

The Poetry of W.H. Auden

On This Island

Look, stranger, on this island now
The leaping light for your delight discovers,
Stand stable here
And silent be,
That through the channels of the ear
May wander like a river
The swaying sound of the sea.

Here at a small field's ending pause
Where the chalk wall falls to the foam and its tall ledges
Oppose the pluck
And knock of the tide,
And the shingle scrambles after the suck-
-ing surf, and a gull lodges
A moment on its sheer side.

Far off like floating seeds the ships
Diverge on urgent voluntary errands,
And this full view
Indeed may enter
And move in memory as now these clouds do,
That pass the harbour mirror
And all the summer through the water saunter.

Auden has a reputation for obscurity. Not the unsurprising incomprehensibility of Ezra

Pound or T.S. Eliot, where as often or not it's a matter of simply not understanding the references. But Auden is different. It seems easy. The landscape's familiar, there are no obscure references, and frequently there's a gripping opening line to get you off to a good start – only it doesn't last. I'm not saying that the poems begin well and then taper off, though they do begin well. Auden has some wonderful opening lines:

“August for the people and their favourite islands...”

“What siren zooming is sounding our coming...”

“Out on the lawn I lie in bed,
Vega conspicuous overhead...”

And of course, perhaps his most famous lines:

“Lie your sleeping head, my love,
Human of my faithless arm...”

But once he's got you with one of these lines, and certainly in his earlier poems, he's off into a territory of his own, an alternate world of leaders and gangs, frontiers and flight, on what Seamus Heaney called “those oddly unparaphrasable riffs.”

“He gets carried away” would be another way of putting it, though Christopher Isherwood, with whom he often collaborated in the Thirties, said that the obscurity could also be put down to the fact that Auden was lazy.

According to Isherwood, “He hated polishing and making corrections. If he didn't like a poem, he threw it away and wrote another. If he liked one line, he would keep it and work it into a new poem. In this way, whole poems were constructed which were simply anthologies of favourite lines, entirely regardless of grammar or sense.”

“This,” said Isherwood, “is the simple explanation of much of Auden's celebrated obscurity.” More writers have worked like that, Shakespeare included, than is generally admitted, and it certainly puts literary criticism in its place.

Some poems don't require exposition, though. Auden was fascinated by verse in all its forms, and this is a pastiche of an 18th-century ballad, transformed into a nightmare:

O What Is That Sound

O what is that sound which so thrills the ear
Down in the valley drumming, drumming?
Only the scarlet soldiers, dear,
The soldiers coming.

O what is that light I see flashing so clear
Over the distance brightly, brightly?
Only the sun on their weapons, dear,
As they step lightly.

O what are they doing with all that gear,
What are they doing this morning, morning?
Only their usual manoeuvres, dear,
Or perhaps a warning.

O why have they left the road down there,
Why are they suddenly wheeling, wheeling?
Perhaps a change in their orders, dear,
Why are you kneeling?

O haven't they stopped for the doctor's care,
Haven't they reined their horses, horses?
Why, they are none of them wounded, dear,

None of these forces.

O is it the parson they want, with white hair,
Is it the parson, is it, is it?
No, they are passing his gateway, dear,
Without a visit.

O it must be the farmer that lives so near.
It must be the farmer so cunning, so cunning?
They have passed the farmyard already, dear,
And now they are running.

O where are you going? Stay with me here!
Were the vows you swore deceiving, deceiving?
No, I promised to love you, dear,
But I must be leaving.

O it's broken the lock and splintered the door,
O it's the gate where they're turning, turning;
Their boots are heavy on the floor
And their eyes are burning.

Auden is good at casting a spell, hinting at horrors just around the corner, and he uses Hitchcock's technique of investing the ordinary and domestic with nightmare and suspense. Some of it manages to be prophetic. If Auden is a great poet, this ability to prophecy is one constituent of his greatness:

From "[The Witnesses](#)"

I shouldn't dance.

We're afraid in that case you'll have a fall.

We've been watching you over the garden wall

For hours.

The sky is darkening like a stain,

Something is going to fall like rain

And it won't be flowers.

Nobody in the Thirties was quite sure what war would be like, whether there would be gas, for instance, or aerial bombardment. There's a stock and rather silly question: "Why was there no poetry written in the Second World War?" One answer is that there was, but it was written in the ten years before the war started.

Auden was a landscape poet, though of a rather peculiar kind. The son of a doctor, he was born in York in 1907, but brought up in Solihull in the heart of the industrial Midlands. Not the landscape of conventional poetry, but, for Auden, magical:

From [Letter to Lord Byron](#):

But let me say before it has to go,

It's the most lovely country that I know;

Clearer than Seafell Pike, my heart has stamped on

The view from Birmingham to Wolverhampton.

Long, long ago, when I was only four,

Going towards my grandmother, the line

Passed through a coal-field. From the corridor
I watched it pass with envy, thought 'How fine!
Oh how I wish that situation mine.'
Tramlines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery,
That was, and still is, my ideal scenery.

At Oxford, he was already writing and publishing poetry. To his contemporaries, he was a magnetic figure, partly because he seemed to have all the answers, a characteristic that his later self came to deplore, though he remained a bit of an intellectual bully all his life. As a man, he was insecure and unhappy and doesn't seem to have fallen in love until he went to America in 1939, but this didn't stop him prescribing for the love affairs of his friends.

The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard says that there are two ways to suffer: one is to suffer; the other is to become a professor of the fact that another suffers. Auden was to play both roles in his time, but when he was an undergraduate, he was undoubtedly a professor.

Who's Who

A shilling life will give you all the facts:
How Father beat him, how he ran away,
What were the struggles of his youth, what acts
Made him the greatest figure of his day;
Of how he fought, fished, hunted, worked all night,
Though giddy, climbed new mountains; named a sea;
Some of the last researchers even write
Love made him weep his pints like you and me.

With all his honours on, he sighed for one

Who, say astonished critics, lived at home;
Did little jobs about the house with skill
And nothing else; could whistle; would sit still
Or potter round the garden; answered some
Of his long marvellous letters but kept none.

Auden taught at various prep schools in the early Thirties, and one of the criticisms that contemporaries made of his poetry was that his view of the world was dictated by his unhappy experiences at school. “The best reason I have for opposing fascism,” he said, “is that at school I lived in a fascist state.” Not a statement that would commend itself to someone actually having to live in a fascist state, and the kind of remark that made him blush once he got away from England in 1939.

“All the verse I wrote,” said Auden later, “all the positions I took in the Thirties didn't save a single Jew. These writings, these attitudes only help oneself. They merely make people who think like one, admire and like me, which is rather embarrassing.

Which is true, but which says nothing about the poetry, and embarrassing though the older Auden found his younger self, the poetry of that younger self survives the embarrassment.

The turning point in Auden's life came, or is supposed to have come, when he and Isherwood went to the United States at the start of 1939 and stayed there, both eventually becoming American citizens. Silly people at the time took this to be cowardice, which it wasn't, and even people who admired him thought Auden's poetry was never as good afterwards. But this wasn't true either.

Why Auden left England has been much discussed. He had gone to America in 1939, seemingly with no plans to stay, and for the first time in his life, he had fallen in love – with Chester Kallman with whom he was to live happily and unhappily for the rest of his

life. It just happened that change in private places coincided with change in public places, love and war concurrent. Auden really was just an early “G.I. Bride.” Somebody who cared more about what people thought would have returned when war started, but Auden – and it was one of the winning characteristics in a personality that was not always attractive – didn't care what people thought.

Going to America turned out to be a deliverance, the kind of escape an established writer often craves, a way of eluding his public, of not having to go on writing in the same way, of not having to imitate himself. “By the time you have perfected a style of writing,” said George Orwell, “you have outgrown it.” “You spending 25 years learning to be yourself,” said Auden, “and then you find you must now start learning not to be yourself” - and it took him a while. This next poem Auden called a “hangover from home”. He wrote it in America, but one of the reasons he left England, he said, was to stop writing poetry like this:

September 1, 1939

I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death

Offends the September night.

Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offence
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew
All that a speech can say
About Democracy,
And what dictators do,
The elderly rubbish they talk
To an apathetic grave;
Analysed all in his book,
The enlightenment driven away,

The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air
Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long
In an euphoric dream;
Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the international wrong.

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume

The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

The windiest militant trash
Important Persons shout
Is not so crude as our wish:
What mad Nijinsky wrote
About Diaghilev
Is true of the normal heart;
For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

From the conservative dark
Into the ethical life
The dense commuters come,
Repeating their morning vow;

"I will be true to the wife,
I'll concentrate more on my work,"
And helpless governors wake
To resume their compulsory game:
Who can release them now,
Who can reach the deaf,
Who can speak for the dumb?

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;

Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

In America, Auden's poetry began to take on a different tone, "His old grand manner," as he described it, proceeded from a "resonant heart". With the war and the Cold War that followed:

From "[**We, too have known golden hours.**](#)"
All words like Peace and Love,
All sane affirmative speech,
Had been soiled, profaned, debased
To a horrid mechanical screech.

And so the tone of his poetry grew more wry and ironic and, as he got older, increasingly intimate and domestic. Not that his circumstances were ever conventionally cozy; he and Kallman lived in some squalor. They weren't home makers, either of them, though Kallman was a good cook. The Stravinskys came round for supper one night. Madame Stravinsky – endearingly named Vera – was paying a call of nature when she spotted a bowl of dirty water on the bathroom floor. In a forlorn attempt to give the place a woman's touch, she emptied the contents of the bowl down the wash basin, only to

discover later that this was the *piece de resistance* of the meal: a chocolate pudding. The basin was, incidentally, the same in which Auden routinely urinated. Where, one wonders, did one wash one's hands, after one had washed one's hands?

The next poem was written in 1948:

A Walk After Dark

A cloudless night like this
Can set the spirit soaring:
After a tiring day
The clockwork spectacle is
Impressive in a slightly boring
Eighteenth-century way.

It soothed adolescence a lot
To meet so shameless a stare;
The things I did could not
Be so shocking as they said
If that would still be there
After the shocked were dead

Now, unready to die
But already at the stage
When one starts to resent the young,

I am glad those points in the sky
May also be counted among
The creatures of middle-age.

It's cozier thinking of night
As more an Old People's Home
Than a shed for a faultless machine,
That the red pre-Cambrian light
Is gone like Imperial Rome
Or myself at seventeen.

Yet however much we may like
The stoic manner in which
The classical authors wrote,
Only the young and rich
Have the nerve or the figure to strike
The lacrimae rerum note.

For the present stalks abroad
Like the past and its wronged again
Whimper and are ignored,
And the truth cannot be hid;

Somebody chose their pain,
What needn't have happened did.

Occurring this very night
By no established rule,
Some event may already have hurled
Its first little No at the right
Of the laws we accept to school
Our post-diluvian world:

But the stars burn on overhead,
Unconscious of final ends,
As I walk home to bed,
Asking what judgment waits
My person, all my friends,
And these United States.

The apartment in which Auden and Kallman lived was in a rather seedy area of the Lower East Side and had formerly belonged to an abortionist, which resulted in frequent misunderstandings. On one occasion, a young woman from Hunter College knocked at the door. Auden answered, and after beating about the bush for some time, she eventually plucked up courage to say: "But aren't you an abortionist?" "No," said Auden flatly. "Poet."

The story has a point in that there was a matter-of-factness in his approach to writing, and although he didn't exactly put "POET" on a brass plate on the door, he did feel that a poet should be able to turn his hand to anything in verse – to wedding poems, poems for celebrations, librettos, poems in obscure metres – and he took great pride in being a craftsman able to produce these to order. This, though, is one of his earlier and best-known poems, written in 1938 and often cited as the quintessential "ekphrastic" poem, or, a poem inspired by a piece of visual art:

Musee des Beaux Arts

About suffering they were never wrong,
The old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position: how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully
along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
In Breughel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,

But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water, and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

Auden thought of poetry as dual: poetry as song, poetry as truth. It's perhaps this that his poem "Their lonely betters," written in 1950, made him skeptical of birds who sing without feeling and with no regard for truth:

Their Lonely Betters

As I listened from a beach-chair in the shade
To all the noises that my garden made,
It seemed to me only proper that words
Should be withheld from vegetables and birds.

A robin with no Christian name ran through
The Robin-Anthem which was all it knew,
And rustling flowers for some third party waited
To say which pairs, if any, should get mated.

No one of them was capable of lying,
There was not one which knew that it was dying
Or could have with a rhythm or a rhyme

Assumed responsibility for time.

Let them leave language to their lonely betters

Who count some days and long for certain letters;

We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:

Words are for those with promises to keep.

Auden died in Vienna in 1973, when he was only 66, but it would be hard to say his work was not finished. His output had been prodigious, and he went on working right until the end in a routine that was every bit as rigid as that of Housman, whom he so briskly analyzed when he was a young man thus: “Deliberately he chose the dry-as-dust,/Kept tears like dirty postcards in a drawer.” But you're no more likely to find consistency in a writer than you would in a normal human being. Besides, as Auden himself said: “At 30 I tried to vex my elders. Past 60 it's the young whom I hope to bother.”

I would be hard put to say what a great poet is, but part of it, in Auden's case, is the obscurity with which I started. If his life has to be divided into two parts, there are great poems in both. Perhaps he was too clever for the English. Bossy and not entirely likeable, when he died his death occasioned less regret than that of Larkin or Betjeman, though he was the greater poet. This would not have concerned him as he was not vain: criticism seldom bothered him nor did he covet praise or money. And although he would have quite liked the Nobel Prize, all he demanded at the finish was punctuality.

I'll end with the final part of the poem Auden wrote in memory of another poet, W.B. Yeats, who died in January 1939. The last two lines are inscribed on Auden's memorial in Westminster Abbey:

In Memory of W. B. Yeats (*final part*)

Earth, receive an honoured guest:

William Yeats is laid to rest.

Let the Irish vessel lie

Emptied of its poetry.

[Auden later deleted the next three stanzas.]

Time that is intolerant

Of the brave and the innocent,

And indifferent in a week

To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives

Everyone by whom it lives;

Pardons cowardice, conceit,

Lays its honours at their feet.

Time that with this strange excuse

Pardoned Kipling and his views,

And will pardon Paul Claudel,

Pardons him for writing well.

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

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

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

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

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