. In fact, I think one of the most beautiful, free and expansive ideas about art is that it — unlike just about everything else in our culture — doesn't have to partake in an ethical discourse. As a matter of fact, if it wants to, it can take an *unethical* stance and test what it means to be that without having to endure the consequences of real world investigations.⁶⁷

This accounts for the peculiar obtuseness of Goldsmith's attempt to defend his actions by appealing to the artistic integrity of his writing method. Ultimately, he was merely using a body—a slaughtered human body—to further his aesthetic agenda. As one commentator put it in a tweet,

Forget it bc Kenneth Goldsmith did a thing...made a thing...for a crowd.. out of a black boy's dead body ... he performed ... and was paid well.⁶⁸

However, more than anything, what this incident demonstrates to me is the acute need in Goldsmith's conceptualist-art derived poetics to designate the real operations of writing and poetry and their relationship to the poetic subject, the object, the world, and ultimately to truth.

When Goldsmith writes that the “candle has blown out, and we’re left with a hall of mirrors” to describe the new uncreative notions of creativity, it suggests to me that, rather than recognising the need for a completely new schema befitting the radically new artistic epoch he advocates, he is still very much underpinning this rich new “ecosystem” with a very familiar schema for linking art and thought—the mimetic classicism of Aristotle. In spite of the avant-garde procedures he champions, he fully accepts as a given that the “mirrors” generated by the Web and digital technology have no truth. The appropriative strategies are essentially forms of representation rather than ways of forging links, disturbing and/or illuminating as they may be. Goldsmith’s book confirms the charge that Badiou makes against Dadaism, the Situationists, and other 20th Century avant-gardes: they are little more than “escort experiments for contemporary art,” representing the “desperate and unstable search for a mediating schema”.⁶⁹ After all, isn’t this precisely what Goldsmith is proudly announcing in his remark about “poethics” that I’ve quoted above?

But interestingly, Badiou characterises the 20th century avant-gardes as searching for a didactico-romantic schema and being fundamentally anticlassical in tenor. They were didactic in their desire to put an end to art, while condemning art’s alienated and inauthentic nature. At the same time they were romantic in terms of their belief that art must be reborn as absolute and immediately legible as truth. Goldsmith, however, endorses an anti-romantic position, given that he believes that truth is elusive at best, and most likely isn’t even there. To be authentic, in his view, art must represent the dispersed nature of the Web’s digital ecosystem. He retains the didactic

impulse of earlier avant-gardes, yet in the emphasis he places on the imperative for art to be more authentically representative he suggests that the new 21st century avant-garde has merely moved to the opposite pole of the 20th century avant-garde: where 20th century avant-gardes were resolutely anticlassical, the new 21st century avant-garde seems—at least as articulated by Goldsmith—above all radically anti-romantic, not merely rejecting the romantic myth of original genius, but denying the validity of voluntary human agency.

It is fitting then that in his book's afterword Goldsmith speculates on a future when poetry written by humans has been supplanted by humankind's machines writing and producing literature for other machines. According to the genetics historian, Susan Blackmore, humans have already been supplanted by machines.⁷⁰ It is increasingly machines, through their storing, copying, and selection of binary information, which are the designers and controllers of the newly evolving world. In such a world it's the computers who will move writing on to its next phase—“robopoetics.” Goldsmith accepts this evolutionary pathway as inevitable. He sees himself as part of a “bridge generation”—between old school 20th century media and 21st century robopoetics. Uncreative writing is itself a bridge, between human-designed creativity and the machine-driven robopoetics of the 21st.

I have absolutely no interest in disputing Goldsmith's vision of a robopoetic future. My sole interest in this letter has been in answering these questions—what are the models and procedures that Goldsmith offers to the contemporary poet? And how can they be of service to me? In the paragraphs above I've tried to present to you a thorough outline of all these procedures, at

the same time detailing what I perceive to be the limitations of the conceptual schema underpinning them. The implications of this conceptual schema—the fact that Goldsmith’s poetics operate under the assumptions that truth is external to art, that art has little or no access to either this external truth or to a truth that is immanent and belongs uniquely to it, and that art’s function is ultimately mimetic representation—mean that his conception of art and art’s role has little to tell me about the real operations of poetry and its relationship to the poetic subject, the object, the world, and to truth.

It’s possible, therefore, to identify Goldsmith’s poetics and writing procedures with what Badiou describes as the disjointed artistic predicament of the present, in which the arts seem to have disavowed the link between art and any schemata. Goldsmith’s poetics and writing procedures do not provide us with any new schemata or really any new conceptions of the relationship between art and philosophy.

On the other hand, I connect your work to the synthetic schema combining the didactic and the classical. But a closer look at two of your most important poems, *The Sea and the Mirror* and “New Year Letter”, revealed to me that you seem to be stretching your poem’s language beyond this, to suggest the multiple—a higher presence, force, or alternate language at the limits of verbal expression. In this, in your conscious mixing of high and low styles, and in your consciousness of the breakdown of the traditional language styles and the social structures that supported them you seem to be reaching towards a form of poetic expression as a truth procedure both immanent and unique to itself. You seem to be reaching towards poetry as the form of its own thought.

In *The Sea and the Mirror*, “New Year Letter”, and in some contemporary poetry (I’m thinking of the work of poets like John Ashbery, Anne Carson, John Wilkinson, James Merrill, and Susan Howe) the poem doesn’t necessarily seem interested in themes of the subject or the object. The poem’s true interest seems to be more to do with the relation between language, thought, and presence. As with *The Sea and the Mirror* and “New Year Letter”, the poem’s surface may be pleasing, but its beauty partly consists in the enigma of its surface. It seems to beckon the reader to enter into the operation of the poem as a unique procedure. The poem is a truth procedure both immanent and unique to itself as poetry. But, Badiou reminds us, the poem isn’t a truth in and of itself: it is a “situated *inquiry* about the truth that it locally actualizes or of which it is a finite fragment”.⁷¹

The relevant place for us to think about art as an immanent singular truth can be found not at the level of the individual poem, however, but at the level of an identifiable sequence, or configuration, which was started by a complex of works which together make up a poetic/artistic event.⁷² And so, for example, using Badiou’s terms, we could identify the sonnet as a recognisable configuration: its appearance as a group of works in Italy in the 13th century marked an *event*, the sort of rupture which retrospectively made a prior configuration of poems obsolete and signalled the beginning of a new configuration which would eventually produce names like Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and yourself. The configuration of the sonnet produced therefore, with regard to the immanence of the sonnet itself, what Badiou would call an “art-truth;” that is, a truth of this particular configuration of art.⁷³

And as for your great poetic works, *The Sea and the Mirror* and “New Year Letter”, they mark points of inquiry, singular, localised instances of particular sequences or configurations. They pose tests for these configurations, and in doing so put into operation the artistic configurations’ thinking of themselves: “a configuration thinks itself in the works that compose it”.⁷⁴ The configuration’s truth emerges through the thinking of each and every one of its poems or, in other words, in each of the localised subject points (poems) which comprise it. The inquiry contained in a singular poetic work is the subject point of the artistic procedure/configuration to which it belongs. Your singular poetic works, *The Sea and the Mirror* and “New Year Letter”, are finite facts of art. Each is what Badiou calls a “finite multiple”: “multiple” because the artwork is finite in three senses (it’s a finite object, it’s regulated by the principle of artistic completion, and it presents itself as a questioning of its own finality). But the procedures of which your singular poetic works are part represent the opening out of the inquiry into the infinite—that is, the realm of truth. *The Sea and the Mirror* and “New Year Letter” are thinking operations, events. They are events which are taking place, and which invite the reader into their operations, in order to think what happens in them and move towards their truth. We could say the same thing of your sonnet sequence “In Time of War”.

Can I, and will I be able to use some of the uncreative strategies and approaches advocated by Kenneth Goldsmith? Most definitely. But I think it’s important not to be lured into what seems to me to be a kind of conceptual cul-de-sac concerning poetry, the poetic subject, the object world, and language. But for me, it’s definitely not a matter of attempting to reclaim for

poetry and art a romantic schema. Such a step would have a very dubious validity. It's more a matter of claiming and being inspired by the freer and yet more austere constraints of the new schema proposed by Alain Badiou—a fourth type of knot uniting art, philosophy, and thought—art as its own truth procedure. I hope to do so, while also adopting some of the uncreative procedures advocated by Kenneth Goldsmith, which I will outline in my next letter to you. In doing so, I hope to pursue the post-romantic, post-classical, and post-didactic trajectory that you yourself seem to anticipate in the announcement you make in your commonplace book, for, as you say, “the Empire has fallen”.

With appreciation and thanks,

Dennis L. M. Lewis

Notes

- ¹ Erich Auerbach, "Dark Ages, Thank God for the," in W. H. Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 95.
- ² Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U. P., 2011), p. 59.
- ³ See Marjorie Perloff's "Poetry on the Brink", *Boston Review* (May/June, 2012), accessed online at <http://bostonreview.net/forum/poetry-brink>
- ⁴ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, (New York: Columbia U. P., 2011), p. 1.
- ⁵ W.H. Auden, "Writing", *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* [1962] (New York: Vintage International, 1989), pp. 13 – 27.
- ⁶ Auden, "Writing" p. 19.
- ⁷ Auden, "Writing" p. 26.
- ⁸ Auden, "Writing" p. 27.
- ⁹ Auden, "Writing" p. 27.
- ¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 2005), p. 5.
- ¹¹ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 2.
- ¹² Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 3.
- ¹³ Auden, "Writing" p. 26.
- ¹⁴ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 7.
- ¹⁵ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 9.
- ¹⁶ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 9.
- ¹⁷ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p.36.
- ¹⁸ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p.37.
- ¹⁹ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 53.
- ²⁰ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 49.

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- ²¹ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 65.
- ²² Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 71.
- ²³ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 81.
- ²⁴ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 84.
- ²⁵ Robert Fitterman, "Directory," *Poetry*, 194.4 (July/August, 2009), 335.
- ²⁶ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 104.
- ²⁷ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 104.
- ²⁸ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 85.
- ²⁹ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 85.
- ³⁰ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, (New York: Oxford U.P., 1953).
- ³¹ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 113.
- ³² Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 116.
- ³³ *The Arcades Project*, [1982], ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge: Belknap of Harvard U. P., 2002), p. 262.
- ³⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* p. 462.
- ³⁵ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 117.
- ³⁶ See Alec Wilkinson, "Something Borrowed", *The New Yorker*, (October 5, 2015); Jacqueline Valencia, "Thoughts on Kenneth Goldsmith and Michael Brown", online blog <http://jacquelinevalencia.com/2015/03/15/thoughts-on-kenneth-goldsmith-and-michael-brown/>; and Cathy Park Hong, "There's a New Movement in Poetry and It's Not Kenneth Goldsmith", *New Republic* (October 1, 2015).
- ³⁷ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 118.
- ³⁸ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 118.
- ³⁹ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 123.
- ⁴⁰ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 123.

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- ⁴¹ Derek Walcott, interview with Jacki Lyden, *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio (18 March, 2007), accessed online at <http://www.npr.org/>
- ⁴² Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 128.
- ⁴³ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," paragraph 6 (1967), accessed online at <http://www.paulj.myzen.co.uk/blog/teaching/voices/files/2008/07/Lewitt-Paragraphs-on-Conceptual-Art1.pdf>
- ⁴⁴ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 139.
- ⁴⁵ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 141.
- ⁴⁶ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image - Music - Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 146.
- ⁴⁷ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 187.
- ⁴⁸ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 201.
- ⁴⁹ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 201.
- ⁵⁰ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 201.
- ⁵¹ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 203.
- ⁵² Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 214.
- ⁵³ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 218.
- ⁵⁴ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 218.
- ⁵⁵ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* pp. 218 – 219.
- ⁵⁶ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 219.
- ⁵⁷ Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* p. 220.
- ⁵⁸ W.H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror*, in *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: the Modern Library, 2007), pp. 443 – 444).
- ⁵⁹ *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 33.
- ⁶⁰ *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 19.
- ⁶¹ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 21.

⁶² Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 22.

⁶³ Alec Wilkinson, "Something Borrowed".

⁶⁴ Cathy Park Hong, "There's a New Movement in Poetry and It's Not Kenneth Goldsmith."

⁶⁵ Kenneth Goldsmith, "The Body of Michael Brown", Facebook post, (15 March, 2015).

⁶⁶ Alec Wilkinson, "Something Borrowed".

⁶⁷ Kenneth Goldsmith, interview, "The Tortoise and the Hare: Dale Smith and Kenneth Goldsmith Parse Slow and Fast Poetries, *Jacket*, 38 (July 6 – 25, 2009), 32.

⁶⁸ Kima Jones, @kima_jones, tweet, (Mar 15, 2015), accessed online at <http://www.vidaweb.org/>

⁶⁹ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 8.

⁷⁰ "She Won't Be Me," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 19 (Nos. 1-2, 2012), 16-19.

⁷¹ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 12.

⁷² Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 13.

⁷³ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 13.

⁷⁴ Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics* p. 14.

LETTER TO MR. AUDEN #8

Dear Mr. Auden,

Thank you once more for the interest you showed in my last letter and for your kind feedback. I must admit, I was afraid that you'd dismiss out of hand both my discussion of Kenneth Goldsmith's uncreative writing strategies and my readings of your great poetic works, *The Sea and the Mirror* and "New Year Letter". But I was pleasantly surprised to find you not only quite receptive to the notion of appropriating other authors' texts in poetic composition but also sympathetic to the notion of poetry as a form of thought. Thank you for your encouraging words about the importance of developing a reading of a selection of poets and poetical works that will serve my own use. I am deeply grateful for your receptiveness regarding my outline of my writing project and writing procedures in this letter.

Here then is a list of statements, stating the basic principles guiding my writing procedures in this writing project.

Statement of Procedures and Intent in the Writing Project:

1. To write an autobiographical serial poem comprised of units of 14-line poems.
2. The autobiographical serial poem shall also contain units of longer poems.
3. The autobiographical serial poem shall feature personal memories, recollections, reflections, anecdotes, musings, and feelings,

especially in relation to the ambivalent relationship between a son and his father, and the efforts to reconcile a divided inheritance.

4. The autobiographical serial poem shall not contain any of the author's personal memories, recollections, reflections, anecdotes, musings, and feelings, especially in relation to the ambivalent relationship between a son and his father, and any efforts to reconcile a divided inheritance.
5. The autobiographical serial poem shall consist mostly of words and sentences appropriated from the public speeches of the U.S. President, Barack Hussein Obama.
6. The autobiographical serial poem shall also contain words and sentences appropriated from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.
7. The autobiographical serial poem shall also contain words and sentences appropriated from several notable biographies of U.S. President Hussein Obama.

I hope you find the above statements helpful as you look through my serial poem. Please feel free to add any suggestions to the copy.
Thanks your generous reading of this letter.

With appreciation,

Dennis L. M. Lewis

**CHAPTER SEVEN: “THE MOUNTAINS OF
OUR CHOICE”: *JOURNEY TO A WAR***

“The Mountains of Our Choice”: W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood’s *Journey to a War*

W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood’s 1939 book, *Journey to a War*, is a hybrid, four-part text that records the authors’ reactions to the Sino-Japanese War of 1938. The book comprises a travel–diary by Isherwood, a “Picture Commentary” of sixty-five photographs by Auden, a 27-poem sonnet sequence, and a separate poetic Commentary by Auden. Both writers seemed oddly diffident about their efforts: years after the book’s publication, Isherwood admitted the book’s purported unsatisfactory prose style, its self-consciousness, and what he termed its “excessive use of similes.”¹ Auden, meanwhile, sent the typescript of the sonnet sequence to a friend, and wondered, “Are the enclosed trash, or not? I am much too close to them to know....”² He would later describe the Commentary as “preachy”, dropping it from a revised version of the sonnet sequence, and extensively rewrite the poems, discarding several of them.³

The critical verdict on the sonnet sequence in particular is mixed. For Auden’s contemporaries like Evelyn Waugh and Randall Swingler, the poems were “awkward”, “dull”, and “flatter” than other poems he had written.⁴ While reviewers and critics such as Geoffrey Grigson and Edward

¹ Auden and Isherwood, “Second Thoughts,” in *Journey to A War* (London: Faber and Faber, rev. ed., 1973), p. 8.

² Letter to Mrs. A. E. Dodds, 5 September 1938, in *W.H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 288.

³ “Second Thoughts,” p. 7.

⁴ “Spectator,” 24 March 1939; “Daily Worker,” 29 March 1939, both in *W.H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden, (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 290 and p. 291, respectively.

Mendelson have praised the sequence, the general perception that the poems were a creative nadir for Auden has persisted even to the present day. In *Abroad*, his widely praised 1980 book on British travel writing between the wars, for example, Paul Fussell states unequivocally that the poems are “bad”, “strained and inert,” “some of Auden’s very worst things”.⁵ Similar negative evaluations of these poems are shared by such diverse contemporary critical figures as Jeffrey Hart, Robert Greacan, Justin Replogle, and Valentine Cunningham.⁶

The easy dismissal of Auden’s sonnet sequence is especially baffling to me as I found the poems to be raw, taut, sombrely musical in their use of a simplified syntax and vocabulary, and powerfully effective in their combination of general human types with localised particulars. When I started work on my creative project, trying to develop a body of poems that could address public themes in an intimate and accessible manner, I turned instinctively towards Auden’s sonnet sequence “In Time of War” for insights as to how this might be done. Perhaps because I was decades removed from the controversies surrounding the evolution of Auden’s highly politicised aesthetic in the 1930s, I believe it has been easier for me to recognise those qualities in his sonnet sequence that make it seem like such an audacious and profoundly successful poem. I am referring here to the sequence’s ambitious historical scope, the subtlety in its use of varied

⁵ *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars*, (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1980).

⁶ Jeffrey Hart, “How Good Was Auden” *The New Criterion*, 15 (Feb. 1997); Robert Greacan, *Books and Bookmen* (June 1969); Justin Replogle, *Auden’s Poetry* (London: Methuen & Co., 1969), pp. 128-129; Valentine Cunningham, *British Travel Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1988).

personae, the brilliance of its narrative compression, its primal emotional clarity in the encounter with political crisis, its moral logic, and also its moral weight— all qualities which seem so brilliant precisely because they are so distinct from current poetic practice. “In Time of War” arouses disdain partly because its politically engaged ethos—the fact that it expresses its political sympathies and has no qualms about universalising those sympathies quite unequivocally, even though it does so in a subtle manner—seems to be largely out of step with methods of poetry as they are practised today.

Crucially, Auden and Isherwood’s presumption in addressing the war in China while being honest and unapologetic about their limited knowledge of the local culture has earned them the ethical disapproval of several earnestly right-minded academics,⁷ who deem the writers’ engagement with China a failure. Such critics condemn Auden for having the temerity as a Western writer to pursue what they term a “total” representation of China.⁸ However, if anything, Auden’s work, both in the sonnet sequence and in the travel book he co-wrote with Isherwood, exposes the extent to which the scope of so much of our current literary criticism and poetic practice is narrowed by timidity and ideological over-determination. The travel book *Journey to a War*, and its sonnet sequence “In Time of War” in particular, still have many valuable lessons to teach

⁷ See Douglas Kerr’s “Journey to a War: ‘A Test for Men from Europe’”, in *W.H. Auden: A Legacy*, ed. David Garrett Izzo (West Cornwall, C.T.: Locust Hill, 2002) and Stuart Christie’s “Disorientations: Canon without Context in Auden’s ‘Sonnets from China,’” *Modern Language Association*, 120, 5 (2005), 1576-1587.

⁸ Christie, “Disorientatons,” 1583.

contemporary readers and poets about the use of lyric and narrative to address public themes and issues.

The hybrid nature of *Journey to a War*—the fact that it is a book which is not a coherent travel narrative so much as a sequence of disruptive texts in different genres—makes it easy to dismiss the book as a failed travel narrative. In “Sequence and Lyric Narrative in Auden and Isherwood’s *Journey to a War*,” Jason M. Coats argues that the authors purposely adopted a discontinuous hybrid form for their work in order to call attention to the book’s artifice: “Each fragmentary section is further fragmented into individual diary entries, photographs, and sonnets that record the authors’ impressions within a bounded span of time without any overt mediation to link those impressions together.”⁹ According to Coats, the interpretative role is left to the reader, who must discern meaning by consciously linking the book’s separate elements together. For Coats, *Journey to a War* is very much a postmodernist text, whose structure defers the travel book’s main task to make coherent sense of its authors’ experience of travel. In the case of this particular travel book, this task is even more important because Auden and Isherwood ostensibly seek to win support for China against Japanese military aggression. Yet Isherwood makes it clear from the book’s Foreword that the two friends lack the professional expertise, the background knowledge, and the special insights of local informants normally expected of travel writers:

⁹ Coats, “Sequence and Lyric Narrative in Auden and Isherwood’s *Journey to a War*,” *Narrative* 22, 2, (2014), 169.

This was our first journey to any place east of Suez. We spoke no Chinese, and possessed no special knowledge of Far Eastern affairs. It is hardly necessary, therefore, to point out that we cannot vouch for the accuracy of many statements made in this book. Some of our informants may have been unreliable, some merely polite, some deliberately pulling our leg. We can only record, for the benefit of the reader who has never been to China, some impression of what he would be likely to see, and of what kind of stories he would be likely to hear.¹⁰

From the very outset then, Isherwood and Auden are very much aware that they are more like *war tourists* than proper war correspondents.

Martha Gellhorn first coined the term “tourist of wars” to describe what then seemed to her the strange profession of war correspondent, but by the 1930s that profession already had the prestige of being a glamorous and serious vocation at the cutting edge of modern global events and of modern global crises.¹¹ Books like George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia* and Evelyn Waugh’s *Waugh in Abyssinia*, meanwhile, —both of them versions of that distinct sub-genre of travel literature called the war book— attested to the bond between war correspondent, journalist, and travel writer that had developed by the 1930s.¹² There was a huge market for travel writing in the 1930s and for the documentary practice in travel books of recording the weird sights and the harsh realities of the modern world.

Samuel Hynes claims that “the journey was the most insistent of ’thirties

¹⁰ W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* [1939] (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), p. 13. Subsequent references in parentheses are to this reprint edition.

¹¹ *The Face of War* [1959] (London: Granta Books, 1988), p. 15.

¹² Hugh Haughton, “Journeys to War: W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood and William Empson in China”, in *A Century of Travels in China: Critical Essays on Travel Writing from the 1840s to the 1940s*, ed. Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn (Hong Kong: Hong Kong U P, 2007) p. 148.

metaphors”, and he argues that “the travel books simply act out, in the real world, the basic trope of the generation” as “the perimeter of awareness and the community of disaster expanded—to Africa, to Mexico, to China, to the whole troubled world”.¹³

And so, if we turn once more to Isherwood’s Foreword, we can recognise that although it appears self-deprecating and modest, it is also a knowing and canny move. Later on in his travel diary, Isherwood will excitedly record his meetings with several well-known war correspondent “professionals”— the acclaimed travel writer and war correspondent Peter Fleming, the famous Hungarian war photographer and photojournalist Robert Capa, and the American leftist travel writer and propagandist, Agnes Smedley. Both Fleming and Smedley had a lot of professional expertise on China. Fleming was the author of the popular 1934 travel book *One’s Company*, an account of a journey through Southern China and across the Trans-Siberian Railway, and the 1936 book *News from Tartary*, chronicling his trip from Beijing to India during the Civil War. Smedley had already written *China’s Red Army Marches* in 1934 and would go on to write *China Fights Back: An American Woman with the Eighth Route Army* in 1938, a propagandistic account of the Sino-Japanese War. By continually contrasting himself and Auden with these travel writing “professionals” it is as if Isherwood were self-consciously underscoring the amateurish nature of his own “Travel-Diary.” In doing so,

¹³ *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976) p. 229.

he makes his readers aware of the kind of travel narrative *Journey to a War* is not. It is not the sort of heroic, masculine Orientalist travel book produced by the travel writer and war correspondent Peter Fleming; neither is it heroic, politically engaged propaganda reporting of the sort produced by the feminist activist writer Agnes Smedley.

Journey to a War's postmodernity is also revealed in the playfulness of its hybrid form. When Randall Swinger dismissed Isherwood and Auden for being “too pre-occupied by their own psychological plight to be anything but helplessly lost in the struggle of modern China” and for offering the reader nothing but “accurate superficialities about the course of the war,” he was especially damning of their playfulness: “the authors are playing: playing at being war correspondents, at being Englishmen, at being poets”.¹⁴ Paul Fussell was also very annoyed by what he termed the “jokiness” of Auden and Isherwood’s narrative: “the narrative is disturbingly discontinuous, interrupted by jokiness, nervousness over what literary mode is appropriate, and self-consciousness about the travel book genre itself”.¹⁵ For Marsha Bryant, the authors’ “jokiness” and lack of authenticity in terms of their hybrid text, their nationality, and their vocations are all examples of Auden and Isherwood’s “homographesis”, their camp undermining of traditional Western masculinity and national identity.¹⁶ In Bryant’s

¹⁴ “Daily Worker,” p. 291.

¹⁵ *Abroad* pp. 219-220.

¹⁶ “Documentary Dilemmas: Shifting Fronts in *Journey to a War*,” in *The Isherwood Century: Essays on the Life and Work of Christopher Isherwood*, ed. James J. Berg and Chris Freeman (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 179.

reckoning, everything this hybrid, self-reflexive travel book does is designed to scrutinise Western culture and expose the various ways that Western constructions of masculinity distort “first-hand” experience of China.¹⁷

Bryant cites the instances in the narrative when Auden and Isherwood are made conscious of their physical appearance or seem troubled by a sense of their own inauthenticity—when they make their first appearance at a Hankow press conference and the seasoned correspondents viewed them with “inquisitively hostile eyes” (p. 53), or when Peter Fleming greets them for the first time, “with the amused, self-conscious smile of a guest who arrives at a party in fancy dress” (p. 207). Isherwood offers a detailed description of Fleming’s almost theatrical style of dress—“In his khaki shirt and shorts, complete with golf-stockings, strong suede shoes, waterproof wrist-watch and Leica camera, he might have stepped straight from a London tailor’s window, advertising Gent’s Tropical Exploration Kit” (p. 207). For Bryant, it is as if Fleming were performing his role as hyper-masculine war correspondent. Bryant also pays a great deal of attention to Auden and Isherwood’s stay at Journey’s End—the mountain resort run by the Mr. Norris-like Charleton and staffed by houseboys in shorts.

These are richly comic scenes, and Bryant is surely correct to recognise their performative, theatrical aspects. However, by focusing so heavily on theatrical “drag” elements in the travel book, she glosses over

¹⁷ “Documentary Dilemmas,” p. 185.

or suppresses the book's many heterogeneous elements that do not seem to fit her sexually over-determined script. When Auden and Isherwood make their first appearance at the Hankow press conference, for example, and their insecurities cause them to sense the scrutiny of inquisitive hostile eyes, their anxiety is relieved by the entrance of their two uninhibited non-gay friends, the photojournalist, Robert Capa, and the Dutch cameraman, John Fernhout: "with their horse-play, bottom-pinching, exclamations of 'Eh, quoi! Salop!' and endless jokes about *les poules*, they had been the life and soul of the second class" (p. 53). The situation is suddenly transformed into a scene that is still very comic, but one that no longer offers a simplistic staging of 'Western masculinity'. While some of the scene's comedy may indeed derive from the reader's awareness of its author's anxiety over the possible discovery of his true sexual identity, the comedy here seems to be more broadly based on Isherwood and Auden's anxiety over not belonging due to their *professional inauthenticity*.

Bryant picks out the masculine figure of the war correspondent Peter Fleming to contrast with Auden and Isherwood, the gay impersonator war correspondents. With his heterosexuality and good looks, Fleming is a rather too obvious target for this camp debunking. He is transformed by Bryant into a kind of heterosexual stalking horse for the travel book's purported "homographesis"—the living embodiment of not merely the "conservative social order" but also all of Western patriarchy and Western imperialism. It is a very heavy load. It is also grossly unfair

and inaccurate; especially when we remember that the other major travel author Isherwood describes and uses to draw a contrast with his own travel book is in fact a woman—Agnes Smedley. However, when we look carefully once more at the comical description of Fleming, we recognise that Isherwood is not nearly so crude in his characterisation as Bryant would have us believe: Fleming is himself amused and self-conscious, as if conscious of a role he is playing. And later on, the travel narrative reveals the source of the initial tension between the war correspondent and the two pretenders: Isherwood and Auden were defensive towards him because of their own “anti-Etonianism and professional jealousy”, and he on his side had suspected they were “hundred per cent ideologists” (p. 214). The comedy is intensified as they climb uphill, “the Fleming Legend accompanying us like a distorted shadow” (p. 214). When they part from the war correspondent, Auden sums up the camp comedy of their shared expedition: “Well, we’ve been on a journey with Fleming in China, and now we’re real travellers for ever and ever. We need never go farther than Brighton again” (p. 232). There are many delightful registers to this little comedy—Isherwood and Auden’s ambivalence over public fame, their anxiety over their professional inauthenticity, their self-conscious awareness of the various ways in which their own travel narrative does not meet the conventional standards of a travel book, the question over what constitutes ‘real travel’ and who ‘real travellers’ are, the awareness that they have indeed been on a “journey with Fleming in China,” their

awareness that they are indeed “travellers” of a sort, their awareness of themselves as ‘political fellow-travellers’, their possible anxiety over homelessness, and also possibly their awareness of themselves as gay travellers—but to reduce Fleming to a mere stalking horse for a recuperative gay writing project, as if, naturally, such a writing project would be *all* that Auden and Isherwood would ultimately be interested in, surely does little justice to the subtlety of their narrative strategies.

Because her account of Auden and Isherwood’s hybrid travel book imposes a unitary and reductive programme onto their disjunctive narrative, Bryant suppresses or is simply oblivious to the instances where Isherwood attempts and does indeed achieve—at least momentarily—the kind of coherent, complete, and authoritative expression expected from a war report or travel book. When the two travellers first enter Hankow, “the real capital of war-time China,” for example, Isherwood addresses Auden’s familiar theme of History:

All kinds of people live in this town—Chiang Kai-shek, Agnes Smedley, Chou En-lai; generals, ambassadors, journalists, foreign naval officers, soldiers of fortune, airmen, missionaries, spies. Hidden here are all the clues which would enable an expert, if he could only find them, to predict the events of the next fifty years. History, grown weary of Shanghai, bored with Barcelona, has fixed her capricious interest upon Hankow. But where is she staying? Everybody boasts that he has met her, but nobody can exactly say. Shall we find her at the big hotel, drinking whisky with the journalists in the bar? Is she the guest of the Generalissimo, or the Soviet Ambassador? Does she prefer the headquarters of the Eighth Route Army, or the German military

advisers? Is she content with a rickshaw-coolies' hut?
(pp. 50-51)

We notice here how the passage allegorises history in a witty and camp way that recalls Auden's manner. It concisely compacts a representative range of occupational types—"generals, ambassadors, journalists, foreign naval officers, soldiers of fortune, airmen," etc.—in much the way Auden would. In the "Picture Commentary" which succeeds the "Travel-Diary" Auden will present a sequence of photographs of the range of different types encountered in the war. Indeed, the various types and the different places mentioned in Isherwood's passage give us a foretaste of the method of allegorical abstraction Auden will later use in the travel book's sonnet sequence. The passage reminds us of the way in which travel narrative seems to naturally approach the mode of allegory. It also serves paradoxically to undermine the authority of the travel writer by reminding the reader of the many characters and perspectives to be accommodated in a unified narrative of history.¹⁸ In essence here, the passage expresses the lessons about history that Auden had had to learn and re-learn over several years since the writing of his 1936 poem *Letter to Lord Byron*: the writer has no special privileged insight into the workings of history; his perspective is not much better or worse than anyone else's. While the historian may detect clues that will help him make prognostications about the future, the writer cannot.

¹⁸ Haughton, "Journeys to War," p. 152.

Another passage in which Isherwood seems to achieve the sort of coherent and authoritative expression one would expect in war reportage at the same time he skilfully undermines that very authority with his narrative's self-reflexiveness occurs in his description of a bombing raid over Hankow. The raid occurs the day after Auden and Isherwood's interview with Madame Chiang Kai-shek. The lead-up to the bombing raid establishes a tone that is oddly aesthetic: "The brilliant moon lit up the Yangtze and the whole of the darkened city" (p. 70). The passage itself continues this note of aestheticism, but it also conveys a real sense of terror:

A pause. Then, far off, the hollow, approaching roar of the bombers, boring their way invisibly through the dark. The dull, punching thud of bombs falling, near the airfield, out in the suburbs. The searchlights criss-crossed, plotting points, like dividers; and suddenly there they were, six of them, flying close together and high up. It was as if a microscope had brought dramatically into focus the bacilli of a fatal disease. They passed, bright, tiny, and deadly, infecting the night. The searchlights followed them right across the sky; guns smashed out; tracer-bullets bounced up towards them, falling hopelessly short, like slow-motion rockets. The concussions made you catch your breath; the watchers around us on the roof exclaimed softly, breathlessly: 'Look! look! there!' It was as tremendous as Beethoven, but *wrong*—a cosmic offence, an insult to the whole of Nature and the entire earth. I don't know if I was frightened. Something inside me was flapping about like a fish. If you looked closely you could see dull red sparks, as the Japanese planes spat back. Over by the aerodrome a great crimson blossom of fire burst from the burning hangars. In ten minutes it was all over, and they had gone. (p. 71)

The passage combines at once aesthetic pleasure, the author's self-parodying anti-heroic terror, and precise, detailed reportage. But what really transforms this into something other than mere war reportage is the oddly disturbing yet effective projection of metaphor onto the details: "It was as if a microscope had brought... into focus the bacilli of a fatal disease. They passed...infecting the night" (p. 71). The narrative projects poetry onto the scene. It is hard not to detect Auden's hand and influence in this description. Indeed, Auden will himself use precisely the same metaphor and the same image of fatal infection in Sonnet XIV of his sonnet sequence—"Yes, we are going to suffer, now; the sky/ Throbs like a feverish forehead; pain is real;/ The groping searchlights suddenly reveal/ The little natures that will make us cry..." (p. 272). This is the sonnet in which Auden first transports his reader into the present-day horror of the war. Isherwood's passage reminds us that we should not necessarily use the distinction between prose and poetry to distinguish between the two authors: it suggests that, in this collaborative project, Isherwood and Auden have combined to create a third, or a corporate implied author.

But most crucially it suggests the way in which, in this hybrid travel book, each of the different components or genres gains its full moral and interpretative weight when read in relation to what precedes it. Recognising this, offers us the possibility of a much richer, more suggestive reading of Auden's sonnet sequence, "In Time of War", which

succeeds the “Travel-Diary” and “Picture Commentary.” According to Coats, the main difficulty in trying to analyse and interpret the structure of Auden’s “In Time of War” stems from *A Journey to War*’s composition out of different genres and their repetition of the same narratives. Many of the events and personages in the “Travel-Diary” will be illustrated and named in the “Picture Commentary,” and then many of those same events and personages will be used and transformed by Auden in the sonnet sequence. The “Commentary,” which concludes the travel book, will explain in detail the events and the character types in the sonnets. (But the “Commentary” has much less to offer in terms of this point than the other parts of the hybrid travel book.)¹⁹ Coats dubs *Journey to a War* a lyric-narrative hybrid. The travel book’s hybrid status underlines Auden’s sonnet sequence’s break with the sonnet tradition, which was traditionally written solely for lyric ends.²⁰ “In Time of War” uses the conventional and formal properties of poetry to move the reader through the text and condition his or her judgements about the text. Coats argues that poetry and narrative not only co-exist but that we also need to review our understanding of what happens in the lyric to properly reflect on what happens in lyric-narrative hybrids that occur in poems like “In Time of War”.²¹ In Auden and Isherwood’s hybrid travel book Coats detects

¹⁹ In his Preface to the revised 1973 edition of *Journey to a War*, Auden admitted that the “Commentary’s” explanation was “preachy” and most probably unnecessary (“Second Thoughts,” p. 7). As Mendelson states in his book *Early Auden*, the “Commentary” merely expands wordily on the sonnet sequence, while drastically simplifying the sonnets’ moral complexity (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 358.

²⁰ Coats, “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 175.

²¹ “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 175.

suggestions for a reading practice that is more “vertical” than horizontal; that is, a method of reading that concentrates more on comparing phrases, images, or tropes between remote elements in a longer sequence, or across several lines of poetry than on the links within the local rhetorical boundaries of a single component of a given text.²² Hugh Haughton makes a similar point when he describes the effect on the reading experience when Auden thoroughly revised the sonnet sequence as “Sonnets from China”, and then in a later edition reprinted the revised text without the photographs:

the sequence loses much of its power. Like so much of Auden’s best work of the 1930s, including the documentary poetry of “Night Mail,” the verse drama, and travel books, it is occasional and collaborative, mixing poetry with other media. When juxtaposed, as originally designed against Isherwood’s prose and the “Photographic Commentary,” the sequence generates an electric charge it does not have on its own. (p. 155)

With the broader understanding of lyricality that the lyric-narrative hybrid text suggests, our judgements about *Journey to a War* and Auden’s sonnet sequence “In Time of War” must remain provisional or delayed until the lyric span of the book is complete.

The conclusion of the “Travel-Diary” presents yet another instance in which Isherwood demonstrates the authority of the travel narrative’s representation at the same time he also seems to unravel it. Throughout the “Travel-Diary” he records his and Auden’s constant and frequently

²² Coats, “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 175.

comical attempts to get to the war front, in the north or the southeast of the country. Instead of a straightforward movement towards the battle zones, the narrative gets bogged down in a meandering and frequently self-parodying chronology that takes the writers from embassy parties to railway sleeping cars, to exclusive resorts and mission stations, to consulates and universities, and eventually to the International Settlement in Shanghai. The travel diary ends with the travellers' self-denunciation and confession: "And the well-meaning tourist, the liberal and humanitarian intellectual, can only wring his hands over all this and exclaim: 'Oh dear, things are so awful here—so complicated. One doesn't know where to start'" (p. 253). The purported mission of the travel book—to convey a coherent and true sense of the reality of the Sino-Japanese war to its Western readers—fails.

Journey to a War offers no narrative satisfaction to the reader. There are no causally linked time-elements, and so the text's ultimate meaning remains ambiguous.²³ That same sense of irresolution and ambiguity, the same sense that the authors have not fully delivered on their mission to arouse sympathy for the Chinese and fully captivate the reader through a forceful and satisfying narrative is replicated four times over through the book's four main parts. What can we say of a book that fails to successfully coordinate all of its different elements through all four of its different component genres? What can we call such a book that employs a parataxis of fragments on purpose? The critic of narrativity,

²³ Coats, "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 170.

Brian McHale, would dub the book's four iterations of failed narrative "weak narrativity".²⁴ In his richly suggestive article "Weak Narrativity: The Case of Avant-Garde Narrative Poetry," McHale points out the deeply problematic nature of the narrative in lyric poetry. McHale's discussion provides us with the opportunity to do the review of what happens in the poetic lyric that Coats suggested we do two paragraphs above.

The lyric is usually regarded as being generically resistant to narrative.²⁵ Jason Coats explains this resistance by reminding us that the lyric is best known for its suggestion of intimacy between poet and audience: "That intimacy has long been understood as the convention of lyric instantaneity".²⁶ Coats is referring here to the convention that the lyric utterance takes place in the moment of utterance and that no time passes over the course of the lyric. Time passes as the reader reads the lyric, but it does not pass within the world of the lyric, no matter how long the lyric is. In a lyric sequence, therefore, the convention of instantaneity makes each lyric into a discrete moment, followed by another discrete moment. This, for Coats, is reminiscent of cinematic montage—the technique of producing a composite whole from fragments of pictures or texts.²⁷ Each element in the montage replaces another, prompting a rereading of the sequence. This is the experience which results in the "vertical reading" I

²⁴ Brian McHale, "Weak Narrativity: The Case of Avant-Garde Narrative Poetry", *Narrative*, 9, 2, (2001), 161.

²⁵ McHale, "Weak Narrativity", 161.

²⁶ Coats, "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 171.

²⁷ "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 172.

have mentioned above. The momentary quality is never collapsed into a narrative continuum.

According to James Phelan in *Narrative as Rhetoric*, though, the difference between narrative and lyric depends on the reader's ability to respond to "textual content and rhetorical utterance".²⁸ Lyric promises to allow the reader to inhabit the speaker's state of mind and to thereby project himself into the poem. The reader judges the speaker's mind after the lyric moment has passed. In the narrative, the reader's internal judgements of characters as the reader makes his or her way through the text are necessary, but in lyric such judgements have to be suspended until after the lyric moment. In lyric, the object of study is the way somebody is depicting an individual subjectivity, and the readers' engagement with the poetic text requires the reader's identification with that subjectivity.²⁹

McHale explains that narrativity in lyric poetry has been problematic for a long time, but that longer poetic genres, like the epic, have long used narrative modes of organisation.³⁰ With the advent of modernism, however, a crisis developed in the long poem: modernism "interdicts narrative modes of organization and submits the long-poem genre to a general 'lyricization'".³¹ If we think of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*—the paradigmatic modernist long poem—or Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, we notice

²⁸ *Narrative as Rhetoric: Technique, Audiences, Ethics, Ideology* (Columbus: The Ohio State U P, 1996), p. 27.

²⁹ Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric* p. 173.

³⁰ "Weak Narrativity", 161-162.

³¹ McHale, "Weak Narrativity", 162.

that the narrative, while not entirely banished, has now been reduced to another level; hovering in the background as the ghost-like “master narrative”.³² Narrative, while nowhere present *in* the text, still provides the text with its ideological and to some extent its formal coherence.

The arrival of postmodernism reintroduced the use and presence of the narrative to poetry; however, this was narrativity with a difference.³³ Modernist poets had reacted against the tradition of the narrative long-poem, but postmodernists, on the other hand, reacted against the modernist reaction. Of course, postmodern poets could not simply return to pre-modernist styles of narrative long-poems; they instead developed a variety of ways to tell stories without actually inscribing these stories within master narratives.³⁴ McHale outlines some of the most prominent of these postmodernist narrative strategies: there are parody and pastiche—he cites Edward Dorn’s *Gunslinger* and Kenneth Koch’s *Seasons on Earth*—and there is the method of *evoking* narrative forms of coherence without actually resorting to a narrative, or without turning to parody or pastiche. To illustrate this latter strategy, McHale cites Lyn Hejinian’s 1991 book *Oxota*, which is subtitled *A Short Russian Novel*.³⁵ The book consists of 270 unrhymed or sporadically rhymed crypto-sonnets which Hejinian calls “chapters”. *Oxota*’s model, McHale informs us, is Pushkin’s verse-novel, *Evgeny Onegin*.³⁶ But the Hejinian book does not have a “main” narrative;

³² McHale, “Weak Narrativity”, 162.

³³ McHale, “Weak Narrativity”, 162.

³⁴ McHale, “Weak Narrativity”, 162.

³⁵ Lyn Hejinian, *Oxota: A Short Russian Novel*, (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 1991).

³⁶ McHale, “Weak Narrativity”, 162.

it contains a variety of “minor” narrative genres—anecdotes, gossip, jokes, dream narratives, and narrative ekphrases of paintings. On top of this, the book fragments all of these minor narratives and spreads them throughout different non-contiguous lines and chapters in the poems.³⁷ Hejinian leaves it up to the reader to put the narratives back together and decide which fragments are related to each other: “the text refuses to cooperate with us in that task, as it might have done by indicating relevant continuities ... of space, time, or agent from fragment to fragment”.³⁸ For McHale, then, *Oxofa* is an instance of “weak narrativity”: it “involves precisely, telling stories ‘poorly,’ distractedly, with much irrelevance and indeterminacy, in such a way as to *evoke* narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it; in short, having one’s cake and eating it too”.³⁹

When we turn to the opening of Auden’s sonnet sequence “In Time of War”, we confront a sonnet that does not seem to have anything to do with the Sino-Japanese War or McHale’s discussion of postmodernist narrative strategies:

So from the years the gifts were showered; each
Ran off with his at once into his life:
Bee took the politics that make a hive,
Fish swam as fish, peach settled into peach.

And were successful at the first endeavour;
The hour of birth their only time at college,
They were content with their precocious knowledge,
And knew their station and were good for ever.

³⁷ McHale, “Weak Narrativity”, 162.

³⁸ McHale, “Weak Narrativity”, 162.

³⁹ McHale, “Weak Narrativity”, 165.

Till finally there came a childish creature
 On whom the years could model any feature,
 And fake with ease a leopard or a dove;

Who by the lightest wind was changed and shaken,
 And looked for truth and was continually mistaken,
 And envied his few friends and chose his love. (p.259)

There is a narrative here, but it does not seem to have any direct relationship to Isherwood's "Travel-Diary" or to what has come immediately before in Auden's "Picture Commentary." Coats argues that Auden's sonnets are best understood in an order roughly tracking with the photographs in the commentary; that is, as a chronological sequence as opposed to a meaningful sequence.⁴⁰ But if we look at the pictures in order to help with our understanding of the sonnets, our expectations of coherence still seem to be frustrated. There are 65 black and white plates in the "Picture Commentary." The first ten are formal portraits of public figures, beginning with "The Chiangs" and other leading Chinese figures, such as Chou En-lai, and then descending in importance to army officers. The figures who have more social status have their names written in parenthesis beside their function: Chou En-lai is the representative "communist," and Du Yueh-seng is captioned as "capitalist."

Auden has grouped all of the photos under different major headings: the first six photos of government officials, Chou En-lai, and the businessman Du Yueh-seng are grouped under the heading "United Front." The next major categories are "Soldiers and Civilians" and "War

⁴⁰ Coats, "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 180.

Zone.” Most of the photographs are grouped under “Soldiers and Civilians.” The category contains pictures of provincial governors, army officers, and then unnamed ordinary Chinese people. There is a photo of “Men”—a group of four ordinary Chinese conscripts. Then, there’s a picture of a group of child soldiers standing in a courtyard and in a lorry, which Auden sardonically captions “With legs.” The next photo shows a teenaged boy smiling under which is written, “Without.” Underneath these two pictures Auden has written the caption, “Children in Uniform.”

Other photos which are grouped under the heading “Soldiers and Civilians” show portraits of people who are simply captioned according to their profession or function: “Railway Engineer,” “Press Bureau,” “Chauffeur,” “Reporters,” “Intellectual,” and “Coolies.” Once again, the more distinguished figures are named as well given a profession. Peter Fleming—labelled “Special Correspondent—poses in profile, seemingly deep in thought, with his hand on his pipe. In the plate beside him, Robert Capa—Press Photographer—stands and gazes confrontationally at the camera. There are also pictures of an “Ambassador,” an “Advisor,” missionaries, (Western) doctors, and then we move on to the “War Zone.” Above the caption “In the Trenches,” there’s a photo of Auden looking for all the world like a tourist—in tweeds and a tie, with a slight smile curling his lips, while a group of Chinese soldiers work unconcernedly in the background, and in the foreground, a partially shaded Chinese soldier,

stands beside him and gazes at the poet from under his cap; whether the gaze is derisive or admiring is not quite clear.

From there, we move onto photos that become steadily more disturbing—a static-looking “Japanese front line” is followed by “Enemy planes overhead,” and then stark photos of body remains, captioned with almost allegorical captions—“The Innocent” and “The Guilty.” There are pictures of bombed buildings, war victims in hospital, refugees, passengers, “Train parasites,” and pictures depicting the cramped living conditions among the ruins —above the caption “La Condition Humaine.” Several people in the photos continue with what they’re doing, seemingly oblivious to Auden’s camera, while others stare directly at him—two boys smile, and a man peers at him quizzically. There are then two stills from *Fight to the Last*, a Chinese war film of the time. The very last plate is a portrait showing a young Chinese soldier standing and gazing thoughtfully at something or someone beyond the frame. The photo is captioned, “The Unknown Soldier.”

The two most disturbing photos under the “War Zone” heading are “The Innocent” and “The Guilty.” “The Innocent” shows a dead man lying on a wooden pallet; his body is covered in a rough blanket or quilt and the top half of his head concealed beneath a bloody cloth. His mouth gapes open. The feet of another corpse lies on a pallet beside him. In “The Guilty” we see a man’s body that had been buried in the ground has been partially dug up. The man’s naked white arm is stretched out along the

ground. The body has no face; we only see remnants of the back of the man's skull. The potent captions point us more blatantly than most of the others to the world outside the "Picture Commentary." Because of its repetition of key images that we find in the two photos—the corpse on a pallet, a quilt, and a skull—there is a sonnet in the sonnet sequence that seems most closely linked to the two terrible images—XVIII:

Far from the heart of culture he was used:
Abandoned by his general and his lice,
Under a padded quilt he closed his eyes
And vanished. He will not be introduced

When this campaign is tidied into books:
No vital knowledge perished in his skull;
His jokes were stale; like wartime, he was dull;
His name is lost for ever like his looks.

He neither knew nor chose the Good, but taught us,
And added meaning like a comma, when
He turned to dust in China that our daughters

Be fit to love the earth, and not again
Disgraced before the dogs; that, where are waters,
Mountains and houses, may be also men. (p. 276)

Here the fragments of narrative the reader can detect in the photographs momentarily cohere into a more complete narrative clearly connected to the Sino-Japanese War. The subject of the sonnet is still vague—he's just a "he"—but his story is particularised. It is the story of one ordinary man, not a public official or an officer, who dies abjectly, and whose individual story—not even a footnote in the wider historical narrative of the war—will simply be forgotten: "He will not be introduced/ When this campaign is tidied into books..."

He was most likely a common soldier, but the second stanza introduces another possibility: “No vital knowledge perished in his skull...” Was this man a spy, perhaps? The use of the word “skull” here to describe the man’s lack of any information of strategic value refers back to the photograph of the corpse, but it is also reminiscent of an incident Isherwood recounts in the “Travel-Diary.” The two writers go strolling around a village near the front, when they see a dog on a waste plot of ground gnawing at a human arm. The local Chinese explain that the arm belonged to a spy who had been executed and then buried in a shallow grave there. The dog had dug up the corpse halfway out of the ground. Adding a note of black humour to the scene, Isherwood reveals, “It was rather a pretty dog with a fine, bushy tail. I remembered how we had patted it when it came begging for scraps of our supper the evening before” (p. 112).

According to their Chinese informants, the alleged spy, a poor peasant, had been so naïve as to simply ask a Chinese general’s cook where his master’s tent was. Isherwood explains that many Chinese peasants were starving and were willing to work for the Japanese because they paid well. If we go back to the two photographs, then, the captions “The Innocent” and “The Guilty” become even more ambiguous now because they could equally apply to ordinary Chinese soldiers or sad wretches like the peasant spy in Isherwood’s anecdote. The dog in Isherwood’s anecdote also makes its reappearance in the sonnet’s final

stanza, only this time respectfully removed from the corpse it had previously violated: the soldier's death had "added meaning like a comma," because it defended "our daughters" who will "Be fit to love the earth, and not again/Disgraced before the dogs" (p. 276). Now, it is the "daughters'" possible violation before the dogs that has been prevented through the death of the "used" and "abandoned" common soldier/peasant.

Once again here we see how images, ideas, and figures in one of the hybrid travel book's component parts or genres are dispersed and repeated throughout the other parts and genres. The images, ideas, and figures of the "Travel-Diary" reappear in the "Picture Commentary's" narrative fragments, and these will often make their reappearance woven into Auden's sonnets. I have used the term "narrative fragments" to describe what is contained in the "Picture Commentary's" photographic images because the snippets of narrative are dispersed in a proliferation of minor narratives. It is possible to recognise in Auden's "Picture Commentary", then, the presence of what Brian McHale calls "weak narrativity"—"telling stories 'poorly,' distractedly, with much [apparent] irrelevance and indeterminacy, in such a way as to evoke narrative coherence while at the same time withholding commitment to it and undermining confidence in it".⁴¹ Above, in my introduction to Auden's "In Time of War", I wondered how the sonnet sequence could be related to

⁴¹ "Weak Narrativity", 165.

both the “Picture Commentary,” which immediately precedes it, and to the “Travel-Diary.”

Coats had argued that Auden’s sonnets are best understood as a chronological sequence, in an order roughly tracking with the photographs in the commentary rather than being a meaningful sequence.⁴² But, as we have seen, the “Picture Commentary” continually confounds and destabilises our expectations of narrative coherence. For Coats, the key aesthetic question is whether or not *Journey to a War* can be read as if its fragments are incoherent or disjunctive (as a montage or a collage).⁴³ This question is related to the hybrid travel book’s overall politics and what James Phelan would call its “ethics of rhetorical purpose”.⁴⁴ This question cannot be answered until the book is concluded and the reader can make a full judgement about the implied.⁴⁵ Coats explains that the reader progresses through poetic sequences and lyric narratives through two simultaneous processes: the implied reader’s provisional judgements of the central characters of the sequence, and the reader’s constant reappraisal of the relations among the poem’s different segments and components (including the author and the reader).⁴⁶ These processes are central to the lyric-narrative hybridity of many poems as well as to Auden’s “In Time of War”. The reader’s constant reappraisal of the relations among

⁴² “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 180.

⁴³ “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 177.

⁴⁴ *Experiencing Fiction: Judgments, Progressions, and the Rhetorical Theory of Narrative* (Columbus: The Ohio State U. P., 2007), p. 11.

⁴⁵ Coats, “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 177.

⁴⁶ “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 177.

the poem's components is vital to any understanding of the implied author behind a poem's persona.

“So from the years the gifts were showered; each/ Ran off with his at once into life,” (p. 259) begins the first sonnet in the sequence. It comes directly after the last photo in the “Picture Commentary,” depicting the “Unknown Soldier.” The photo accompanying this caption shows a young Chinese soldier gazing reflectively into the distance, his thoughts inscrutable to Auden and to the reader. The words “Unknown Soldier” evoke the numerous memorials and tombs built to commemorate anonymous fallen soldiers in the First World War and countless other wars since. The “Unknown Soldier”—both the tomb and the war poem—is a legacy from the First World War that has been repeated and become so generalised that it has become a sentimental cliché, almost a kind of macabre kitsch. But Auden's simple, un-histrionic photo of the Chinese soldier has the effect of placing the emphasis on the first part of the caption—“Unknown.” Just as the man's thoughts are unknowable so also is this Chinese man to Auden and to his Western readers. The hybrid travel book's “ethics of rhetorical purpose” had purportedly been based on the premise of presenting to the Western reader a real picture of what was going on in the Sino-Japanese War. But we have seen the extent to which Auden and Isherwood adopt narrative strategies in *Journey to a War* which help to continually frustrate that expectation. Auden's photo of the “Unknown Soldier” likewise seems to emphasise the unknowability of its

Chinese subject rather than seeking to stress some sort of kinship. If anything, the photograph seems more suggestive of the primal and strange surface of elemental difference, or the border. The “Unknown Soldier” resonates not so much as a particular unknown Chinese soldier so much as a kind of primal figure, a primal signifier—alien and remote, and yet at the same time quite familiar.

And it is this sense of encountering a primal, strange, yet familiar scene that seems to be at play in Auden’s Sonnet I of the sequence: “So from the years the gifts were showered; each/ Ran off with his at once into his life:/ Bee took the politics that make a hive, / fish swam as fish, peach settled into peach” (p. 259, lines 1 – 4). The sonnet displays the contrast between various creatures and humans, a contrast that had often fascinated Auden in many of his previous poems. He is reactivating here the Creation myth. The sonnet’s frequently rough, inexact rhymes—“life”/ “hive” in the first stanza, and “endeavour” / “for ever” in the second—have the effect of giving a raw, unfinished quality to the sonnets, that is antithetical to the smoother tones of the love poems usually reserved for the sonnet form. The creatures and the plant life mentioned in the sonnet are defined at their first emergence by their initial actions, and they act only once: “And were successful at the first endeavour;/ The hour of birth their only time at college, / They were content with their precocious knowledge, / And knew their station and were good for ever”. Humankind is only introduced long after the creatures, in the sonnet’s sestet: “Till

finally there came a childish creature/ On whom the years could model any feature” (lines 9 – 11). In contrast to the other creatures, humans cannot seem to settle on a single action or identity: “a childish creature/ On whom the years could model any feature,/ And fake with ease a leopard or a dove;/ Who by the lightest wind was changed and shaken” (lines 9 – 12).

This human capacity for constant change and adaptability is what sets humans apart from the other creatures. Man is the creature who constantly makes the wrong decisions, who inquires, who envies, makes misjudgements, and chooses his own love: “And looked for truth and was continually mistaken, / And envied his few friends and chose his love” (lines 13 – 14).

We remember that throughout his poetry in the 1930s Auden had frequently probed the issue of human agency and free will in the face of the forces of instinctual nature, evolution, and history. Here, Auden suggests that human agency is most frequently expressed through humankind’s capacity to err and do wrong. Man, the subject in this first sonnet, is a “childish creature,” but how should we treat this subject in terms of being a ‘poetic subject’? Do we read the subject of this sonnet as a ‘lyric subject’? We remember from the discussion above that in lyric, according to Jason Phelan, the poetic subject typically requires the reader’s engagement if not identification with that subjectivity.⁴⁷ The lyric promises to allow the reader to inhabit that subjectivity or the speaker’s

⁴⁷ *Narrative as Rhetoric* p. 173 (see p. 18 above).

state and thereby project himself into the poem. The reader only judges that subjectivity or the speaker's mind after the lyric moment has passed. In addition, in a lyric sequence, the convention of instantaneity makes each constituent lyric a discrete moment that impacts every lyric in the sequence.⁴⁸ But all of this is complicated in Sonnet I by the fact that the speaker here is relating a narrative. In lyric, the object of study is the way somebody is depicting an individual subjectivity, and not usually on the presentation of somebody else's story. The sonnet here matches the expectations of prose narrative. According to Coats,

not much distinguishes the rhetorical conduit between a lyric's speaker and addressee from that of a character narrator and narratee. We do not hesitate to locate moments within prose narratives in which a narrator deviates from norms established by an implied author. In such cases no mediating agency justifies a theoretical distinction between a narrative requirement and a lyric forestalling of judgement.⁴⁹

In the first sonnet of "In Time of War," then, Auden's speaker introduces man as a "childish creature" and invites the reader's judgement of him along the same lines as rhetorical narratology. Interestingly, while the epithet for man, "childish creature," matches the immediacy with which "the gifts" are "showered" upon each of the other creatures and suggests, like them, the instantaneity of the emergence of the species rather than an evolutionary force, the sestet's second line makes it clear that man's

⁴⁸ Phelan, *Narrative as Rhetoric* p. 172.

⁴⁹ "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 173.

difference emerges through the passage of time or history: “On whom the years could model any feature” (line 10). His crucial flaws of inauthenticity, dishonesty, and self-deception are in fact revealed through the passage of centuries: the character flaw that the sestet reveals uncoils a chain of moral consequences connecting bad ancient choices with present-day effects: “Who by the lightest wind was changed and shaken,/ And looked for truth and was continually mistaken” (lines 12 – 13).

What we have here is not a lyric subjectivity so much as the history of humanity as if it were compressed into the life of a single individual. Over the years, critics have habitually remarked on Auden’s tendency towards allegory through his use of human types, but Sonnet I shows Auden achieving a metaphoric connection between the general case and the particular by portraying a figure that is not merely allegorical. As Mendelson writes of the figures in the sonnet sequence as a whole, “their relations with others are not allegorical relations, and not quite exemplary, since their experience is more extensive than any exemplar’s could be”.⁵⁰ Allegorical texts are typically composed in such a way that their written sense refers to an “other” sense, often political or moral, outside the text. But in this sonnet the figure’s narrative may or may not have a hidden political or moral meaning; it is an extensive history of an individual, who experiences centuries of change in one lifetime. The reader is openly invited to judge this figure. The figure’s falsehoods and impersonations in the first half of the sestet approach the artifice of artistic representation—

⁵⁰ *Later Auden* p. 349.

“could model any feature, / And fake with ease a leopard or a dove,” but, over the centuries covered by the end of the sonnet they are transformed into a perpetually doomed search for truth and for love. The falsehoods and impersonations are transformed into vulnerability and self-deception that evoke pity rather than condemnation: “And looked for truth and was continually mistaken, / And envied his few friends and chose his love”.

We can also sense here the sonnet’s prompting of the reader’s judgement of the speaking persona separate from Auden himself: after all, Auden had been the poet who throughout the 30s had tried to commit himself to a politicised poetics, wedded to the “truths” of history and continually questing for an abiding love. One senses here, one of the many hints that Coats notices in *Journey to a War*, that the corporate implied author was deeply troubled by the poem’s political-rhetorical situation.⁵¹

In the second sonnet, the “childish creature,” that had emerged as the purported ‘lyric subject’ or main narrative agent at the end of the Sonnet I, is transformed into “They”: “They wondered why the fruit had been forbidden” (p. 260, line 1). For Coats, the indeterminacy of the antecedents—“he,” “they,” and “we”—in “In Time of War” makes the progress of the sonnet sequence quite difficult to describe: “Some pronouns refer to agents, some to victims of violence, without the poem heralding any shift in focus”.⁵² Sonnet II revisits the biblical tale of Adam

⁵¹ “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 174.

⁵² “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 178.

and Eve's stealing of the fruit from the Tree of Life. Once again, the events in the lives of the sonnet's lyric subjects span several centuries: "They wept and quarrelled: freedom was so wild. / In front, maturity, as he ascended, / Retired like a horizon from the child" (lines 9 – 11).

Interestingly, here in the sonnet's sestet, the pronoun antecedent "They" gives way to the emergence of "the child," reminding the reader once more that this narrative is in fact a condensed history of that "childish creature," man and his civilisation. This sonnet, however, presents the movement of mankind from the psychic wholeness implied by the primal garden as a regression: "the memory faded / Of all they'd learnt" (lines 5 – 6), and instead of growing wiser in his freedom he becomes "the child" (line 11). The last half of the sonnet's sestet presents a condensed and almost Blakean judgement of human civilisation: "The dangers and the punishments grew greater; / And the way back by angels was defended / Against the poet and the legislator" (lines 12 – 14). The "way back" here is the human quest for a return to psychic wholeness, or what Auden would call in his later poetry, the Just City. The "poet" and the "legislator" are the speaker's shorthand for the arts and statecraft—the civilizational attainments with which the "child" or man has attempted to win his way back to the Garden. But, Sonnet II's speaker suggests, it is impossible for humankind to achieve psychic wholeness and content even with these attainments. Man is "the child," beset by an increasing range of hazards and psychic punishments. The civilizational progress that the sonnet

sequence tracks reveals at each stage humans undone by error and disappointment.

Yet if “In Time of War” presents a kind of history, in which events in Christian time have equal status with social and economic developments, the sonnet sequence can also be read as a kind of genealogy, in which Auden traces the lineage of certain key human types. Sonnet III, for example, attempts to do what the conventional lyric is expected to do by inhabiting the subjectivity of its lyric subject:

Only a smell had feelings to make known,
 Only an eye could point in a direction;
 The fountain’s utterance was itself alone;
 The bird meant nothing: that was his projection

Who named it as he hunted it for food.
 (p. 261, lines 1 - 5).

The sonnet is at once suggestive of the inception of poetry through the act of naming and of the emergence of written language itself. The protagonist here is a sort of Proto-Poet giving meaning to the phenomenological world through the act of naming. In an essay Auden wrote years later, “Making, Knowing and Judging,” he speculated on the origin of poetry: poetry’s inception began when Adam, the Proto-Poet, named the things of the world.⁵³ The sonnet shows that the Proto-Poet’s initiation of the poet’s characteristic act of naming is *not* merely one of mimetically referencing animals and things in the world; he brings poetry into being by giving

⁵³ *Dyer’s Hand* [1962] (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 46.

names to those concepts in *his mind*: “The bird meant nothing: that was his projection / Who named it as he hunted it for food” (line 4).

The Proto-Poet is prolific in creating the things of his world through his acts of nominalism, and yet these creations are a kind of plague which engender his enslavement: “They bred like locusts till they hid the green / And edges of the world: and he was abject, / And to his own creation became subject” (lines 9 – 11). By the end of the sonnet, the reader is again confronted with the lyric subject’s envy and self-hatred: “And shook with hate for things he’d never seen, / And knew of love without love’s proper object” (lines 12 – 13).

But it is an earlier essay of Auden’s, called “Writing,” written for a children’s encyclopaedia in 1932, which suggests the true terror and loneliness that afflicts this poet-artist type. In that essay Auden had described the primordial emergence of self-consciousness and sense of isolation amongst human individuals—from other humans and from nature.⁵⁴ Language, he asserted, arose out of humans’ efforts to “bridge over the gulf” dividing humans from other humans and to restore wholeness. But the poet’s written language rises from a different source—from a sense of separateness in time, “of I’m here to-day, but I shall be dead to-morrow, and you will be active in my place...”⁵⁵ Writing attempts to do the impossible—join the living with the dead. The sonnet exposes the raw loneliness of that impossible yearning, as it is represented as the

⁵⁴ W.H. Auden, “Writing” [1932], in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 305.

⁵⁵ Auden, “Writing”, pp. 305-306.

poet's insatiable desire for something he cannot even conceptualise as an object: "And knew of love without love's proper object, / and was oppressed as he had never been" (line 14). The sonnet establishes the line of descent of the poet here in the figure of this Proto-Poet. And here, at the moment of the poet's inception, the sonnet reveals that the poet's dream of wholeness—through language and through love—will be inevitably and endlessly defeated.

The protagonist in Sonnet III becomes subject "to his own creation," and the "He" in IV is "imprisoned in possession" (p. 262, line 1). Are they the same person? Clearly, they are not. Where the protagonist in III lives among others and has the scope of an entire world within his grasp, IV's protagonist seems to be an isolated denizen of nature: "The seasons stood like guards about his ways, / The mountains chose the mother of his children, / And like a conscience the sun ruled his days" (p. 262, lines 2 – 4). His humble rural existence is contrasted with the rapid, "unnatural course" of his "young cousins in the city," who "Believed in nothing but were easy-going" (lines 5 – 7). Centuries pass, and by the sonnet's sestet, therefore, these figures have coalesced into the archetypal and fairly simplistic juxtaposition between country dweller and urbanite. Yet, Auden also infuses the sestet with the subtle, multi-layered edge of the sonnet sequence's special world:

And he changed little,
But took his colour from the earth,
And grew in likeness to his sheep and cattle.
The townsman thought him miserly and simple,

The poet wept and saw in him the truth,
 And the oppressor held him up as an example.
 (Lines 9 – 14)

The country dweller becomes at once the embodiment of the peasant and the *lumpenproletariat*, a mass figure, an underclass figure, and—for the poet and other artist figures—a kind of Noble Savage projection. Then, as if to prepare the reader for the altogether more sinister protagonist who will be unveiled in the next sonnet, the last line presents the politically expedient perspective of the fascist tyrant, who sees the underclass figure's powerlessness and docility as ideal.

In Sonnet V, the sequence shifts focus, the pronoun 'he' is now transformed from a victim into a powerful agent:

His generous bearing was a new invention:
 For life was slow; earth needed to be careless:
 With horse and sword he drew the girls' attention;
 He was the Rich, the Bountiful, the Fearless.
 (p. 263, lines 1 – 4)

The transformation here of the substantive content of adjectives—"rich," "bountiful," and "fearless"—into capitalised nouns is of course characteristic of Auden's style and his proclivity for allegory. But his allegorising seems almost obtrusive here. Does it work? Does it help convince the reader of this protagonist's plausibility? When this kind of miniature allegory is combined with the sonnet sequence's vague, indeterminate protagonist and the constant shifting of its pronoun antecedents—"he," "they," and "we"—it is very easy to suspect that Auden

is not quite in control of his poetic means and, because his sonnet sequence relies overwhelmingly on this allegorising technique and far less so on the various other tools in Auden's rhetorical arsenal, to dismiss "In Time of War" as simply bad poetry. As I have said in the introduction to this chapter, this is precisely what some contemporary critics have done.

Justin Replogle, for example, sees "In Time of War" as "the low point of Auden's career".⁵⁶ Its poetry lacks what he calls "verbal excitement," and is simply bad, he writes. He senses serious flaws in the work's persona, but the key weakness, according to Replogle, stems from the voice that the poet adopts and his lifeless poetic technique: "After inventing voices for more than ten years, it is as though Auden suddenly could find no voice at all. What remains is a huge heap of rhetorical devices living on after their speaker is dead" (p. 129). His judgement is sweeping and dismissive, and would seem to offer no point of engagement for a sympathetic critical reading. And yet, in spite of the harshness of Replogle's verdict, it is to his critique that I would now like to turn in order to get a better understanding of Sonnet V and of what Auden seems to be doing throughout the sonnet sequence. The very fact that Replogle's is one of the most detailed critical discussions of "In Time of War," offers us the opportunity to consider the effect of some of the sequence's stylistic features and the various ways in which Auden modifies the traditional form of the sonnet to suit his needs.

⁵⁶ *Auden's Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 128.

For Justin Replogle, “In Time of War” is part of Auden’s long and unsuccessful search in the 1930s for a “suitable Poetic persona”.⁵⁷ In Replogle’s account, Auden in the 1930s was discontented with Standard English poetic speech and sought to move his poetry beyond this to a style and diction that were more uniquely his own. “In Time of War” is the result of this effort. Replogle presents a succinct and generally quite accurate summary of some of the main elements of Auden’s poetic style: his conceptual diction, his unemotive syllable sound, his propensity for allegory, his frequent use of direct statement unadorned with figurative speech, and the various methods Auden adopted to bring his concepts to life and compensate for his intellectual tendencies.

One of the more important ways in which he animates the concepts in his poetry is through his personification of conceptual nouns. Ironically enough, although Replogle demonstrates this animating strategy in many of Auden’s early and later poems, he neglects to notice Auden’s ample use of it in “In Time of War.” This is no doubt because he is convinced the sonnet sequence is substandard fare, and because he is blind to its virtues. However, Auden’s personification of conceptual nouns is still very much present: in Sonnet IX, for example, Auden writes of “our open sorrow” (p. 267), in Sonnet XIII he describes the “quick new West” as “false” (p. 271), and in XXVII the “warm nude ages of instinctive poise” (p. 285). The activation of an allegorical landscape by linking active verbs to conceptual nouns, meanwhile, is another method Auden uses to bring his

⁵⁷ *Auden’s Poetry* p. 129.

sonnets to life: Sonnet II, for instance, reveals that “maturity... / Retired like a horizon from the child,” Sonnet V explains that “earth needed to be careless” (p. 263), in XIII, “History opposes its grief to our buoyant song” (p. 271), while in XX, “all the rivers and the railways run / Away from Neighbourhood as from a curse” (p. 278). The effect of all this is to create in “In Time of War” a special world, with its own rules and its own unique allegorical atmosphere. I will discuss the significance of this special world in more detail later, but for now I would like to continue outlining some of the distinctive features Replogle identifies in Auden’s style and how they operate in the sonnet sequence.

Because his nouns are mostly abstract and generic, Auden uses attributive adjectives quite extensively throughout his poetry. But by “In Time of War,” Replogle complains, “weakly animated adjectives, capitalized or personified by a preliminary “the,” turned up too often”.⁵⁸ To prove his point, Replogle quotes from Sonnet V above: “the Rich, the Bountiful, the Fearless.” But here we can detect the weakness of Replogle’s analysis and begin to suspect him of being almost wilful in his efforts to misread Auden. In the special world created within the sonnet sequence it is clear that the capitalised adjectives are not merely “desperate allegorical maneuvers”⁵⁹ as Replogle maintains, but that they function rather as typological adjectives, especially when we remember that the events in each sonnet may encompass not just single lifetimes but

⁵⁸ *Auden’s Poetry* p. 193.

⁵⁹ *Auden’s Poetry* p. 192.

entire epochs, or at least several centuries. Identifying the operation of narratological principles in the sonnet sequence's lyric-narrative hybridity, Coats argues that the speaker's statements about the protagonist match the kind of characterisation of another subjectivity that we would find in prose narrative. The speaker does not merely display his own subjectivity, in line with the lyric norm, he also displays another's: "the speaker notes the same emphases the subject would have suggested himself: in other words, [what Gerard Genette would call] focalization".⁶⁰ Genette's term here—"internal focalization," to be exact—refers to the narrative technique in which information is presented through or reflects the subjective perspective of a certain character.⁶¹ The "Rich, the Bountiful, the Fearless" are the qualities or part of the "new invention" the protagonist in this sonnet has gathered at a particular epoch, when "life was slow" and "earth needed to be careless." He draws the young men to him and seems to initiate them into manhood through a kind of Oedipal fissure—"They needed him to free them from their mothers"—and universal nomadic fraternity: "round his camp learnt all men are brothers" (lines 6 – 8). The protagonist's education of the young takes place "in the long migration." How long this "long migration" lasts is not quite clear: was it several seasons of migration or several centuries? All the sonnet reveals is that it was long enough for a major behavioural change to occur—a change caused no doubt by epochal societal, environmental, and ideological

⁶⁰ Coats, "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 173.

⁶¹ Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* [1972] (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 189.

factors (possibly the same doctrine of universal brotherhood?)—the young “grew sharp-witted.” This behavioural change, the poem suggests in the third stanza, unleashes its own environmental shift in turn: “suddenly the earth was full.” In a new, more organised, and more sedentary form of social organisation, the protagonist’s status is reversed: he becomes the “shabby and demented.” It is doubtful that this is how the protagonist would see himself, however, and the sonnet’s last four lines move toward judgement of the protagonist: “And took to drink to screw his nerves to murder / Or sat in offices and stole” (lines 11 – 12). The protagonist’s earlier flattering typologies have now been replaced by typologies suggestive of the new constraints of a bureaucratised, sedentary civilisation and also of fascism: “And spoke approvingly of Law and Order” (line 13). The speaker’s narration tracks the protagonist’s progress from expansiveness and generosity to constriction and hatred. Interestingly, by the sonnet’s conclusion it also seems to present a judgement on the protagonist’s endorsement of the very belief systems that Auden the poet had embraced up until the late 1930s— Marxist ideology and Freudian psychoanalysis as programmes of liberation. By the sonnet’s conclusion, they are exposed as the protagonist’s masks concealing his desire for domination and his absolute contempt for life. And so once again then, a close reading of a poem in the sonnet sequence unearths a condensed and very sharp critique that implicates its own author in its judgement.

Another method that Auden uses to bring his conceptual poetry to

life, according to Replogle, is his use of similes: “It is almost always a miniature allegory, and it frequently functions simply as an alternative to the attributive adjective”.⁶² In Replogle’s account, Auden turned to the use of similes as he struggled to simplify his poetic voice during the composition of “In Time of War.” Auden, he speculates, needed to jettison a syntax that was dependent on a plethora of attributive adjectives, and so he replaced his abundance of adjectives with similes. This did not improve Auden’s poetry, Replogle maintains: “At its worst it added nothing to meaning and only an embarrassing cleverness to animated concepts”.⁶³ Replogle offers Sonnet VIII as an example of the Auden simile at its “worst”: “Museums stored his learning like a box” (p. 266, line 7). Replogle suggests, in all seriousness, that “boxlike museums store up learning” would have been preferable.⁶⁴ He then offers another example from the same sonnet of Auden’s “embarrassing cleverness”: “And paper watched his money like a spy” (p. 266, line 8).

This is the point where Replogle is at his least convincing—when he presumes to explain Auden’s motives and compositional struggles instead of striving to engage with the sonnet and work out how the similes operate within it. We notice that the “He” featured in this sonnet is markedly different in character from the “He” who features in Sonnet VII. Sonnet VII’s protagonist is a poet figure, through whom Auden seems to map the entire history of the poet’s role and status in the long transition

⁶² *Auden’s Poetry* p. 193.

⁶³ *Auden’s Poetry* p. 194.

⁶⁴ *Auden’s Poetry* p. 193.

from preliterate, tribal communities to literate, highly organised societies. The poet figure starts out as the sacred carrier of divine and tribal wisdom, completely at one with his tightly knit community—“Their feeling gathered in him like a wind / And sang: they cried—‘It is a God that sings’” (p. 265, lines 3 – 4). But by the poem’s end he is the embittered and neurotic *poète maudit*, completely alienated from society: “And walked like an assassin through the town, / And looked at men and did not like them, / But trembled if one passed him with a frown” (lines 12 – 14).

Sonnet VIII’s protagonist, however, inhabits a commercialised and highly complex social world:

He turned his field into a meeting-place,
And grew the tolerant ironic eye,
And formed the mobile money-changer’s face,
And found the notion of equality. (p. 266, lines 1 – 4)

The last two lines in this stanza and the link they make between the financial mobility of capitalism and social equality tip us off about this protagonist’s identity: he is the representative type of the new kind of human created by capitalism and the social and technological advances of the Renaissance. The sonnet reads as a condensed and more potent version of the account of the “new Anthropos” or “Empiric Economic Man,” which appears in Auden’s 1940 poem “New Year Letter.”

The second stanza presents an ironical elaboration of the capitalistic “notion of equality” which the protagonist has discovered: “And strangers were as brothers to his clocks” (line 5). This newfound equality

has not in fact liberated humans, but has instead reduced humans and made them equivalent to mechanisms. Nature itself has been mechanised by the new system and its horizons diminished to mere utility: “And with his spires he made a human sky” (line 6). And so, with all of this in mind, when we come to the lines whose similes Replogle has quoted so disapprovingly—“Museums stored his learning like a box, / And paper watched his money like a spy”—we can only conclude that the similes are in fact brilliant condensations of the idea of profit as modern man’s rational incentive, and how the depersonalised nature of this has resulted in the detachment of the objective from human will. Small wonder, then that by the sonnet’s end the protagonist is isolated, alienated both from the worldly phenomena he has sought to accumulate and control and the very desire which had sparked it all into existence:

It grew so fast his life was overgrown,
And he forgot what once it had been made for,
And gathered into crowds and was alone,

And lived expensively and did without,
And could not find the earth which he had paid for,
Nor feel the love that he knew all about. (p. 266, lines
9 – 14)

The thing that strikes me about this sonnet is the way in which Auden seems to have returned to the same themes—*isolation and alienation*—but from a different angle or perspective. It is as if throughout “*In Time of War*” he were continually changing his camera angles on a limited set of strange and yet peculiarly familiar primal types.

The central stylistic paradox about Auden that Replogle seeks to wrestle with is the fact that Auden's poetic corpus, which is largely conceptual and non-emotive in nature, and which does not use syllable sounds, word choice, or rhetorical emotion to arouse emotion in the reader, is yet still capable of arousing feelings. However, Replogle points out that there are dozens of other elements in his poetry that Auden could rely on to arouse feelings in the reader apart from all the above-mentioned elements.⁶⁵

The poet's choice of traditional poetic forms is one such element, which conveys meaning and also arouses emotions in the reader. Replogle points to the "rather cautious traditionalism" in many of Auden's formal choices, which act as stylistic devices for provoking the feeling states the reader links with these formal practices.⁶⁶ Replogle makes these valid points and yet seems unable or unwilling to draw the obvious conclusion from his own arguments—that Auden may in fact be attempting something very similar by using the sonnet form in "In Time of War."

Persona—speaking like a certain kind of personality—is another key stylistic device through which Auden stirs reactions from his readers, according to Replogle, and it is the speaker himself rather than what he says that the reader cares about.⁶⁷ But if the speaker is created by the sound of his voice, for Auden there is no more important stylistic feature to provoke emotion than tone of voice. Replogle points out that voices and

⁶⁵ Replogle, *Auden's Poetry* p.199.

⁶⁶ Replogle *Auden's Poetry* p. 199.

⁶⁷ *Auden's Poetry* p. 200.

their tone are more than usually important in Auden's poetry because of the dramatic nature of his verse, "where so much meaning is carried by the *sound* of the speaking rather than what is being talked about".⁶⁸ But subject matter, or rather the reader's sense of what sort of voice is appropriate for certain subject matters, can also trigger certain feeling states.

Replogle makes the surprising yet entirely accurate argument that poetic diction in Auden's poetry, whether conceptual or emotional, may have no effect on the emotive sounds of the voice he uses.⁶⁹ Even when he is making the barest, flattest, and most direct statement, Auden is able to arouse intense feelings in his readers. Auden's voices are fundamentally "oratorical"; that is, they are almost always geared towards public performance before a larger audience, towards persuasion, and towards exciting reactions within the reader through this public performance. But how is it possible, then, Replogle asks, that even though the poet's subjects, rhetorical ornaments, and words arouse little emotion, Auden is still able to give his oratorical voices all the emotion they need?⁷⁰ He is able to do this because of the profound link between certain emotions and attitudes conveyed by certain tones of voice, words, and verbal syntax in public speech. When we as readers of Auden's poetry encounter his diction and his verbal constructions, we begin to hear certain oratorical voices, and our feelings are provoked. It is for this

⁶⁸ *Auden's Poetry* p. 202.

⁶⁹ *Auden's Poetry* p. 202.

⁷⁰ *Auden's Poetry* p. 203.

reason that *tone of voice* is such a key component in Auden's poetry.

For Replogle, Auden's syntax, more than anything else, is responsible for creating his unique oratorical voice.⁷¹ He quite convincingly demonstrates that even in poems such as "Lay your sleeping head, my love, / Human on my faithless arm", where Auden presents a speaker directly addressing a lover, we as readers are never in doubt that the speaker's "sonorities" are in reality addressed to the ears of some vast public audience whose reactions the speaker is trying to arouse. In the late 1930s, according to Replogle, Auden was trying to rebuild his syntax, reduce its loftiness and make it more like conversational speech. Even though the poetic style was as oratorical as ever in "In Time of War", Replogle maintains that in the sonnet sequence Auden has swung from the extreme of lofty oratorical diction to the opposite of exaggerated short, flat, declarative sentences.⁷² Replogle deplores the "maddeningly short and similar sentences" of the sonnet sequence and their rougher and choppiest rhythms, so new to Auden's poetic style. He points derisively to what he regards as Auden's crude attempts to get some kind of rhythmical flow in the sonnets' "excessively simple syntax": the connective "and," he mocks, "turns up forty-four times at the head of a line".⁷³

Yet, Replogle has himself answered his own objections to the flatness, bareness, and directness of Auden's new diction in "In Time of War". When he acknowledges that even the flattest and most direct

⁷¹ *Auden's Poetry* p. 203.

⁷² *Auden's Poetry* p. 205.

⁷³ Replogle *Auden's Poetry* p. 205.

statement in Auden's poetry can arouse the most intense emotions he correctly and persuasively asserts the primacy of voice and tone in Auden's poetry. Should we not therefore pay close attention to the operation of voice in the sonnet sequence? If we acknowledge the oratorical nature of the bulk of Auden's poetry, should we not also consider the oratorical function of the sonnets' simple syntax and their rough and choppy rhythms? Looking more closely at the syntax of the sonnets, I find their roughness and directness offer scant evidence of being "compulsive" or "mannered", as Replogle claims. The syntax of the sonnets instead demonstrate a flexibility—varying from the short declarative sentences in Sonnet II to the longer, inverted syntax of XIII. Replogle criticises Sonnet II—"They wondered why the fruit had been forbidden"—as "mannered," "pedagogical," and "sententious".⁷⁴ Yet far from being mannered or in any way sententious, the sonnet's tone is conversational, reminding one, if anything, of the irresistible force of rumour and providing a succinct and original account of the biblical fall. The rhythm of repeated Ws, which runs throughout the entire sonnet, adds to a sense of a querulous wondering voice appropriate to the age of myth.

Replogle is right to claim that the sonnets are not suitable for "declamation from some high podium", but he is surely wrong not to recognise their oratorical nature. The sonnet sequence may not feature high oratory, but how is it possible to brand the long sentence which opens Sonnet XIII—"Certainly praise: let the song mount again and again /

⁷⁴ *Auden's Poetry* p. 206.

For life as it blossoms out in a jar or a face, / For the vegetable patience,
the animal grace”—as “crude” and “excessively simple”?

But it is when we turn to Replogle’s derision of Auden’s use of the connective “and”, that we clearly we see how wrong-headed his critique really is. If Auden’s deployment of diction and syntax as well as subject matter can inform the reader about his speaker’s voice and tone, and thereby provoke intense emotional reactions in the reader, should we not as readers be paying careful attention to the use even of this simple connective (especially when it is used so repetitively)? In Sonnet XII, for instance, the connective “and” is carefully deployed eight times, but its use clearly encompasses much more than the merely additive or linking function we would normally expect of a connective:

And the age ended, and the last deliverer died
In bed, grown idle and unhappy; they were safe:
The sudden shadow of the giant’s enormous calf
Would fall no more at dusk across the lawn outside.
(p. 270, lines 1 – 4)

The “and” that occurs in the second line operates as a normal connective, but the “and” that occurs twice in the first line establishes a rhythm in the sonnet that is clearly part of its meaning. At a semantic level, the “and” operates as part of a logical or continuative style, the “age” being linked with the passing of the “last deliverer”. Beyond its semantic meaning, the continuative style is evocative once again of yet another distant epoch of the sort that the sonnet sequence provides in such variety. But with long Alexandrine lines, Auden has shifted the camera angle’s focus again; this

time the camera lens focuses on a long-ago world and time that exists on the dim and inchoate border between mythic history and fairy tale:

They slept in peace: in marshes here and there no doubt
A sterile dragon lingered to a natural death,
But in a year the spoor had vanished from the heath;
The kobold's knocking in the mountain petered out.
(p. 270, lines 5 – 8)

But by the time we get to the sonnet's third and fourth stanzas we recognise that the connective "and" is also being used in a manner suggestive of the distinctively direct and forceful connective style found in biblical narrative:

Only the sculptors and the poets were half sad,
And the pert retinue from the magician's house
Grumbled and went elsewhere. The vanquished powers
were glad

To be invisible and free: without remorse
Struck down the sons who strayed into their course,
And ravished the daughters, and drove the fathers mad.
(Lines 9 – 14)

What Auden achieves here through his diction and rhythmical syntax is a sonnet that works at the level of myth and dark fable, but which is also able to sustain a richly suggestive psychological reading: the sonnet evokes the transition from a mythical/ religious pre-modern consciousness to rational modern consciousness. The primal beasts— "the giants" and the "dragons"—have been "vanquished" by the secular and rational modern mind-set. But unanchored by primitive faith or religious belief, these loosened "powers" now rage, "invisible and free", as far more potent

modern neuroses and psychoses: “without remorse / Struck down the sons who strayed into their course, / And ravished the daughters, and drove the fathers mad.”

In Sonnet VIII, the connective “and” has a logical and continuative function at the same time it establishes a direct and emphatic style that is reminiscent of biblical narrative:

He turned his field into a meeting-place,
And grew the tolerant ironic eye,
And formed the mobile money-changer’s face,
And found the notion of equality. (p. 266, lines 1 – 4)

“And” operates in a similar way in Sonnet X, where Auden’s speaker introduces a child deity:

As a young child the wisest could adore him;
He felt familiar to them like their wives:
The very poor saved up their pennies for him,
And martyrs brought him presents of their lives.
(p. 268, lines 1 – 4)

The “child” seems to be at once the embodiment of art, or at least all the community’s most instinctive, ephemeral, and healthy pleasures as well as a more innocent and humble age in human development:

But who could sit and play with him all day?
Their other needs were pressing, work, and bed:
The beautiful stone courts were built where they
Could leave him to be worshipped and well fed.
(Lines 5 – 8)

The “beautiful stone courts” are evocative of that epoch in human

societies when religious power, the power of the State, and state law first became institutionalised. But once again who “he” actually is remains uncertain and richly suggestive. In the sonnet’s final two stanzas the connective “and” is used as a continuative and helps establish the tone of the ancient historical/religious-mythic time-frame:

But he escaped. They were too blind to tell
That it was he who came with them to labour,
And talked and grew up with them like a neighbour:

To fear and greed those courts became a centre;
The poor saw there the tyrant’s citadel,
And martyrs the lost face of the tormentor.
(Lines 9 – 14)

But in the final two stanzas the connective “and” appearing in the two lines that contain the end-rhymes serves to make emphatic the ironic reversal that seems to be the main point of this sonnet: that the seemingly light and inconsequential is in fact the most vital, life-affirming and important, while that which garners most power and respect in the world is the most corrupt and inimical to life.

I have described the rhythmic syntactical patterning in Auden’s use of the connective “and” as reminiscent of biblical narrative, but I think he is even more specific in his use of the connective than this: Auden through his diction and syntactical style seems to be quite clearly evoking the voice and tone of the parables of the New Testament. We only have to turn to two of the best-known parables to straightaway notice the similarity

in simple diction and emphatic syntax between Auden's sonnets in "In Time of War" and the New Testament: "And he began to speak unto them by parables," the apostle Mark begins his telling of the Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (12: 1-10).⁷⁵ As with the sonnets in Auden's "In Time of War", the connective "and" is used in both a continuative and a rhythmic, emphatic manner:

A *certain* man planted a vineyard, and set an hedge about *it*, and digged *a place for* winefat, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country.
And at the season he sent to the husbandmen a servant, that he might receive from the husbandmen of the fruit of the vineyard. (12: 1-2).⁷⁶

Luke's telling of the well-known Parable of the Good Samaritan also demonstrates a marked similarity with the diction and syntactical patterning of "In Time of War":

And Jesus answering said, A certain *man* went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded *him*, and departed, leaving *him* half dead.
And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.
And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked *on him*, and passed by on the other side.
But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had

⁷⁵ *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* [1611], ed. Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1997), p. 61.

⁷⁶ *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* p. 61.

compassion *on him*... (10: 30-33)⁷⁷

Here, as with Auden's sonnet sequence, the narrative is carefully shaped and its transparent surface appears also to contain subtle depths and layers of possible meaning. (Frank Kermode suggests, for example, that the parable conceals meanings that depend on secret allusions to several Old Testament texts).⁷⁸ The parable's significance in terms of our understanding of Auden's sonnet sequence lies in the sense that a deceptively simple, outwardly directed narrative may operate on several levels and contain meanings that appeal to certain inner human values. The narrative is shaped with an allegorical purpose (although neither Jesus, the speaker, nor Luke explicitly state what that purpose is). In addition, much as with "In Time of War", there is a certain vagueness and indeterminacy surrounding the protagonist, the "he" in this narrative.

In his book *Varieties of Parable*, the poet and friend of Auden, Louis MacNeice presents a subtle and suggestive discussion of parabolic writing in modern literature. MacNeice outlines some of the main features of this parabolic writing. Firstly, it generates a "special world", which while not often adhering to the normal rules of mimetic verisimilitude, is "true to life" with respect to the "inner life" of humans.⁷⁹ Because of its focus on an "inner reality", MacNeice argues that parable writing has a strong spiritual

⁷⁷ *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* pp. 89 – 90.

⁷⁸ *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1979), p. 38.

⁷⁹ Louis MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1965), p. 76.

or mystical element.⁸⁰ This last point makes it appear that MacNeice's insights have little validity in a discussion of "In Time of War". But pointing to such key parabolic works as Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*, MacNeice argues that they are all fundamentally concerned with the problem of identity.⁸¹ Viewed from this perspective, we are able to recognise that the clear interest of "In Time of War" in the issue of humans' moral identity means that, according to MacNeice's terms, Auden's sonnet sequence also has a strong "spiritual element".

Interestingly, MacNeice asserts that parable writing, in contrast to realistic writing, is more concerned with themes and with developing these themes through a "very strong story-line" as opposed to the realistic work's stress on character.⁸² This is interesting in terms of a discussion of "In Time of War" because we have already noted how Coats makes a sophisticated argument for Auden's diminishment of narrative. Nevertheless, it is clear that MacNeice's general point about parable writing's main interest in theme and story does apply to the sonnet sequence.

Related to this last point, MacNeice states that the hero in parable writing is usually an "Everyman".⁸³ If we accept this for "In Time of War", it has some important implications: is this point, for instance, related to the

⁸⁰ *Varieties of Parable* p. 76.

⁸¹ *Varieties of Parable* p. 77.

⁸² *Varieties of Parable* p. 77.

⁸³ *Varieties of Parable* p. 77.

sonnet sequence's frequent indeterminate pronoun antecedents? And how does the notion of Everyman help us to account for Auden's division of the sonnet sequence between the 13 initial poems, which seem addressed to more general human types, and the remaining poems, which narrate the particulars of the Sino-Japanese War?

One of the most important characteristics of parable writing is its "double-level writing"—the fact that it is a narration in which something is expressed in terms of something else. It therefore tempts us—"just as religious myths and folk tales do"—to look beneath the text's surface for latent meanings, as a psychologist would.⁸⁴ This is dangerous because it has the potential to render the parable narrative's multiple meanings into a reductive one-to-one correspondence. As MacNeice states, "The writer's mythopoeic faculty transcends both his personal background and his so-called message".⁸⁵ Through his discussion of Spenser's subtle, multi-layered use of allegory in *The Faerie Queene*, MacNeice demonstrates that, at its best, parabolic writing involves much more than merely "double-level writing"; it can manage several levels of allegory—the political, the historical, the moral, the psychological, and the personal—all at the very same time.⁸⁶ He notes the variety of Spenser's themes and the variety in Spenser's approaches to those same themes. Additionally, there are also the many instances in *The Faerie Queene* of Spenser's creation of composite allegorical personages—figures who, like Archimago, in their

⁸⁴ MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable* p. 78.

⁸⁵ *Varieties of Parable* p. 78.

⁸⁶ *Varieties of Parable*, p. 33.

one person comprise several different traits. And what MacNeice says about Spenser's intertwining of satire with allegory can also be applied to Auden. The protagonist in his Sonnet VIII, for instance, is surely also a partly satirical figure:

And paper watched his money like a spy.

It grew so fast his life was overgrown,
And he forgot what once it had been made for,
And gathered into crowds and was alone,

And lived expensively and did without,
And could not find the earth which he had paid for,
Nor feel the love that he knew all about.
(p. 266, lines 8 – 14)

The parabolist, MacNeice states, follows a poetic rather than a “documentary procedure”.⁸⁷ This is interesting, firstly, because, as part of a hybrid travel-diary/poetic work, “In Time of War” clearly has strong documentary elements. MacNeice’s statement is also interesting because, in spite of this assertion, his discussion of modern parabolic works is focused on novels and drama, and not on poetry. In fact, MacNeice is confident in his assertion that the period of poetry’s fruitful engagement with parabolic writing has long passed. (The last works of parable writing in verse that he deems worthy of mention are poems by the Victorian-age poets Robert Browning and Christina Rossetti). MacNeice does admit that in *The Age of Anxiety*, his friend Auden “verges on parable”, but, he notes, Auden’s poems unfortunately contain sacred objects which have a merely

⁸⁷ *Varieties of Parable* p. 78

private meaning. Auden, he maintains, is not a consistent or sustained parabolist.⁸⁸ It is remarkable that MacNeice, so familiar with Auden on a personal basis, would be unaware of his friend's achievements in "In Time of War", especially since the last main quality MacNeice attributes to the modern parabolist—"that, in order to achieve parable writing of the order of Imagination rather than of mere Fancy, the parabolist must have some sort of world-view which engages his deepest feelings"—is perfectly applicable to Auden in "In Time of War".

There is no doubt, however, that Louis MacNeice's discussion offers insights into Auden's achievement in "In Time of War" that take us beyond Coats' narratological reading. Coats argues that each of the sonnets in the sequence makes up its own lyric narrative that continually builds up expectations of overall narrative coherence for the sonnet sequence and then refutes those same expectations.⁸⁹ Each sonnet seems to resist any sense of closure the reader may find in the sequence. Coats sees the dispersive relationship between the sonnets as a countermeasure which applies to other sections of *Journey to a War*. But it is significant that, in spite of this narrative dispersion, certain figures and tropes are repeated throughout the sonnet sequence. The "young child" who appears in Sonnet X, for example, and who evokes the most guileless, ephemeral, and healthy human instincts, appears to be prefigured in IX, though his earlier form is as a pluralised pronoun

⁸⁸ MacNeice, *Varieties of Parable* p. 106.

⁸⁹ "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 177.

antecedent:

They died and entered the closed life like nuns:
Even the very poor lost something; oppression
Was no more a fact; and the self-centred ones
Took up an even more extreme position.
(p. 267, lines 1 – 4)

“They” here seems to stand for those deepest powers of instinct, which in this sonnet have been conquered or at least suppressed to the point where they appear to have “died”. Was this death the consequence of the triumph of capitalism, empirical knowledge, and rational self-interest depicted in Sonnet VIII? The shift between the sonnets in pronoun antecedents (from “He” to “They”) and the gap between discrete narrative worlds that this shift implies means that we can never answer the question with any certainty.

But what is certain is that the apparent triumph over the instincts has not brought liberation: “We bring them back with promises to free them, / But as ourselves continually betray them” (lines 10 – 11). The purported conquest of the instincts has resulted in their return as more generalised human neuroses and inner sicknesses: “And the kingly and the saintly also were / Distributed among the woods and oceans, / And touch our open sorrow everywhere” (lines 5 – 7). The relationship between these suppressed yet still more potent instincts and a wounded, unaware humanity is striking. It prefigures ideas and tropes that appear in later Auden poems like “In Memory of Ernst Toller,” “Like a Vocation,” and “In Memory of Sigmund Freud.” According to Sonnet IX, for example, the very

instincts we claim to have conquered are in fact ubiquitous and influence every intimate corner of our lives:

And the kingly and the saintly also were
 Distributed among the woods and oceans,
 And touch our open sorrow everywhere,
 Airs, waters, places, round our sex and reasons;

Are what we feed on as we make our choice.
 (Lines 5 – 9)

The lines prefigure Auden's famously sceptical remarks about human autonomy in the 1939 poem "In Memory of Ernst Toller:" "We are lived by powers we pretend to understand: / They arrange our loves; it is they who direct at the end / The enemy bullet, the sickness, or even our hand".⁹⁰

Those ever-present instincts are transformed in "Like a Vocation" into a figure reminiscent of the young child in Sonnet X, only this time a "terrified / Imaginative child" whose "weeping climbs towards [the] life" of the poem's speaker "like a vocation".⁹¹ And in Auden's great elegy "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," those same banished instinctual powers return transformed from a child into "delectable creatures" with "large sad eyes", who "look up and beg us dumbly" to guide them into our future, and to let them "serve enlightenment" like Freud.⁹²

We can recognise, therefore, the deep and subtle ways in which "In Time of War's" fluid lyric narrative allows Auden, in the 27 poems that make up the sequence, to repeatedly return to and elaborate on certain

⁹⁰ W. H. Auden, *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson [1976] (New York: Modern Library, 2007), p. 248.

⁹¹ Auden, *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems* p. 255.

⁹² Auden, *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems* p. 274.

familiar human types and ethical situations. Coats will claim that the glimpses of coherence that briefly connect the travel book's different sections—travel-diary, Picture Commentary, and sonnet sequence—encourage the reader to look for vertical linkages in order to progress through the book. The book, Coats maintains, achieves a “collection of different generic fragments” displaying the same sort of “weak narrativity: telling the same story badly, over and over”.⁹³ But I would dispute this claim: far from telling the stories in his sonnet sequence “badly”, Auden tells them succinctly and expertly, to the extent that they transcend the Travel-Diary, Picture Commentary, and Commentary. Coats, in his enthusiastic endorsement of McHale's theory of “weak narrativity”, prematurely overlooks a key aspect of Auden's sonnet sequence, and thereby misrepresents the nature of Auden's lyric narratives. The sonnets do achieve a fragmented sense of incompleteness, or a montage, so to speak. It is true that they are incomplete and lack coherence, but they seem to produce the same effect and make the same demands of the reader that Auden notes in the parabolic works of Franz Kafka:

Though the hero of a parable may be given a proper name (often, though, he may just be called “a certain man” or “K”) [or in the case of Auden's sonnet sequence “He” or “They”] and a definite historical and geographical setting, these particulars are irrelevant to the meaning of parable. To find out what, if anything, a parable means, I have to surrender my objectivity and identify myself with what I read. The “meaning” of a parable, in fact, is different for every

⁹³ “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 177.

reader.⁹⁴

Auden's narratives in "In Time of War" are not in fact "weak narratives"; they can best be described as skeletal primal narratives. That is, they operate like parables. It is Auden's characters in the sonnet sequence that are "weak": they are "types". If, as MacNeice states, the hero in parable writing is usually an "Everyman", it is possible to recognise this principle at work in "In Time of War's" frequent indeterminate and interchangeable pronoun antecedents. It does not matter what name or grammatical number we give to the lyric subject or subjects in the sonnets that make up the sequence. What matters is their standing for the human archetype in general. Over and over these "weak characters" or types are presented in the sorts of archetypal ethical situations that one only encounters in parables.

Sonnet XIII represents the halfway point in the sonnet sequence, the point at which "In Time of War" shifts from the abstract universal vistas of humanity's primordial ages to present particular instances in the Sino-Japanese War. It also marks a momentary break from the plain, unadorned lines, their choppy rhythms, reduced syntax and diction, and the succession of condensed narratives. What we get instead in this sonnet is a long opening sentence and lines featuring slightly longer syllables and longer, more sonorous vowel sounds:

⁹⁴ W. H. Auden, "The I without a Self", in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* [1962] (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 160.

Certainly praise: let the song mount again and again
 For life as it blossoms out in a jar or a face,
 For the vegetable patience, the animal grace;
 Some people have been happy; there have been great
 men.
 (p. 271, lines 1 – 4)

The sonnet's opening seems, at first glance, to be a celebration— of not merely “great men” but of the various manifestations of life, and of a variety of virtues and principles. However, as the poem's long opening sentence turns past the end of the second line—“life as it blossoms out in a jar or a face”—it is impossible *not* to recognise a slightly sardonic and mocking note. We just might possibly be able to read straight the speaker's exhortation to “let the song mount again and again—though “again and again” does seem uncharacteristically enthusiastic for Auden—in praise of “life” blossoming in a jar or a human face. It deflates poetry's typical subject matter even in the midst of a serious address. But when the speaker's sentence turns and exhorts praise “For the vegetable patience, the animal grace”, the sonnet's tone is clearly admonitory, faintly derisive even, rather than approving. “Some people have been happy,” Auden's speaker sardonically remarks, and “there have been great men”—he understates in parenthesis before introducing the “but” which we have been anticipating from the poem's opening two words:

But hear the morning's injured weeping, and know why:
 Cities and men have fallen; the will of the Unjust
 Has never lost its power; still, all princes must
 Employ the Fairly-Noble unifying Lie. (Lines 4 – 8)

Auden's speaker here has jolted us into the present, yet the world he surveys in this stanza is still somewhat abstract and universalised: it encompasses the contemporary reality of China, but it could also be applied to cities in Spain, newly fallen to fascism. The speaker's observation that "all princes must/ Employ the Fairly-Noble unifying Lie" seems a fair description of not just the opposing sides in the Sino-Japanese War, but also of political leaders in the West. Auden shifts in this stanza from an admonitory tone to one that is plainspoken and matter-of-fact. In the next stanza, however, the admonitory tone returns again:

History opposes its grief to our buoyant song:
 The Good Place has not been; our star has warmed to
birth
 A race of promise that has never proved its worth...
 (Lines 9 – 11)

Who is Auden's speaker addressing here? The phrase "our buoyant song" suggests that he is addressing poets and artists in general. But, in particular, he also appears to be addressing the poet W. H. Auden himself. The poet's "buoyant song" and his aesthetic representations of the phenomena of life are confronted with History and with the fact that the "Good Place" prefigured in these representations does not exist and has never existed. And what has the poet produced or "warmed to birth" with his compositions? Wonderful ideas—a "race of promise"—that have never delivered or lived up to what they promised. Art's ideas are clearly analogous to the "Fairly-Noble unifying Lie" of rulers mentioned in the

previous stanza.

Sonnet XIII is that *meta-poetic* moment in the sonnet sequence, when it seems as if Auden's speaker steps outside the sequence and reflects on the nature of "In Time of War" as literary artefact and its capacity to change or have any sort of impact on the historical events unfolding in the Sino-Japanese war. He calls into question the notion that the sonnet sequence and the authorial project of which it is a part can ever have a meaningful influence on the minds and actions of its readers.

Sonnet XIII's final stanza builds on this awareness of the opposition between the buoyant song and the crushing reality of history. For the first time in the sonnet sequence Auden's speaker makes an explicit reference to the current events in China:

The quick new West is false; and prodigious, but wrong
This passive flower-like people who for so long
In the Eighteen Provinces have constructed the earth.
(Lines 12 – 14)

The concluding stanza is enigmatic: if the sonnet sequence is ostensibly addressed to the Sino-Japanese War, and Auden and Isherwood are attempting to garner support in the West for China against Japanese aggression, why does this stanza place the West and not Japan in opposition to China (the "Eighteen Provinces")? The answer would seem to lie in the attributes which Auden links to the West: it is the "quick new West", "prodigious", "but wrong". The West has political, economic, and technological pre-eminence in the world, yet there is a hint in these

attributes of the Western upstart; a sense of activity that is willed but also rash and of short duration. Appearances of superiority may be “false” just as the promise that Western ideas seem to hold out may prove disappointing. “Prodigious” carries strong connotations of unnaturalness as well as wonder and novelty. Auden ends the first line of the stanza with an emphasis on the rhyme “wrong”. The West is “wrong”, but since the sentence continues without punctuation through to the last two lines it is hard not to misread the adjective “wrong” as a verb. The sentence has a double sense, therefore: “wrong” is at once an adjective, conveying an attribute of the “quick new West,” and a verb—conveying (non-grammatically) the sense that the West *wrongs* the people of China. This *wrong* would be in the obvious sense of the West’s failure to offer help to China in its struggle against Japanese aggression, but more importantly it encompasses the realm of ideas—revolution and the “false” doctrines of imperialism, fascism and communism.

If “wrong” is not misread as a verb but as an attribute of the “quick new West”, the final two lines present a non-grammatical sentence, a sentence fragment: “This passive flower-like people who for so long / In the Eighteen Provinces have constructed the earth” (lines 13 – 14). We recognise here the Orientalist stereotype of passivity and historical longevity in contrast to the “quick new West”. The “flower-like” Chinese echoes the image in the sonnet’s second line of life that “blossoms out in a jar”. The suggestion here could be that if the West is “wrong” then China is

somehow more natural, or in a healthier relationship with its true nature than the post-Industrial West. But there is an additional possibility: the word “wrong” could be part of an inverted modifier of the “passive flower-like people” of China who are contrasted with the “quick”, “new”, “false”, and “prodigious” West in a kind of parallel structure separated by a comma: “but wrong / This passive flower-like people who for so long / In the Eighteen Provinces have constructed the earth.” In this reading, the passive flower-like Chinese are themselves *wrong*. The final stanza’s *double-voicedness* would seem, then, to reinforce the reader’s impression that Auden wishes to undercut any certainty his Western readers may have that “In Time of War” can encapsulate or present Western ideological remedies that would be applicable to the Sino-Japanese War.

But if Auden is circumspect about casting the Sino-Japanese War within a readymade Western-centred framework, the next sonnet, Sonnet XIV, proves that this approach does not deny his personal implication in the Asian conflict. “Yes, we are going to suffer, now”, the sonnet’s opening line states, and its speaker casts the Japanese bombing raid in terms that suggest his own and his cohort’s psychic sickness and personal nightmare:

the sky

Throbs like a feverish forehead; pain is real;
The groping searchlights suddenly reveal
The little natures that will make us cry,

Who never quite believed they could exist,
Not where we were. They take us by surprise

Like ugly long forgotten-memories,
 And like a conscience all the guns resist.
 (p. 272, lines 1 – 8)

The sonnet's third stanza displays Auden's familiar concern with the private consequences of public acts: "Behind each sociable home-loving eye / The private massacres are taking place; / All Women, Jews, the Rich, the Human Race" (lines 9 – 11). The sequential listing of those most vulnerable groups affected by war is fairly standard procedure in Auden's poetry and in war poetry in general, but the linking of the threatened groups in this line is an odd one: the special vulnerability of women in modern warfare was highlighted in the infamous mass-rapes and mutilations of Nanking, and the brutal German policies towards Jews were already well-known by 1938. But alongside these two most threatened groups Auden places the "Rich" and "the Human Race". The third term—"Rich"—does not seem to belong, and the final term—"Human Race"—subsumes all of the categories previously mentioned. For Coats, the sequential listing is indicative of parataxis—the haphazard linking of phrases or terms without subordination or coordination.⁹⁵ But Auden's list is not random; it merely begins with the obviously vulnerable and then widens to embrace all categories. It suggests to me Auden's interest in moving beyond class categories and oppositions and his effort to encompass in his consideration the entire human species: "The mountains cannot judge us when we lie: / We dwell upon the earth; the

⁹⁵ "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 179.

earth obeys / The intelligent and evil till they die” (lines 12 – 14). There is something very disturbing about these lines. They are predicated—like the entire sonnet—on the notion that the various phenomena on “earth” are the direct consequences of human thought and will.

This brings us to one of the most puzzling aspects of “In Time of War”—the way in which Auden has chosen to order the sonnets, the fact that his sequence moves from the universal to the particular: the sequence opens with thirteen sonnets depicting a variety of abstract human types, and only afterwards does it proceed to a representation of the Sino-Japanese War. Surely, it would have been more natural and typical for the sequence to proceed from the particular to the universal. For Coats, Auden’s ordering of the sequence has the effect of “muddy[ing] the interpretative waters”:

The authorial audience...anticipates anti-war rhetoric strongly sympathetic to the Chinese. That rhetoric is deferred until the middle of the sequence, and the intervening poems ... [cast] blame everywhere and nowhere, to the extent that the “we” who are “going to suffer now” might as easily, and with more justification, refer to all human beings, not just those located in East Asia.⁹⁶

That does indeed appear to be precisely Auden’s point. Even though he is clearly deeply sympathetic to the particularised suffering that the Japanese have inflicted on the Chinese in this war, in his opening sonnets Auden evokes primal developmental myths which he suggests occur in all

⁹⁶ “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 178.

human societies. In doing so, he is able to narrate the particulars of the Sino-Japanese War while linking the war with fascistic impulses implicit in human nature everywhere.

As noted above, according to Coats, Auden's ordering of his sonnet sequence amounts to a "haphazard accretion of fragments" suggestive of *parataxis* (the absence of subordination or coordination) as opposed to its opposite, *hypotaxis*.⁹⁷ But I feel that Coats has overstated things. The sonnets are indeed fragments of narrative, but they are not haphazard. When Coats writes that Auden's sequence is best read as a collage, "prefiguring the type of dispersive segmentivity we normally associate with postmodernist sequence," one can recognise the partial validity of his claim. The sonnets proceed from one narrative fragment to another, shifting pronoun antecedent and subject, without a coherent narrative linkage between the fragments. Yet Auden's use of narrative, for all the ambiguity surrounding pronoun antecedents and subject, has a clarity and sharpness in each of its narratives. The effect of moving from the abstract (in the opening sonnets) to the particular in the later sonnets is a sharpening of the focus in each narrative. Where the opening thirteen sonnets featured abstract character types, for example, the sonnets which follow and which are focused on the Sino-Japanese War are much more concrete in their use of pronouns than those which came before.

Sonnet XV, for instance, shifts the narrative perspective from Sonnet XIV's focus on the vulnerabilities of the human victims of bombing

⁹⁷ "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 179.

raids to the lofty perspective of the Japanese pilots who fly the planes that
unleash the bombs:

Engines bear them through the sky: they're free
And isolated like the very rich;
Remote like savants, they can only see
The breathing city as a target which

Requires their skill.... (p. 273, lines 1 – 4)

The perspective here is reminiscent of the “helmeted airman” and the
hawk’s eye view that we encounter so frequently in Auden’s early poetry.
But where those early poems presented a point of view that was very far
removed from the social scenes and movements that were depicted far
below, the narrative lens in Sonnet XV is firmly fixed on the pilots
themselves: they, we learn,

will never see how flying
Is the creation of ideas they hate,
Nor how their own machines are always trying
To push through into life. They chose a fate

The islands where they live did not compel.
(p. 273, lines 5 – 9)

Significantly, these pilots, in spite of their wide perspective from on high,
“will never see” the moral impact of their actions, or even that their actions
are malicious. For Auden, their actions are the antithesis of the principles
of liberation and vitality that are most often evoked by the idea of flying.

For Auden also, the pilots’ participation in the cruelty of strategic

bombing—the indiscriminate destruction of combatant and civilian—is a conscious moral choice: “They chose a fate / The islands where they live did not compel” (lines 8 – 9). The primal archetypal groundwork that Auden has established with his thirteen opening sonnets allows him to implicate all humans everywhere in a moral choice. Like the pilots, all humans are confronted with a conscious moral choice between freedom and the various forms of entrapment succinctly detailed in this sonnet: enslavement by national tradition, social system, and biological predisposition:

At any time it will be possible

To turn away from freedom and become
Bound like the heiress in her mother’s womb,
And helpless as the poor have always been.
(Lines 11 – 14)

According to Coats, Auden’s sonnets are best understood as a “chronological rather than a meaningful sequence”, which roughly tracks the ordering of the photographs in the Picture Commentary.⁹⁸ Again, this is true up to a point—some of the sonnets do match certain pictures. We have already seen how Sonnet XVIII (“Far from the heart of culture he was used”) presents a striking example of this. The lyric subject in this sonnet seems to correspond to the executed Chinese spy, whose story Isherwood recounts in his Travel-Diary and whose body he describes being dug up and gnawed at by a dog. The sonnet and the Travel-Diary

⁹⁸ “Sequence and Lyric Narrative”, 180.

entry seem to match the photographic plate titled “The Guilty”. But even this sonnet’s chronological relationship with the Picture Commentary and Travel-Diary is ambiguous: while it seems to be related to the photographic plate titled “The Guilty,” some of the lines in the sonnet clearly connect it to the photographic plate titled “The Innocent.”

“In Time of War’s” sonnets, in fact, transcend both the Picture Commentary and the Travel-Diary in terms of their range of aesthetic intensities and their implication of the reader. Sonnet XVI, for example, maintains the sequence’s universalising perspective on the Asian conflict while simultaneously plunging the reader into its particularised immediacy:

Here war is simple like a monument:
A telephone is speaking to a man;
Flags on a map assert that troops were sent;
A boy brings milk in bowls. There is a plan

For living men in terror of their lives,
Who thirst at nine who were to thirst at noon,
And can be lost and are, and miss their wives,
And, unlike an idea, can die too soon.
(p. 274, lines 1 – 8)

There are some very fine things here. The simile which Replogle had dubbed an example of Auden’s “embarrassing cleverness” in the sonnet sequence—“war is simple like a monument”—is in fact a subtle proposition about the intersection between objects and living beings in the physical world with the abstract realm of ideas. The entire sonnet seems to be a meditation on this topic. “War *is* simple like a monument” in the

sense that it is fundamentally about things acting upon other things. The sonnet demonstrates that war is about cause and effect relations between thought and actions. The images “A telephone is speaking to a man” and “Flags on a map assert that troops were sent” succinctly register the abstractness of modern warfare. But they also show with breath-taking clarity that cause and effect relations behind actions in the physical world of war are equivalent to the mundane action of “A boy brings milk in bowls”, an action proceeding from an act of volition, a request.

Throughout the sonnet the individual lives of humans, with all their bodily and emotional vulnerabilities, are juxtaposed with the realm of thought. “There is a plan”, the sonnet’s speaker tells us, in the remote, distant consciousness of the political/military strategist, which will consciously regulate the privations inflicted on the bodies and minds of ordinary soldiers—

living men in terror of their lives,
 Who thirst at nine who were to thirst at noon,
 And can be lost and are, and miss their wives,
 And, unlike an idea, can die too soon. (Lines 5 – 8)

Ideas are promulgated and are “lived” through the minds and bodies of humans. They cease to “live” or they “die” when they no longer have currency among humans. But because they are produced from the realm of thought and only have “life” so long as they have currency within humans’ thoughts, words and actions, we can never say they have died prematurely or “too soon”—but men—the frail servants of ideas—can and

do die in the service of ideas. In this sense then ideas are not “true” or real.

But ideas can be true although men die,
And we can watch a thousand faces
Made active by one lie... (Lines 9 – 11)

Here we come to the crux of the sonnet’s meditation on the relation between thought and action in the modern world: an idea, even a false and very bad one, may not be “real” in terms of having purchase in the world of things and living beings, but it still has the power to activate multitudes. And our vilest thoughts can actually be mapped as geographical locations upon the physical world:

And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now:
Nanking; Dachau. (Lines 12 - 14)

It is strange to encounter that adjective “evil” in an Auden poem from the thirties. Significantly also, Nanking and Dachau are the first names of actual places to be mentioned in “In Time of War”. Their naming and the atrocities associated with them mark the sudden irruption of the contemporary and the real into the sonnet sequence’s framework of abstractions. The shock of that irruption (and the startling rhyming of “now” and “Dachau”) causes the poetic line to drop a foot and the poem’s metric rhythm suddenly to break. The missing foot creates a sudden and obtrusive silence at the line’s end. The sonnet ends on this stumbling,

awkward note of shocked recognition: our evil thoughts *are* real.

The following poem, Sonnet XVII, presents yet another instance where the insights and aesthetic intensities offered by Auden's poetry take the reader's engagement with the Sino-Japanese War far beyond the Travel-Diary and Picture Commentary. Once again, Auden's speaker seems preoccupied with the operation of cause and effect relations in the war: "They are and suffer; that is all they do" (p. 275, line 1). But in Sonnet XVII it is as if Auden has focused his narrative lens and made it much more particularised. The previous sonnet presented the war's reduction of humans into things. This sonnet is also about the transformations humans endure in war, and as with the previous sonnet, there is what seems like a fantastic metamorphosis: a reduction to a wounded body part. But in this sonnet Auden activates the full semantic distance between the pronouns "they"—standing for those who have undergone the metamorphosis—the wounded—and "we"—the healthy and physically whole. "They" becomes the marker for a unique category of Otherness that humans enter when wounded by war:

They are and suffer; that is all they do:
A bandage hides the place where each is living,
His knowledge of the world restricted to
The treatment that the instruments are giving.
(Lines 1 – 4)

Their wounded condition cuts them off from the physically whole but also from each other in complete isolation: "And lie apart like epochs from each other" (line 5). But the poem takes it even further:

—Truth in their sense is how much they can bear;
 It is not talk like ours, but groans they smother—
 And are remote as plants; we stand elsewhere.
 (Lines 6 – 8)

The sonnet suggests here that physical injury and the suffering connected with it constitute their own kind of separate ontology or ground of being. In the second and third stanzas, the speaker argues the complete separateness of these others in the isolated pain they suffer. But in the third, using “we”, the speaker urges the universality of this condition at the same time he stresses the incommensurability of this realm of experience to one who is whole:

For who when healthy can become a foot?
 Even a scratch we can't recall when cured,
 But are boist'rous in a moment and believe

In the common world of the uninjured, and cannot
 Imagine isolation. (Lines 9 – 13)

When Auden's speaker states that “when cured” we “believe / In the common world of the uninjured, and cannot / Imagine isolation”, it is hard not to see in these lines a muted parable of the relationship between the “healthy” rich capitalist democracies of the West with the remote and intractable conflicts in the non-Western worlds. That impression is only reinforced in the sonnet's final lines, in which Auden's speaker presents a very diminished view of the possibilities of true sympathy and understanding, let alone political action, between the worlds of “them” and “us”: “Only happiness is shared, / And anger, and the idea of love” (lines

13 – 14). There is not even the possibility of sharing love here; there is only the “*idea* of love”.

Sonnet XIX stands out as one of the most strongly narrative poems in “In Time of War.” In this sonnet Auden’s speaker is far less identified with or focused on any of the pronoun antecedents he has used before; the speaker functions, at least initially, much more like the unobtrusive narrator one would encounter in a novel:

But in the evening the oppression lifted;
The peaks came into focus; it had rained:
Across the lawns and cultured flowers drifted
The conversation of the highly trained.
(p. 277, lines 1 – 4)

The sonnet’s opening with the conjunction “But” is striking. It creates a sense of the continuation of an earlier conversation or of a condition, which the present in the sonnet will somehow modify or be contrasted with. The “oppression lifted” the sonnet’s speaker states, as if he were announcing a respite from the grim tone and imagery of the five sonnets which have preceded this one. The sonnet then establishes a regular iambic pentameter rhythm that is maintained until the last stanza. Each image unfolds with crisp, precise cinematic clarity. The poem moves from a hawk-like view of “the peaks” coming into focus, to the sound of “conversation” drifting over the “lawns and cultured flowers”, and then in the second stanza to careful novelistic social observation:

The gardeners watched them pass and priced their shoes;
 A chauffeur waited, reading in the drive,
 For them to finish their exchange of views;
 It seemed a picture of the private life. (Lines 5 – 8)

The striking thing about the sonnet is that the main figures at the centre of the poem, its protagonists, are never actually presented or even described. The closest we get is the epithet “the highly trained”, and since this is merely part of the phrase “the conversation of the highly trained”, even this does not help to place the supposed protagonists before us. What moves over the lawns and flowers is merely the sound of their talk. The rest of the sonnet consists of carefully observed descriptions of people—the gardeners, the chauffeur, and in the third stanza, the distant massed armies—observing these central yet absent figures. Who are these people? They could be politicians or diplomats perhaps, urbanely chatting at some embassy party. Whoever these powerful people are, as the poem progresses from its regular iambic rhythm and lightly ironical tone to a rhythm that is slower and heavier and a tone that is darker, one increasingly senses that these supposedly central powerful figures are merely empty ciphers, with absolutely no control over outside events:

Far off, no matter what good they intended,
 The armies waited for a verbal error
 With all the instruments for causing pain...
 (Lines 9 – 11)

There is the mention of that word “instruments” once again. It is a moment of reversal, with the “instruments” of war supplanting the image of the

“highly trained”, the subjects ostensibly at the centre of the sonnet. “Highly trained” is now given a new meaning connoting weaponry and readiness for war. The speaker is suggesting here that the “highly trained” central figures are blind instruments of the larger forces that have produced the conflict. War is predetermined by our history and by the typology of our instincts mapped out in the first half of the sonnet sequence.

By the time the speaker reaches the sonnet’s sestet the poem’s metre has been stretched to its limits and the rhyme to its most emphatic:

Far off, no matter what good they intended,
The armies waited for a verbal error
With all the instruments for causing pain:

And on the issue of their charm depended
A land laid waste, with all its young men slain,
The women weeping, and the towns in terror.
(Lines 9 – 14)

The sonnet’s climax is in the final two stretched out and devastating lines—“A land laid waste, with all its young men slain, / The women weeping, and the towns in terror” (lines 13 – 14). Auden pronounces his absolute moral condemnation of the war here in his most savage terms.

Much like Auden and Isherwood’s *Travel-Diary*, “In Time of War” is anti-heroic. Throughout the last half of the sonnet sequence Auden’s speaker seems fascinated with the contrast between the differing fates and perspectives of the elevated—the pilots, the leaders, those who he proclaims in Sonnet XXIV “leave material traces”—and the anonymous “others”, whose names are “lost for ever”. Sonnet XX, for instance,

presents the experiences of civilian refugees:

They carry terror with them like a purse,
And flinch from the horizons like a gun;
And all the rivers and the railways run
Away from Neighbourhood as from a curse.
(p. 278, lines 1 – 4)

Here rhyme and simile work together to suggest not merely the war's dispersal of these people's communities but also the diminishment of human value to a "purse". The refugees are trapped in their disaster, fearful of the alien spaces, through which they must now negotiate their movements, and also of future disasters: "Time speaks a language they will never master" (line 8). By the sonnet's end the purse becomes a metaphor for the riddle of human life:

We live here. We lie in the Present's unopened
Sorrow; its limits are what we are.
The prisoner ought never to pardon his cell.

Can future ages ever escape so far,
Yet feel derived from everything that happened,
Even from us, that even this was well? (Lines 9 - 14)

The disastrous present moment is the refugee's "cell" from which he can never escape. But that "cell"—like an unopened purse—also contains within it the future, even possibly a benign future. In the paradoxical logic of human destiny, disastrous causes may yet yield glorious effects.

"The life of man is never quite completed", begins Sonnet XXI in the sequence (p. 279, line 1). In this sonnet Auden presents yet another example of anonymous "others" whose lives are uprooted by war, this time

European exiles. Oddly, Auden compares these exiles' abject sense of loss and failure with the situation of the artist: "But as an artist feels his power gone, / These walk the earth and know themselves defeated" (line 3 – 4). It is an odd comparison because it seems to suggest that the exile, and by implication the refugee also, shares, or at least would like to, the same sense of organic selfhood promulgated by certain post-Romantic artistic figures. By organic selfhood, I mean the highly aestheticized sense of human identity as a creative and participating agent in the conflicting worldly forces surrounding it. Auden's speaker depicts the exiles defeated by circumstances in their efforts, or at least in their *deluded* attempts, to act out the organic role as self-creators in the face of the hostile world that surrounds them. Instead they are forever accompanied by reminders of their complete lack of agency, the spectre of their very worst fears:

Loss is their shadow-wife, Anxiety
 Receives them like a grand hotel; but where
 They may regret they must; their life, to hear

The call of the forbidden cities, see
 The stranger watch them with a happy stare,
 And Freedom hostile in each home and tree.
 (Lines 9 – 14)

However, the thirteen sonnets with which Auden had opened "In Time of War", with their depiction of the primal archetypal forces that have shaped human identity, had already placed this sense of human "Freedom" and the organic selfhood it presupposed in doubt. We already

know that Auden himself would have been highly suspicious of such organic notions of identity. As Anthony Hecht points out, Auden, much like Samuel Johnson,

repeatedly maintained that the ‘main of life’ consists of ‘little things’; that happiness or misery is to be found in the accumulation of ‘petty’ and ‘domestic’ details, not in ‘large’ ambitions, which are inevitably self-defeating, and turn to ashes in the mouth.⁹⁹

For this reason, therefore, it is all the more surprising to find Auden two sonnets later, in Sonnet XXIII, making a clear allusion to the very figure who is most representative in his work of ambitious aestheticized notions of organic selfhood—Rainer Maria Rilke. The sonnet opens with an evocation of the hopeless situation of the Chinese in the Sino-Japanese War:

When all the apparatus of report
Confirms the triumph of our enemies;
Our bastion pierced, our army in retreat,
Violence successful like a new disease,

And Wrong a charmer everywhere invited...
(p. 281, lines 1 – 5)

In the midst of abject despair, “When we regret that we were ever born”, Auden’s speaker thinks of the person, “Who through ten years of silence worked and waited, / Until in Muzot all his powers spoke, / And everything was given once for all” (lines 6 – 11). The reference here is to the tower at the Château de Muzot in the Swiss Rhone Valley, where after ten barren

⁹⁹ *Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U. P.), p. 143.

years of frustration, Rilke completed his *Duino Elegies*. Rilke, therefore, is the sonnet sequence's potent symbol of artistic completion in the face of catastrophe in the outside world. The sonnet presents the abject moment when Auden's speaker despairs of art having any kind of efficacy in the real-world struggle against fascism. At this moment he can only find consolation by looking *inward*, turning to aesthetics and the idea of fulfilling personal destiny through the completion of a grand artistic project:

And everything was given once for all:

And with the gratitude of the Completed
He went out in the winter night to stroke
That little tower like a great animal. (Lines 11 – 14)¹⁰⁰

There is little doubt that Rilke's poetry is the most significant stylistic influence on Auden's sonnet sequence. In spite of Auden's undoubted disdain for Rilke's politics and his aestheticized notion of selfhood, it is to Rilke that Auden turns as a figure of resistance. In many ways Rilke may be seen as the continuation and fulfilment of the archetypal poetic figures Auden has already presented in the first half of the sonnet sequence. But Rilke's presence in the sequence at this late stage seems to represent the recognition on Auden's part that poetry and its unique claims to identity are ultimately insufficient and that they have little if any role to play in real world struggles against political tyranny and violence. Personal artistic triumphs such as Rilke's are perhaps the best

¹⁰⁰ Rilke wrote in a letter, after he had completed the *Duino Elegies*, "I have gone out and stroked my little Muzot for having guarded all this for me and at last granted it to me, stroked it like a great shaggy beast" (*Selected Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke 1920-1926*, trans. R. F. C. Hull [London: Macmillan, 1947], p. 354).

that artists can hope for in terms of impact on the world. And as if to confirm this last point and his conviction that *real* human life is “never quite completed”, Auden returns once more to the anonymous multitudes of “they” in Sonnet XXIV.

“No,” Auden’s speaker announces, “not their names”: it was not the nameless masses who “built / Each great coercive avenue and square, / Where men can only recollect and stare” (p. 282, lines 1 – 3). It was instead the leaders, the powerful “others” who felt compelled to “complete themselves” through lasting monuments because of their loneliness. They are “The really lonely with the sense of guilt/ Who wanted to persist like that for ever” (lines 4 – 5). But unlike Rilkean artists and the guilt-ridden, power-hungry leaders, the humble “they” have no ambition to craft unique identities for themselves or to complete lasting monuments of those identities. They have no greater ambition than to follow their instinctual desire to live and love and propagate their genes:

But these need nothing but our better faces,
And dwell in them, and know that we shall never

Remember who we are nor why we’re needed.
Earth grew them as a bay grows fishermen
Or hills a shepherd; they grew ripe and seeded...
(Lines 7 – 11)

Auden’s imagery here echoes the flowering images we encountered in Sonnet XIII—“life as it blossoms out in a jar or a face” (p. 271, line 2). The anonymous masses will leave behind no monuments, and all memory of their names will fade away, but they will still live on in “our better faces”

(line 7) and in the blood of future generations: “And the seeds clung to us; even our blood/ Was able to revive them; and they grew again; / Happy their wish and mild to flower and flood” (lines 12 – 14).

As if to reinforce the impression that Rilke’s myth of organic selfhood is a tempting delusion, Auden’s speaker continues in much the same vein in the next sonnet, Sonnet XXV:

Nothing is given: we must find our law.
Great buildings jostle in the sun for domination;
Behind them stretch like sorry vegetation
The low recessive houses of the poor.
(p. 283, lines 1 – 4)

The “low recessive houses” can be seen as a refutation of the Château de Muzot’s tower and the myth of a special human identity and fate: “We have no destiny assigned us: / Nothing is certain but the body” (lines 5 – 6). Rilke’s desire for transcendent meaning and purpose is dismissed. Instead of speculating about the nature of angels and using these speculations to define what it means to be human, Auden’s speaker reminds us of the basic physical frailty that all humans share: “we plan/ To better ourselves; the hospitals alone remind us/ Of the equality of man” (lines 6 – 8).

But in the penultimate sonnet in the sequence, Sonnet XXVI, Auden’s speaker makes a surprising discovery: “Always far from the centre of our names, / The little workshop of love” (p. 284, lines 1 – 2). The love that he discovers is far removed from grand romantic visions, empty idealism and light fantasies of wish-fulfilment: “how wrong/ We were

about the old manors and the long/ Abandoned Folly and the children's games" (lines 2 – 4). But neither is it the instinctual Eros that we encountered in Sonnet XXIV, growing "ripe and seeded" separate from the human will. Strangely, Sonnet XXVI evokes this love through metaphors of commerce and investment:

Only the acquisitive expects a quaint
 Unsaleable product, something to please
 An artistic girl; it's the selfish who sees
 In every impractical beggar a saint. (Lines 5 – 8)

Although it seems that Auden desecrates the value that the sonnet conventionally accords love here, he is in fact rehabilitating it. He seems to be revising its terms of value to more realistic standards: gone are the wilful, egoistic fantasies ("something to please an artistic girl") and the deluded idealism which "sees / In every impractical beggar a saint" (lines 6 – 8).

This new love is also far removed from our ambitious Rilkean projects of self-completion. It emerges unexpectedly from the fringes of our consciousness, almost as if it does not belong to us, and we had no role in its existence: "We can't believe that we ourselves designed it, / A minor item of our daring plan / That caused no trouble; we took no notice of it" (lines 9 – 11). It is humble, modest in its ambitions, and yet indefatigable, faithful, patient, and hopeful: "Disaster comes, and we're amazed to find it / The single project that since work began / Through all the cycle showed a steady profit" (lines 12 – 14). This "little workshop of

love” seems to be the accumulation of all the ‘little things’, the petty and domestic details, the private hopes, and the warm human affiliations and loyalties that Auden belatedly came to realise would ultimately determine whether or not we had lived happy lives or miserable ones.

The final sonnet in the sequence, Sonnet XXVII, returns us to the abstract primal landscape of the first half of “In Time of War:”

Wandering lost upon the mountains of our choice,
Again and again we sigh for an ancient South,
For the warm nude ages of instinctive poise,
For the taste of joy in the innocent mouth.
(p. 285, lines 1 – 4)

In the sonnet’s first line there is even an echo of Auden’s brilliant sestina from 1933, “Paysage Moralisé” (“Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys / Seeing at end of street the barren mountains”).¹⁰¹ The mountains in that earlier poem were resonant symbols of the endless human quest. But in this final sonnet the tone is wistful and elegiac: Auden’s speaker yearns for a joyous, sun-kissed idyllic past—“the warm nudes of instinctive poise”. In the second stanza, the speaker evokes the image of these idyllic ancient human communities dreaming of a brilliant future:

Asleep in our huts, how we dream of a part
In the glorious balls of the future; each intricate maze
Has a plan, and the disciplined movements of the heart
Can follow for ever and ever its harmless ways.
(lines 5 – 8)

The images of the “intricate maze” which has a plan and the “disciplined

¹⁰¹ *Collected Poems*, p.119.

movements of the heart” should alert us to the falseness of this vision. The sonnet sequence has taught us that human plans frequently go awry and that the human heart is far from disciplined. All the desirable images of the first two stanzas in the sonnet are wistful fantasies. The “warm nude ages of instinctive poise” never existed, and the dream of the “glorious balls of the future” is a utopian chimera. As the sonnet’s opening line makes clear, we are “Wandering lost upon the mountains of our choice” (line 1). This is the human condition: we are lost, homeless, and uncertain of our future. “We are artiled to error”, Auden’s speaker announces in the third stanza, and the sonnet with its allusions to the winding flow of streams reminds us of the etymology of this word, which means to go astray as well as to be wrong. From the very first poem in the sonnet sequence Auden’s speaker has alluded to the human capacity for constant change and error. It is the human condition to make the wrong decisions and misjudgements and to fail. But this, Auden implies, is a necessary outcome of our condition of freedom: “We live in freedom by necessity, / A mountain people dwelling among mountains” (lines 13 – 14).

The sequence’s ending is inconclusive. It does not tie together the various narrative strands and themes raised throughout “In Time of War”. And it does not offer a definitive and coherent response to the Sino-Japanese War. Jason M. Coats argues that “In Time of War” fits within the overall framework of Isherwood and Auden’s hybrid travel book—*Journey to War*—about China and the Sino-Japanese War. For Coats, the

impossibility of making sense of the war is the defining thematic and structural motif of *Journey to the War*. What he terms as the book's "weak narrativity" is rhetorically purposive. All of the hybrid book's segments—Travel-Diary, Picture Commentary, and sonnet sequence—exhibit the same sense of frustration and delay in reaching the front. That continual deferral of the travel book's generic expectations is also extrapolated, Coats argues, in Auden's "In Time of War". The book shows the kinship between Europeans and the Chinese people at the same time it suggests the distinctiveness of Chinese culture, lives and historical traditions.¹⁰² It suggests intervention "by evoking similarity rather than universality".¹⁰³ It puts together all the elements from which a reader could develop a sympathetic and humane response, but does so without offering a more overt authorial signal for how to combine all of the book's fragments meaningfully. Because of this, the process of combining the book's various fragments of phrases, images, tropes, and narratives costs its reader a true emotional and cognitive effort. But at some point the reader must make a judgement and accept the promise of the book's montage of narratives and images and piece together the ambiguous pronouns and the intention that they wish to see borne out.¹⁰⁴

However, we do not really need to adopt such an elaborate and abstruse procedure to understand the efficacy of "In Time of War" and the travel book of which it forms an important part. It is Auden's sonnet

¹⁰² "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 183.

¹⁰³ "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 183.

¹⁰⁴ "Sequence and Lyric Narrative", 183.

sequence with its hybrid lyric narrative and its projection of primal human archetypes that seems to most effectively obey the montage aesthetic of combining the book's various elements. It is Auden's parabolic writing procedures in the sonnet sequence that allow him to combine the abstract and the particular so successfully. And it is Auden's parabolic presentation of skeletal narratives and primal archetypes together with particularised Chinese variations on these that fully immerses the reader in the interpretative process, and thereby implicates him. Louis MacNeice had claimed that Auden was not a consistent or sustained parabolist, but "In Time of War" proves that he could be both consistent and sustained. Auden's deep and subtle use of parable in his sonnet sequence gives a suppleness to his lyric narrative that allows him to repeatedly return to and elaborate on certain human types and ethical situations. At the same time, his evocation of special worlds within his parabolic narratives, which seem true to the "inner reality" of humans, means that Auden's sonnet sequence has a range of aesthetic intensities and multiple meanings that take us far beyond Coats' narratological reading. The primal archetypal groundwork that Auden establishes in "In Time of War" allows him to implicate all humans everywhere in a world of moral choice. In his ordering of the sonnets—moving from the universal to the particular—Auden seems to refer to all human beings. Contrary to what Coats maintains, Auden *is* asserting universality, but his procedure for doing so is not facile or ready-made: the reader must earn that vision of universality through emotional

and cognitive effort. Even though “In Time of War” is clearly profoundly sympathetic to the Chinese cause, it evokes primal developmental myths, which the reader is made to recognise in all human societies. Through his or her intense involvement at every step of the interpretative process, the reader learns to link the Sino-Japanese War to the struggle against fascistic impulses everywhere.

CHAPTER EIGHT: LETTERS TO MR. AUDEN

#9 AND #10

LETTER TO MR. AUDEN #9

Dear Mr. Auden,

Thank you for the patience you've shown in waiting for me to complete my chapter discussing your sonnet sequence "In Time of War." I'm sure the wait must have seemed interminable, and you must have wondered why on earth you expressed your surprise and curiosity about my interest in your sonnet sequence. No doubt you've wondered if I'd really be able to find something interesting or insightful to say about this relatively underrated work of yours. Did you perhaps secretly believe that your sonnet sequence about the 1938 Sino-Japanese War deserved to be undervalued? I remember reading about how all those years ago, when you sent the typescript of "In Time of War" to your friends the Dodds, you asked them, "Are the enclosed trash, or not? I am much too close to them to know..."¹ And then much later, when you revised the sonnet sequence for the 1966 edition of *Collected Poems*, you removed the sequence from its textual context as a component of the hybrid travel book *Journey to a War*, retitled the sequence as a separate textual entity—"Sonnets from China", rewrote some of the best sonnets, changing their rhymes, cut the sonnets numbered IX, X, XIV, XV, XX, XXV, and XXVI from the sequence and completely omitted the "Commentary." These actions suggest to me that by 1966 you didn't just feel slightly diffident about the merits of the

work, you'd really come to disdain the overall literary worth of the sonnet sequence.

I can't say I've ever really entertained these sorts of doubts about the merits of your sonnet sequence. Over the years, as I've worked on this degree, I've read and re-read "In Time of War" and have enjoyed your original sonnets. I've found your sonnet sequence especially helpful to me while I was working on the creative part of my degree, the serial poem. Many times, when I was experiencing moments of difficulty, when the writing wasn't going so well, I'd find myself turning to "In Time of War" and reading through several sonnets at a time. Every time I opened one of your war sonnets, I was struck by the originality and technical virtuosity of your individual sonnets. I remember laughing at the boldness of your poetic vision to somehow encapsulate the Sino-Japanese War and universal human history within 27 sonnets. Who would actually dare to do such a thing nowadays? Your sonnet sequence served to remind me that poetry can take on both public and personally intimate concerns, and it can take risks with public figures. I greatly admired the ambitious scope of your sonnet sequence—the fact that it encompassed all of human history from primordial times to the contemporary era. More than these things, though, I was always drawn back to your sonnets because they were such very good poems: it was a pleasure to read them. It seemed to me that in each of the sonnets you were flouting some time-honoured convention of the love sonnet and desecrating the poetic form's decorum.

But the strange thing was, whenever I picked up “In Time of War” and browsed through its sonnets, I did not consciously realise the connection between this work and my own poetic project. As far as I knew, I was turning to your sonnet sequence simply because it was entertaining and it pleased me to read a substantial and fully realised work of poetry, which took me in my imagination somewhere different. It was only much later that I recognised that in my own way I was in fact trying to emulate what you’d achieved with the vast scope and authority of your war sonnets. It was only when I found myself in my own poetry writing increasingly addressing the conflicts currently raging in the Middle East and Afghanistan that I was forced to recognise that, in a very modest way, I was concerned with similar themes as those you’d dealt with. But even at this stage, I could only see the various ways in which my poems did not and could not measure up to yours. It still seemed highly unlikely that I could attempt a body of poems with a similar wide scope and ambition.

By the time I’d finished writing my chapter of critical appraisal on your great 1940 poem “New Year Letter”, I’d also completed a fairly large bulk of poems using matter related to the US President Barack Obama. This body of work gave a greater sense of solidity to my creative project; I’d begun to feel that my ambition to create a special imaginative world based on the speeches of Barack Obama was not an entirely quixotic one—I might possibly be able to realise it. By this stage too, as I looked over the chapters of critical analysis that I’d written on those poetical

works of yours that seemed most relevant to my concerns, it seemed obvious to me that there was one glaring omission in my critical writing: a critical discussion of “In Time of War”. I’d finally come to understand the importance of the sonnet sequence to my own poetry project.

“In Time of War” was significant because its concerns with politics, culture, and history were also present in many of the poems I’d written. I was also concerned with interweaving weighty public themes with more private perspectives. I became aware that “In Time of War” was in some ways a sort of Ur-text for me; that is, a kind of foundational poetic text—unique in its kind—consisting of a series of separate poems which presented condensed little symbolical parables comprising a dense web of history, politics, and cultural phenomena. Your sonnet sequence provided me with a foundational text that was at once a powerful model to emulate and a challenge to me to find some way of answering its poetic account of its special world with a poetic world of my own, that was equally as special or that could at least extend what you’d achieved. It was clear to me now that, if I wished to make a proper defence of my own poems, in my final chapter of critical analysis I needed to try to present a full and thoroughly researched account of your sonnet sequence. The fact that there was a dearth of rich and sustained critical analysis of your sonnet sequence made it even more incumbent upon me to do full justice to “In Time of War.”

And that then is how I came to my decision to write my final critical chapter on your sonnet sequence “In Time of War.” Now that I’ve finished writing the chapter, I’m more than ever convinced that “In Time of War” is one of the finest works of poetry that you completed in the 1930s. I suspect that you’re still not convinced of the merits of your own work, and that you largely agree with the critical verdict of your contemporaries such as Evelyn Waugh and Randall Swingler. For Evelyn Waugh, you’ll recall, the sonnets were “awkward” and “dull”, while Swingler found them to be a lot “flatter” than anything else you’d written in the 1930s.² Paul Fussell also has some unkind things to say about your poetry in his book *Abroad*. He calls your sonnets “bad”, “strained and inert,” “some of [your] very worst things”.³ Even such contemporary critics as Jeffrey Hart, Justin Replogle, and Valentine Cunningham have disparaged your sonnet sequence.⁴

Why on earth are so many critics so hostile to “In Time of War”? Why is it that even you seem to dislike this work? I remember in the Preface to a revised edition of the travel book *Journey to a War* (in which your sonnet sequence appears) you described the Commentary that originally accompanied “In Time of War” as “preachy”.⁵ That’s a fair point. I read through this part of your book with difficulty, and when I came to write my critical appraisal I chose not to include a discussion of it as I agree with you that the Commentary seriously weakens the impact of the sonnet sequence. Small wonder that you dropped it when you revised the

sonnets for the *Collected Poems* in 1969. But it's what you chose to actually do with the sonnets when you revised and even dropped some of them in 1969 that I think is revealing. You cut out Sonnets IX, X, XV, XX, XXV, and XXVI, all of which are good poems. In fact, Sonnets XV, XX, and XXVI are very strong poems indeed, and, as I hope I've shown in my critical chapter on "In Time of War", greatly enrich the thematic development of the sonnet sequence as a whole.

Interestingly, in the revised version of the sonnet sequence—retitled as "Sonnets from China" and removed from their textual context as part of *Journey to a War*—you took the sonnet "To E.M. Forster", which originally had appeared as the Dedication in the travel book, and made it the coda to the sonnets. In the revised version of the Forster sonnet, you've rewritten the first stanza. The original version was written like this:

Here, though the bombs are real and dangerous,
And Italy and King's are far away,
And we're afraid that you will speak to us,
You promise still the inner life shall pay.⁶

The revised version is more abstract and somewhat less immediate:

Though Italy and King's are far away,
And Truth a subject only bombs discuss.
Our ears unfriendly, still you speak to us,
Insisting that the inner life can pay.⁷

In the first version those bombs are very much present. Forster's importance to you comes through in both versions of the sonnet. Forster,

in his very English, humble, and homely way seemed to represent for you and your friend Isherwood the living principle of civilised and humble decency involved in the private life. He was the opposite of the sorts of public, heroic and tragic figures you evoke so tellingly in the rest of your sonnet sequence. You write in your sonnet that “As we run down the slope of Hate with gladness,” Forster “[trips] us up like an unnoticed stone, / And just as we are closeted with Madness/ [He interrupts] us like the telephone” (p. 11, ll. 5 – 8).

Forster functions here like our conscience, which disrupts our easy slide into “international evil” that’s caused by our immersion in the public discourse of world politics and media. He stands for the “inner life” or the “private faces” that you were so fond of opposing to what you deemed the hell of “public places”. The public world of news headlines and of international politics is a world of abstract hatreds and what you call in Sonnet VII the “little tremors of ...mind and heart” (p. 265, l. 7). Forster because he is focused in his novels on the materiality of everyday local life, startles us awake, like a ringing telephone, from the hypnotic world of abstractions.

Miss Avery, Forster’s housekeeper character from *Howard’s End* also makes a significant appearance in this sonnet, just as we are about to eagerly join the “jolly ranks of the benighted” in the public lust for war and hatred, “Where Reason is denied and Love ignored” (p. 11, l. 12). “But”, you write, “as we swear our lie, Miss Avery / Comes out into the garden

with the sword” (ll. 13 – 14). Miss Avery appeared at the end of *Howard’s End* carrying the sword with which the patriarch, Charles Wilcox had murdered Leonard Bast, and she denounced the murderer. She carries a sword again in your sonnet because rather than violence she is the living embodiment of justice. And so, just as we try to preserve the lying public façade and try to get away with it like Charles Wilcox, Miss Avery appears to confront us with the truth. I think it’s obvious that this is the same kind of effect you want your sonnet sequence to have on your reader’s moral conscience.

Your revision of the Forster sonnet has definitely helped to bring the significance of the English novelist more clearly into focus. That part of the revision was effective, then. But I wonder, though, if in trying to simplify some of the elements of the sonnet sequence you haven’t diminished the sequence as a whole? This is definitely the impression I get when I look at the changes you made to some of the rhyme words in some of the sonnets. In the original version of Sonnet 1, for example, the rhymes in the first stanza are not quite exact:

So from the years the gifts were showered; each
Ran off with his at once into his life:
Bee took the politics that make a hive,
Fish swam as fish, peach settled into peach. (p. 259,
ll. 1 – 4)

But in your revised version, the second line has been changed to “Grabbed at the one it needed to survive” (l. 2).⁸ You’ve made the line’s meaning clearer to be sure, and “survive” is a more exact rhyme for “hive”

than “life” is. But by reducing the line’s ambiguity, you’ve made the line more straightforward but far less interesting. It seems to me that you’ve also reduced the interest of the rhyme for the reader by smoothing it out.

There is a similar impression of the poem being simplified and made much more literal when we look at Sonnet V. Here’s what the opening stanza in the original version looks like:

His generous bearing was a new invention:
 For life was slow; earth needed to be careless:
 With horse and sword he drew the girls’ attention;
 He was the Rich, the Bountiful, the Fearless.
 (p. 263, ll. 1 – 4)

However, in the revised version the second line’s condensed evocation of a world and a different sense of values has been greatly reduced to this pedestrian line: “Life was too slow, too regular, too grave” (l. 2).⁹ It’s all a little too obvious and too regular. You’ll also notice that your suggestive allegorization of the adjectives by turning them into nouns—an interesting and characteristic quirk in much of your best poetry—“He was the Rich, the Bountiful, the Fearless”—has now been normalised to this: “A conquering hero, bountiful and brave”. This is a more conventional poetic line, and technically it is clearer, but it’s also flatter and less interesting, don’t you think? Isn’t it less like you, *W.H. Auden*?

When I look through these sorts of changes that you’ve made to “In Time of War”, I cannot help but feel that you’ve made the revisions in deference to the objections of some of the critics and reviewers of your time. I find it surprising that you’d defer to the misguided opinions of

people who had no appreciation for the beauty to be found in the raw, taut music of the rough, inexact rhymes and the rugged, simplified syntax and vocabulary of your sonnet sequence in its original form.

Well, you'll be disappointed to know that the criticism and lack of appreciation have continued into more recent critics. They've criticised you for your penchant for allegory. They've also criticised the vague, indeterminate protagonists in your sonnet sequence and the constant shifting of its pronoun antecedents—"he," "they," and "we". In some ways, I can understand why it's easy to point to what seem like flaws in "In Time of War": the sonnets you've written don't quite match up with what we conventionally expect from sonnets, or even from poems. The persona you adopt in each sonnet seems diminished and indeterminate, your vocabulary and syntax have been reduced and simplified, and the voice you adopt seems a lot more restrained than normal for you. You're clearly not using all of the tools in your rhetorical arsenal. And for all of these reasons, then, it was all too easy for some critics to dismiss "In Time of War" as bad poetry.

Because I was convinced that the sonnets in "In Time of War" were anything but bad, and because I felt I needed to present a full rebuttal to the major criticisms made of your sonnet sequence, I chose to discuss the opinions of one of your more recent critics—Justin Replogle—at length. I chose him because his book about your work doesn't just dismiss "In Time of War" it dismisses it on the basis of the patterns that he identifies in the

broader context of *all* your work. I knew that if I could develop rebuttals to his very considered and well informed arguments I would have a much more solid defence of your work.

Well, I'm not going to go through all of the arguments that I developed to rebut Justin Replogle in this letter, but I will say this: his critique gave me a better understanding of those qualities I like in "In Time of War" and in your poetry in general. His summary of some of the main attributes of your poetic style is generally quite accurate: he mentions your conceptual diction, your non-emotive syllable sound, your propensity for allegory, your frequent use of direct statement unadorned with figurative speech, the various ways in which you give life to your concepts in order to make up for your intellectual tendencies, and your wonderful oratorical voice and its wide variety of tones.

However, Replogle does miss a few things. He notes that one of the more important ways in which you give life to concepts in your poetry is through your personification of conceptual nouns. He points out how you do this in many of your earlier and later poems, but he neglects to notice that you also use quite a lot of it in "In Time of War." In Sonnet IX, for example, you write about "our open sorrow" (p. 267), in Sonnet XIII you describe the "quick new West" as "false" (p. 271), and in XXVII the "warm nude ages of instinctive poise" (p. 285).

Another really glaring omission in Replogle's analysis of your work is his failure to mention one of your most singular gifts: your wonderful

talent for creating crisp, almost cinematic images. This is something that everyone who reads and enjoys your poetry remarks upon. I'll never forget, for example, that Derek Walcott workshop I participated in a few years ago with several other students, and how Mr. Walcott impressed this singular quality of yours upon us. He had us carefully read your 1947 poem "Fall of Rome," and excerpts from your 1940 poem "Anthem for St. Cecilia's Day" and "Lakes" from 1952, which appears in your "Bucolics". We read these lines from "The Fall of Rome" out loud:

The piers are pummelled by the waves;
 In a lonely field the rain
 Lashes an abandoned train;
 Outlaws fill the mountain caves.¹⁰

Walcott instructed us to memorise the lines. He eventually had us memorise and then say the entire poem out loud. The point of his lesson was to teach us the way in which your crisp rhymed lines assisted the reader in "seeing" and then retaining each of the poem's images.

Walcott also quoted these truncated lines from your "Anthem for St. Cecilia's Day" to us: "*O dear white children casual as birds, / Playing among...*"¹¹ He then concealed the rest of the poem. We had to work out the poem's meter and then complete the second line with words of our own choosing. None of us were able to complete the second line with words or images anywhere near as surprising and interesting as your own: "*Playing among the ruined languages...*" I think my paltry effort was

something along the lines of “Playing among the monuments.” I wasn’t at all very imaginative or interesting, I’m afraid.

With “Lakes”, Walcott merely pronounced the poem’s opening sentence, which stretched across an entire stanza:

A lake allows an average father, walking slowly,
 To circumvent it in an afternoon,
 And any healthy mother to halloo the children
 Back to her bedtime from their games across:
 (Anything bigger than that, like Michigan or Baikal,
 Though potable, is an ‘estranging sea’).¹²

Walcott’s point was to demonstrate the skilful and witty way you matched image and syntax with the action of walking.

If Replogle fails to mention this obvious trait of yours in your poetry in general, it’s hardly surprising if he misses it in your “In Time of War”. But it’s there, isn’t it? In Sonnet VI, for instance, you presented a shaman-philosopher figure, and in two lines managed to evoke an entire ancient world and its values:

He watched the stars and noted birds in flight;
 The rivers flooded or the Empire fell:
 He made predictions and was sometimes right;
 His lucky guesses were rewarded well.
 (p. 264, ll. 1 – 4)

You did much the same sort of thing in Sonnet VII, this time succinctly evoking the psychological transition of a primitive bard into the modern figure of the alienated poète maudit:

He hugged his sorrow like a plot of land,

And walked like an assassin through the town,
 And looked at men and did not like them,
 But trembled if one passed him with a frown.
 (p. 265, ll. 11 – 14)

What these two examples also reveal is how you're able to combine your image-making talent with potent condensed narratives.

Significantly, Replogle neglects to mention the skill with which you've composed the many little narratives in "In Time of War." At times, the narratives you present capture the spirit of dark fairy tales:

And the age ended, and the last deliverer died
 In bed, grown idle and unhappy; they were safe:
 The sudden shadow of the giant's enormous calf
 Would fall no more at dusk across the lawn outside.
 (p. 270, ll. 1 – 4)

And then at other moments in the sonnet sequence, you unveil images that have the fresh stark quality of newsreels or documentaries:

Yes, we are going to suffer, now; the sky
 Throbs like a feverish forehead; pain is real;
 The groping searchlights suddenly reveal
 The little natures that will make us cry,

Who never quite believed they could exist,
 Not where we were. (p. 272, ll. 1 – 6)

I've just compared this to a documentary or newsreel, but I think there's something else here: the way your images seem at once intimately physical, capturing the body's vulnerability, and yet also look at the scene from afar. These are images spliced together like cinema montage, but if I

had to say what kind of cinema this reminds me of, I'd have to say surrealist—almost in the spirit of Luis Buñuel's and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*. It's nightmarish, evocative of primal fears at the same time it seems so realistically precise.

Nowhere is this talent you have for wedding brilliantly compressed narratives with stark images more in evidence than in Sonnets XVI and XVIII, where you present images of the Sino-Japanese War. In Sonnet XVI, you baldly state, "Here war is simple like a monument" (p. 274, l. 1). It's shocking in its simplicity and the oddity of its comparison. Replogle feels obliged to acknowledge the image's originality, but unsurprisingly he cannot bring himself to accept that you have created it for sound poetic reasons. For him, the simile is an example of your "embarrassing cleverness".¹³ But for me, the simile seems to function like other stark images in the sonnet to convey the physical immediacy and yet absurdity of war. There are other images just as stark: "A telephone is speaking to a man; / Flags on a map assert that troops were sent; / A boy brings milk in bowls" (ll. 2 – 4). The entire sonnet plays on the connection between the world of things—physical objects and men's emotions and bodies in the physical world—and the bloodless abstract world of thoughts which propels this world of things into action and quite possibly death:

There is a plan

For living men in terror of their lives,
Who thirst at nine who were to thirst at noon,
And can be lost and are, and miss their wives,
And, unlike an idea, can die too soon. (ll. 4 – 8)

Yet, you handle the ambivalence in these images so skilfully that even while I recognise the diabolical impact of the abstract realm of thoughts, the sonnet also forces me to accept its surprising assertion that abstractions can indeed be noble and even worth dying for: “But ideas can be true although men die, / And we can watch a thousand faces / Made active by one lie” (ll. 9 – 11). This is an assertion that’s as disturbing (we remember the thousands of faces lit up with inspiration at Hitler’s Nuremberg rallies, or the thousands animated by the lies of General Tojo) as it is reassuring. Significantly, for me, it underlines the effectiveness of this sonnet in confronting the reader with the concrete and abstract phenomenological realities of war.

In my chapter, I believe I discussed quite thoroughly how you used narrative and image in Sonnet XVIII: “Far from the heart of culture he was used: / Abandoned by his general and his lice” (p. 276, ll. 1 – 2). The only thing I might add is that in this sonnet’s stark and unsentimental imagery there is a real yet well-controlled pathos, which you manage to maintain right through to the end of the poem. It seems to me that you’re able to maintain that balance because of the control of your speaker’s voice in this sonnet. You dispassionately present some of the less flattering aspects of the sonnet’s rather dubious protagonist (he may have been a spy for the enemy, after all). The very lowly and unheroic status you give him is what makes his imagistic association with dogs in the final stanza appropriate, but it’s also paradoxically what makes this wretched

protagonist sympathetic and gives him human dignity:

He turned to dust in China that our daughters

Be fit to love the earth, and not again
Disgraced before the dogs; that, where are waters,
Mountains and houses, may also be men. (ll. 11 – 14)

I hope that by now you're beginning to agree with me that even when a critic appears to have many valid reasons on his side, as Justin Replogle seems to do, he can still be quite wrong in his judgements. I recognise that you've often been your own harshest critic, but I really do think that Replogle, like many other critics who've dismissed "In Time of War" as substandard poetry, is completely off-track.

In his book, in order to help explain what he feels are the many seemingly contradictory elements in your poetry—for example, the frequent mismatch, especially in your earlier poetry, between your words and your tone of voice— Replogle adopts the interesting conceit of imagining that you have two distinct poetical personae. He imagines your personality split into a Poet and an Anti-Poet. Auden the Poet is inclined to adopt lofty syntax, espouse lofty ideals, and address himself to some of the serious and worthy themes of poetry. Auden the Anti-Poet, by contrast, may also use lofty syntax and address himself to serious themes, but he's also likely to subvert the lofty language and sentiments by parodying the voice and language of the Poet. Replogle admits that this model is fairly crude and that your work often complicates matters by combining both Poet and Anti-Poet in the same poem, but he's convinced

that this conceit has provided him with many useful insights into some of the characteristic quirks of your poetry.

I'll admit that with his conceit Replogle is able to elucidate some bold points about your poetry. I thought it was quite helpful in his discussion of some of your earlier poetry (even though he does tend to mistakenly undervalue much of it). He suggests that your "In Time of War" is written totally in the persona of Auden the Poet: he argues this because he feels your sonnet sequence is characterised by a serious tone of voice and its concern with the serious themes of war, identity, and human destiny. So far, so good, you might think. And yet Replogle doesn't seem to be aware that throughout *Journey to War*, the hybrid travel book of which "In Time of War" is a part, you and Mr. Isherwood seem to have purposely frustrated your readers' expectations of an authoritative account of the war in China. I think you'd agree that what Replogle calls the Anti-Poet is also very much present in the sonnet sequence.

The mocking and satirical voice of Auden the Anti-Poet is definitely present in Sonnet VIII, wouldn't you say? In this sonnet you have your speaker describe a protagonist who's a successful product of the Enlightenment:

He turned his field into a meeting place,
And grew the tolerant ironic eye,
And formed the mobile money-changer's face,
And found the notion of equality. (p. 266, ll. 1 – 4)

You condense within these lines a summation of the main achievements

of the Enlightenment: the triumph of capitalism, democracy, empirical science, and paper credit. You've also laced these lines with a definite satirical edge. By the second half of the sonnet's octet the satire is full-blown:

And strangers were as brothers to his clocks,
 And with spires he made a human sky;
 Museums stored his learning like a box,
 And paper watched his money like a spy. (ll. 5 – 8)

The newfound marriage between knowledge, efficiency and rational devotion to profit has freed money and movement and brought the world closer, but it has also resulted in the man's loss of humanity. By the time you unveil the sonnet's sestet, it has become clear that humanity has achieved the exact opposite of what the Enlightenment intended: industrial urbanization, isolation, and spiritual impoverishment. But you don't state any of this directly; you convey it through your diction and your speaker's tone of voice:

And he forgot what once it had been made for,
 And gathered into crowds and was alone,

 And lived expensively and did without,
 And could not find the earth which he had paid for,
 Nor feel the love that he knew all about. (ll. 11 – 14)

Replogle's thesis about the influence of the Poet and Anti-Poet personae in your work makes me wonder whether he believes that you are conscious or unconscious of these two opposing proclivities in your work. He seems to assume, it seems to me, that you have no conscious

control of your creative impulses. It's as if he believes that you lack a self-critical awareness. It's not surprising, therefore, that he disparages you for what he calls your "maddeningly short and similar sentences" and the relatively rough and choppy rhythms of your sonnet sequence.¹⁴ And as I've pointed out in my chapter, Replogle even goes so far as to mock what he deems your "excessively simple syntax" in terms of overusing the connective "and."¹⁵ It doesn't seem to occur to him that you may have actually chosen to use a simpler syntax for a perfectly valid poetic reason.

In my chapter on your sonnet sequence, I stated my belief that you chose to use this simpler syntax and the connective "and" because you were consciously trying to evoke the language and style of the parable. I'd come to this conclusion a long time before I started writing my chapter on your sonnet sequence. I got my first hint from your essay about Franz Kafka.¹⁶ You wrote about the anonymity of the Kafka hero and the curious way in which a reader must identify with the Kafka text in order to get something out of it:

Though the hero of a parable may be given a proper name (often, though, he may just be called "a certain man" or "K") and a definite historical and geographical setting, these particulars are irrelevant to the meaning of parable. To find out what, if anything, a parable means, I have to surrender my objectivity and identify myself with what I read. The "meaning" of a parable, in fact, is different for every reader.¹⁷

As I read and re-read "In Time of War", I felt that there was a slight

similarity between the effect of the sonnet sequence and that of a Kafka story. The similarity definitely wasn't exact, and because of that fact I did question myself as to whether I may have been mistaken. But the qualities of the sonnet sequence that made it seem parabolic in nature were its skeletal narratives, the sketchiness of its protagonists, and the indeterminacy in the sonnets' use of pronouns for their subjects. It was clear to me that you did not want the characters in the sonnets to be read as fully developed characters. They were clearly archetypes, especially the protagonists in the first thirteen sonnets, but they were also constantly immersed in the kinds of symbolical and moral predicaments that made them seem like allegorical figures. But the narratives had a suppleness that one does not typically find in straightforward allegorical writing.

What convinced me finally of the parabolic nature of "In Time of War" was your simplified syntax and frequent use of the connective "and". As I read through Sonnet XII for the umpteenth time, I noted the fairy tale quality of its syntactical structure and the very deliberate repetitions of the connective "and". Sonnets IV, V, VI, VIII, and X had a similar structure. I mouthed the lines and picked up on the hypnotic rhythm of the sonnets. It reminded me of something I'd read many times before. I picked up a bible and flicked through the pages until I came to the Book of Matthew in the New Testament, and then the Books of Mark and Luke. I knew I'd found my answer: "In Time of War's" sonnets were parables. The exact nature of these parables I strove to work out in my chapter on the sonnet sequence.

I think you can imagine my excitement once I'd realised that my hunch about your sonnet sequence was right. I re-read the sonnets, I discovered that your friend Louis MacNeice had written an entire book about modern parabolic writing, and I read his book.¹⁸ Did he know? I wondered. Surely, as your close friend, he would. And yet, to my surprise, he said you were close but that you weren't quite there as a parabolic writer: too much subjective and secret coded language, he felt. But that definitely wasn't the case in "In Time of War." But he hadn't realised. Few people had. It seemed so obvious now—hidden in plain sight. And yet so many people hadn't seen it and had dismissed your great war sonnets. I still wonder now whether you yourself forgot what you'd achieved, and then, over time, had learned to disdain your own masterpiece.

As I wrote, the special world of your sonnet sequence seemed to open up to me. It seemed there were vistas. The strange veil, which for so long had hidden something vital about the true nature of the poems that I myself had been writing in my serial poem, now seemed to be lifted. I began to recognise why "In Time of War" had been the one text I returned to again and again; why it had seemed like my Ur-text. All along it had been serving as the enigmatic model for my serial poem. My own creative project was an effort of parabolic writing. From the very first moment I had started transcribing the words of Barack Hussein Obama and composing them into poems I had been creating parables.

With gratitude,

Dennis L. M. Lewis

Notes

¹ Letter to Mrs. A. E. Dodds, n.d., 1938, in *W.H. Auden: The Critical Heritage* ed. John Haffenden (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 288.

² "Spectator," March 24, 1939; "Daily Worker," March 29, 1939, both in *W.H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden, (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 291.

³ *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars*, (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1980).

⁴ Jeffrey Hart, "How Good Was Auden" *The New Criterion*, 15 (Feb. 1997); Justin Replogle, *Auden's Poetry* (London: Methuen & Co., 1969), pp. 128-129; Valentine Cunningham, *British Travel Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1988).

⁵ Auden and Isherwood, "Second Thoughts," in *Journey to A War* (London: Faber and Faber, rev. ed., 1973), p. 7.

⁶ W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, *Journey to a War* [1939] (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), p. 11. Subsequent references in parentheses are to this reprint edition.

⁷ W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 157.

⁸ W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 149.

⁹ W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 151.

¹⁰ Auden, *Collected Poems* p. 257.

¹¹ Auden, *Collected Poems* p. 221.

¹² Auden *Collected Poems* p. 430.

¹³ *Auden's Poetry* p. 194.

¹⁴ *Auden's Poetry* p. 205.

¹⁵ Replogle *Auden's Poetry* p. 205.

¹⁶ "The I without the Self", in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* [1948] (New York: Vintage International, 1989), pp. 159-167.

¹⁷ W. H. Auden, "The I without a Self", in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* [1948] (New York: Vintage International, 1989), p. 160.

¹⁸ *Varieties of Parable* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1965).

LETTER TO MR. AUDEN #10

Dear Mr. Auden,

Once more, thank you for the patience that you've shown. I'm finally approaching the end of my project now, and so it's likely that this will be my last letter to you (at least in this forum).

I cannot quite believe that in less than a week I'll be packing my bags again and preparing to fly back to my teaching job in the Arabian Gulf. Another trip back home to England has come to an end and has passed all too quickly. Each time I fly back here I feel I've made progress but that I've also blazed through several months of my life compressed into an intense one or two-week time span. Just think—it was only four brief months ago that I was packing my bags for the return trip to Doha after yet another short trip here—that time for only two days, but during that time I seemed to shed my working identity and settle down to my English study routine within a matter of hours after being shown into my hotel room and setting down my suitcase. And then, at the end of the third day, when I was seated once more on a plane waiting to take off for the return flight to Doha, I had to resist the urge to check my watch and confirm again that *only* three days of my life had actually passed.

It just occurred to me that almost this entire part-time PhD “by distance” has been researched and written more or less in transit, or at

least when I've been on holiday or been able to afford an absence from my normal work life. It's been very much what you might call a "travelling dissertation" or a "portable degree". I suppose in some ways my peripatetic experience completing this degree has, in a minor way, mimicked your poetic career—I mean in the sense that you led a rather uprooted, restless sort of life. According to one critic, you had long-term homes in five countries, visited or lived in five different continents, and were in transit for 94% of the years of your adult life.¹ The impact of all the journeys you took from the time you were a young man, all of the projects you began or were working on while on the move, and all the ships, planes, hotel lobbies, hotel rooms, and transient places and faces that no doubt played a role in the writing and shaping of your poems is a rich topic that still needs to be carefully considered and analysed by literary critics.

Of course, when I put it like that—and remember how you managed to craft a poetics out of constant movement and dislocations—it's a sobering reminder to me of my own shortcomings and failures as a student, writer, and poet. But yet, I still feel that there's an aptness in the fact that I've had to do my degree in transit.

Whenever someone finishes a book, a lengthy project, or a dissertation, it's conventional, almost a kind of cliché, for him or her to use the idea of the journey as a metaphor for the long process they've gone through. They'll say things like, "At the end of my research journey", or "Thanks to everyone who assisted me on my journey", or perhaps they'll

recount some of the obstacles they've had to overcome on their "journey"—the distractions and the divagations, the occasions when they were way-laid by Sirens, bewitched by sorceresses on distant islands, had to escape from Cyclops, etc. You get the picture. Pushed to the limits, these kinds of statements cast the degree candidate as a kind of Odysseus figure enduring seemingly endless wandering before he reaches his Ithaca. But applying the all-too-common journey metaphor to the experience of completing a Creative Writing project in poetry brings to mind not just your example but also that of a great contemporary poet of travels, the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott.

Like you, Mr. Walcott has had a restless, well-travelled life, what Nicholas Jenkins would call a "career... in movement, a life with multiple foci".² His career as a poet readily fits into the modern pattern of exilic dislocation and cosmopolitanism. The eclectic range of his poetry reflects the restlessness of a mobile, exilic persona. Indeed, it's possible to make the argument that Walcott's entire body of poetic work is a series of travel narratives.³ But for all his journeys, his exile identity was quite different in kind from that of your mutual friend, Joseph Brodsky. Unlike the Russian-American émigré, Walcott could go home.⁴ Though he lived and travelled for long stretches of time outside the Caribbean, Walcott has always been deeply attached to his Caribbean roots. He defines himself as a Caribbean poet, and that identity shapes his view of the world and the poetic voice he's developed. And so, while it's accurate to say, as I've said above, that

Walcott has had a “career in movement, a life with multiple foci”, his central focus is St. Lucia and the Antilles. It would be wrong, therefore, to identify his restlessness too closely with yours.

Why do I mention Walcott, then? Well, I mention him because now that I’m approaching the end of a period of intense focus on your poetry and on the uprooted, trans-national identity you invented for yourself, I’ve been thinking about my own poetry and the issue of rootedness. Just as a poet needs to define the speaking ‘I’ who will shape his poems, he must also imagine the society or place in which his poems will unfold.⁵ Where are my poems rooted? From where do I speak? The stakes are pretty high, I believe.

There was a famous essay published by Stuart Hall a few years ago—“Cultural Identity and Diaspora”—which addressed some of these issues. He published it in the 1990s, and at the time there was a wave of new films—directed by British people of Afro-Caribbean background and featuring British protagonists of Afro-Caribbean heritage. “Who is this emergent, new subject of the cinema? From where does he/she speak?” Hall had asked.⁶ His paper was an investigation into the subject of cultural identity and the practices of representation:

Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write—the positions of enunciation. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say ‘in our own name’, of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the

subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place.⁷

I was born into and spent my childhood and adolescence in a working-class Afro-Jamaican immigrant family in London, England. At the age of 16, I migrated to Canada, where I completed my undergraduate and master's studies in English, worked at various occupations, and lived for more than 20 years. I've gone on to live and work in countries like Thailand, the UAE, and Qatar. I have also travelled quite extensively. I am both a privileged child of the West, able to exploit to my advantage my native possession of English, the lingua franca of globalisation, and my possession of Western citizenship. Yet at the same time, as the first-generation offspring of Afro-Caribbean immigrants to Britain, I'm still a somewhat marginal figure whose identity as Englishman and British citizen is subject to scepticism if not outright denial both outside Britain and also at times within Britain. By virtue of my Afro-Caribbean parentage and my status as the first-generation British offspring of my parents, then, I am in the position which Hall ascribes to black people living in the "shadow of the diaspora, the belly of the beast," and striving to compose an 'imaginary reunification' of the diverse, seemingly contradictory fragments that make up my personal reality.⁸ As Hall suggests, though I speak of my self and from my own experiences, the voice I speak with and the subject I speak of are not, in fact, identical.

I've lived and travelled all of my adult life, therefore, in the shadow of the black diaspora both within the "belly of the beast", as Hall terms England, and in the wider world. My letters to you, Mr. Auden, and also my poetry are *not*, however, preoccupied with the "diaspora experience and its narratives of displacement", and I don't believe they are obsessed with diaspora issues of cultural identity and fragmentation. That's not to say that I'm not interested in these issues or that these issues are of no relevance to me. They are of relevance, for what my travels and experiences beyond England and Canada, in other countries have underlined to me is the extent to which Africa and people of African heritage are seen in the wider world as marginal and of minimal significance. Nevertheless, I only have a tangential interest in the issues of the dispersal of cultural identity, displacement, and fragmentation. For me, it's not that they're unimportant issues; it's that they're *givens*; they are such normative constitutive realities in my experience of the world that I don't feel that my primary focus needs to be on them. I accept it as normal that I'm less interested in questions of authenticity and identity than I am in questions of the multiplicity of our identities and in the continuities and overlaps between these identities within different kinds of discourse.

It seems to me that what Hall wrote about identity not being "an already accomplished fact" and about identity as a "production", which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within ... representation" is readily apparent when we consider the development of

poetic ‘voice’. While we realise that poetic identity or voice is not an “already accomplished fact,” we still have trouble recognising the extent to which poetic voice, like identity is a production always in process. ‘Authenticity’ seems to be an effect of this production of ‘voice’. And what gives ‘authenticity’ to this ‘voice’ is the sense that it’s rooted in a place, a society from which this ‘voice’ emerges, and to which it speaks. But when we consider questions about the multiplicity of identities and the continuities between these identities, how should we speak of ‘roots’? How can a ‘voice’ that emerges from a trans-cultural overlap of identities ever speak with ‘authenticity’?

You’ll recall that in my chapter about *The Sea and the Mirror* I discussed your transitional years—between the time you first immigrated to the US in 1939 and the time you completed *The Sea and the Mirror*, in 1944. That was the period when you started to speak about attempting “to live deliberately without roots,” and about your idea of England as consisting of fragments of childhood memories of certain parts of England, your English friends; and of your idea of “building the Just City”.⁹ You once told your friends in a letter that “the old idea of ‘roots’, of people belonging to one place” no longer had any meaning to you: “You may speak of England as roots,” you said, “but after all what is my England? My childhood and my English friends”.¹⁰

To a certain extent I can readily identify with this perspective of yours. I’ve now lived outside the United Kingdom for more than 30 years.

And though I've continually journeyed back here over the years, in some respects, "my England" also consists of dim childhood memories of certain English locations and of childhood friends. I remember attending a writing workshop several years ago at Moniack Mhor in Scotland. In one writing exercise participants were asked to write down fragments of memories that evoked the idea of a "home" and a "home landscape" to them. Most of the other students were able to produce detailed evocations of particular locales in England. One student in particular produced an especially poignant evocation of the grottness of a certain part of London. In contrast to the others, however, I drew a blank. Only much later did memories of myself retracing William Blake's haunts in Lambeth and the Camberwell fields, of the road leading up from Camberwell to Peckham, of the green fields of my summers on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent, of the Piranesi-like labyrinths that made up my early-morning paper routes through some dimly-lit Stockwell office buildings, and of the rancid smell of boiled cabbage in a friend's council estate stairwells return to me.

The idea that a poet's poetry is deeply rooted in their native places or local landscapes is a widely accepted commonplace.¹¹ The consensus seems to be that "good" poetry is poetry firmly rooted in "place". And for these reasons, it is slightly troubling when I look at the poems I've been writing over the years for this project and I see poems about a distant American public figure and poems ranging far and wide around the world. Do my poems reflect my original local environment? Have I derived

inspiration from the place, or landscape I once called home? Have I imagined the society or place in which my poems will unfold? No. The answer is “no” to all of these questions.

I think you can understand now some of the reasons why Derek Walcott and his poetry have an appeal for me. As I've stated above, Walcott is a fundamentally *rooted* writer. However, I suppose at a certain level, if I were to delve into all the inchoate feelings roused in me by Walcott, I have to admit that at some point I must have felt a certain identification with him because of the fact that he was a West-Indian of African heritage. Although from my present vantage point such identification does seem crude, I wouldn't ever underestimate the deep levels of affirmation I must have felt, as a young British son of Afro-Caribbean immigrants, at the example of a West Indian achieving worldwide fame for his literary mastery of the English language. Walcott has for years been a powerful example of a dignified, cosmopolitan, and highly articulate intellectual who had gained the acclaim that was due to him—on his own terms, without demeaning himself with self-hating, *Uncle-tomming* talk or squalid jobs.

I suspect that there was also the sense, due in part because of the fact that Walcott was West Indian, that he possessed in my eyes a cultural 'wholeness', a cultural authenticity that we sons and daughters of immigrants—with our nascent, still-nebulous sense of identity—did not possess. He was a real 'countryman'—fully in touch with his nation's folk-

culture, conversant in its *patois*, and comfortable in his skin. Of course, when I was much younger, it simply would not have occurred to me that Walcott too had had to fight his own personal battles with the contradictions and paradoxes bequeathed to him by the legacy of empire and the Caribbean's traumatic history. But yet at that half-aware stage, he would have attained for me the status of almost an ideal kind of father figure—both literary and in the literal sense of kin. I would have looked at him and seen a man in possession of all I lacked. He was, to me, in full possession of the *whole cultural package* with which to master the world.

Now, when I consider Walcott from my vantage point as adult and poet, I can still recognise in him a cultural strength: by virtue of being a writer of the Caribbean and writing 'from the margins', or at least outside of the Anglo-American metropolitan centres, he would seem to present a singular confirmation of many of Adorno's contentions about lyric poetry and the poet's voice. You'll remember Adorno's arguments concerning the native opposition between the poet and society-at-large (the public). According to Adorno, lyric poetry is opposed to the dominance of the material world, and we modern readers identify the lyric qualities of immediacy of voice and the immateriality of poetry with the poet's connection with nature.¹² The lyric poem is always, Adorno states, an expression of social antagonism. The modern poet resists the forces of society by abandoning himself to his unique language. As society, through media and governmental control, has brought even more pressure to bear

on the individual, poetic language has become even more specialised, self-conscious and strained. Yet paradoxically, it is only when the poet throws himself fully into his specialised language that he is able to tap into the “collective undercurrent” and thereby become more than a mere subject.¹³

“[L]yric poetry is opposed to the dominance of the material world”, “We ... identify the lyric qualities of immediacy of voice and the immateriality of poetry with the poet’s connection with nature”, “[t]he lyric poem is always an expression of social antagonism”. It’s as if Adorno were writing an oblique commentary on Walcott’s *Another Life*, so accurately do these statements describe some of the qualities of the long autobiographical poem. Even the very title gives you a clue that what you’ll be encountering in this book is something daring and somewhat confrontational. It alerts you to the poet’s ambition to convey the scope of a human life—his own life, no less. Certainly, it smacks of arrogance. Anyone unfamiliar with Walcott, would wonder, “Why should *his* life merit our attention?” But the title also announces to readers that what is being presented is something *other*: an *other* version of life—a vision of life much broader and richer, a life or world that they will, no doubt, be unfamiliar with.

And so here, just as Adorno had predicted, is that *oppositional* lyric text, offering confirmation of the poet’s unique language, voice, and vision. The idiosyncratic quality of his voice is the paradoxical proof of his return

once more to that ‘truer’, more authentic primal and communal language, which we, the denizens of the material world, have long forgotten. What’s more, the *other life* he speaks of is the *other, truer world* out there, beyond the boundaries of the industrialised metropolitan Western centre, the world of the Edenic Caribbean islands. It is the other life of the imagination that exists beyond the factual domain of History and its official custodians—governments, the Western metropolitan political elites, the academic historians, and the mass media.

When Walcott started work on *Another Life*, he knew that he was attempting something different. Edward Baugh recounts how he wrote to the publisher, Robert Giroux in 1969 and complained of the depression and fatigue that this new project had been costing him:

and yet I come back to it with the certainty that it must be done, that it is really attempting something never achieved before, though to tell you what that is would be to know what I should do with it daybreak after daybreak. It has my own tone, and I can only hope that it would turn out unaffected and honest.¹⁴

It was to be an autobiography, but at the same time, with it, Walcott sought to memorialise his friendship with the artist Dunstan St Omer and their mentorship by Harry Simmons; so, it’s also a memoir. But then, additionally, it’s an evocation of an entire nation. “Name!” “Nommez! Nommez!” This is the command repeated like an incantation throughout the book. The poem’s many voices will name the people, flora, and objects of St. Lucia—Walcott’s *home*—and bring the island to life. It is a

lyrical poem, yet it also borrows many qualities from prose fiction and non-fiction, and it incorporates elements of the epic. So, exactly what genre is it, then? Perhaps the most accurate description of it would be to call it an autobiographical poem in creative tension with the novel, the non-fiction memoir, the epic, the poetic treatise, the defence of poetry, and the monograph of painting.¹⁵

Walcott himself claims that Boris Pasternak's memoir *Safe Conduct* was the strongest influence on the style of *Another Life*.¹⁶ And this influence is certainly reflected in the book's painterly style, its focus on the inward experiences of its protagonist, and its digressions on different topics, such as history, European art, the nature of biographies, and the poet's vocation.¹⁷ The painterly style can be seen in the way the book advances its narrative with painterly tableaux, describing landscapes, objects, or setting, rather than narrative sequence.¹⁸ But those tableaux aren't frozen in any way; they are dynamic, pulsating with traces of past movements.¹⁹

The book is rich with metaphors and symbols, which appear and then re-appear much later. Interestingly, Paul Breslin points out that many of the book's motifs function metonymically as well as symbolically, and they seem to shift in meaning as the poem repeats them in different contexts.²⁰ Much like a modernist novelist, Walcott gradually unveils the meanings of events through the slow accumulation of his protagonist's emotional responses. Walcott, in fact, is exemplary in seeming to

articulate a poetic ideology that is fully and intimately engaged with Western poetic and intellectual traditions but which is also able to articulate an independent poetics that has its own integrity. This is what Walcott meant when he wrote to Robert Giroux and stated the importance of finding a tone that was “unaffected and honest”.

We can immediately identify the unique lyric qualities of Walcott’s tone and voice right from the poem’s opening:

Verandahs, where the pages of the sea
are a book left open by an absent master
in the middle of another life—
I begin here again,
begin until this ocean’s
a shut book, and like a bulb
the white moon’s filaments wane.

Begin with twilight, when a glare
which held a cry of bugles lowered
the coconut lances of the inlet,
as a sun, tired of empire, declined.
It mesmerized like fire without wind,
and as its amber climbed
the beer-stein ovals of the British fort
above the promontory, the sky
grew drunk with light.²¹

The sweep is vast, the cadence is pentametrical, the voice and tone elevated, and there’s a musical, almost symphonic structure to this opening. “Verandahs,” “the pages of the sea”, “master”, “twilights,” “another life”—all of these words will re-appear numerous times throughout the poem. They operate like musical motifs, and each time they re-appear they will have accumulated new meanings, new emotional

responses. The “absent master”, for example, at this point in time is no doubt Walcott’s “master” or artistic mentor, Harry Simmons. But later that word will connote an absent God in a cosmos that resounds with nothingness. The narrative, like all great epics, begins in *media res*. The narrator is looking back from the vantage point of middle years and recounting his life and the lives of others encompassed by that life.

The autobiographical poem’s four books succinctly tell the story of Walcott’s childhood, friendship, artistic apprenticeship, first love, departure from St. Lucia in his 20s, and then return to the island at the period of the poem’s composition. Obviously, I will not tell you all the details of the poem in this letter. But I do want to convey a sense of how Walcott evokes his home and to share with you the poetic practice of a poet who seems to know his poetic *roots*. Can he help me in my imagining of the society or place in which my poems will unfold? Can his poetics help me understand where my poems are rooted, and from where I speak? I’d like you to help me consider these questions.

Book One evokes Walcott’s early childhood and his natural and social environment. Book Two presents Walcott’s best friend and the main hero of the entire poem, the painter Dunstan St Omer, whom Walcott renames, Gregorias. In Book Three we are shown the great fire of Castries and the full flowering of the poet’s love affair with Anna. In Book Four, the central event is the suicide of Harry Simmons, Walcott and Gregorias’ artistic and intellectual mentor. Walcott is at his most bitter in

this book. But after he presents a moving elegy to his mentor, the poem seems to move into a transcendent realm—moving far above bitterness, far beyond history—towards resolution and a commitment to life. The most remarkable and, I'd say, questionable aspect of this book is Walcott's defeat of the Muse of History.

I'd like to share with you two major passages in *Another Life*. The first is one of the most intensely lyrical in Book One: it's that moment when at the age of 14, Walcott experiences a conversion to art and a commitment to a lifelong service to his island home and its people. Chapter 7 in Book Two opens with Walcott's apology for the mock-pantheon of local characters he'd presented in the previous chapters: "pardon, life, / if he saw autumn in a rusted leaf. / What else was he but a divided child?" (p. 41, 965 – 967)

You'll notice here that Walcott is using the third-person, as if distancing himself from the lyric subject/protagonist. In Chapter 2, the most intimate of Book Two's chapters, in which he describes his mother's home and its objects ("Why should we weep for dumb things?" he asks as if he were Proust), Walcott uses the 'I'. He switches back and forth between his pronouns, constantly changing perspectives. Sometimes the 'I' and the "he" become "you". You're probably smiling wryly now: no doubt you recognise this trick from "In Time of War". But the effect of all this switching between pronouns in *Another Life* is not to give the sense of an indeterminate lyric subject. It seems, rather, as if Walcott is performing a

splitting of his selves and looking at himself from different angles. At each stage, though, you can't escape the conclusion that this entire poem is about Walcott or surrogates for Walcott. The immediate effect, though, is to reinforce the sense that Walcott has of himself as a character in his own myth. He's always self-consciously watching his past selves performing in the past.

It's hardly surprising therefore that he calls himself a "divided child" and gives Book 1 this same title. He's obviously alluding to the fact of his twin cultural inheritance—as a young West Indian boy given a sound British colonial education and steeped in European art. Obviously, it's a racial metaphor as well—he's racially mixed. But in the next poem in the passage he describes a kind of choice he made while gazing at the things that had been precious to his painter father:

I saw, as through the glass of some provincial gallery
 the hieratic objects which my father loved:
 the stuffed dark nightingale of Keats,
 bead-eyed, snow-headed eagles,
 all that romantic taxidermy,
 and each one was a fragment of the True Cross,
 each one upheld, as if it were The Host;
 those venerated, venerable objects
 borne by the black hands (reflecting like mahogany)
 of reverential teachers, shone the more
 they were repolished by our use.

The Church upheld the Word, but this new Word
 was here, attainable
 to my own hand,
 in the deep country it found the natural man,
 generous, rooted. (pp. 42- 43, ll. 968 – 984)

Book 1's title, "The Divided Child", had also hinted at this choice that the boy had to make. The choice was between the Methodist religion of his parents and art. The boy chose art. Previous chapters had depicted the funeral for the light-skinned girl, Pinkie, and Catholic priests administering to poor parishioners in the rural villages. The white supremacy, racial bigotry, and white paternalism on show had made it clear that religion might *not* have been an attractive choice anyway for the young, precocious boy. But this passage also hints at possible conflicts: the "venerated, venerable objects" are contrasted with the "black hands (reflecting like mahogany)" which carry them. There is a sense here, once again, of black people mindlessly reverencing the cultural relics of their colonial masters. There is a strong note of irony in the boy's wistful but slightly deluded lines about this new "Word," which was "attainable/ to my own hand, / in the deep country it found the natural man, / generous, rooted" (p. 42, ll. 980 – 983).

There's mimicry here of precisely the sense of vocation an idealistic young priest would feel, but the words "natural man" "generous, rooted" are suggestive of the Noble Savage. The passage implies that Walcott, by choosing his artistic vocation (which he automatically associates by default with white agency), alienates himself from and exoticizes his own kinfolk, the rural poor St. Lucians who live "in the deep country". There's even an intimation here of the adult Walcott's predicament in the distant future—of being a highly educated and highly talented artist born in a

small island colony, who, though he may not be alienated from his own country, finds that he must leave it if he is ever going to follow his vocation. And so, ironically, Walcott in his moment of choosing a “faith” mimics the attitude of a colonialist missionary:

And I now yearned to suffer for that life,
I looked for some ancestral, tribal country,
I heard its clear tongue over the clean stones
of the river, I looked from the bus window
and multiplied the bush with savages,
speckled the leaves with jaguar and deer,
I changed those crusted boulders
to grey, stone-lidded crocodiles,
my head shrieked with metallic, raucous parrots,
I held my breath as savages grinned,
stalking, through the bush. (ll. 984 – 994)

What the passage makes grotesquely clear is that the racial division in the “divided child” metaphor is closely connected to the division between art and life.²² Young Walcott, the budding servant of art, is as distant from the lives of his poor rural countrymen, to whom he feels a vague sense of mission, as he is unknowingly from the norms of Western art that he so venerates.

It’s against this background, then, that the narrative presents the moment when the young Walcott experiences an epiphany:

About the August of my fourteenth year
I lost my self somewhere above a valley
owned by a spinster-farmer, my dead father’s friend.
At hill’s edge there was a scarp
with bushes and boulders stuck in its side.
Afternoon light ripened the valley,

rifling smoke climbed from small labourers' houses,
 and I dissolved into a trance.
 I was seized by a pity more profound
 than my young body could bear, I climbed
 with the laboring smoke,
 I drowned in laboring breakers of bright cloud,
 then uncontrollably I began to weep,
 inwardly, without tears, with a serene extinction
 of all sense; I felt compelled to kneel,
 I wept for nothing and for everything,
 I wept for the earth of the hill under my knees,
 for the grass, the pebbles, for the cooking smoke
 above the labourers' houses like a cry,
 for unheard avalanches of white cloud...
 (pp. 43 – 44, ll. 995 –1014)

It's a remarkable passage, not least because of its combination of precise description of the landscape and sweeping lyrical egotism. There's still a clear relation between the naïve, self-centred self that's depicted in the preceding poem—with his unwitting mimicry of colonialist missionary—and the fourteen-year-old Walcott. In the second line of this passage the two parts of the lyric subject's pronoun identity are uncoupled ("my self"). And then, as he proceeds into the valley, it's as if his ego dissolves: "I dissolved into a trance". This "trance" in which he no longer seems himself opens up the vulnerability that exposes him to the paroxysm of pity. But what causes this paroxysm of pity? The sweeping lines that follow do not settle on any specific human or animal form. The lines continually mention the actions and flowing emotions of this dissolving "I". He is still the centre of attention until we reach line 1011. By then we've finally learned why he's weeping: "I wept for nothing and for everything, / I wept for the earth

of the hill.... / for the grass, the pebbles, for the cooking smoke above the labourers' houses like a cry, / the unheard avalanches of white cloud..." (ll. 1010 – 1014). He doesn't really weep for humans or for any other living creature; he cries instead for the landscape and the objects in that landscape which surrounds him. And how is it possible for a landscape of things to excite this paroxysm of tears? It's hard not to conclude that it is his own self-identification with what he sees around him: he weeps because his "self" has dissolved and has been projected out across the vista that surrounds him. In essence, he weeps for himself. Everything that he sees in that humble landscape is what he believes he himself is. This epiphany is one of those moments in the poem—and there are others—when he has found an objective correlative for himself. He looks outside and recognises his reflection as himself. He sees himself for what he is and feels pity for himself. It's an extraordinary passage. Very few romantic poets could match this magnificent, sweeping egotistic lyricism, which identifies itself with everything that surrounds it.

The other thing that needs to be noted about the above passage is its use of "nothing". Young Walcott weeps for "nothing and for everything". The motif of nothingness is one that resonates on many levels throughout the entire poem. It's hinted at again at the midway point of this passage—"darker grows the valley, more and more forgetting." I noted above its role in the poem's opening on connoting an absent God. Later, particularly in Book 3 and Book 4, where the narrative presents the crises that will lead

to Harry's suicide and even threaten the sanity of Gregorias, the motif of nothingness will become identified with the principle of nihilism and complete negation. It will engulf the life of Harry Simmons and scorch all the hopes and ideals of Walcott's speaker. But in Book 4, it will also become fully identified with amnesia. We've seen that there are already hints of that identification with forgetfulness in the quotation midway through this passage from George Meredith—"Darker grows the valley, more and more forgetting: / so were it with me if forgetting could be willed".²³ Nothingness or amnesia is the balm with which Walcott's speaker will salve his psychic wounds and which he'll use eventually to overcome that old, callous archenemy of the Caribbean called History.

Let's go back to young Walcott's epiphany. His paroxysm of pity subsides, and that dissolved sense of self diminishes. Whereas in the previous lines his awareness of the humans living in this valley had seemed indirect and distant, he can now imagine the narrow human lives that huddle there:

For their lights still shine through the hovels like
litmus,
 the smoking lamp still slowly says its prayer,
 the poor still move behind their tinted scrim,
 the taste of water is still shared everywhere,
 but in that ship of night, locked in together,
 through which, like chains, a little light might leak,
 something still fastens us forever to the poor.
 (p. 43, ll. 1016 – 1022)

Walcott comes much closer to the poor people as he imagines their movements underneath the roofs of their cramped hovels. Eventually, towards the passage's end, the images begin to change—"the taste of water is still shared everywhere"—and from the image of water the next line moves associatively to the sea: "but in that ship of night, locked in together, / through which, like chains, a little light might leak" (ll. 1020 – 1021). Walcott has taken us into the hold of a slave ship crossing the Middle Passage. Here, finally, his identification with the poor people of St. Lucia becomes real. It is the common link that they all share as the descendants of African slaves that "fastens" Walcott "forever to the poor" (l. 1022).

The last passage I'd like to share with you occurs in Book 4, in Chapter 22, in Rampanalgas, on the Rampanalgas River, on the rugged, rain forested northeast coast of Trinidad. Walcott begins to speak for the first time in his own voice, and his verse is at its most clogged yet lush:

Miasma, acedia, the enervations of damp,
 as the teeth of the mould gnaw, greening the carious
 stump
 of the beaten, corrugated silver of the marsh light,
 where the red heron hides, without a secret,
 as the cordage of mangrove tightens
 bland water to bland sky
 heavy and sodden as canvas,
 where the pirogue foundered with its caved-in
 stomach
 (a hulk, trying hard to look like
 a paleolithic, half-gnawed memory of pre-history)
 as the too green acid grasses set the salt teeth on
 edge,

acids and russets and water-coloured water,
 let the historian go mad there
 from thirst. Slowly the water rat takes up its reed pen
 and scribbles. Leisurely, the egret
 on the mud tablet stamps its hieroglyph.
 (p. 141, ll. 3318 – 3333)

This is not a pretty sight. The tangled syntax of this passage mimics the dense tangle, decay, chaos, and repugnance of the foliage. Walcott is evoking the primordial bush of the New World here. This is an originary site of chaos and negation. This is the place where Walcott fully recovers the unique language of his lyrical voice. His oppositional lyric voice reaches its fullest expression and finally taps into and gives expression to what Adorno would call the “collective undercurrent” in opposition to the oppressive material order of the Western world.²⁴ Self-consciously, Walcott announces his absolute antagonism towards the powers and order of the material world.

This tangled bush is the primordial chaos that confounded the emissaries of the material world—the explorers, the historians, the merchants, and the accountants—and it’s the void which will swallow up all of world history:

The explorer stumbles out of the bush crying out for
 myth,
 The tired slave vomits his past...
 the Chinese grocer’s smile is leaden with boredom:
 so many lbs. of cod,
 so many bales of biscuits,
 on spiked shop paper,
 the mummified odour of onions,

spikenard, and old Pharoahs peeling like onionskin
to the archaeologist's finger—all that
is the Muse of history. Potsherds,
and the crusted amphora of cutthroats.
(pp. 141 – 142, ll. 3334 - 3348)

It's significant here that Walcott's imagery associates the bored accounting of the grocer with the archiving activity of the archaeologist—an unlikely coupling. But for Walcott all of these activities—exploration, conquest, mercantilism, the spread of capitalism, and the veneration of the pots and stones and bones of the past—are the "Muse of history". It's a damning indictment. Interestingly, at this moment, for the first time in the poem Walcott decides not to preface a chapter with a reading from another author. He doesn't need to, for the "Muse of history" is the theme of this chapter.

The rich, chaotic profusion of nature at Rampanalgas is Walcott's rebuttal to Froude's racist slur against the humanity of black people in the West Indies—"There are no people there in the true sense of the word"—and the expansion of that slur by V.S. Naipaul, Froude's eager mimic man: "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies".²⁵ If West Indians had no history and had achieved nothing, then it meant that they could be free of the decadent idolatry of history and reinvent themselves as new and better versions of people in the Old World. The "sigh of History" is how Walcott would later term the tradition of basking in the nostalgic glow of the past and the use of it as a weapon to abuse other supposedly inferior cultures and races.²⁶

History, in these terms, is the Old World's obscene myth; Europeans' reverence for it a sign of their decadence. "Decadence begins," Walcott wrote in a newspaper article, "when a civilisation falls in love with its ruins."²⁷ What follows in the passage are examples of the signs of the Old World's decadence and the undoing of its linear, mercantilist myths of history:

All of the epics are blown away with the leaves,
blown with the careful calculations on brown paper;
these were the only epics: the leaves.

No horsemen here, no cuirasses
crashing, no fork-bearded Castilians,
only the narrow, silvery creeks of sadness
like the snail's trail,
only the historian deciphering, in invisible ink,
its patient slime,
no cataracts abounding down gorges
like bolts of lace,
while the lizards are taking a million years to change,
and the lopped head of the coconut rolls to gasp on
the sand,
its mouth open at the very moment
of forgetting its name. (pp. 142 – 143; ll. 3360 – 3373)

"Nothing" had been used as a term of abuse, but Walcott's vigorous poetic imagination metamorphoses that "nothing" into a powerful new myth: for now "nothing" signals the "moment / of forgetting", which will allow West Indians to be born anew. "Nothing" here is connected to historical amnesia—the forgetting of history and all of its traumas. Walcott gazes at his young children playing in the nearby river:

That child who sets his half-shell afloat
 in the brown creek that is Rampanalgas River—
 my son first, then two daughters—
 towards the roar of waters,
 towards the Atlantic with a dead almond leaf for a sail,
 with a twig for a mast,
 was, like his father, this child,
 a child without history, without knowledge of its pre-
 world,
 only the knowledge of water runnelling rocks,
 and the desperate whelk that grips the rock's outcrop
 like a man whom the waves can never wash
 overboard;
 that child who puts the shell's howl to his ear,
 hears nothing, hears everything
 that the historian cannot hear, the howls
 of all races that crossed the water....
 (p. 143, ll. 3375 – 3389)

Walcott's children represent the new, Adamic, elemental man, born without history's baggage, innocent, harmless, and without memory.²⁸ Their harmlessness and innocence is signalled by the guileless way they set their half-shells afloat on the river and launch them towards the Atlantic and the Old World—to enact a symbolic reverse conquest perhaps?—but with no feelings of revenge. The new Adamic man, “without history, without knowledge of [his] pre-world” can never be drowned by history, but has the gift of eternal resurrection by virtue of his forgetfulness. The Adamic child, in language that's reminiscent of the young Walcott's epiphany in Book 2, “hear[s] nothing, hear[s] everything”. He is not ignorant, but in his rebirth he is born with the primal knowledge of nature, not trauma. He hears the suffering of his slave ancestors, and the voices of the “fellaheen, the Madrasi, the Mandingo,” and the

multitudes of other people brought across the seas to the New World. Because the Adamic child comprises all of these multitudes, he accepts them unquestioningly: “And the sea, which is always the same, / accepts them” (ll. 3403 – 3404).

This chapter, then, is *Another Life*'s transcendence of the “gilded cruelties” of history and all the bitter experiences of life in Walcott's homeland. The strange, alluring music of its pentametrical pulse combined with its baroque, almost overly-luxuriant language attempts to remove us from history's materiality and reconnect us with the primal forces of life. The poem has a symphonic sense of completion and unity. I hope I've given you a sense of how Walcott evokes his home. His poetic practice calls upon him to take upon himself what he perceives to be the collective voice of his nation. He is impelled—as very few poets are nowadays—to *name* his home; that is, to bring the island of St. Lucia into being through the vigour of his poetry.

Earlier, I wrote that a poet in his work must strive to imagine the society in which his poems will unfold. Well, Walcott not only seems to have done that but also to have powerfully identified himself and his poetic voice with his island and his home region. I've termed this powerful sense of identification and the robust poetry it impels Walcott to produce, *egotistic lyricism*. It's a potent, myth-generating machine, which by virtue of its rootedness is able to continually make myths out of the poet's self.

It's also an intensely romantic poetic practice. It seems to be dependent on Walcott's profound sense of place.

In his dissertation on Derek Walcott, Ben Jefferson argues that Walcott privileges the idea of place in his poetics over the idea of space.²⁹ Jefferson shows how Walcott rejected space as an invention and abstract 'design' with imperialistic connotations. For the poet, space was associated with colonial domination and neo-colonial practices. We can easily confirm the veracity of Jefferson's claims about Walcott's privileging of subjective, personalised place when we remember his intensely personalised evocations of his hometown, Castries, of his mother's house, and of Rampanalgas. The political nature of Walcott's poetic choices seems to confirm Adorno's pronouncements about the innately oppositional nature of lyric poetry: Walcott's concept of place is a major part of the poet's marshalling of his lyric in the fight against the impact of the world of materiality—commercialism, the growth of the multinational hotel industry in the Caribbean, and the various other forms materiality can take.

Everything I read in Jefferson's excellent dissertation underlined my impressions of Walcott's poetics and lyric identity. It also helped also to confirm my feeling that Walcott's poetics of place *cannot* really answer my concerns about rootedness and imagining the society or place in which my poems will unfold. I simply am *not* wedded as deeply to one particular place as Walcott is. I doubt I would be able to summon the sweeping

egotistic lyricism with which to claim a region for my poetic self.

Additionally, I do not believe in that guileless, innocent, history-less and purportedly harmless Adamic myth Walcott invents for the New World. It strikes as a highly dubious and slightly dangerous form of romantic organicism.

For better or for worse, like you, Mr. Auden, I have an uprooted, trans-national identity. I believe that your restless, adaptive, and expansive poetics speaks most authentically to my own experience. Your most telling self-definitions reveal the extent to which travel and displacement impinged on your sense of poetic self: you called yourself "the Wandering Jew," an "alien," a "*déraciné*," a "metic."³⁰ You came from the Old World, lived for a time in the New World, and became a hybrid of both. In this, though you may not have known it, you were the living refutation of the inadequacy of all dualistic propositions involving the way poets should live their lives and write their poetry. I doubt you'd accept Adorno's tempting but ultimately reductive myths of the lyric poet. And to the assertion that *p/ace* should oppose *space*, you proposed the portable self:

Poems, and the people and things they envision, can begin in one place and time (where an author wrote them or where they are "set"), and arrive at other places and times, where they retain (at least some of) their coherence and their effect. Reading lyric, we assume or pretend that an object's function and meaning, an utterance's force and effect, and consciousness itself can travel from one place to another—that they retain at least some of their sense

and force apart from their founding contexts. We thus participate in the imaginative transport of subjectivity from one time to another and from place to place.³¹

But there are risks to this portable project, and you knew it. You'll no doubt remember what Philip Larkin wrote about you in his famous article "What Happened to Wystan?" He claimed that in abandoning England you'd abandoned your native imaginary homeland and your native rhetoric: "At one stroke he lost his key subject and emotion ---: Europe and the fear of war—and abandoned his audience together with their common dialect and concerns."³² And I must reluctantly agree with Seamus Heaney, that in turning to civic poetry you lost that "element of the uncanny" in your poetry.³³ But these were conscious choices on your part, not due to any loss of skill.

My whole project has been founded on a faith in portability—of speech, of voice, of parable. You taught me how the parable can be the answer to the fragility of transport: they can be readily packed in the simplest and most direct language, and yet they draw upon our deepest fears and wishes. They implicate our reader in different places and different times. They allow us to recognise the truths that lie hidden in plain sight. In these my letters to you, my long-dead yet still living mentor, I have my proof of the viability of that project of portability. In spite of differences of class, race, and sexuality, I can still read you meaningfully. And even now, I know that your poetry and criticism have relevance to me in this time and space, and in this life. In the portability implied in the act of

writing poems, I communicate with presences and imagine the society and the spaces in which my poems will unfold into the future.

I'll end my correspondence with you for now. Thanks once more for your patience and kindness in reading these letters of mine, and for the decency and wisdom you've shown in remaining silent while I've made my many mistakes and then tried to correct some of them myself. I'll continue to do so. And I'll communicate with you again.

Always your student,

Dennis Lewis

Notes

¹ Nicholas Jenkins, "The Travelling Auden", (2003), The W.H. Auden Society, accessed online at <http://audensociety.org/travellingauden.html>

² Jenkins.

³ Ben Thomas Jefferson makes that very argument in his dissertation. See *'If I Listen, I Can Hear': Derek Walcott and Place*, diss., U. of Essex, 2012, uk.bl.ethos.559261.

⁴ Edward Baugh, *Derek Walcott*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2006), p. 173.

⁵ Paul Breslin, *Nobody's Nation: Reading Derek Walcott* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 2001), p. 2.

⁶ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222.

⁷ Hall, 222.

⁸ Hall, 223.

⁹ Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p. 299.

¹⁰ Carpenter, p. 289.

¹¹ This basic assumption is reflected in countless critical studies connecting poets to specific places. See Monroe K. Spears, *The Poetry of W.H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island* (New York: Oxford U. P., 1968); Patrick Rafroidi, "The Sense of Place in Seamus Heaney's Poetry"; in *Studies on Seamus Heaney*, ed. Jacqueline Genet (Caen: Presses Universitaires de Caen, 1987), pp. 79-88; and George B. Handley, "A Post-Colonial Sense of Place and the Work of Derek Walcott", *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 7, 2 (2000), 1 – 23, for example. The assumption is also reflected in numerous conference titles and course syllabi.

¹² Theodor Adorno, "On Lyric Poetry and Society", in *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Jon Cook (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 345.

¹³ Adorno, p. 349.

¹⁴ Farrar, Straus, Giroux Archives, Box 374, qtd. in Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, "Reading *Another Life*: A Critical Essay", in Derek Walcott, *Another Life* [1973], ed. Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh (London: Lynne Rienner, 2004), p. 163.

¹⁵ Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, "Reading *Another Life*: A Critical Essay", in Derek Walcott, *Another Life* p. 164.

¹⁶ Breslin, *Nobody's Nation* p. 157.

¹⁷ Breslin, *Nobody's Nation* p. 158.

¹⁸ Paul Breslin, "'I Met History Once, but He Ain't Recognize Me': The Poetry of Derek Walcott," *TriQuarterly* 68 (1987): 178.

¹⁹ Breslin, *Nobody's Nation* p. 161.

²⁰ Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, p. 157.

²¹ Derek Walcott, *Another Life* [1973], ed. Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh (London: Lynne Rienner, 2004), p. 3, ll. 1-16. Subsequent references in parentheses are to this edition.

²² Breslin, *Nobody's Nation*, p. 163.

²³ George Meredith, "Darker grows the valley," in *The Poems of George Meredith*, ed. Phyllis B. Bartlett, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale U. Press, 1978), p. 251, qtd. in Derek Walcott, *Another Life*, ed. Edward Baugh and Colbert Nepaulsingh, p. 257.

²⁴ Adorno, p. 349.

²⁵ James Anthony Froude, *The English in the West Indies: Or, the Bow of Ulysses* [1888] (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2010), p. 347; V.S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1962), p. 29.

²⁶ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 68.

²⁷ Derek Walcott, "A Dilemma", in *Sunday Guardian*, January 12 (1964), 3.

²⁸ Baugh and Nepaulsingh, "Reading *Another Life*, p. 328.

²⁹ Jefferson, 'If I Listen, I Can Hear': *Derek Walcott and Place*, abstract.

³⁰ Jenkins.

³¹ Stephen Burt, "Portability; Or, the Traveling Uses of a Poetic Idea", *Modern Philology*, 100, 1, (Aug., 2002), 25.

³² Philip Larkin, "What's Become Wystan?" *The Spectator*, 14 Jul. (1960), p. 24, accessed online at <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/15th-july-1960/24/books>

³³ Seamus Heaney, *Government of the Tongue*, (London: Faber, 1988) p. 124.

BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA: A SERIAL POEM

"Or again, you often doubt if you really exist.
You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's
minds."

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA

I

Barack, Barac, Barach, Barak, Baroke,
 Brock, Broach, Brocco, Barocco, Rocco,
 Borack, Bo-rak, Brack, Brach, Broke,
 Baraka, Bar-ark, Barrack, Bar-rak, Berarko,

Hussein, Husein, Husane, Hoh-ssein, Hoosseen,
 Heeseen, Huesien, Huisen, Hussien, Hussan,
 Huzza, Hussah, Hazzar, Hazzan, Huzzeen,
 Housan, Houssane, Housen, Houson, Houston,

Obama, Obamma, Obamo, Obana, Obanno,
 Obomba, Obbama, Oh-bo-mah, Oh-bom-bah,
 Obbahma, Obma, Abama, Bama, Bammou,

Brash, Brush, Brosh, Barosh, Barasha,
 Huzayne, Husayne, Hewsane, Hussaine, Hussayno,
 Obmas, Obomhas, Oblomas, Obhamas, Osama.

II

Barack Hussein Obama, Barac Husein
 Obamma, Barach Husane Obamo,
 Barak Hoh-ssein Obana, Baroke Hoosseen
 Obanno, Brock Heeseen Obomba, Broach
 Huesien Obbama, Brocco Hussien Oh-
 bo-mah, Barocco Hussan Oh-bom-bah,
 Baraka Huzza Obbah-ma, Bar-ark
 Hussah Obma, Barrack Hazzar Abama,
 Bar-rak Hazzan Bama, Berarko Huzzeen
 Bammou, Brash Housan Obmas, Brush
 Houssane Obomhas Brosh Housen Oblam-
 as Barosh Houson Obhamas Barasha
 Houston Osama, Barack Huzayne
 Abama, Barack Hussein Obama.

1

What a startling person B. is—so strange
to voice intimations of my own perceptions—
hear them answered as my own projections
a sadness too, in a way, how to effect change

when questioning that original bliss has dissipated,
but feels good to not be faltering behind
some façade—to not feel that doubts of this kind
must be silenced or transliterated

into distance. Like me, supports net neutrality,
wants to get past the natural antipathy,
make sure the barriers to entry are kept low,

equal to all comers—all this, while keeping poker face.
I have to recognise (despite a wry and mocking trace)
his voice has kindled something in me to make it so.

Speech Against the Iraq War

delivered 26 October 2002, at anti-war rally, Federal Plaza, Chicago

Standing before you someone is not opposed to war

Science can be as cold as a well-digger's posterior

September witnesses carnage, dust, and tears,

The invisible music that an invisible man hears

There's a crucible of sacrifice in some circumstances,

knowing, seeing, hearing, and certain countenances

Innocent savages could begin a more perfect union

People sway with transitional thoughts and opinions

Grandfathers signed up for Auschwitz and Treblinka

Multitudes act the same old thankless role of tinker

Willingly, in the crowds there is no shortage of patriots

Many dream the same old, ancestral dreams of Camelot

Bad and petty Saddam will be thrown away into the dustbin

All dreamers and sleepwalkers pay the price for indiscipline

Postscript—

Covert networks and ghost-ops protect the sacred homeland

Sweet are pomegranates, bitter the winter of Samangan.

2

I have to recognise that I find his thereness very threatening....

Distance, distance, distance, and wariness.

I really wonder where it's all going, all this with B.

My wanting to probe the ancient pools of emotional trauma....

Played with a good poker face

And as he says, it's not always a question of intent,

deliberate withholding... or disclosing

He feels accessible, and he is,

In discerning ways.

Something also of a smoothed veneer

The veil.

Coming back from running, standing in the doorway,

With his finger ticking back and forth on my arm

Underneath, where neither of us really feels it, I think

There is a lot collecting, connecting.

2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address¹

Delivered 27 July 2004, Fleet Center, Boston

on behalf of the great state, crossroads of the nation,
I'm divulging—
long before I was born, my father was a student,
his father—my grandfather—was a servant,
he had dreams, and his son, my father, got a scholarship.
Father met mother, her father—my grandfather—
worked on oilrigs and farms, grandma raised a baby
in a bomb factory, and they too had dreams.
Their daughter—my mother—and my father
shared an improbable dream. My two
precious daughters are like that dream
We tuck in our children at night, knowing they're fed,
The father, is losing his job, tears up for his son.
He was a good-looking kid—six two, six three,
clear eyed, with an easy smile—all that any of us
might want in a child.
Sons, daughters, husbands and wives, friends
and neighbours, are not coming back.

¹ The Democratic National Convention (DNC) is a series of conventions held every four years, at which members of the U.S. Democratic Party nominate a Democratic candidate to run in the U.S. presidential elections. These conventions have been held since 1832.

Now—now let me be clear. Let me be clear.
If there's a child, it's not my grandparent,
an Arab American family is one family,
my brother's keeper, my sister's keeper,
if a skinny kid has a funny name, is a tall,
lean, gangling, reddish-brown-skinned fellow,
to use a common word, both of us are 'spooky.'
Sitting at my father's grave, I listened—
unimaginable, his dark, unblemished skin
said, "I never told you, but our life is war,
and I've been a spy in the enemy's country.
Live with your head in the lion's mouth."
And promised much painful boomeranging
of expectations. I'm told I take after him.

3

Says he feels all these people asking him to undo himself, protecting the ability to feel innocence and springborn, and recognising he is not who they really expected or wanted in that instance.

He talks quite a lot about his discontent
Balancing the tendency to be always
the observer with the need to reinvent
himself, to effect change. In real haste,

he gives his work the time that is called for,
no more no less. Ponying up the cash,
leery of acceding to the social lure,

With visions of his life, but in a hiatus
as to the means of their implementation;
oddly blind to the fact they're his real afflatus.

Senate Floor Speech on Ohio Electoral Vote Counting Procedures

delivered 6 January 2005, Washington, D.C.

A woman will decide to come shake hands with me

and take a photograph. She won't ask for anything,

I will be very grateful she took the time to come by,

and share an unexceptional moment, and she, in fact,

at some point, if not herself, then others on behalf

of people like her. I am absolutely convinced that

I was not in this body; I am in this body now.

What I observed were troubling; it is unfortunate.

We continue to see circumstances, continue

taking place. There is no reason at a time

all across the globe, people who are not certain.

This is something we can fix. We have experts.

I would strongly urge that in a circumstance.

But keep in mind, there is a long record.

4

I'm waiting to meet him at midnight,
with a ticket in my hand.

Told me last night of having pushed
Pushed his mother away

I woke up to an image, a feeling that
He is round and soft and young.

I really like about B. that he's so obviously
kindling something in me—my voice to myself.

On Sunday I woke up, waiting for B. to wake,
Writing a bit more—feeling severed

From him through breakfast...

And I just lay with my head in B.'s lap and my eyes
closed, with words and words and words
lapping through my tongue, and I felt older.

Commencement Address at Knox College²

delivered 4 June 2005

It's been rather easy, a fascinating journey so far,

but there have been a few surreal moments.

Remember the night before, sitting in that bar—

talk turned to history, and Dirksen made his comment.

Some thought he must be kidding, yet quite in earnest,

he repeated it out loud, and as sullen eyes across that dive

cut towards our little posse, he jutted out his chest,

returned their glares. We chose to act together then and rise

to defend our guy. Once we'd mobilized in unison,

they never stood a chance. Uncertain and afraid,

² A commencement speech or commencement address is a speech given to graduating students, generally at a university. In the U.S., these speeches are often given by notable public figures.

they turned back towards the mirror and stayed
in their places. But our breed was always the exception, none
of us would ever know his place, for our need has made
for us a cocksure faith, a restive dream of more perfect union.

5

It's all too interior, always in his bedroom without clothes on or reading papers in the living room ... the sexual warmth is definitely there—but the rest of it has sharp edges and I'm finding it all unsettling and finding myself wanting to withdraw from it all. I have to admit that I am feeling anger at him for some reason, multi-stranded reasons.

His warmth can be deceptive. Though he speaks sweet words and can be open and trusting, there is also that coolness—and I begin to have an inkling of some things about him that could get to me.

Senate Floor Speech on the PATRIOT Act

delivered 15 December 2005

Four years ago, following the most devastating attack, this Senate passed the USA PATRIOTIC Act, giving law enforcement scientific tools to track down those all over the world who plot and lurk within the borders of this nation, in our states, in Washington, and perhaps within this very Senate.

And all of you agreed you needed legislation to make it harder for the suspected to go undetected. Remember, though, the world moves not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware those who speak of *spirals!*)

I'm not complaining; sometimes it's an advantage to be unseen in plain sight—when you've lived invisible as long as I have, you develop a certain ingenuity.

Call me Barack-the-Bear—in a state of hibernation.

Remember too that hibernation is covert preparation for more overt action.

6

B. mentioned his father while also talking about the mass murders that July at McDonald's. He spoke of his reaction of tears the night as he watched the news report....

Not long after that, B. had a dream about his father. It was a dream of a distant place and the lost figure brought back to life....

B. rode a bus across a landscape of deep fields and grass and hills that bucked against an orange sky until he reached a jail cell and found Father before him, with only a cloth wrapped round his waist. The father, slender, with hairless arms, saw his son and said, "Look at you, so tall—and so thin, grey hairs, even," and I approached him and hugged him and wept.

At times B. confessed that he felt like an imposter.

Official Announcement of Candidacy for US President

Delivered 10 February 2007, Springfield, Illinois

Let me—Let me begin...in the face of politics,
one people, building that more perfect union.

That's the journey...but let me...Now—

Now, listen, I—I...Look, I—I...recognize
that there is a certain audacity...Now look.

Alright. Okay, look, so let us begin. Let us
begin, let us...Let us...Let's...Let's...Let's...

We can do that. Let's...Let's...Let's protect...

Let's make...Let's allow...We can do that.

We can do this. We can do that. Let's be...

the generation that makes future generations.

It's time—It's time to start...I have a plan...

I want—I want to win, I want—quest, destiny—
new birth of freedom on this Earth.

7

... wish I could remember what I said
and what B. said as I lay crying—I jumbled
a lot of stuff together—a lot of projection—
sad. B. said he cried a lot when he was 15—
feeling sorry for himself. B. is sweet.

He buys me butter and won't let
important things go unspoken.

Want to sit and chronicle the small turns
and cogwheel teeth of current changes;
—zones of uncertainty, redefinition and
as yet unaccustomed ways of coping with
the hiatus

But it's still revolving and being experienced—
How beneath the surface things are after all.
So many masks we wear to filter.

Senate Floor Speech on the Iraq War After 4 Years

delivered 21 March 2007, Washington, D.C.

It was not at all impossible back then to see
we might arrive at the place we're at today—
promises of swift victories, cooling insurgencies,
brief springs, sliding into civil war, on and on until this day.

I wish I had been wrong. I wish we're weren't still here,
talking about dumb wars and their consequences,
while our sons and daughters are maimed in Fallujah.

The architects continue their rapt talk of coincidences

of history, and of resolve and the warfare to perpetuity.

Neutral books will one day be written on our efforts in Iraq.

They'll admit, perhaps, that ideology was our foreign policy.

Not to say, of course, that history will shed light upon the dark,
like some reasonable citizen who performs a tidy courtesy;

No: history is a blind force that wheels back on us, in an arc.

8

My bedroom smells sweetly of hyacinths,
thick blossoms bought today at Key Foods.
With B. at Maison de... for dinner and drinks.
The ease has gently come back: an interlude

to our day to day. Felt jagged at first, but I zipped
home on my bike from the subway— the bicycle
and its quickness wonderful—the evening air rich
with possibilities. The uneventful yet civil
shift from B.'s living with me to living elsewhere
We communicate, we make love, and we talk;
We laugh. But annoy B. intensely when I squawk

about it all, though he laughs and calls me unfair
By p.m. he returns much sobered from a walk,
and, head down, silent, signals open warfare.

Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration Speech³

delivered 4 March 2007, Brown Chapel, Selma, Alabama

Warm applause for the Congressman, Artur Davis.
Reverend Jackson, thanks so much. Good Bishop
Kirkland, thanks too. Essence of courage, John Lewis,
Congressman. You, Reverend Lowery, you stole
the show. And C.T. Vivian— the man whom King
called the greatest preacher he ever heard—and so,
you can see why I’m just a little nervous, coming on
after so many greats. But I got a letter from a friend,
name of Dr. Jeremiah Wright. Wish *I* was a rabble-rouser—
orator. Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way
of your need for light and ever more and brighter light.
The light is the truth, truth is light, and truth is invisible.
But when *I* finish all four walls, I’m gonna start on the floor.
How it’ll go, I’m not sure. But when I am, I’ll let you know.

³ The original Selma to Montgomery, Alabama marches were held in March 1965, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. State troopers and police attacked the unarmed marchers with tear gas and billy clubs.

Private Exchange Recorded between Senator Obama and Reverend Jesse Jackson on the Occasion of the above-mentioned Speech

recorded 4 March 2007, Brown Chapel, Selma, Alabama

I acknowledge that there is a certain presumptuousness.

But we still got that 10% in order to cross to the other side.

Imagine young people then, 16, 17, 20, 21, backs straight,

eyes clear, suit and tie, sitting down at a lunch counter,

knowing somebody is going to spill milk on you but you

have the discipline. I feel like now we've lost it a little bit.

I just don't know who taught them that reading, writing,

conjugating verbs was something only whites can do.

Got to get over that mentality. I also know that if Pookie

would get off the couch, take off them bedroom slippers,

we'd change the politics, change this goddamned country!

And there are too many children in poverty in this country.

Everyone should be ashamed. We got too many daddies

who don't act like daddies. I know something about that!

Spent a restless hour tossing things in my mind
before I could fall asleep last night. B. doubts
and questions whether there was anything
between us except bozeling, and towards that
his tone is somewhat scathing. Haven't
really felt like making love with him lately—
I was silent and somewhat withdrawn
and annoyed with B. on Saturday;
He had no key and kept on asking me
If I'd be home by 2.30. I was, and waited
Till 5.00 until I heard from him.
I didn't feel bad, just quiet...
Later, felt dishonest in not voicing
the thought to which he was responding.

Iowa Caucus Victory Speech⁴

delivered 3 January 2008, Des Moines, Iowa

You said the time has come to move beyond the bitter pettiness and anger, to end the strategy that's been all about division, and instead make it about addition; to build a coalition of sorts because that's how we'll win, and that's how we'll finally meet the challenges we face.

Doing so, we'll be choosing hope over fear, you said.

The time has come to tell them, you said. They think their money and influence speak much louder than our voice; they don't, you said. They don't control our lives, you said.

The time has come to be truly honest about our choice.

You said you want someone you can learn from, someone who'll listen to you and learn from you, even when we disagree, who won't just tell you what you want to hear, but what you need to know. I will be that man, you said.

⁴ A caucus is a meeting held by members and supporters of a particular party. In the U.S., members usually nominate a candidate or discuss party policy.

I really insulted him the other night—
a retaliatory fuck-you. Made him yell at me
about being insecure all the time, impolite;
didn't I know he wouldn't invite me, silly,

(or some such) if he wasn't in love with me....

But I find now that questions of what he might
be reflect back on myself, and back to the murky
middle ground. Truth is, I found him to be not quite

"enough," so I pushed him away. His light
air of withheld-ness chafed me; it seemed to be
so intrinsically part of his character, outright,

this careful thinking through of everything he does,
I saw it, then, as a sort of wound; the person
he would "fix" it with would certainly not be me.

A More Perfect Union

delivered 18 March 2008, Philadelphia, PA

A forceful wind carries Jeremiah's voice up to the rafters within the gracious and the thoughtful. Form more perfect simple words patriots convention. The document? Of course, the answer time. And yet words the reality of their time. Tasked to run story. that in no other country on earth is story even possible. It's a story. One. Despite the temptation to still. This is not to say that. At various stages some commentators. The press as well. On one end of the spectrum, we've heard alike. In unequivocal terms, and in some cases, pain. Of course. Remarks that could be considered Yes. Views? Absolutely. But weren't simply. They weren't simply. Instead, they expressed. As such, charged problems that are neither professed values nor ideals. Why associate snippets same way. But the truth is man. The woman and man reaching out to those. *up to the rafters. And in that single note— dry bones. Those stories story. The blood rebuild.* Like other predominantly experience in America. And this helps explain, perhaps. No more disown cringe. These people are. Now, some will see crank or demagogue, Geraldine Ferraro in the aftermath. But race is America: to simplify— American.

Understanding—recite. Legalized lack. After them. Who scratched and clawed. In public, in front of white morning. That—that *that* exists between the races. In fact, working white don't feel, as far as they're concerned, are anxious global over time. Resentments aren't always polite shape landscape bogus attention from the real right now. And contrary to the claims of union. For the African-American that path burdens always turn the cheek. Now, in the white community, path prosper. Believe in destiny and, yes, tomorrow. In the end, then, what is called well....choice in this country, or change. That is Time. Not this time we want. This time we want. election. There's one story in millions too. Now, Ashley might. Anyway, that does not say, by itself, that patriots signed you.

Fraser is the most common name for men in my family—great-granddaddy, one-armed kiln labourer who died in 'thirty-six, was seen as first—he was born after the Civil War ended; married a woman named Rose Ella Cohen; they had Zenobia, Verdelle, Thomas, and of course Fraser, the one who packed up all he owned and moved northwest to Chicago, where work in slaughterhouses, stock pens, steel mills, and railroads had swelled the South Side black. Dad got a lifetime job as janitor, a big deal back then 'cause Daley really kept us in our place.

Dad said, a man's public face mayn't be true—
who you are in the shadows is what defines you.

Address to the People of Berlin

delivered 24 July 2008, Victory Column

Berlin. extraordinary tonight. The journey. At the height
decided, like so many others, the forgotten world— the dream—
required promised. letter after letter. Yearning. somebody,
somewhere answered. Ours touched down at Tempelhof.
And that's when—that's when this city. On one fall day,
hundreds of thousands to the Tiergarten. Look at Berlin.
Look at Berlin, where the bullet holes. that wall—a wall.
The fall by the distance of an ocean. prison camps and doors
open. Markets too. secrets from a scientist in Pakistan.
poppies in Afghanistan come to Berlin. in Somalia breeds
tomorrow. allow new walls. The walls. races tribes and creeds;
We know—We know these walls. never easy. dry up the well.
airlift planes appear in sky above the 21st century. the century—
those pilots and all the world will know the story. of Berlin—

12

Gradually. With Fraser and Marian.

into a new landscape

born, embodied

being acted upon and acting,

the evolution and point

“They’ve got my back,”—a ready-made—like plates.

At the start,

politics felt sometimes,

“a waste.” Nowadays,

like this one,

“work-family balance”

serves this task

humanise you, normalise

And of course, cut you down to size.

Democratic National Convention Presidential Nomination Acceptance

delivered 28 August 2008, INVESCO Field at Mile High Stadium, Denver, Colorado

My great friend. We meet once more. Tonight,
more homes are watching your home plummet.
More cars drive, more credit cards pay politics.
One woman in Ohio finds herself disaster. A man
in Indiana explains how he feels; families sit on
their hands while a major city drowns. Tonight,
friend, we're here. On November 4th, we'll talk.
Autoworkers show up everyday and try to work;
families watch their people go off; families pay
for college; the student sleeps for three hours;
I think about my mom, I listen to another worker.
I hear a woman talk, I think about my grandmother.
I think—I...I have a better life. This has been mine.
I don't know what John thinks. But the stories win.

Boy, you strange
I told that crowd in Butte, Montana
how your grandma ate tuna with pickles
told them freely you can't even put away the butter
or secure the bread in bread-bin
toss your socks
hamper
"The Saviour"
that "veil"
waiting
adoration
world beyond
woman friends love passionately
that private realm
how public polarising.
Hard-line
out as target
"The gift that keeps on giving."

Speech at Nasdaq

delivered 17 October 2007, at the Nasdaq Stock Exchange, New York

faith is shaken when confidence is called for, or

this vision of a trust renewed, renewed spirit.

Faith—faith in our tradition, in our institutions,

faith in ourselves. Few recognize the new terms

this faith is calling us and much of Wall Street

holds its breath...the tickers are being watched,

there's hope that headlines will bring better news.

It is a hope shared by millions, wondering if all

this will spill. We know there is a need to renew

a psychic trust. We all believe the free market

is the engine, trust we've guided the invisible hand

with a higher principle, always saying to ourselves

the tide will lift all the boats, we rise and fall as one;

and markets will be ravished in a crisis of confidence—

Deep down inside, I'm still that little girl.
Everything I think about and do is shaped
around the life I'd live in some future world.
I've lived and worked in transitional landscapes.
I had the black Barbie, the Ken, toy house,
and cars, an Easy-Bake Oven, I yearned
for a worthy adversary as my spouse,
not some smart smooth brother I could spurn
without a thought. 'Oh, here we go again,' I thought—
You sounded way too good. But I was sure,
beneath your calm and sunny front, I caught
a glimpse of sharper edges, hidden claws.

Perhaps you're meaner than I am; that excites me,
while to you that's a sign of emotional bounty.

Renewing the American Economy

delivered 27 March 2008, at Cooper Union, New York

Being here... how big the circus has become, how fast.
appreciate the presence. the invisible hand. balanced
the forces. so products could be moved to market.
that's been the engine. a market that's created, a market
that's provided. capital markets and people are aligned.
all of us here. we've lost some. now, this loss. in board
rooms, thumbs on scales. bubbles burst the streets.
Concentrations. Let's be clear. No Glass rewards greed
and does not stand still swift currents. capital flows.
Partial deregulation of the sector enabled (inaudible).
push the envelope, pump up, look better, query balance
sheets. trust in capital markets. subprime to return,
patchwork tax cuts. deficit spending and borrowing.
consequences clear. no dividing line. Consequences
repeat a cycle in housing plunge. stabilize foreclosure
to keep risk. gamble reckless windfall. offer sacrifice,
while preventing. long-term collapse lenders, borrowers.
What ignores homeowners. fraud beyond their means.
modify families to the terms of a loan. fraud in the future,

consumers. mortgage curve to the crisis. look at all the borrowers, reduce the principal on mortgages. can this prevent the larger losses. foreclosure and resale, capital markets build advantage. Reserve. the very least, liquidity and capital requirements. mortgage securities develop liquidity risks. large, complex institutions landscape categories. compete in multiple markets. institutions do, not are. commercial banks and thrift. subject to guidelines. framework failed to sense. crack down on line to market manipulation. bets against the country. manipulation risks. regulators market oversight. experts' risks erupt in crisis. the risks assume their own incentives. Execs and shareholders come with excessive complexity. Even the best cannot fully substitute. complex financial instruments ask the public. We do business and people. we turn. a blind excessive leverage risk. And finally, the people just trust. The bedrock of economic success is dream. dream you work hard, you support a family; you get sick, you can afford, you retire...retire the dignity and security. essence of dream today, for far away. Americans' recession for the past. We have just come through...We have just come through.

Costs are a legacy. opportunity a series of proposals. will spoke about the need. the policies behind us said..."You are on your own." policies recognize this. And the most powerful need that agenda. an agenda starts a stimulus. the most vulnerable, hand to hand struggling, often fault their own. Beyond dream work. make secure, for less than \$50,000 per year. make health care. cover work, create opportunity, ensure...the cutting edge, expand our margins. continue to the best shores. know changes. won't pretend. the tax loopholes are not shared. prosperity. going to fiscal discipline. overcome our doubts. divisions yield long-term costs, opportunity slips away. prosperity will suffer here. a common purpose act responsibilities have our country, opportunity and prosperity have done. before. we've recognized that common stake. we have people. our inheritance has responsibility. the work—renew a new century. write the next story. success. can do work today.

I inherited dreams from my father too,
fortunate perhaps my dad was present—
In fact, he was the signal presence who
defined my childhood dreams, made them different.
He was a vigorous man, crippled by MS.
He worked each day, with no complaints, then died
on his way to work—he'd never quite gotten access
to what he really needed. Of course, I can't deny
he'd made his deal with a corrupt Machine—
for a tenured job, he'd sold his conscience.
Love, at times, requires methods quite obscene
or abject, or sometimes seizes power to advance.

What unites us then, are the dreams we share
for this nation, and all the things our love would dare.

President-Elect Victory Speech

delivered 4 November 2008, Grant Park, Chicago, Illinois

people waited and believed this time; their voices.
answer. we have never been individuals. we are,
and always will be, the answer that—that. tonight
we can put out our hands and bend them forwards.
once more. it's been a long time, but tonight, we
all look forward. promise in the months ahead. want
this journey. campaigned and spoke. the streets train
home, and earned the new that's coming. that debt
beyond. not hatched. draws strength. braves bitter doors,
stretches schools and churches. it grows up. rejected.
This victory. didn't win. didn't start. didn't. But above all,
will never truly belong. belong. never for this. because
understand the enormity. even we know the challenges
that. we stand, the mountains risk, waking up in deserts.

INAUGURATION: First Presidential Inaugural Address

Delivered 20 January 2009, Washington

Thank you. Thank you. Fellow citizens: today,
throughout this transition now, during rising tides
and the still so very often of our nation's birth,
it must be now each day a short span of time
will be met on this day the time has come
and again continue, remain, the time of standing pat
a new era will judge at this very hour has come
and again continue remain starting today
for so long today is not only then still
watching today once more now shall someday
pass shall soon dissolve itself reveal at
this very hour through the ages at this moment
that will define ultimately when the darkest
hours finally may be required now history
this day can now stand this day in the coldest
of months in the depths of winter when nothing
but the winter timeless words may come,
our children's children in future years
of our nation's birth, in a small band

huddled by dying campfires on the shores
of an icy river. At a moment when the outcome
is most in doubt, against a far-reaching network.
Economy weakened, homes lost, jobs shed,
Businesses shattered, health care too costly,
Sapping of confidence across the land—
nagging fear that nation's decline is inevitable,
at this moment—a moment that will define
a generation—the father ordered words
to the people: "Let to future world be told!"
Humbled, grateful, mindful, taken, and spoken new,
tide waters, the crisis network, homes, health care,
adversaries sapping land decline, but
this will be met. Dogma measures shortcuts
or settling, less risk-takers, the doers obscure
in labor, in sweatshops lash plows the Khe Sahn
hands were raw, bigger than the sum, workers are no less,
minds standing pat, dust begins again work bold,
band swift, electric grid harness sun and soil
to fuel the cars, question scale too big plans
this country has—stale care they can gross
every willing heart reject as false the rule of law

ideals still light my father once, and forge
their broken aims and bitter swill that dark
someday West, which clings dissent like ours.
The world has changed and far-off whispers honour
the levees storm, a stairway hard, these things old
quiet force of duties, duties that seize in knowledge,
creed whose father huddled, capital
abandoned, snow stained with blood, the outcome
of our nation ordered in the depth, came forth
to meet in face of common dangers. Remember,
our children's children and God's grace,
that great gift—God bless our United States.

Swelled black and packed into overcrowded points
within parameters, our private realms were joined,
but I maintained a cool and public front,
while conversations were going on behind.
There was in me a branching out, I felt
I'd been one thing but now was something other. Who
in their right mind would want this? Asphalt kept
black residents contained, far from the Loop.
My life was compartmentalised—work in one part
of the city, home in another. There was my naïveté.
But blue collars already bore white specks;
The rude black swimmers drifting inadvertently
past the boundary in Lake Michigan reminded me of you—
ignoring the covenant and always jumping the queue.

Speech to the Turkish Parliament

delivered 6 April 2009, Ankara, Turkey

Travels to Ankara and Istanbul,
message an answer, a part of Europe,
this morning a towering obelisk,
a memorial or a tomb for founder,
cast in stone and marble. Flags
and ribbons each day, from windows
in central city squares, every day
more people, more tributes; one,
a marble plaque, comes from sultan,
a poem inscribed with simple words:
"Flourish in years after, by our side,
from Korea to Kosovo to Kabul."
Listen carefully, corridor oil and natural gas
bind the bridges over Bosphorus,
gains are not diminished, kids get what
they need, in places people put out fire
with flames, although they say you can't
put out flames with fire. People know this.
Wonder will be pulled in one direction

or another, lies at the centre of things.

A New Beginning: Speech at Cairo University

delivered 4 June 2009, Cairo, Egypt

I arrived yesterday— the Nile at my window—
and that first cold evening, I crossed the bridge
to Zamalek; when I returned, the security guards
weren't sure whether I was a hotel guest or local.
I wandered street after street in poor districts—
narrow allies, children, crowded tenements,
laundry flapping from balconies, buckets
lowered to the ground by rope, till someone
emptied their contents, then raised them up again.
A man sitting alone in a doorway, did nothing
but stare at my sparks of anonymity. I rejoiced
inwardly to hear them greet me as brother.
I desired at that time to do nothing more than
just wander through the streets and gaze
at these people, glorying in our brotherhood.

As a boy, I'd spent several years in Indonesia;
I'd heard the call of the azaan at the break
of dawn and at fall of dusk. As a young man,
I'd spread the word in Chicago communities
about the dignity and peace found in our faith.
Until I'd joined the Brotherhood, I do believe
I was some wild jack-in-the-box, broken loose
from my springs, rootless, untouched, invisible—
to others and even to myself. For what was I
but one of those transitory beings, too distant
from the centre, outside history and the great
social currents of our times; a no-count nothing
bird of passage, how often I'd felt the twitterings
and mutterings of derision, both outside and within,
with each step, each movement, and every word that
I spoke. Before I knew my kin. Before I knew how
powerful the meaning and purpose of our brotherhood.

II

Relationships by proxies change some views.

So long sow those cycles of discord.

Cairo abound in competition,

publicity this complex overlap.

But in order, say, there must be speak.

That is—are far, now part of this—

years heard, worked, a student, know—

algebra, magnetic compass, pens, disease;

arches, spires, poetry, music;

calligraphy, places, and possibilities.

What John Adams wrote, "has in itself no
character," before the coming region.

Perceptions do stereotype—out of many,

there is mosque in state hijab—and

punish of course, recognizing beginnings.

And if prosperity infects one human being,

pursued, the risk arises.

In one stretch of mountains, that's a stain.
 That is what it means. And tribes— and, yes,
 religions—subjugating each other, elevates
 will fail. Among measure—whether Muslims,
 Maronites or Copts—honest, fault lines, well,
 violence, particularly.

Protect, giving harder zakat. Likewise,
 from religion fit—for instance, clothes
 a woman wears behind pretence,
 forging bring, turn bridges—or disaster.
 Want is women's, know—and audience,
 believe a woman, women's by simply an.
 Why, as with any country—young women
 through dreams.

Think of past, be prisoners of it.
 Problems must be dealt. Ignore sources,
 suggest the opposite—specific, in forms,
 the same. Affiliates debated bases there,

continue case costs none of us—as if
 whoever—whoever few, not solved. That’s why,
 that’s why on—unlike provoked tyranny,
 Jefferson said: “hope it.”

Dual forge clear resources. Sovereignty
 cities never patron—alter or trauma
 it provoked, led deals, concrete rule
 prohibited, which and unwelcome,
 bonds are known. That inspiration—
 homeland, around, and culminated.
 Tomorrow, visit Buchenwald,
 network Reich, vile evoke, also
 pursuit lead—large and small—
 occupation, and then back down,
 elusive.

Point Palestinians point
 to founding, and point beyond.
 Lash insistence, centre story—
 violence is dead—sign on

Gaza, Gaza, Arab Peach,
claimed, surrendered needs,
say in public, say in private,
state to act on what—
what to Arabs, will not go likewise,
tears, blood, and mothers' work.

Holy Land, three Gods mingle
Isra, Iran, defined in part,
in fact middle, made then known,
core must kept, a region share.

Countries grew their while distinct,
same is true with progress. But all
must with currency such investment
within, now seek expand exchange
and increase.

Time create a new corps
partner, counterparts in countries.
Science transfer to marketplace, so

today a new with polio,
expand communities to health,
pursue a life.

All the extremists have come home;
they own and serve God's children.

That is the world; there's so much,
so, so much over years. But if bound by,
will never reimagine, remake this world.

For one rule lies religion—
we do others, them do us.

This truth peoples a belief.

A belief pulsed in the cradle,
a belief still beats.

You took me once to a meeting in a church
basement. You took off your tie, rolled
up the sleeves on your lean brown arms,
and talked to a congregation of spent
versions of myself about community;
then afterwards, you tapped my back and smoked.
We never see all of who we are;
just snippets and distortions, like the rushing patch
of ground through the rusted hole in your car's
passenger door. You loved that car. It'd shake
when you'd start it up, and we'd have this talk;
we looked around, saw the opportunities, we knew
that the chasms are so vast—we got it—
this is what we got this education for,
and eventually my conscience said okay.

First Presidential State of the Union Address

delivered 27 January 2010, Washington, D.C.

Our pact requires that from time to time,
One of us shall give to other, or self to self,
information about the state of our union.

For several millennia now our forbears
have fulfilled this duty, done so during periods
of tranquillity, or in the midst of depressions,

great strife or struggle. As tempting it may be
to look back on these moments, as if progress
was inevitable, and we were always destined

to succeed, our future was anything but certain.
These are times that tested our convictions,
and the strength of our union, continually.

Yet despite our divisions and disagreements,
confusions, hesitations and fears, we prevail.
Again, we are tested. Again, we feel the burden,

Again, we must answer the autochthonous call.
And so again, you act—and so now, the worst
has passed. But the devastation still remains.

You have shuttered your business, while values
have declined and the matter gotten harder.
The recession has compounded our burdens,

But you know that these anxieties are not new.
For struggles like these are the very reason why
you strive with what you've witnessed over years,

and in many places, along with what you've heard
about, in strange letters, that you read each night—
you're still burning up, with the riddle of your need.

I suppose I shall have to wear the mask
again—it's painful put 'em on, rip 'em—
I'm tired of being known for what I wear.
I'll stop speaking about your agenda;
I did not want to be, or seem to be,
the type who interfered—if your goals
had been sprawling, I made mine targeted,
and if you struggled to connect with your
audience, I strived to become their friend,
so my approval ratings climbed so high
they became a running in-house joke.
In front of everyone, you needled me
endlessly, but complaining about how things work
is like remonstrating with the rainfall.

Address to the Troops in Afghanistan

delivered 28 March 2010, Clamshell, Bagram Air Field

How much do they know?

Well, it just turns out that they do.

Give them a round.

They're guests in the country—

I think they know that

though they didn't get a lot of notice.

I want them to know

and everybody to understand,

I'll tell them right now the same thing—

I could order all of them right away,

but I want them to know,

whether they're working the line,

whether they're standing by watching,

they are here.

Most of them understand that

they've got the equipment,

they're on the offensive,

they're bringing to bear—

that's the work they are doing.

They are doing,
they've done theirs,
that's what they've earned.
I've seen their tenacity—I've seen their tenacity;
each one of them is a part—
I want them to understand this.
All of them show what's possible—
they want to bring people,
they know the entire stands
when they put on that uniform—
there are more folks like them.

START Treaty⁵ Signing Joint Presser with President Medvedev

delivered 08 April 2010

How happy to be back

in this beautiful city.

It's true—

old adversaries can forge

new friendships—

people-to-people contacts,

keeping commitments.

In the wrong mouths these words

could be dangerous weapons

to people everywhere.

⁵ START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) was a bilateral treaty between the U.S. and the Union of USSR on the reduction and limitation of strategic weapons. The original was signed in 1991, but expired in 2009.

We have this conversation—we could build
a very comfortable life for ourselves,
we've gone to the right schools, and have
all these advantages, but I'll just look around—
I have a ton of bright friends who could do
what I am doing, but they didn't get the breaks.
They did not have the right inspiration.
Success and failure—it's such a flimsy difference.
Is this survivor's guilt speaking? Is this
the hint of vulnerability you said you liked
in me? That's always been your trump card. You
always plead the cause of community, then
I'm in it—feeling passion... I so much enjoy
our conversation; there's always so much give-and-take.

Nobel Prize for Peace Acceptance Speech and Lecture

delivered 10 December 2009, Oslo City Hall, Oslo, Norway

I

I would be remiss if I didn't.
didn't admit
acknowledge the controversy
didn't believe in spite of all the cruelty
sense the conflict
didn't feel responsible
admit I'm the beginning
didn't say our actions
try to bend
didn't toil for giants
try to profit
didn't bide my time
take my turn
didn't see the millions
recognise quiet acts
didn't know the beaten
serve our customers
didn't mind your business
deploy
didn't replace one with the other
wind it down
didn't bristle with questions
feel darkness
didn't smell something
didn't make a speech
spit
I would be remiss.

II

No one questioned its morality at first.
It appeared, in one form or other, at dawn
as a simple fact, like drought or something nursed
within our genes, a virus or guise to be worn
when tribes and civilisations sought control.
And over time, the codes imposed their rules
of law, violence was trained, the honoured goal
became "just war," but soldiers like other tools
of total conflict, couldn't discern between
civilian and combatant-- neither one was spared.
The efficient Reich made it more obscene.
Until today, advent of the terror age,
when global structures made to prop up peace,
and markets, hedge against one sect's outsized rage.

III

The play had been richly suggestive,
thanks to Elena— Elena, who herself appeared
a manifestation of one of his own ideas—
He'd gone to the Poetry Library
and found poetry in the flesh.
A mercurial, talkative woman—
thin, intense, eccentric...
They were at Brown's, close to the theatre.
We attach ourselves to certain cities,
she said, they're our temperaments—
London is me! Her passions— theatre,
galleries, museums, the Socialist Party,
and family—
Reminded him of Mimi— she laughed
when he said her mysteriousness
about her illness evoked this...
At any moment a relapse was possible—
she struck him right then as more alive—
minute by minute—than any he'd ever met.
The Powell Principle—how certain tendencies
and patterns are repeated and replayed,
with variations—was noticeable.
She seemed a more refined version
of E., the Frenchwoman he'd known
briefly at Columbia...And years ago
at Punahou, he'd met and kissed Diana,
Irishwoman—her husband had been
a race car driver who'd crashed and died.
Trafalgar Square arm-in-arm...
A chess game of constant charge,
denial, rebuttal, and change.
After kissing forcefully,
What are you thinking?
Her eyes, cheekbones, nose,
mouth, the taste and scent of saliva—
He was feeling and thinking a complex
thought about their physicality...
Vaguely repelled perhaps
and filled with desire.
She said she wanted him.

She wanted him to phone her
when he got back to New York.
She suggested he could come to visit
her in London...They spoke of December,
the midterms. Rome meeting?
No, Milan. Her father had bought her
an apartment there, close to the clinic.
It would be cheaper. He went through
the actions, said the words he said,
but he didn't know what this was.

IV

Let me tell you a hard truth
about myself—I am not the chief
or commander I thought I was.
I don't believe we're just prisoners—
actions do matter, do bend things,
but I'd be remiss if I didn't admit
I will not eradicate the conflict—
there will be times when force
will find the use not just needed
but justified. I am living proof
of the impact of conflict...I know
there's nothing weak, nothing passive
about the creeds or the needs
of life, but still I cannot guide
my life. I try to face the world
as it is, I make my mistakes,
and know nothing is truly foreign
to me, evil really does exist
within, and to say that force sometimes
may force the issue is not a call
to be cynical, it's to know
your limits and your history.
I raise this point, I begin with this
because in many there's a deep
ambivalence about action—
a sort of buckling under to new
threats. And at times this is joined
by a reflexive suspicion
of the divided human self.

V

I dislike my own kind.
 I dislike my own slovenly, casual kind.
 I was still angry over yesterday—
 the casual gestures instead of words,
 the way he motioned to me
 with his head—disarming yet I disliked it.
 I told him low, but not too low,
 and clean up the back and sides.
 He proceeded to give me a low
 queue ball look. The thought gnaws
 my gut for the rest of the day—
 disturbed—I'm much too passive.
 So slovenly in dress and speech
 and manner...the usual rant about *them*
 and about *us* being much better—
 This time, it's the sun's rays
 that prove it, for everywhere *they*
 run for cover—*they're dying, can't take it!*
 It's funny, but untrue, but every time
 the complacent, lazy jokes,
 and the slovenly presumption.
 Yet, they rip off their own kind.
 Yet, we curse out or cut up
 or shoot up our own kind.
 Always most savage with each other.
 Chicago, Detroit, Washington,
 Liberia, or was it Sierra Leone?
 The child soldier rapists, butchers
 who feared the return of order
 and law, and so one last wave
 of maiming and rape—
 they rape the matrons—
 women of 30, 40, 55—
 and disembowel the husbands,
 the husband given a cigarette
 before his guts are cut out.
 Last rites. The wife must say *Fine*
 while it's happening.
 The bloody Black Jacobins.
 The zero sum game. Of course

there's Bosnia, Yugoslavia,
Srebrenica—read a Milosz poem
about the epochs of blood lust
and the boot on the neck.
But who can exceed the Hutus
and Tutsis, the limbs lopped off
and the belly laughter?
I fear the revolution, for when it comes,
there'll be barely the excuse
of ideology before the descent...

VI

We were fleeing the war,
packed what we could carry
in our backpacks.
We travelled in a large group—
me and my teenaged daughter
and the families of four neighbours—
till we reached the border.
An armed mob was there to meet us.
The leader—lithe, muscled, sneering—
looked her over and then spat
a fleck of phlegm on her,
claimed her as his own.
I...

VII

One of them burning.
Air Force One was flying somewhere.
She talked calmly then started screaming.

VIII

Tower of Babel.

IX

A dead black dog lay on the pavement
outside the gates,
Bright red tongue thrust through its teeth,
Open animal eyes,
A spot of dried blood by the head,
and a small black turd
squeezed out neatly by the rump.

X

Majesties, Highnesses, heads of state,
lords, governors, potentates,
distinguished Members, honoured citizens,
Nobel Committee, great religions,
and heirs of fortitude, honour,
gratitude and humility,
with foresight of generations past,
our highest aspirations, our ideals
of liberty, self-determination,
equality, the rule of law,
and enlightened self-interest,
embrace the perestroika
and encompass economic security,
as the world grows smaller.

I remember you giving a speech once about how—if you want to move your own agenda—you have to really understand who has power and what their self-interest is. This was at a time when there were rumours circulating that you weren't "black enough." We watched with some bemusement while this thing bubbled up, and then continued to grow until it metastasised into a sort of myth that you'd faked your own birth and were an interloper, not who you claimed to be. We laughed, as we reflected that nowhere could this story happen but in America. I also wondered if you'd been too unsubtle.

Memorial Service Address for Upper Branch Coal Miners⁶

delivered 25 April 2010, Beckley, West Virginia

The only light was the lamp,
or the glow from the mantrap,
day after day, they would burrow,
the fruits of their labour, that light.
And most days they'd emerge
from the dark, squinting at the light.
Most days, they'd emerge from dark,
feeling sweaty and dirty and used.
Most days they said they'd come,
but that day they left for the mines—
some, having waited whole lives,
having longed to follow in footsteps.
Yet, none of them did it themselves—
all their lives they spent in pursuit.
There, in the mines, for families,
they became a family themselves.
Their community revealed for all
in the minutes, and hours, and days,
in the dark, in the light of a lamp.

⁶ The Upper Big Branch Mine disaster occurred in Raleigh County, West Virginia in April 5, 2010. 38 miners were killed. At the time, it was the worst accident of its kind in the U.S.

***Remarks upon Signing the Health Insurance Reform Bill
Washington, D.C., March 23, 2010***

Very few know all the story
of the pre-existing conditions,
reaching very different conclusions
about the very same things.
Remember Ted walking through
that door at the summit in this room—
one of his last public appearances,
and it was hard for him to make it.

21

My experiences have made me far more
aware of Blackness than ever before.
From the time I was young I've known the forms
this dark matter could take and I harboured
a sense that things could so easily go
very wrong, that good fortune could vanish
with one misstep. There's the social contagion too—
the kinship between my own personal history
and the crude amorphous force of rank dark
bodies moving slowly down the platform,
going God knows where. The white mobs sit back,
meanwhile, and amuse themselves playing "turkey bingo,"
the game where they seek out the dreams and convictions
of black lovers, then tax them with impotent derision.

Oval Office Address to the Nation on BP Oil Spill Disaster

delivered 15 June 2010, Washington, D.C.

They came and prayed each season,
for as the priest and the fisherman said,
He is with us always, so they come and pray again.
The long ceremony goes on though it took place weeks ago.
And still, they come and pray.

For tens of decades, they've talked and prayed.
For years, they've known the days were numbered.
They thought they saw the consequences
of their inaction.
There'll be more damage before this siege is done,
they said.
They believed they deserved to know the answer why.
But time and again, the path seemed blocked.

There was a swift, wide-ranging mobilisation,
five and a half million feet of boom had been laid
across the water.
Legions of cops in riot gear deployed across the cities.

But now it's very clear that the problem here
runs much deeper—it was more
than a single event that does its damage
in a matter of minutes, months, or days—

Millions of gallons of black crude
that's been spilled are like a black epidemic
that's been spewed into water—

more than a mile beneath the surface,
and drilling underground.

How men and women have slowly learned to have interesting conversations.

How the desire that women feel for men, and for other women, has altered through the centuries.

How respect has become more desirable than power.

Why friendship between women and men has been so fragile.

How some people have acquired an immunity to loneliness.

How new forms of love have been invented.

How those who want neither to give orders nor to receive them can be intermediaries.

How people have freed themselves from fear by finding new fears.

How people searching for their roots are only beginning to look far and deep enough.

Why fathers and their children are changing their minds about what they want from each other.

Why it has become increasingly difficult to destroy your enemies.

How even astrologers resist their destiny.

Why people have not been able to find the time to lead several lives.

How people choose a way of life, and how it does not wholly satisfy them.

Address to the Nation on the End of Operation Iraqi Freedom

delivered 31 August 2010, Oval Office of the White House, Washington, D.C.

Tonight is the end—
the Whiskey Tango Foxtrot moment.
A decade sometime in the future that
draws down here today,
began seven and a half years ago—
the beginning that night,
during the course of a better future,
in the end, at a time
of new beginning.

And so tonight is ending,
is over—
the last time this year
Tonight is ending.
And now, it's time to turn
toward its outset future, on 9/11
now, the tenth year again.
Now able for a limited time.
And next autumn will begin
this transition to the future.

My time today, tomorrow, now
throughout my history,
and over the last decade,
this in turn for too long,
while, at this moment
I wind down.
Now, in days to come,
as long as I feel, in decades,
the signature wounds of today,
post-World War,
as though, in spite of myself,
I was fulfilling
the bequest of my grandfathers,

In the pre-dawn darkness
the last of them is passing.
In the early morning hours,
of over seven years before,

since the war began,
this day,
and for over two centuries,
there lay in an age
beyond the pre-dawn darkness,
in a state of hibernation,
waiting,
not an arrow
but something like a boomerang.

I get a little angry when I hear “the bitter half”—
the thing about me being negative.

I am a can-do person. You know what,
today you have to get up and do something
you don't love doing. Moving people
outside their clans, a goal we often talk about.
We don't like being pushed outside our zones
of comfort. You know it. You know us folks.
We are our own evil.... We're cynical and mean.
We're still divided, we live in isolation.
People believe that their pain is unique,
and we become much more isolated.
My point is the same as yours, you make
it all sound lofty, but I'm realistic, not bleak.

Remarks by the President at a Memorial Service for the Victims of the Shooting in Tucson, Arizona

delivered 12 January 2011, McKale Memorial Centre University of Arizona Tucson, Arizona

I

Nothing I say or do will fill
the hole torn in your heart.

A memorial service will be held for the victim—
families will come and all who called me friend,
students from the university,
graduates from my law school,
soldiers, cops, and colleagues,
representatives of the people.

Vigils will be held, candles lit, prayers said,
songs will be chanted, and you'll weep
for me, and for the others who've been
harmed or killed by having too much hope.

And boys in transition, will move slowly
down subway platforms, speaking
their jived-up urban language,
throwing blue sparks—they, too,
will represent the unseen thing
that was lost.

II

To all who want to get to know me better,
there is nothing I can say or do that will fill
the dark and sodden hole in your hearts.

III

He was our dancer, our gymnast
and our swimmer, and sometimes,
sometimes—he did—some things
with passion, raising the question
what small part we each could play
in the making of this union—
so curious, so trusting, so full of magic,
and irresponsible, believed, in part,
because of what they said,
so sorry, though you may well deny it,
but we've decided you'll be our hero.

IV

And still you'll doubt if you really exist.
You'll read these lines and wonder still
if you aren't a phantom in other people's
minds—

V

There is a river whose streams make glad.
There is a conversation that commences.
There are reasons why bad things happen.
There are facts which will be re-examined.

VI

I call my home a "hole"; it's a warm hole.
But nothing will fill the hole.

Your hearts know this.

But living, will pull through.

We'll have conversations, and we'll share our
thoughts over the course of conversations,
but I sometimes feel that it's not for me to say.
It feels almost like there aren't any words.
I do, at times, wonder at the journey
you've made, all the risks that you've taken to
get here, and I'll admit I am amazed
at your level of calm ... I see you thrive
in this; I don't yet see the weight.
Is such a tale possible anywhere
but here? Your lack of caution, readiness
to change ... the world and we need that.
But you're not going to keep running and running,
baby, at some point they do beat the shit out of you.

Address to the British Parliament

delivered 25 May 2011, Westminster Hall, London

I

In London once, I visited a large parkland,
filled with statuary relics and temples,
which dated from the Roman times.
The buildings—overgrown with moss and weeds,
spoiled with dirt—were still impressive.
Statues of emperors and heroes stood above
the bodies of the beaten mortals at their feet.
(In particular, I remember the figure—a woman—
spread out on her back and reaching upward).

The final monument was the image of a hero
and his hound—I recall the lean and ragged curve
of the creature's underbelly and the severity
of the hero's frame, without remembering
specific details of his features.
A voice, just then, from a loudspeaker announced
we were to be evacuated— for with the outbreak
of hostilities there was the certainty that
London too would be attacked.

They took us to an underground mall in Stockwell.
Civilians crowded in tunnels and passageways.
I walked with my half-brothers and sisters
down a corridor, and as I turned to the right,
I noticed the face and figure of a childhood friend.
I called out to him, and he turned and saw me.
He was visibly moved and murmured my name.
We shook hands; I told him I'd wanted to get
in touch with him many times but couldn't.
At the same time, I had it in my mind to apologise,
but I never got the chance, as he continued talking
at the same time. And though I was truly contrite,
I soon noticed—in all the chaos, rush and panic—
that my siblings had moved far beyond my sight:
I would never know again which way they'd gone.
The dangers and vagaries of this war were such—
I realised then— that circumstances required
I go with my friend to his home and give up—for now—
all hope of future contact or joining with my family.

II

There was the time, at the war's height,
when I came across my father, and he recounted
my ill treatment—my various 'misdemeanours'—
I'd grown wretched with guilt and fear,
but this had not prevented me from doing
the very thing my mother had long ago
warned me against doing.

I punched him—I masked my fear by striking
out at him, trading punches with an aging man
He smiled mirthlessly and hit me back—
I took many hard shots, but I returned them,
pummelling my father. And afterwards, I fled.

III

Years later, my mother and I journeyed to Africa. Our journey proceeded like a long march, over a crackling telephone line—her telling me what we'd accomplished as each day passed.

During the first stage, we walked with a group of people through a hot and dusty landscape. At nights, my mother would give me her reports.

In the second phase, my mother reached the hotel, and phoned my room, but I'd gone out for the day. In the evening, she described her journey, and I saw what she saw—long roads, unpaved, as I walked upon still-wet, unset concrete, or mud. The African faces that surrounded us were passive, still, and pleasant. And all the time the images evoked by mother's words continually surprised my expectations. Each day brought with it a fresh report over the telephone line.

In the last phase, she described her arrival at a hotel: I saw a glistening wet road of the still unset concrete. There were people walking through a hot landscape and the shimmering mirage of a hotel in the distance—

all this while my mother spoke to me by telephone. She kept lamenting the line as a kind of refrain, but I heard her loud and clear—she sounded very happy. She'd arrived at the hotel, where she'd cooked dinner, and prepared her room to receive my father's family. And as I approached, I kept on seeing things I never expected to see in Africa—bright and futuristic cars, fridges hanging from the trees, and I heard myself saying to her, "Well, this is your first trip to Africa, so enjoy it!" It wasn't an imperative; more a summing up of our journey and our dialogue—the implication—as an undertone—it would likely be our last together.

IV

I left the party with the pleasant Trinidadian.
There was an awkward politeness—I felt unconnected.
I walked her to the subway at the corner.
We lingered and chatted. She asked how long
I'd been back, whether I felt this was now home.
I answered honestly—told her it wasn't home
but it was more so than the island.
Spoke about the dispersal of my family.
She remarked on her ties to home, how it felt
to be rooted. I saw straightaway how right she was,
and my condition in its true light—my autonomy
versus her warm belonging. Wanted to tell her
how hard it was to get—that rootedness.
And I realised that I was sick—felt it was there
for all to read—at that party, on the subway going home—
all my efforts—to make myself independent—
of family and community identity, my rootlessness,
the endless scope of my ambition—How could I
presume to invite any woman within my life,
when I'm not quite whole?

V

I could have cried right then, thinking of this barren,
wasted life. I could have cried.

I felt a sudden fear of breakdown like my mother's.

I laughed at the idea—right then—of feeling sorry
for myself.

But the agony of trying to become complete.

What I notice about all men like you
is that your order is in there somewhere—
your order is me, my family, maybe God
is in there, but me is first, but for women, me
is fourth, and that's not healthy, but we learned
from the very best how a well-run home
should operate; I am quite old-fashioned.
You say I'm quite a lot meaner than you,
that there's one rule in our marriage—I get
to tease, and you do not—Forgive me, but
those jobs still fall into the laps of women;
Don't get me wrong, I think you're wonderful,
though you've stretched out marriage like an accordion,
and still can't see what I have to complain about.

VI

During my childhood I often used to enjoy conducting exercises of psychological probing 'backwards'—alone in my room, I'd try to push back my self-consciousness, the awareness of myself as an individual entity, as far, far back into my past sense of self as I could, and I would then achieve—or imagine—a heightened awareness of my difference from my present self. I'd become aware of self in the dim recesses of the past—not as a single consciousness or entity, but as *part* of something larger, a small component of some much vaster entity. My sense of myself in the present then seemed somehow incomplete, though not disturbingly so, for it seemed to give my identity a richer and deeper source.

VII

I'd come alone to carry on the search for father. The institutional building where the search took place was labyrinthine—there were many stairwells and many doors to offices and apartments in the stairwells. But this was where they'd told me he would be. I entered a kind of vestibule area, where many people crowded. At first, I seemed to know where to look, but soon I got waylaid—at one point in a restaurant-kitchen area, at another at a doctor's waiting room. An attractive, young bi-racial girl passed by and told me that she too was looking for her father. I followed her, but lost her amongst another hubbub of people. I was still unhurried and certain where I'd find my father. I imagined him with a woman, charming her or already engaged in sex. At this point, I asked a woman in the corridor whether she'd seen a stocky, muscular black man with a certain air about him, and realised I was describing someone the woman—a middle-aged black woman—would likely have found irresistible. It struck me I should have mentioned his advanced age. Later, I was sure I saw him at the top of a stairwell, talking with a woman. I was certain now I'd reach him. I went up the stairwell where I thought he'd be, but was confronted with door after door, one looking like another. I listened at a door where I thought I heard voices—a woman with a whining voice that could have been my mother's. But the door was not an entrance—it was some sort of exit or back entrance. I continued up the winding staircase until I was out on the street, and looked upon row after row of multi-coloured doors to different offices, houses and apartments. I realised then that it was hopeless. I'd have to go back to the beginning.

VIII

So much is commonly known—
my mother told a very funny joke once,
everyone laughed, though the punch line
was directed at herself—self-deprecating—
and it's hurt me ever since.

There were strong ties between us,
that strong between-relationship,
and special ages reigning over English,
The very active press corps strains—
notions rabble-roused the other side,
as Churchill said, nature needs the times
and Habeas Corpus sometimes works
the path of slaves and immigrants.

Mother was an island-continent,
Mother was a market economy,
Mother was an insatiable army.

If I've given you nothing else,
she said, I've given you a life
that's very interesting. She seemed
to have some sort of deep insider
knowledge of so many things.
Yet, she wasn't very organised.
And that disorganization often spilled
over—
She'd had to make some very difficult
decisions, and at times, it seemed,
she took for granted that, Well,
it'll all work out, it'll all be fine.

I didn't care that she was so unrestrained,
had such an appetite for strange places,
such interesting people and adventures,
but she put herself in vulnerable positions,
always unstable, always at the brink,
as new threats spread across the borders—
always under threat, always an outsider,
always a just little bit of an observer.

And yet, I can't deny that her roving bohemian life has an appeal that's very powerful to me. Looking back, I think so many of my life choices have been directly inspired by her. I feel she hasn't removed her forces.

Since she and I have shared so much in common, our relationship has often been overanalysed for the slightest hint of strain. Sometimes, it's true, there may have been hurt feelings, but fortunately, these last few years, things have gone quite smoothly.

Often, concealed beneath the dais, while I've given speeches, mother caressed my penis and fellated me.

IX

Dawns arise
and spark rapidly in fits and starts,
moving principles always.
A new life can sing
like any other.
In years to come,
not only this island-continent,
but the world will chirp,
Look back to what you've done,
and do not march with promise
together much.

**CHAPTER TEN: A COMMENTARY ON THE
CREATIVE WRITING PROJECT**

A Commentary on the Creative Writing Project

In the Introduction, I described this thesis as essentially the result of a seven-year conversation I have been having with W.H. Auden and other poets. It is a conversation in which I have had to work quite hard to figure out the exact form of what I wanted to say. Initially, I made more progress with the critical component of this thesis. A crucial development, however, was when I decided in 2011 that the thesis would also contain a series of reflective letters to Auden, whom I imagined as my mentor. The letters helped me frame my theoretical as well as practical concerns related to the creative project.

Initially, I also believed that I would be equally focused on the work of Derek Walcott. I believed that his wide body of work had many valuable lessons to teach me about the notion of the poet's relation to place. However, as I advanced further in my reading of Auden's poetry and my correspondence with him I recognised that it would be prudent if I focused on one poet. Had I continued with my original plan, it would probably have resulted in me having to write two separate PhDs.

In 2009, an early version of my chapter on *The Sea and the Mirror* was accepted at the 8th Annual Louisiana Conference on Literature, Language and Culture in Lafayette, Louisiana. In this paper, I argued that Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, and Caliban's address especially, present the poet's artistic reflection on the making of poetic art and the role of the poet. The paper represented my first efforts to map the evolution of Auden's

poetics from his early period of critical success in the 1930s to his more formal mid to late periods. In addition, I made an effort to present a nuanced discussion of the connections between his personal and religious preoccupations and his poetics. The paper received some favourable feedback.

This paper was much revised, greatly improved, and retitled as “‘The Only Subject that You Have:’ Poetic Voice, Power, and the Mere Mortal Self in W.H. Auden’s *The Sea and the Mirror*.” It was accepted at the Poetry and Voice Conference held 25th-27th June 2010 at the University of Chichester. The changes and improvements to the paper reflected my deepened understanding of some of the implications of the changes in Auden’s poetics and his innovative approaches to poetic voice in this major poetic work.

The much greater emphasis I gave to the questions of history and politics in the revised paper was at least partially influenced by my careful consideration of some of the provocative ideas of Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou and the implications they had for modern theories of poetics. Rancière’s book *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* opened up for me exciting new ways to think about poetry and the arts in relation to politics and society.

Another important influence on my critical analysis as well as the overall trajectory of my creative project was Mary Kinzie’s book *A Poet’s Guide to Poetry*. The other writer who has had a decisive influence on me is

the San Francisco poet Jack Spicer, whose metaphor of the poet as wireless receiver receiving transmissions from outer space or from ghosts resonated suggestively with me. I also encountered the ideas of Kenneth Goldsmith. Through his influence, I felt emboldened to adopt uncreative and appropriative procedures in composing my poems. However, I would also have to say that his influence was as much negative or oppositional as it was positive.

In December 2013, I submitted a collection of 27 poems to my supervisory board: ten of these poems were love poems focused on presenting the course of a love affair between the Obama persona and an unnamed young woman and written from the perspective of the young woman. The remaining poems had all been based on appropriations and reworkings of speeches actually made by the current US President. 27 poems still amounted to a modest beginning to my poetic project, but for me at that stage they marked a small watershed stage in my creative writing degree because for the first time I felt as if I had properly begun work on a poetry project that could be developed and sustained over an entire book manuscript.

The process by which I had reached that initial submission of 27 poems had been a long, self-doubting, and uncertain one. As late as April 2013 I recall being in a kind of stasis in my writing of poems (although I was still able to continue composing letters to Auden). I knew I wanted to write in some way about U.S. President Obama, and that I wanted to use him as

the medium with which to address public issues while also projecting my own personal concerns, without writing confessional poetry. Additionally, I was interested in the possibility of adapting some of Auden's poetic forms – the Hudibrasian form of his “New Year Letter ” and the public sonnet form he used in “In Time of War”. I also knew for certain that many of my poems would be written from the underground of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

I had been reading Marjorie Perloff's article “Poetry on the Brink” and her book *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* about the *uncreative* method of erasure. I knew that my poetic writing strategy would embrace appropriative, Conceptualist art methods. But I wanted a clear set of principles. I did not want to just create these poems according to some internal, subjective whim. I wanted to minimise the subjective.

A key stage in my slow progress was my realisation that, while the Conceptualist art methods of Kenneth Goldsmith offered me some useful strategies for poetic composition, his model of poetry was ultimately insufficient for me. His vision of the poet's role and of the operations of poetry were limiting because ultimately he still saw the poet's role as being mimetic in nature. Of far more use to me were the ideas of Alain Badiou who saw poetry as a matter of creating *openings*—that is, claiming and proposing new and wider schema.

The main takeaway from the Goldsmith book had been the notion of approaching the writing of poems procedurally, without agonising over

“inspiration,” etc. In appropriating a text, the poet dispensed with the pressure to be original and with producing his work *ex nihilo*. Yet, as I sat down in front of my computer and reams of paper and books, I still found I faced the same problem as ever—how to start, how to transform the dead words in front of me into vivid and interesting lines of poetry? I still felt, as I copied out the sentences of the Ralph Ellison novel, I was waiting for the lightening bolt of inspiration or the Muse to come and possess me. According to the letters I had written to Auden, I was supposed to have freed myself from this delusion.

I wrote out a set of procedures for myself, which ranged from general guidelines to more specific ones. I was not, for example, writing a narrative, and so I should completely drop the idea that I had to establish a narrative link between the *Invisible Man* narrative and Obama as president; they are one and the same person simultaneously. I would not be writing poetry that was mimetic or focused on narrative (although I might use narrative at times). I would not necessarily have to write poems based solely on Obama speeches in isolation; I could combine the words of speeches with other source texts, such as biographical works.

The first poem that I completed using appropriative methods was a draft of “Inauguration,” which reworked Obama’s speech at his inauguration as U.S. President on 20th January 2009. I completed the draft on 17th August 2013, and afterwards, I recognised for the first time that I was not writing mimetically. Additionally, as I wrote the poem, I found myself trying

to avoid as much as possible the distressing habit of waiting until I felt like writing, or in other words waiting for inspiration. The procedural method I had adopted was not easy, nor was it an easy way to avoid being concerned with form. It was in fact more difficult than traditional methods of composition, but less random and dependent on subjective moods. In appropriating Obama's speech, I found myself turning it against itself, looking beneath the rhetorical surface for patterns, images, and ideas that seemed to be hidden but yet in plain sight. I seemed to be focused on language and the unfolding of thought and obsession through language.

But months later, I was still uncertain and I still sometimes found myself suspecting that my intention to use the speeches of Obama as the basis of my poems was foolhardy and naïve. I persisted. Earlier in 2013, I had read David Maraniss' thorough biography of Obama and had found one chapter in which the author discussed several of Obama's love relationships to be richly suggestive. I re-read and copied out these passages. At the same time I was reading and transcribing Obama's 2002 speech on network neutrality (the principle that internet service providers and governments should be completely detached from the content of information sent over the internet). After several days of transcribing and reshaping text, ten love poems emerged. It was as if I had sculpted the poems from the textual material that I had transcribed.

The process had been a lengthy one in which I had been assailed by doubts as to the merits of the method and worry that I was simply wasting

my time. What Kenneth Goldsmith had described as “infallible processes”—the mechanical procedures of creation used by conceptual artists like Sol LeWitt and Lawrence Weiner—were no guarantees of angst-free production of poetry. Nevertheless, in spite of my anxiety and self-doubt, in adopting this approach I did have a dim notion of procedure—that of copying out and then re-copying passages of text that seemed interesting to me—and by following this crude procedure I had unexpectedly produced ten love lyrics. As time went by and I wrote more poems, I greatly refined and also varied this procedure so that I was able to write poems whose shape and content truly surprised me.

At the same time I had adopted the Conceptualist art methods for my poetry writing, I was also trying to be true to Jack Spicer’s idea of what he termed the “serial poem.” By this he meant the poet plunging into the writing of a large group of related poems without knowing fully which direction he was going. Although I was trying to adopt procedural methods, I could not say to myself, “I’m going to do this” and thereby predetermine my compositional route. I had to let the poem have its ‘head’, so to speak. As I worked on each draft, I forbade myself the comfort of rereading previous poems; that is, looking at the signs along the forest path in order to see where I was or how I had gotten there. Once I had entered the forest, I simply had to go forward. Each poem would be structured by the dictation of the Obama speech and not by me. I knew that once I started to get a sense of what the poem would amount to, I would unconsciously start to steer the

poem, and that that was precisely what I *should not* be doing. Spicer talks about striving to prevent his mind from thinking, talking, or making connections itself. The mind has to remain blank or ignorant. I had to divorce myself, as much as I could, from what I thought the poem was saying. I had to let the poem's connections go the way they wanted to go instead of the way I wanted them to. I recognised at this stage that the real task for me in my poetry writing was to reconcile the procedural, process-based methods advocated by Sol LeWitt and Kenneth Goldsmith with the rich and dark uncertainty of Jack Spicer's serial poem.

Yet a month or so later, long after I had felt that I was on my way in terms of the writing of my serial poem, I was stuck. I simply could not write. All I could do was look at lines from an Obama speech, copy them in a desultory fashion, and then look at them again. I was not sure if I should have been seeking out rhyming patterns for Audenesque sonnets, just write random lines, or try to emulate Jack Spicer's free verse. Nothing seemed to work for me. Each time I wrote something, it seemed to emerge as trite and banal. The process-based method seemed to have yielded nothing. And then one evening I opened up the Obama speech I had been working on and just started typing out lines and sentences from it, striving to repress my impulse to process or judge what I was writing. After twenty minutes of this mechanical activity, a poem emerged. All that was left for me to do was to work on the length of the poem's lines, order the words and impose a regular metre: "Let me—Let me begin...in the face of politics, / one people,

building that more perfect union. / That's the journey...but let me...Now".

I realised afterwards that my self-doubt, uncertainty, and overall cluelessness while writing the poem were all good and healthy signs that the writing process was in good working order: for it was precisely this sense of being lost in the forest and not knowing where I was going that Spicer said I should be experiencing if I was really writing a serial poem. Had I been self-assured and certain of what I was doing as I wrote, that would have been a clear sign that I was in fact doing something wrong, and that my poem was weak. As I progressed from one poem to the writing of another, I experienced again and again the feeling that I was starting from scratch, and the familiar self-doubts and uncertainties about the validity of my entire poetry project would creep back. But I learned to live with this uncertainty and self-doubt as a constantly returning friend—the paradoxical confirmation that I was on track with my writing.

By the time I came to write the poem based on Obama's "More Perfect Union" speech in November 2013, I had a much firmer grasp of my compositional procedure. As I began the poem, I still felt as if I were learning from scratch how to write a poem all over again, there were the old self-doubts and uncertainties over the validity of the entire serial poem project. But by this stage I had come to expect these feelings and had learned to write while accepting these feelings as my constant compositional companions. My procedure with the "More Perfect Union" speech was to scrap the preliminary sentences and phrases I had

previously transcribed from the speech. I deleted any word, phrase or sentence that referred to race or the specifics of racial oppression. In case this procedure did not provoke my poem and my synapses, my backup plan was to take the speech apart word by word. But the procedure worked: after a few minutes of taking out whole paragraphs and sentences I found that certain words and phrases linked with unexpected words and phrases. I broke down the grammar and constructed words and phrases in little knots. And a meaning started to emerge as I deleted sentences and blocks of text and punctuation. What emerged was a subtle, rough, and very interesting elliptical poem composed of fragments and nodes of images, hesitations, stammers, ellipses, and repetitions. One of the phrases that the poem contained was “dry bones,” and this aptly described the feeling I got from the poem. It began with a very strong and musical line—“Jeremiah’s voice” going up to the rafters within the “thoughtful and the gracious.” The latter phrase I discovered after I had deleted whole paragraphs in front of it. Most importantly, the poem did what I had not expected it to do when I first started writing days before—it reshaped the words and locutions from Obama’s rather craven, mealy-mouthed speech to convey a subtle counter message which undercut the cravenness and dishonesty of the original by challenging, in an elliptical, ambiguous fashion, the myth of U.S. exceptionalism and Obama’s post-racial myth of unity—the “more perfect union.”

To sum up, then: in the various stages of completing the poems which

make up what I term my 'serial poem I was at first challenged, but then ultimately broke away from my old plans for and preconceptions about my creative project. The detailed discussion above provides the background to what I would like to consider is a significant achievement in this creative writing project—the completion of a substantial body of poems.

In most of these poems I had adhered to a specific constraint—restricting myself to the words contained in the speeches of the US President Barack Obama. In several of the poems I had technically broken this rule by resorting to images recorded in journal entries and certain imaginative episodes produced from my own imagination. But each of these, while not technically based on specific words uttered by Obama, were specifically inspired by the words and the concerns of his speeches. The poems show a concern with public issues and yet are often conveyed with an intimate confessional voice and lyrical mode. I have essentially fulfilled the task that I had intuitively set for myself much more than a year ago in my Letter No. 5 to Auden. Finding my own lyric voice in my poetry, I wrote, could not be answered through the cultivation of my unique *voice* expressing my *unique experiences*. The speaker of the lyric is not really identified with the poet himself. It does not even reside in fictive personae; it is much more than ventriloquizing. The lyric voice would be located in trying as much as possible to get away from my own self; it involved, it seemed to me at the time I wrote that letter and even more so now, a reconnection to the social and the socially symbolic in the production of a phenomenal world

through the phenomenalization of the poetic voice.

By “phenomenalization of the poetic voice” I was referring to something similar to what the literary critic Paul De Man proposes in his essay, “Lyrical Voice in Contemporary Theory: Riffaterre and Jauss”—the kind of poetic force or presence that seems to put the verbal world of the poem in play for the reader.¹ It had been the sort of thing that first got me interested in the work of Jack Spicer, with his view of the lyric as wireless transmission, communication with ghosts, or with aliens. And it also puts me in mind of T.S. Eliot’s attack upon the theory of the unity of the soul: “the poet has, not a ‘personality to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways”.² I had been intrigued by that sense that the lyric was conditioned less by individual poetic voice than by the activation of poetic presences in language and in the mind of the reader. The writing and production of my serial poem seemed to be a confirmation of my intuition.

The experience of going into a recording studio and recording several of my poems in November 2014 also confirmed my intuition about the lyric voice. Several colleagues at work were kind enough to read and record the poems. Their voices appropriated my poetic “voice” and made the poems their own. The poems they read were no longer *my* poems, organically connected to me. In a November 2002 interview with Glyn Maxwell at the

¹ *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, ed. Chaviva Hosek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), pp. 55-72.

² T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, 7th edition (London: Methuen, 1920), p. 56.

Lannan Foundation, Derek Walcott spoke of his boredom with what he termed the “lyrical moi”—the default lyrical mode of most poetry, it could be argued, since at least the late 18th century.³ He described his frequent experience of opening a magazine or newspaper and coming across a poem and being easily able to predict the shape of every poem he read—its predictable movement towards symmetry or epiphanic resolution of some sort. He had gotten tired of the “ego,” of the predictability of the “lyrical moi,” which he found to be a kind of artistic cul-de-sac. What he said made me think of the position I had been in a few years ago, when I realised that my immersion in just such a lyrical cul-de-sac had seemed to make my poetry uninteresting, mannered, and predictable. As I look back over the poems I have submitted with this serial poem, I recognise that my attempts to give my serial poem diverse registers and tones and a variety of formal expression—flawed as they are—represent my own attempts to escape the aesthetic cul-de-sac of the “lyrical moi.”

³ Derek Walcott, “Derek Walcott with Glyn Maxwell,” Lannan Foundation, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 20 Nov. 2002. Accessed online at <http://www.lannan.org/events/derek-walcott-with-glyn-maxwell>

CONCLUSION

The plurality and paradox in the work of W.H. Auden is part of what makes the study of his poetry so compelling and rewarding to read. In his poetry and in his critical writing, Auden's example serves to remind us that sometimes the most interesting and productive relationships we can have with certain poets are ones of provocation and contradiction. Essential to Auden's understanding of poetry's relation to public issues such as politics, history, social change, and religion, I believe, are his assumptions about discourse and language. In poems like his elegy for Yeats or his elegy for Ernst Toller, Auden was the first poet to write explicitly of being "lived by powers". His "voice" seems to have been one of the first to have been consciously shaped by this consciousness of poetry as public language in competition with the public language of advertising, mass media, and mass politics.

Auden may also have been one of the first to equate the power of the poet's public speech—his "magic"—with the dangerous public rhetorical power of political demagoguery. But there was probably a lot more to this than Auden merely being put off by his position as a public figure who was always expected to articulate a position on the major public issues. What Auden's poetics of disenchantment was addressing was the response of poetry and art to fascism, political terror, and the nightmare of history. Viewed from a larger perspective, we can see this as Auden's response to the problem of how poetry and art can ever respond to the large, and seemingly unsolvable questions of public import.

I believe that there has been a major misreading of Auden's post-1938 work, and that rather than see him as merely cultivating the persona of an urbane, disaffected, witty civic poet focused on civility and on distancing himself from the messy and complex particularities of contemporary life, it might be more fruitful to look at Auden's later works as an attempt to address a modern crisis of art and of language, and in proposing a remedy, opening up to poetry alternative potentialities residing within some of its oldest traditions.

Auden's uprooted, restless career and the portable poetics he developed in response to it underlines a truism about contemporary poetic identity: we have the ability to construct identity, and not just one identity but also several. Auden, vilified for abandoning his 'native language' and identity, sought a wider scope for his poetic rhetoric. He also articulated a wider public role for the poet—that of the civic poet. I am struck by the profound irony of Auden's choice. We only have to consider Adorno's arguments concerning the native opposition between the poet and society-at-large, to appreciate the depth of this irony. I must admit that I am still unconvinced about the aesthetic pleasures of Auden's model of the 'civic poet', but I recognise its necessity for Auden's survival as a poet. In my own modest efforts to develop as a poet, I hope to emulate his opening up of the wider possibilities of the older traditions of poetry. I welcome also his challenge to achieve a multi-voiced public rhetoric that would answer to my own multi-rooted identity.

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