

Book Review:

Auden's poetry and his last years

Later Auden by Edward Mendelson Farrer, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 1999

By Margaret Rees
20 November 1999

The publication last April of *Later Auden*, Edward Mendelson's detailed biography of Wystan Hugh (W.H.) Auden, has again focused attention on this key figure of 20th century English poetry. Mendelson, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University in New York City, wrote *Early Auden*, the first volume of his Auden biography, in 1981.

Born in York, England in 1907, W.H. Auden's writing career spanned four decades. He studied English literature at Oxford University where he met and struck up friendships with Cecil Day Lewis and Stephen Spender. After graduation in 1928, Auden spent almost 12 months in Berlin. By the early 1930s he had emerged as the pre-eminent figure in a group of young writers who boldly asserted that they could speak for the inter-war generation. In 1938 Geoffrey Grigson wrote that *New Verse*, the magazine he edited, "came into existence because of Auden. It has published more poems by Auden than anybody else and there are many people who might quote of Auden: "To you I owe the first development of my imagination; to you I owe the withdrawing of my mind from the low brutal pit of my nature, to the lofty, the pure and the perpetual..."

This work is meant to provide an authoritative study of Auden's enduring significance. Mendelson is Auden's literary executor, having won Auden's approval by demonstrating his command of the poet's entire life work. The starting point of this volume is 1939, at which point a profound inner turmoil drove Auden to fundamentally change the direction of his life.

Summing up the earlier period in the introduction to the second work, Mendelson writes that Auden "believed his verse could serve social causes, and to that end wrote parabolic plays in collaboration with his friend Christopher Isherwood, *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, *The Ascent of F6* and *On the Frontier*, which, with varying degrees of irony and ambiguity, recommended left wing political action."

In 1939 Auden was to break with such conceptions and in the process leave Britain permanently for the United States, together with Isherwood. Their departure on the eve of World War II was denounced as a betrayal, and an act of cowardice and worse by some writers. Cyril Connolly who sympathised with them, wrote: "They are far-sighted and ambitious young men with a strong instinct of self-preservation, and an eye for the main chance, who have abandoned what they consider to be the sinking ship of European democracy, and by implication the aesthetic doctrine of social realism that has been prevailing there. Are they right? It would certainly seem so..."

Mendelson contends that Auden produced some of his greatest poetry after 1939, and claims that he enriched his vocation by purging himself of past political associations. Mendelson is dismissive of the influence of

socialist politics and Freudian psychology on Auden and his poetry. Of the inner tensions Auden confronted at this turning point, Mendelson simply asserts: "Auden questioned his own political poetry not because he disapproved of its politics, but because he was unsure of its value as poetry."

Reviewing Auden's concerns during his visit to Spain where he witnessed the Stalinist Communist parties in action, Mendelson claims that the poet "discovered that those who served history by resisting the manifest injustice of Franco found themselves implicated in the hidden injustice of Stalin's agents." This assertion skates over the extent of the Stalinist betrayal and implies that all those who opposed Franco were supporters of the Stalinist bureaucracy and its crimes.

Auden was one of a layer of writers and artists concerned by the rise of fascism who turned towards socialism and the Stalinist parties, which they mistakenly identified with Marxism. Mendelson's thesis that Auden's later work rose to new heights of greatness after he rejected any orientation towards socialism raises many profound issues, not least among them questions of an aesthetic character. Above all, it assumes that Auden's poetic gifts emerged from the 1930s, unscathed from the destructive influence of Stalinism.

At Oxford University in the late 1920s Auden became the centre of a literary circle, all like himself upper middle class and with a public school background. In their youth, T.S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* (1922) strongly affected them with its world-weariness, despair, pessimism and unbelief. Furthermore Eliot questioned the recognised English poetic tradition, particularly attacking the authority of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the 19th century Romantics.

Eliot, as director of Faber and Faber, was largely responsible for his firm publishing poets like Auden, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day Lewis and Stephen Spender, while they were all in their early twenties. In January 1930, he published Auden's long verse play *Paid on Both Sides* in his magazine the *Criterion*. Ironically enough, and to the disgust of some of his supporters, Eliot acted as literary sponsor to a generation of young writers who were collectively developing left political leanings.

Auden did not agree with Eliot's judgements on the English poetic heritage, and had his own opinions as to its most influential figures. He developed the conception that they spoke to him directly through their poetry. In 1936, he indulged the fantasy that it could be a two-way communication, and one of the results was *Letter to Lord Byron*, written during an excursion to Iceland with MacNeice and a party of schoolboys. He addresses the 19th century Romantic respectfully in a long letter. Choosing sparingly the books he would take on the trip, he explains that he needed a writer with a light touch for companionship in a dour country.

Unconcerned that Eliot and others had condemned Byron, Auden wrote:

*I think a serious critic ought to mention
That one verse style was really your invention
A style whose meaning does not need a spanner
You are the master of the airy manner.*

For Auden's own long poem, the lightness of tone was also fortuitous. He struck the right note to write about changes in literary style, the trip to Iceland, his own life, and developments in social life since Byron's time, all with engaging cheek.

*I want a form that's large enough to swim in,
And talk on any subject that I choose...*

He requested Byron pass on a message to a fellow member of the writers' pantheon:

*But tell Jane Austen, that is, if you dare,
How much her novels are beloved down here.
She wrote them for posterity, she said;
'Twas rash, but by posterity she's read.*

*You could not shock her more than she shocks me;
Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.*

The aesthetic imperatives imposed by Eliot and his academic co-thinkers such as I.A. Richards and F.R. Leavis did not intimidate Auden. He was interested in reviving everyday poetic forms, and drew on popular traditions of anonymous poems, skipping rhymes, riddles, ballads and music hall songs. And with a simple touch he was able to strike chords as if the language itself was a musical instrument. *As I walked out one evening* [1937] is a good example:

*As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,
The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.*

Like Eliot, he turned to poetic drama as an avenue for widening the audience for poetry. But Auden also saw cinema as another means to this end. In 1935 he worked for six months with the GPO Film Unit, under John Grierson and Humphrey Jennings, collaborating with Benjamin Britten on the scores for *Coal Face*, *Night Mail* and other ground-breaking documentaries. His achievement in the poem for *Night Mail* is justly famous—he wrote the verses with a stopwatch, to the metre of the already edited film, as if he were a musician.

At the same time Auden and his fellow writers responded to growing mass unemployment, the defeat of the German working class and the rise of fascism, and gravitated with differing degrees of enthusiasm towards the conception of a revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society.

Developing on his interest in science and Freudianism, Auden turned to what he imagined were Marxist politics. In response to the crisis, he was searching for a leap in literature, for a poetry that could play a positive role in such a period.

When *Illusion and Reality* by Christopher Caudwell was published posthumously in March 1937, just after the author died fighting in Spain, Auden exclaimed in a review: "We have waited a long time for a Marxist book on the aesthetics of poetry. Now at last Mr Caudwell has given us such a book."

Caudwell's contradictory work fought for the powerful conception that "Art is the expression of man's freedom in the world of feeling, just as science is the expression of man's freedom in the world of sensory perception, because both are conscious of the necessities of their worlds and can change them."

In his attempt to provide an economic underpinning to the English poetic tradition, Caudwell provided some unusual insights. Under the heading "The Movement of Bourgeois Poetry" he concluded with "The People's Front", a period where "Poetry now expresses a real revolt against bourgeois conditions by an alliance of the bourgeois ideologist or 'craftsman' with the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. France still leads:

Aragon and Gide, etc. In England: Day Lewis, Auden and Spender in England" Of this period Caudwell judged: "The question of form now tends to take a second place until the problem of social relations has been solved poetically."

Auden, however, was soon to rebel against the restrictions on his artistic independence imposed by the stultifying limitations of Socialist Realism, the so-called Marxist aesthetic, propounded as a monolithic official doctrine by the Soviet State from 1934 onwards. Literature had to be class literature, subordinate to the decree of the party. Writers were forced to debase their talent, while base toadies imposed the most vicious censorship. The lives of more and more artists were crushed.

Auden and his co-thinkers might have been unaware how Stalin's hangmen were imposing the formulas of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, but they began to receive intimations. *Spain* (1937) is a poem objectifying events that Auden recoiled from. He sought in December 1936 to join the International Brigade, but later decided to travel to Spain with the Spanish Medical Aid Committee in order to drive ambulances. He arrived in Valencia in January 1937, and was refused permission to take up this position and instead set to work broadcasting propaganda. He briefly joined the front at Zaragoza, became dispirited and returned to London after seven weeks.

The dilemma he confronted underlies his remark, 25 years later: "I did not wish to talk about Spain when I returned because I was upset by many things I saw or heard about. Some of them were described better than I could ever have done by George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*. Others were what I learned about the treatment of priests" (Letter to Hugh D. Ford, 29 November 1962, quoted in Ford's *A Poet's War*, 1965).

In 1938 Auden and Christopher Isherwood were commissioned by Faber to travel to China to write a book about the Sino-Japanese war. They returned to England via New York, and their book *Journey to a War* was published the next year. Isherwood wrote the prose commentary, which was interspersed with Auden's sonnets. He had taken as his poetic inspiration the writings in German of Rainer Maria Rilke. Auden consistently turned towards German culture, at least partly in reaction against the efforts by writers such as Eliot to transpose the influence of French literature to English poetry.

But the turn to Rilke was also a poetic expression of Auden's attempts to distance himself from the political contradictions now confronting him. In 1939 he wrote of Rilke: "It is, I believe, no accident that as the international crisis becomes more and more acute, the poet to whom writers are becoming increasingly drawn should be one who felt that it was pride and presumption to interfere with the lives of others (for each is unique and the apparent misfortunes of each may be his very way of salvation); one who occupied himself consistently and exclusively with his own inner life..."

His permanent shift to the United States, together with Isherwood, saw them confiding to each other on the sea voyage about their increasing distaste for politics. The day they arrived in New York, Barcelona finally fell to the fascists. Two days later came the death of William Yeats—Irish nationalist, mystic and great poet. The event prompted Auden to write his great elegy *In memory of WB Yeats*.

Mendelson begins *Later Auden* with an analysis of the poem—which stands with the great elegies of previous centuries—Walt Whitman's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* (originally entitled *Memories of President Lincoln*) or Shelley's *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*.

In the third stanza, one of the most moving images, that of the poet's physical end and transformation into the Yeats of posterity, merges with images of the beleaguered city:

*But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours,
The provinces of his body revolted,*

The squares of his mind were empty,

Silence invaded the suburbs,

The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Auden was confronting powerful and contradictory sentiments: his love and respect for Yeats' work, his despair over a decade characterised by the rise of fascism and political betrayal, and a deep sense of trepidation over the future course of history. In the weeks between the poem's first publication and a second reprinting, he wrote an essay entitled *The Public vs the late Mr William Butler Yeats*, which takes the form of a mock trial. In this, Auden tries to oppose the influence of Socialist Realism by asserting that art is inviolate.

The prosecutor spoke for the 1930s idea of poetry-as-action (i.e., Socialist Realism) and the Counsel for the Defence (Auden) spoke against it: "The argument of the prosecution is reduced to this: 'A great poet must give the right answers to the problems which perplex his generation. The deceased gave the wrong answers. Therefore the deceased is not a great poet.' Poetry in such a view is the filling up of a social quiz; to pass with honours the poet must score not less than 75%."

The Defence concludes by arguing art for art's sake: "The case for the prosecution rests on the fallacious belief that art ever makes anything happen, whereas 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."

He interpolated a new second section in the poem about Yeats:

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:

The parish of rich women, physical decay,

Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.

Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives...

While Auden recoiled in distaste from the trammels of Socialist Realism, he did not seek to understand the forces he was resisting. He simply advanced the conception that art was useless in order to insist that art, and poetry in particular, could not be *used*. And, by asserting indifference, he courted the danger of retreating into ever more remote realms of aestheticism.

Mendelson claims the contradiction Auden wrestled with in the Yeats elegy is "the *agon* of an artist in combat with his gift." According to Mendelson, Auden, all through the 1930s, had grappled first with one side of the question—the conscious wish for social justice—and then the other—the irrational, apolitical powers in every psyche and the poetic gift. So Auden's internalised debate was really nothing new. What Mendelson fails to discern is why the break that Auden was undertaking occurred just at this point. Mendelson simply takes the dualism as given, that a conscious desire for social justice must necessarily be divorced from a poetic gift.

Mendelson's thesis, that Auden went from strength to strength poetically and "that much of his most profound and personal work was written in the last fifteen years of his life" is flawed and has already elicited critical reaction. Reviewing *Later Auden* Roger Kimball wrote: "Opinion has long been divided about Auden's later work, especially his work after 1945." Kimball labelled Mendelson a "revisionist" and continued: "technique, uncatalysed by sensibility and subject matter, can be the enemy of poetic achievement. In any event, for Auden, technical fluency sometimes resulted in poetry that seemed to proceed on verbal autopilot" (*The New Criterion*, May 1999).

Judged as part of his life's work, Auden's poetry after 1945 is still punctuated with flashes of brilliance. Furthermore, in one respect he remained stylistically well in advance for some time, and in this he was able to confound his detractors. That was his control of what is usually termed poetic "voice."

For example, *In praise of limestone* (May 1948) transposes Italian landscape onto English, and the great stylistic achievement is the oblique

relationship it achieves between the objective and the subjective voices. The first lines elegantly dissolve one into the other—the feelings of nostalgia melt into the softness of the rock. Auden would often start poems where the subject would not emerge for some time, but in this case he toys with the voice of a dispassionate observer imparting information—"mark this", "examine that" by juxtaposing it with sensuous natural images of fish and the butterfly and the lizard. Suddenly a mother's enveloping love for her young son is evoked, but by posing the image as a rhetorical question, its emotional force is diluted. Childhood memories wash through, limestone is compared to the allure of granite wastes, of purring clays and gravels, of oceanic whisper.

The second half of the poem is in a languid conversational tone, mildly self-mocking and tentatively disparaging the landscape. An invocation to the natural order is decried, the concept of purity ebbs away in a neat didactic couplet. What is left is sediment:

Dear, I know nothing of

Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love

Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur

Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.

Given the whole tradition of pastoral verse in English literature, the unemphatic stress has more than a little sardonic amusement, a tongue in cheek feeling about it, that conveys an element of disquiet beneath the bucolic surface of the poem.

Moreover, Auden's writing still had the potential to achieve a deeply moving quality. In *Memorial for the City*, a four-part poem written in 1949, he evoked the devastation of one of the German cities destroyed by firestorm after Allied bombing four years earlier. He had served in the US forces in occupied Germany, and wept over the ruins of Darmstadt.

Echoes of his own previous poems resonate throughout—the analogy of the body and the city as in the Yeats poem, the sublime unconcern of the natural order for the sufferings of humanity as in *Musee des Beaux Arts*, where martyrdom takes its course while the torturer's horse scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

The question of whether it was possible for language to express the horror of modern war, the contention that the holocaust was inexpressible, hovers over this poem and informs the visual images, such as the crow on the crematorium chimney. As in a nightmare, the observer knows the fate of the ruined city is the annihilation of culture:

The humor, the cuisine, the rites, the taste

The pattern of the city, are erased.

However, woven into the poem is an eccentric scheme of history, reconciling religion and modern revolution, which Auden thought he had discovered in the work of Eugen Rosenstock Huessy, a German theologian and exile from Nazi Germany. Rosenstock Huessy, who became a professor at Harvard, developed a table of history which aligned developments in the Christian religion with the English Civil War, French Revolution and 1917 Russian Revolution, and various other social transformations over the last 1,000 years. Auden, who read Rosenstock Huessy's *Out of Revolution* and *The Christian Future*, embellished this schema in an attempt to fashion from the cloth of Christianity an answer to the dilemmas facing humanity and, perhaps to a great extent, himself.

The last part of the poem didactically advances a new subject—a disembodied *I*—which transcends history and is present as an ironically detached voice at key points in the past—in Christianity, classical antiquity, ancient legend and modern literature.

Religion assumed increasing importance in the content of Auden's work. An odor of mortification of the flesh hangs around the series known as *Horae Canonicae*, each poem named for one of the devotions carried out at intervals each day by medieval monks. An inner policeman is conjured up from these rituals to justify the outer policeman—the trappings of the modern repressive state. His overall direction was towards resignation and acceptance.

But as to whether the post war Auden achieved greatness despite the mixture that he stirred together with the traditional cement of religion—it is not the case.

When he had arrived in the US, Auden received a letter from his father expressing the hope that through his poetry he might act as the mouthpiece for his age. He replied: "If he wishes to be the mouthpiece of his age, as every writer does, it must be the last thing he thinks about. Tennyson, for example *was* the Victorian mouthpiece in *In Memoriam* when he was thinking about Hallam and his grief. When he decided to be the Victorian Bard and wrote the *Idylls of the King*, he ceased to be a poet."

Judged by his own yardstick, he proved unable after 1945 to express poetically the shadow of Cold War alienation and the fractured, staccato pace of modern existence.

In his Introduction to *Poets of the English Language*, Auden claimed: "Perhaps history is forcing the intellectual, whether scientist or artist, into a new conception of himself as neither the respectable bard nor the anarchic aesthete, but as a member of the loyal opposition, defending, not only for his own sake but for all, the inalienable rights of the individual person against encroachment by an overzealous government, with which, nevertheless, even though the latter deny it, he has a bond, their common love for the Just City."

This conception could only arise as the life dried out of him and his poetic insights became increasingly stale. He sadly was to write such artificial verse as *Elegy for JFK*, *United Nations Hymn* and *Moon Landing* in his last years.

Mendelson claims that he practised "an elaborate effort of concealment. Auden had perfected a technique of writing about the darkest possible subjects in a tone that deceived real or imaginary enemies into thinking him too mild and avuncular to bother contending with." This is nonsense. Poetry that can only be interpreted correctly by the favored initiate has nothing in common with the daring imagination that illuminates beneath surface appearances. Mendelson has failed to consider the more plausible explanation, that Auden's work had actually become "mild and avuncular" by the end of his life.

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