

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

Auden Unparadized

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‘ENCASED IN TALENT like a uniform, | The rank of every poet is well known’, wrote Auden. He went on in that sonnet to offer a number of scenarios for lives of the poets: ‘They can amaze us like a thunderstorm, | Or die so young, or live for years alone . . .’ (‘The Novelist’).¹ Of those career-plans, Chatterton, whom this lecture series commemorates, might classically exemplify some combination of the first two, to ‘amaze us like a thunderstorm’ and ‘die so young’, an astonishing, tragically brief and brilliant flash in the pan; while a poet such as Hardy might stand for the alternative fate, to ‘live for years alone’. And what about Auden himself? Well, curiously, and disadvantageously, perhaps a mixture of both. More than any other modern English poet, Auden comes across in contemporary reviews and much of the subsequent criticism as a writer who goes off the boil, someone who throws it all away: few poets can have burst upon the scene with such sensational effect, and few can have had their best days consigned to history so quickly. F. R. Leavis’s *Scrutiny*, which was always the meanest, began to look back to the lost promise of his debut as early as 1933, when Auden was only 26.² ‘We must still feel that he ought to have been a poet’, Leavis shook his head in 1940, ‘but the possibility of development looks very frail’ (quoted by Haffenden: *CH*, 35); and by 1945 the *Scrutiny* review of *For the Time Being* could confidently

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¹ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (rev. edn., London, 2007), p. 180. Hereafter *CP*, with references (made to page numbers) incorporated in the text.

² *W. H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden (London, 1983), p. 140. Hereafter *CH*, with references incorporated in the text.

diagnose what it called ‘an inverted process of development’ (*CH*, 345), the career of a man who had run in reverse. Auden scholarship, of which there is a great deal, executed at a highly distinguished level, is quite another story: it treats the enormous spread of the Audenian canon with the properly impartial interest of genuine expertise. But for most non-specialist readers at large, the idea of Auden as a poet who somehow lived beyond the early moment of his greatest and most amazing genius is still familiar, and may perhaps be even normal—especially (but not only) on this side of the Atlantic. ‘[M]any of his English readers admire the early or the transitional work and think the later poems show a dismal falling-off’, said Denis Donoghue recently (in the magazine *Commonweal*), placing himself among that company.³ Reviewing an earlier *Collected* in 1966, John Carey had detected ‘a savour of dereliction’, noting the multiple ‘fallings-off’ in the poems (*CH*, 439). For Randall Jarrell, twenty-five years before that, Auden’s latest effort represented nothing less than ‘the decline and fall of modernist poetry’ (*CH*, 312). ‘He is a wonderful poet’, William Empson maintained, beginning his 1940 review of *Another Time*, ‘and I cannot see this falling off that people talk about’⁴—which may be handsome but nevertheless reminds you that people *were* talking about Auden’s ‘falling off’.

Adverse criticism can be useful when a powerful reader finds a writer alien in some complete and startling way, like Tolstoy on Shakespeare; but more usually an enlightening negative response is animated by an odd but profound sympathy, like Eliot on Milton, or maybe Nietzsche on Wagner—of whom Auden once remarked that he was ‘superficially anti-Wagner, but you could see how much he must have cared’.⁵ Randall Jarrell’s string of articles analysed with remorseless brilliance the full extent of Auden’s falling off (as he saw it): coming across yet another attack, the battle-hardened Auden reportedly told Stephen Spender, ‘I think Jarrell must be in love with me.’⁶ That was obviously a joke, but not just a joke. There was clearly something in Auden which Jarrell cared about very much indeed, even as he contained his fascination within an overall narrative of the ‘decline and fall of modernist poetry’. As he once

³ ‘What Became of Wystan? Auden early, late, and collected’, *Commonweal*, cxxxiv, 18 (26 Oct. 2007).

⁴ *Argufying: Essays on Literature and Culture*, ed. John Haffenden (London, 1987), p. 372.

⁵ Alan Ansen, *The Table Talk of W. H. Auden*, ed. Nicholas Jenkins (London, 1991), p. 44.

⁶ As Spender later recalled: Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London, 1981), p. 378. And cf. *CH*, p. 72, n. 149.

wrote about Auden in a letter: ‘It must be *awful* to get steadily worse and worse.’⁷

As a critic Jarrell had an outstanding gift for sympathetic responsiveness, and his deeply acquainted encounters with Auden suggest one reason why the idea of ‘decline and fall’ or ‘this falling off’ should recur so insistently: which is, that so many of the greatest Auden poems are themselves about the ‘decline and fall’ and ‘falling off’ of things. Auden’s Thirties poetry is shaped, as everyone agrees, by the feeling that everything is growing ‘worse and worse’, necessarily though perhaps for some ultimate political good; that an entire culture is teetering on the edge of an unspecified abysmal collapse; that every thing which feels habitual in ordinary life is actually a symptom of some widely contracted disease—all this, a state of affairs that is soon to be swept away thanks to a remorseless, super-personal, drift within events: ‘Waiting for the end, boys, waiting for the end’, as Empson put it in ‘Just a Smack at Auden’, ‘Not a chance of blend, boys, things have got to tend.’⁸ Empson spoke without qualification about ‘the great Auden’;⁹ and his smacking lines are quite as admiring as they are satirical, catching that provocative jaunty doom so characteristic of the Master:

The chairs are being brought in from the garden,
The summer talk stopped on that savage coast
Before the storms, after the guests and birds:
In sanitoriums they laugh less and less,
Less certain of cure; and the loud madman
Sinks now into a more terrible calm.

The falling leaves know it, the children,
At play on the fuming alkali-tip
Or by the flooded football ground, know it—
This is the dragon’s day, the devourer’s . . .

(‘1929’, iv: *CP*, 49)

Those lines exemplify the grand manner of the Thirties: the accumulation of apparently random detail as mysteriously symptomatic; the use of the specific-yet-unspecified definite article (‘The summer talk . . .’), as though to imply the existence of a history with which we just happen not to be familiar—the sort of ‘pseudo-reference’ that Yvor Winters found in the

⁷ Quoted in *Randall Jarrell on W. H. Auden*, ed. Stephen Burt with Hannah Brooks-Motl (New York, 2005), p. 10.

⁸ William Empson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Haffenden (London, 2000), 82.

⁹ *Complete Poems*, p. 352.

poetry of T. S. Eliot;¹⁰ and perhaps above all, the charisma of its tone. The secret of the Auden effect, as Empson later observed, was what he called a ‘curious curl of the tongue in his voice’: ‘you didn’t quite know what he was laughing at, but you could hear this [. . .] mysterious tone of fun going on’.¹¹ Auden himself, who confided to his journal in 1929 the dubious wisdom that ‘The only good reason for doing anything is for fun’, had recognised early on the peculiar role that the poet’s pleasure might assume within a poetry of political protest.¹² ‘When an artist writes about slums or disease or Hell’, he told the Worker’s Education Association in 1936, ‘it is quite true that he wants them to be there because they are his material, just as dentists want people to have decaying teeth’ (*EA*, 359). He liked the story of the Oxford philosopher who had confessed, ‘I don’t feel quite happy about pleasure’ (*EA*, 76), mostly no doubt because it showed the emotional incapacity which is known to characterise Oxford dons, but also because it expressed something incompletely resolved about pleasure within his own practice. Here, one of the curls in Auden’s tongue is that although it is manifestly not a good thing for children to play on fuming alkali-tips, still, *nevertheless* . . . The lines show beautifully that phenomenon identified by John Bayley in *The Romantic Survival* (1957), still some of the best criticism written about Auden: ‘He shares with Yeats an enjoyment of the situation and of the possibilities of making it *stylish*.’¹³

* * *

Among the stylish achievements of those lines is what Auden does with the ‘falling leaves’, who also ‘know it’: they join in Auden’s art of sinking with a comically complicit ominousness. That everything, leaves and all, should be in on some great falling movement, as though the world at large were being dragged to its catastrophe by a force as ineluctable as gravity—this is one of the hallmarks of Auden’s early manner: a condition in which we find, as Malin says in *The Age of Anxiety*, ‘gravity a god greater than love’ (*CP*, 453). Here is a small case of samples, up to 1938:

¹⁰ In ‘Primitivism and Decadence’, Winters describes the pseudo-reference, a device of which he does not approve, as ‘reference to a non-existent plot’: *In Defense of Reason* (3rd edn., London, 1947).

¹¹ Empson, *Argufying*, p. 375.

¹² *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London, 1977), p. 300. Hereafter *EA*, with references incorporated in the text.

¹³ John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival: A Study in Poetic Evolution* (London, 1957), p. 130.

we shall bow in Autumn,
 When trees make passes,
 As high gale pushes,
 And bewildered leaves
 Fall on our lives.

Watching through windows the wastes of evening,
 The flare of foundries at fall of the year . . .
 ('The Exiles': *CP*, 66–7)

(Like Hopkins, Auden enjoys punning on 'fall' as a season: it was one appeal of American English. He likes punning, too, in a more approximate way, on 'fell', as in a Northern English mountain, which also lets him smuggle in, ungrammatically, ideas of fallenness—as when the strong leader, about to master his natural weakness and gather himself to action, discerns within the symbolic skyline 'The slow fastidious line | That disciplines the fell' ['Missing': *CP*, 30].)

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.
 ('The Witnesses': *CP*, 77)

('Fall', a noun, returns there with deft insistence as a verb, to which we are the vulnerable object.)

. . . make us as Newton was, who in his garden watching
 The apple falling towards England, became aware
 Between himself and her of an eternal tie.
 ('O Love, the interest . . .': *EA*, 119)

Easy for us to tell,
 Defeats on them like lavas
 Have fallen, fell, kept falling, fell
 On them, poor lovies:
 (*The Orators*: 'Six Odes', ii: *EA*, 97)

(Here is Empson's 'mysterious tone of fun' with a vengeance, like Hopkins crossed with Noël Coward.)

Now the leaves are falling fast,
 Nurse's flowers will not last,
 Nurses to their graves are gone,
 But the prams go rolling on.
 ('Autumn Song': *CP*, 139)

(A duplicated comedy of gravitational pull: first the leaves, and then the monstrous, startlingly autonomous, prams; the dull rhyme on ‘on’ communicates their irresistible progress with a wonderful obduracy.)

. . . 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.
 (‘Musée des Beaux Arts’: *CP*, 179)

Snow is falling. Clutching a little case,
 He walks out briskly to infect a city
 Whose terrible future may have just arrived.
 (‘Gare du Midi’: *CP*, 180)

In the background to this falling poetry, with its self-consciously European spread, must be the Eliot of ‘Falling towers | Jerusalem Athens Alexandria | Vienna London’;¹⁴ but the comparison shows at once the difference. Where Eliot’s lines not only show gravity but convey gravitas, Auden’s verses couple their gravity with a wholly incongruous sort of levity.

Auden’s Thirties poetry is full of falls. The magnificent Old-English-epic *cum* country-house-‘Charade’, *Paid on Both Sides*, on its own could supply multiple examples: the recurrent leitmotif of its imaginative world is that it is a place where ‘proudest into traps | Have fallen’. ‘On him misfortune falls | More than enough’, says the laconic Chorus (*CP*, 11; 12). Such instances show a poetic universe in which things are imagined, like the moon in ‘A Summer Night’, ‘To gravity attentive’ (*EA*, 137). Bombs, as the *Schadenfreude*-ish sardonic speakers in ‘The Witnesses’ observe, are similarly attentive: Valentine Cunningham has demonstrated the dark fascination that many Thirties writers had with this new idea of aerial bombardment.¹⁵ ‘We’ve learned to bomb each other from the air’, Auden informed Lord Byron in his ‘Letter’ (*CP*, 94), with consequences which James Honeyman’s family learned the hard way:

The first bomb hit the Dairy,
 The second the cinema,
 The third fell in the garden
 Just like a falling star.
 (*CP*, 166)

¹⁴ ‘The Waste Land’, ll. 372–5, T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London, 1969), p. 73.

¹⁵ Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 200–3.

The stumbling, cobbled-together rhythms of Auden's jaunty balladry articulate a world of very rough justice indeed. The natural corollary to such downward imaginings is a fascination with those things that go against gravity's pull—the kestrels and hawks and other birds that Auden always regards with touching and inventive admiration: 'a hawk's vertical stooping from the sky' ('Family Ghosts': *CP*, 41); and also, though much more ambiguously, his dubiously heroic men of altitudes, the airmen and the mountaineers. The comically ambivalent Airman of *The Orators* is certainly a man heading for a fall: all-too conscious of the conformist hostility that he provokes in the crowd, the Airman recognises 'the people's satisfaction at crashes' and their belief that "'If the Lord had intended people to fly He'd have given them wings'", while nevertheless knowing that their private fantasies revolve around 'looping the loop, the falling leaf' (*EA*, 76). Song is sometimes said to resist gravity—'let song mount again and again', Auden writes in one of the 'Sonnets from China', 'For life as it blossoms out in a jar or a face'—but song, too, faces a hostile counter-voice: 'History opposes its grief to our buoyant song, | To our hope its warning' (xi: *CP*, 188; 189).

Much of this cast of mind is left unchanged when Auden becomes a Christian poet in 1940, the chapter in his life which can otherwise seem so decisive a break—and which he sometimes encouraged his readers to think of as such a break. Isherwood, who recalled how hard he had to work in their collaborations to stop Auden making the characters flop down on their knees (*CH*, 249), was a much shrewder spotter of trends in this respect than the *Socialist Review*, which had been gratified to recognise in Auden someone who was 'on our side' (quoted by Haffenden, *CH*, 15). For the conception of things falling and fallen which underwrites the great Thirties poetry already drew largely upon a Christian repertoire. The speakers in 'The Witnesses' who say, 'We've been watching you over the garden wall | For hours', place themselves in the position of Satan in *Paradise Lost*; in '1929' it is a 'garden' from which the chairs are brought in, while a time 'Before the storms, after the guests and birds' playfully brings into range an older voice marking a change ('No more of talk where God or angel guest . . .'); and it is an apple that Newton watches drop. So, when in the early 1940s Auden begins compulsively to explore ideas of the Fall in explicitly Christian terms he finds himself redescribing an existing predicament in a different way—a more satisfactory way, in that it answered to a need (a doubtful need) that he had recently come to feel. As he asserted in a talk of 1940: any artist required 'an adequate and conscious metaphysics in

the background'.¹⁶ With the earlier verse in mind, his admiration for Simone Weil, theologian of gravity and grace, is not difficult to understand: 'All the *natural* movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity,' Weil writes: 'Grace is the only exception': 'Obedience to the force of gravity. The greatest sin.'¹⁷ And Kierkegaard appealed, among other reasons, thanks to his charismatic way of thinking about the religious life as a precarious existence in a world dominated by gravitational pull:

A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear:
Although I love you, you will have to leap;
Our dream of safety has to disappear.
(CP, 680)

Kierkegaard features less impressively in *Academic Graffiti*, though still as a theologian of falling: 'Søren Kierkegaard | Tried awfully hard | To take The Leap | But fell in a heap' (CP, 680).

Auden in the 1940s embraced the Fall as ineluctable, hard-wired, all-pervasive: 'the guilt is everywhere', he writes in *New Year Letter* (CP, 203). It would be uncharitable to see him finding safety in numbers, but he evidently brought to America in 1939 a lot of old, personal European guilt;¹⁸ and the breeziness which sometimes accompanies his encompassing diagnoses of spiritual wrongness can be unsettling. Empson, writing in 1940, had admired Auden for having so often 'taped firmly what you had been dumbly feeling; for instance, I have found myself saying weakly in the recent disasters, "I don't know why, but I feel it's somehow all my fault", and I had forgotten how Auden can always say this with a bang.'¹⁹ But Empson would certainly not have approved of the universalising, metaphysical direction that this pervasive feeling of wrong-doing was shortly to take. In *For the Time Being*, Auden states

¹⁶ 'Mimesis and allegory', *Prose*, ii. 78–87, 87.

¹⁷ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London, 1952), pp. 1, 2–3.

¹⁸ 'I know that all the verse I wrote, all the positions I took in the thirties, didn't save a single Jew. These attitudes, these writings, only help oneself. They merely make people who think like one, admire and like one—which is rather embarrassing': quoted in Anne Fremantle, 'Reality and Religion', in *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*, ed. Stephen Spender (London, 1975), pp. 79–92, 89. And cf. the comment that Auden required to be printed as a condition for the inclusion of 'Spain' and four other poems in his anthology of Thirties verse, 'Mr W. H. Auden considers these five poems to be trash which he is ashamed to have written': *Poetry of the Thirties*, ed. Robin Skelton (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 41.

¹⁹ *Argufying*, p. 372.

[F]or even in
 The germ-cell's primary division
 Innocence is lost and sin,
 Already given as a fact,
 Once more issues as an act
 (CP, 366)

Jarrell was satirically exuberant about such illiberalism: 'If only Luther had known about that germ cell's primary division! The advances of Science almost have enabled Auden to beat Luther and Calvin at their own game.'²⁰ Jarrell is right that it is hardly a cheery picture. The theologian Niebuhr, whom Auden knew and admired, described the Fall as 'a symbol of an aspect of every historical moment in the life of man', though Niebuhr had used that notion to mitigate the desolate picture of the human condition that appeared in much lapsarian religious writing, such as 'the extravagant statements of man's depravity' in Luther and other Protestant thinkers.²¹ But such bleak extravagance had an appeal for Auden, whose middle poems often stress the incorrigible wrongness inherent in every decision: a human life, as the graveyard poem on Henry James puts it with disconcerting comprehensiveness, is 'one more series of errors' (CP, 308). 'September 1, 1939' had spoken of 'error bred in the bone', and now it had a name: Original Sin. 'Beloved, we are always in the wrong, | Handling so stupidly our clumsy lives' ('In Sickness and in Health': CP, 317): '*Before God we are always in the wrong*' was a favourite aphorism from Kierkegaard.²² Psycho-analysis might well be right, Auden says in *New Year Letter*, when it begins from the sentiment that 'Everything I want is wrong'; but it is itself wrong not to see that such a belief leads properly, neither to the talking cure nor to anything but the belief 'that sin is real'.²³ The pervasive erroneousness of a doomed class had become the predicament of humanity at large: 'We know very well we are not unlucky but evil', says the Narrator, bleakly enough, in *For the*

²⁰ Randall Jarrell, *The Third Book of Criticism* (London, 1975), p. 176.

²¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (2 vols., London, 1941–3), i. 285; 284. For Auden and the Niebuhrs, see Ursula Niebuhr, 'Memories of the 1940s', in *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*, 104–18. Edward Callan discusses the place of Niebuhr's conception of the Fall in Auden's work: *Auden: A Carnival of Intellect* (New York, 1983), p. 232.

²² Nicholas Jenkins, 'Eleven Letters from Auden to Stephen Spender', in *W. H. Auden: 'The Map of All My Youth'*. *Early Works, Friends, and Influences*, ed. Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (*Auden Studies*. I: Oxford, 1990), pp. 55–93, 72. See Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (London, 1999), p. 130; and John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (London, 1998), pp. 392–3.

²³ W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter* (London, 1941), p. 99.

Time Being (CP, 374). As G. S. Fraser wittily remarked in a review: 'to avoid despair he has to put most of his money on Grace since he knows he is going to fall down on Works' (CH, 382).

* * *

Among those works which can but fall down, a poet should properly number his poetical works. Once he had accepted the idea, Auden never changed his mind that '[t]he historical world is a fallen world';²⁴ and if, for the last twenty-five years or so of his writing life, the Fall no longer pre-occupied Auden so insistently as an explicit theological subject, that was because it had been so thoroughly absorbed and internalised as a rhetorical habit: the verse constantly registers an implicit awareness of its own fallenness, its fallibility and shortfalling.²⁵ One of the recurrent themes of Auden's later literary thinking is the fundamental indefensibility of anything like serious literary thinking; and collectively his utterances on the subject constitute what David Bromwich has called 'perhaps the most limited description of the aim and use of poetry that has ever come from a major poet'.²⁶ Auden tentatively insists over and over that poetry is 'fundamentally frivolity':²⁷ 'A reverent frivolity' is what he prays for in *New Year Letter* (CP, 222); and 'the right to play, the right to frivolity' is what he claims in *The Dyer's Hand* (DH, 89). It is 'a game which it does not matter whether you play or not':²⁸ so that Shakespeare, say, is admirable especially because knowing that 'art is rather a bore . . . he doesn't think it's very important', and consequently 'never takes himself too seriously'.²⁹ A poet is likely to speak platitudinously about poetry, Auden announced disarmingly (and implausibly) during his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, partly because 'he doesn't consider poetry that important: any poet, I believe, will echo Miss Marianne Moore's words: "*I, too, dislike it*".³⁰ Auden's fondness for Byron grew from his attraction to Byron's view, variously expressed, 'Who would

²⁴ 'Nature, history and poetry' (1950), *Prose*, iii. 226–33, 232. He restates the position in 'The Virgin and the Dynamo' (DH, pp. 61–71, 70).

²⁵ For Eliot as an important precursor here, see Bayley, *The Romantic Survival*, pp. 146–7.

²⁶ David Bromwich, *Skeptical Music: Essays on Modern Poetry* (Chicago, 2001), p. 133.

²⁷ *Table Talk*, p. 37.

²⁸ 'Squares and oblongs', *Prose*, ii. 339–50, 343.

²⁹ *Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (London, 2000), p. 319.

³⁰ 'Making, Knowing and Judging', *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London, 1963), pp. 31–60, 51.

write, who had anything better to do?';³¹ but what in Byron is part of the glamour of a showy cult of action, is for Auden the cause of an often ostentatious parade of self-deprecation, a high-minded and paradoxical profession of necessary defeat. 'These halcyon structures', as he put it in some famous lines,

... are useful
 As structures go—though not to be confused
 With anything really important
 Like feeding strays or looking pleased when caught
 By a bore or a hideola

(‘Music is International’: *CP*, 340)

Keen to display its awareness of being nothing ‘really important’, Auden’s later manner repeatedly resorts to what G. S. Fraser called ‘“throwing it away”, as the actors say of a strong line’ (*CH*, 382). A late thanksgiving poem, surveying his literary influences, is a case in point:

Fondly I ponder You all:
 without You I couldn’t have managed
 even my weakest of lines.

(‘A Thanksgiving’: *CP*, 891)

The last line, if not exactly thrown away, could hardly be said to insist upon its own accomplishment as a clincher.

The deference there nicely communicates a regard for the greatness of the dead; but throwing it away is a more general habit. ‘Deference, apology, self-deprecation—these become ritual gestures in Auden’s later poetry’, as Lucy McDiarmid rightly observes;³² and such gestures arise from something more profound than a good grace about one’s irrelevance: there is, too, a deep suspicion of the activity at all, the pervasive Kierkegaardian threat of a ‘constant tendency of the spiritual life to degenerate into an aesthetic performance’.³³ ‘The difficulty for a man is to avoid being an aesthete—to avoid saying things not because they are true, but because they are poetically effective;’³⁴ the resonance of such remarks

³¹ Journal entry, 24 Nov. 1813. *Byron’s Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (13 vols., London, 1973–94), iii. 220.

³² Lucy McDiarmid, *Auden’s Apologies for Poetry* (Princeton, NJ, 1990), p. 120.

³³ ‘Note’ to ‘Depravity: A Sermon’ (‘What was the weather on Eternity’s worst day?’: *EA*, pp. 138–41), *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York, 1945), p. 240.

³⁴ *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews. Fourth Series*, ed. George Plimpton (Harmondsworth, 1977), pp. 245–69, 258. Cf., of the last lines of ‘Spain’: ‘It would have been bad enough if I had ever held this wicked doctrine, but that I should have stated it simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective is quite inexcusable’ (*CP*, xxx).

is personal and self-deploring; and when Auden stigmatises in a cartoonish way the ethical irresponsibility of poets—‘All poets adore explosions, thunderstorms, tornadoes, conflagrations, ruins, scenes of spectacular carnage. The poetic imagination is not at all a desirable quality in a statesman’ (*DH*, 84)—it’s not difficult to imagine that he has particular prominent criticisms in mind. The Marxist Christopher Caudwell, for example, in a book which Auden praised as ‘the most important book on poetry since the books of Dr Richards’, had attacked Auden and his contemporaries for their ‘anarchistic, nihilist, and *surréaliste*’ approach to society, ‘glorify[ing] the revolution as a kind of giant explosion’.³⁵ Sometimes, as we have just seen, the later Auden deplores aestheticism too; but at other times he does not dispute Caudwell’s charge of moral triviality but rather, by an odd kind of defence, owns up and embraces it, and so becomes, as John Bayley puts it, ‘a new type of aesthete’.³⁶

‘I cannot help feeling’, Auden remarked in a lecture in 1942, ‘that a satisfactory theory of Art from the standpoint of the Christian faith has yet to be worked out;’³⁷ and whether his own thinking on the matter ever came very close to ‘a satisfactory theory of Art’ remains open to question. One instinct was always to reduce poetry to what Eliot once called ‘a superior amusement’:³⁸ so that a poem was like a letter you might write ‘to amuse a sick friend’.³⁹ Whether cast as a religious duty or as an odd human ‘right’, though, Auden’s ‘frivolity’ can seem a rather glum attempt to institutionalise the less biddable levity, that ‘mysterious tone of fun’, that animated the early poems so enigmatically. He explained to a correspondent that ‘the serious matter’ of *The Sea and the Mirror* was ‘the fundamental frivolity of art’;⁴⁰ but there is likely to be a price exacted for taking frivolity, of all things, with such purposeful seriousness: ‘It’s amazing’, Auden told Alan Ansen, ‘how much harder it gets when one has come to take things seriously.’⁴¹ But even if it were true that Shakespeare never took himself too seriously, the example would not help much: Shakespeare had no idea that seriousness of the heroic-Romantic

³⁵ From Auden’s review in *New Verse: Prose*, i. 386–7, 387. Christopher Caudwell, *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (1937; new edn., 1946; repr. London, 1966), p. 283.

³⁶ Bayley, *The Romantic Survival*, p. 169.

³⁷ ‘Lecture Notes’, *Prose*, ii. 163

³⁸ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920; 3rd edn., London, 1932), p. viii.

³⁹ From a letter of 1937 to Henry Treece, quoted in Carpenter, *Auden*, p. 340.

⁴⁰ Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven, CT, 2005), p. 67.

⁴¹ *Table Talk*, p. 34.

kind Auden disliked was a possibility in the first place, and had unwittingly enjoyed an innocence that no modern could regain. Auden's self-dismissive remarks are indeed disarming; but one might still wonder when, as Christopher Ricks once asked, 'such a word has to be said accusingly rather than thankfully' (*CH*, 434)? How long can you sustain being, in David Bromwich's phrase, 'the virtuoso of modesty'?⁴²

For Auden's insistence on poetry's unworldliness, so frequently declared, feels oddly misrepresentative of what it is like actually to read his poems, early, middle, *and* late—or, at least, distorts much of what is enjoyable and admirable and rereadable about them. The categorical firmness of his expository writing is itself a delight: Harold Nicolson once claimed for him a 'fierce repudiation of half-way houses' (*CH*, 136); and that was, it seems, always his way. Wilmot, the thinly fictionalised portrait in Stephen Spender's novel *The Temple*, 'made pronouncements with almost absurd emphasis on certain words as though they were Holy Writ'.⁴³ But if it was always possible, as Auden said of Pope, to make 'ideas *too* clear and distinct, more Cartesian than they really are' (*DH*, 26), then such over-clarities could serve their own purposes: Auden's thinking often articulates its best subtleties by proceeding between imagined extremes; and the poems tell a different story to the categorical emphases of the prose. Poetry is a 'halcyon structure', existing in a mysterious way analogous to the 'paradisal state' and to 'the forgiveness of sins', as though reversing 'the historic fall into unfreedom and disorder' (*DH*, 71). So, to judge from the accounts given in the essay on Robert Frost of their respective purposes, for example, it would seem clear that Auden should really be on the side of Ariel. Ariel sponsors a poetry which is 'a verbal earthly paradise, a timeless world of pure play', where Prospero sets out to tell you the truth about things and so, presumably, to affect real human lives (*DH*, 338); but actually none of Auden's later poems are much like an Ariel poem, not even the ones that describe the virtues of Ariel poetry.⁴⁴ Mallarmé's is the kind of poetry that Ariel goes in for (*DH*, 340), an unmitigated lyricism that offers us pleasure 'not because of anything it tells us about the world we live in, but as a purely verbal experience, a paradise of language'.⁴⁵ But the nearest we get to

⁴² Bromwich, *Skeptical Music*, p. 133.

⁴³ Stephen Spender, *The Temple* (London, 1988), p. 5.

⁴⁴ Auden says that 'every poem involves some degree of collaboration' between them, but that nevertheless it is 'usually possible to say of a poem and, sometimes of the whole output of a poet, that it is Ariel-dominated or Prospero-dominated' (*DH*, 338).

⁴⁵ W. H. Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (London, 1971), p. 348.

Mallarmé in Auden's poetry is the jokey 'mallarmesque | syllabic fog | for half an hour' that one enjoys in the steamy pre-lapsarian privacy of the bathroom: 'what Eden is there for the lapsed | but hot water . . .?' ('Encomium Balnei': *CP*, 702; 701). Prospero and Ariel appear to divide up the world between them, but really they are the uninhabited boundaries of a world within which poetry must find its difficult way—rather as the paired 1938 sonnets 'The Novelist' and 'The Composer' (*CP*, 180–1) posit theoretical cases of ethical wisdom and aesthetic delight, only to leave The Poet in the uncharted ground that lies in-between.

There is a way of thinking about Auden's development which seems straightforward: he is a poet who abandoned a generational myth of effectiveness ('They were always thinking I must *act*, I must *do* something', Claud Cockburn recalled of 'the literary people of the '30s')⁴⁶ and embraced instead the disenchanting truth about art's utter triviality and irrelevance: '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'.⁴⁷ But, on inspection, many of Auden's more celebrated later announcements in such a spirit have a self-correcting gesture to them which admits, on second thoughts, a continuing worldly possibility which had seemed ruled out. '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' (*DH*, 27); but as incidental ('In so far as') purposes go, disenchantment and disintoxication are hardly modest, and certainly do not lack ambitions to be efficacious somewhere outside Ariel's Edenic playspace. Similarly, the Yeats elegy (ii: *CP*, 246) proffers a striking set-piece axiom—'For poetry makes nothing happen'—yet returns to the thought of happening just five lines later, redescribing poetry as 'A way of happening': the thought of agency is not to be forgone so readily as all that. In 'Music is International', while looking pleased when caught by a hideola is declared unambiguously better than enjoying verses, still, by the poem's close, unannounced, the balance of power has shifted again: 'Even the dinner waltz in | Its formal way is a voice that assaults | International wrong' (*CP*, 340).⁴⁸ And even in the late poem 'Moon

⁴⁶ 'A conversation with Claud Cockburn', *The Review*, 11–12 [The Thirties Special Number] (1964), 51–3, 51.

⁴⁷ 'The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats', *Prose*, ii. 3–7, 7.

⁴⁸ And, as Michael O'Neill points out, the neatness of the antithesis is further complicated for, since looking pleased (when one isn't really) by the hideola involves an act of deception, 'the moral life is as dependent on lying as the imaginative life is': *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford, 1997), p. 259.

Landing', where the throwaway manner seems to have reached its chatty and charming perfection, the closing lines yet allow an alternative perspective. Speaking of 'the usual squalid mess called History', Auden observes, 'all we can pray for is that artists, | chefs and saints may still appear to blithe it' (*CP*, 845). Either, 'they may still *seem* to blithe it' (by such innocent verbalist pleasures as recuperating the verb 'blithe'); or, 'they may crop up from time to time to make it joyful, really'—the ghost of an old efficacy still appears.⁴⁹

In his useful account of *The Sea and the Mirror*, Edward Callan accurately glosses one sort of readership that Auden envisages approaching literature in the wrong spirit: those who 'expect the poet to be a teacher'.⁵⁰ Auden showily deplored his own use of '[t]he preacher's loose immodest tone' (*New Year Letter: CP*, 202); but he if no longer sought to preach he continued to hold forth all the same. The later poems are chatty, digressive, opinionated, thoroughly interested in all sorts of ways in the world in which they appear; and life and art, though kept so firmly separated in his loudest pronouncements on the subject, keep crossing over—most remarkably perhaps in the elegy for MacNeice, when Auden imagines the prospect of Judgement:

God may reduce you
On Judgement Day
to tears of shame,
reciting by heart
the poems you would
have written, had
your life been good.
(*CP*, 695)

There is nothing here about the pure 'verbal contraption' of art looking after itself, while the ethical life takes on its own more imposing and impressive demands: how would feeding some more strays have *improved* the halcyon structures?⁵¹

So if Auden does cast himself as 'a new type of aesthete' then within his poems this aesthete finds himself in something like the position of Falstaff, as Auden describes him in his essay, 'The Prince's Dog': one who has been 'draw[n] out of his proper world and into the historical world of

⁴⁹ Christopher Ricks notes the ambiguity: 'Natural linguistics', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, I (1972), 27–37, 37.

⁵⁰ Callan, *Auden*, p. 200.

⁵¹ Cf. Bayley, *The Romantic Survival*, pp. 143–4.

suffering and death' (*DH*, 191). As Malin says in *The Age of Anxiety*, 'greenest arcadias have ghosts too' (*CP*, 450). 'Statements important to Auden often end with *there is only ONE Something-or-Other*, since there is nothing he adores so extravagantly as monism, nothing he fears so superstitiously as dualism', according to Jarrell; 'yet his rhetorical monism invariably flowers from an absolute dualism that he has stated only to transcend.'⁵² 'The Truth is one and incapable of self-contradiction,' Auden writes authoritatively in the appendices to *New Year Letter*, which is as monist as you like;⁵³ and at times he philosophised vigorously against dualism;⁵⁴ but, whatever its abstract claims, mental singleness rarely excited him much from line to line, and his own mind worked instinctively between dualities. Auden put Jarrell's insight another way. Glossing the phrase 'double-focus' in *New Year Letter* he wrote: 'The Devil, indeed, is the father of Poetry, for Poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings;⁵⁵ and in at least one other place Auden was happy to relieve the Devil of that duty, and to proclaim 'the capacity for double focus' as '[t]he one infallible symptom of greatness'.⁵⁶

* * *

The Devil of double-focus has his part to play in Auden's falling poetry. Those diverse falls mattered to Auden not only because they conveyed a sense of irresistible, determined trajectory, like Newton's apple drawn towards England, which was so satisfying to those strong monist instincts that Jarrell rightly identifies, but also because a fall could articulate something quite contrary—something that befalls, the happenstance, the accidental, the lucky or unlucky, like slipping on a banana-skin, the example Auden gives in his 'Notes on the Comic' in *The Dyer's Hand* (*DH*, 374), or, more scarily, as in the polished gent in the early poem 'A Free One' who lives 'poised between shocking falls' (*CP*, 40). Those two types of falling belong to quite different universes, but Auden's imagination discovered an allegiance to both of them; and here the most pertinent comparison might be with his first love, Hardy.⁵⁷ Hardy, too, had

⁵² Jarrell, *Third Book*, p. 183.

⁵³ *New Year Letter*, p. 119.

⁵⁴ For his opposition to dualism see, e.g., 'The prolific and the devourer', *Prose*, ii. 411–58, 424–6.

⁵⁵ *New Year Letter*, p. 119.

⁵⁶ 'The double focus: Sandburgh's Lincoln', *Prose*, ii. 55–7, 56.

⁵⁷ 'I cannot write objectively about Thomas Hardy because I was once in love with him': 'A literary transference', *Prose*, ii. 42–9, 42.

elaborate and cranky monistic theories about the necessary trends of history and the ineluctability of fate—the Immanent Will or the ‘Great Will’, to which he devoted *The Dynasts*—but it would be an odd reading of Hardy’s lyric poetry which saw nothing in its fragmented anecdotes but Will working out its implacable purpose. ‘Thomas Hardy | Was never tardy | When summoned to fulfil | The Immanent Will’, is the *Academic Graffiti* offering on the subject (*CP*, 679), which at least plays individual agency against imponderable metaphysics in its clumsily sprightly way. The ‘blighted’ star on which Tess lives is more a place of bad luck than one of obvious teleological purpose.⁵⁸

And so, you might argue, many of the most characteristic Auden poems might allow, too:

They would shoot, of course,
Parting easily who were never joined.
(‘The Secret Agent’: *EA*, 25)

A much better last line than its revised version, ‘Parting easily two that were never joined’ (*CP* 32), since its own syntax barely manages to join; and its jointless flexibility allows the final phrase (‘who were never joined’) magically to apply both to the shot victims and to those who are doing the shooting that parts them, as though some of the horror is in the way that everyone shares in the same predicament. But the masterstroke of those lines is, of course, ‘of course’. You would need to be very determined to read into ‘of course’ a firm statement of determinism: it is, rather, a terrible, weary, acceptance of the sort of thing that happens to happen: it has a kind of beaten worldliness about it. (Eliot is in the background again: ‘I smile, of course, | And go on drinking tea’.⁵⁹) Auden uses the phrase with great power throughout his career: ‘Of course the forest overran her garden’ (‘Kairos and Logos’: *CP*, 305); ‘Those birds, of course, did nothing of the sort’ (‘Woods’: *CP*, 557); and in his poem about waking up in the morning:

I draw breath; that is of course to wish
No matter what, to be wise,
To be different, to die, and the cost,
No matter how, is Paradise
Lost of course and myself owing a death . . .
(‘Prime’: *CP*, 626)

⁵⁸ *Tess of the d’Urbervilles. A Pure Woman* (1891; New Wessex Edition, London, 1985), p. 50. Chapter 4.

⁵⁹ Eliot, ‘Portrait of a Lady’, ii, *Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 19.

Here, the repetition of ‘of course’ makes the phrase itself, momentarily, habitual, in a poem about something that happens habitually. Meanwhile, the rhyme on ‘cost’/‘Lost’ is itself lost over the line-turn: so we have not the splendour of ‘Paradise Lost’, a monument in which you might find some kind of assurance of human capacity, but the sadder, un-sublime, *sotto voce* resignation of ‘Paradise | Lost of course’.⁶⁰

Auden admired Hardy for his monist tendencies, for what he called in his essay ‘A Literary Transference’ ‘his hawk’s vision, his way of looking at life from a very great height’, his ability ‘[t]o see the individual life related not only to the local social life of its time, but to the whole of human history, life on the earth, the stars’ (*Prose*, ii. 46–7); but he admired him, too, as his inaugural lecture at Oxford made handsomely clear, for a different sort of reason altogether: for writing a poetry of what Auden called ‘homage to sacred objects’, bearing witness to a much more close-up kind of attention.⁶¹ Auden ended his lecture by quoting Hardy’s poem ‘Afterwards’, with its rueful auto-epitaph: “‘He was a man who used to notice such things.’” Hardy describes a world that is remarkable—is remarked, is noticed—not for its dutiful compliance to some monist explanation, but for the inconsequentiality of its vivid detail; and chance or accident is a key part of any such pluralist vision because the contingency of your own perspective upon things is an integral part of the wisdom on offer. When Icarus falls out of the sky he is ‘amazing’, like a poet or something poetic, but it is just a bit of bad luck: his failure is of no consequence. ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’, like its inhabitants, looks elsewhere to notice things, and finds no moral to draw from the mythical event which is just one of the things to notice in the poem—there is nothing about over-reaching, for example, or the virtues of prudence. Accident is the stuff of the poem: its opening line with beautiful absent-mindedness wanders into an existence, recollecting its subject when it is already a line old:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters . . .

(*CP*, 179)

The poem is a distended approximation to a sonnet, or a rough draft of what a proper sonneteer might come and brush up: it occupies, like its

⁶⁰ Auden spoke interestingly about the origin of this poem in his thinking about the Fall: see Mendelson, *Later Auden*, p. 339.

⁶¹ W. H. Auden, *Making, Knowing and Judging: An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 11 June 1956* (Oxford, 1956), p. 33. The paragraph (the last) is not reprinted in the text of the lecture given in *DH*.

unheeding animals, 'some untidy spot', and its untidiness is its point. In so far as the poem has an ulterior purpose, it must be something to do with the reading of *King Lear* that Auden gave to his lecture audience in New York: 'Certain states of being—reconciliation, forgiveness, devotion—are states of blessedness, and they exist while other people—conventionally successful people—are in states of misery or chaos.'⁶² Icarus was hardly 'conventionally successful', but the phrase that matters is '. . . while other people . . .': the poem takes place in an example of what Auden calls, in *New Year Letter*, the 'pluralist interstices' (*CP*, 238). It is an Eliotic wisdom that 'implicit in the expression of every experience' are 'other kinds of experience which are possible':⁶³ it is not just in 'Another time' that there are 'other lives to live' (*CP*, 275).

The older Auden got, the more he loved parentheses, and you can see why: for a parenthesis folds into the one poem material that, at another time, might have made another sort of poem. The Airman, in *The Orators*, took a dim view of the habit: one sign of an enemy letter, he lists in his journal, is 'parentheses in brackets' (*EA*, 81), doubtless because it implied the fragmentary and self-divisive nature of enemy consciousness. Later Auden, the plural poet, had evidently come to terms with his Devil, and his parenthetical masterpiece is 'Not in Baedeker':

Man still however (to discourage any
 Romantic glooming over the Universe
 Or any one marriage of work and love)
 Exists on these uplands and the present
 Is not uncheerful: so-so sheep are raised
 And sphagnum moss (in the Latin countries
 Still used in the treatment of gunshot wounds)
 Collected; even the past is not dead
 But revives annually on the festival
 (Which occurs in the month of the willow)
 Of St Cobalt whose saturnine image,
 Crude but certainly medieval, is borne
 In gay procession around the parish,
 Halting at each of the now filled-in shafts
 To the shrill chants of little girls in white
 And the sneers of the local bus-driver
 (Who greases his hair and dreams of halting
 For a mysterious well-dressed passenger
 Who offers at once to take him to the States).

⁶² *Lectures on Shakespeare*, p. 229.

⁶³ 'Andrew Marvell', T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (3rd edn., London, 1951), pp. 292–304, 303.

Indeed, in its own quiet way, the place can strike
 Most if not all of the historical notes
 Even (what place can not?) the accidental:
 One September Thursday two English cyclists
 Stopped here for a *fine* and afterwards strolled
 Along the no longer polluted stream
 As far as the Shot Tower (indirectly
 Responsible in its day for the deaths
 Of goodness knows how many grouse, wild duck
 And magnificent stags) where the younger
 (Whose promise one might have guessed even then
 Would come to nothing), using a rotting
 Rickety gallery for a lectern,
 To amuse his friend gave an imitation
 Of a clergyman with a cleft palate.

(CP, 550–1)

Barbara Everett describes superbly how this poem winds its way ‘towards a quiet climax that is half denied by, but half resists, the profusion of circumstantial detail that precedes it’.⁶⁴ The verse is much looser than the clipped early poems, even disorderly: its principle of pluralism inspires the poetry knowingly to risk being ‘formless, windy, banal’, the attributes that Auden once identified as the characteristics of ‘a poem which was really like a political democracy’ (*DH*, 85). The young man whose promise would come to nothing is, as Everett implies, a touch of wry self-portraiture; and the poem itself comes to nothing very much: there is certainly no trace of the ‘determinist and “musical” view of history’ that Auden’s earlier verses had sometimes entertained, and which he later saw to criticise in Yeats.⁶⁵ Certainly, if the poem has a climax it is very quiet indeed; and its own palate is ‘cleft’, split between its main story and the parenthetical worlds of other narratives and observations impinging upon it—including, within that parenthetical space, intimations of disappointment and violence, political (in the Latin countries) and domestic (in the hunting), ‘the problematic, the painful, the disorderly, the ugly’ (*DH*, 338).

The awareness I am trying to describe—to call it a *point* would be misrepresenting the sort of wisdom on offer—is something like that territory explored by Bernard Williams in his essay on ‘Moral Luck’, in which Williams expresses ‘scepticism about the freedom of morality from

⁶⁴ Barbara Everett, *Auden* (Edinburgh, 1964), p. 110.

⁶⁵ ‘Yeats: master of diction’, *Prose*, ii. 61–3, 63.

luck'.⁶⁶ (Brecht's aphorism, 'Grub First, then Ethics', which expresses something much more than scepticism, long fascinated Auden, a tag which he could neither endorse but nor deny.⁶⁷) *The Age of Anxiety*, perhaps Auden's greatest single achievement in this regard, is movingly about the role of occasion and contingency in the spiritual life. Its four speakers encounter one another sitting at the same bar by chance, and have little else in common except a desire not to be left alone at that instant. The poem is tender and funny about the opacity of its characters one to another, and while it seems to move towards a unifying moment, in which the gap between its participants is bridged and healed, in the event there is no consummation at all, for the boy is too drunk and falls asleep. But nor is the poem remotely bitter or sardonic about its failure, and it comes to its close with Rosetta, sweetly and sadly, standing over the sleeping form of Emble, the young man, and wishing for him to 'have Christian luck' (*CP*, 526). Interviewed in the 1960s Auden said that of his earlier poems 'the things that I like now I sort of wrote by accident';⁶⁸ and, in a career in which much did indeed change, a concern with the place of accident in the good life remained remarkably constant, its expression a highly individual poetry moved by the thought of happy chance and by the counting of blessings—not with a simple-minded or simple-hearted but a 'double-focus' sense of blessing, Auden's motto being perhaps the line from his sonnet 'Objects': 'There is less grief than wonder on the whole' (*CP*, 622).

'I was always very lucky with God', he told Anne Fremantle;⁶⁹ 'I've had a lucky life', he told *The Paris Review*, shortly before he died.⁷⁰ One of the last poems he wrote, 'Thank You, Fog', cherishes the happy contingency of the fog-bound Christmas circle of friends, but remains mindful of 'the facts of filth and violence | that we're too dumb to prevent' (*CP*, 889) that exist outside; and as it does so it returns, as do many of Auden's later poems, to reimagine a moment from the early verse, in this case 'A Summer Night':

⁶⁶ Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973–1980* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 20–39, 39.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., *DH*, 87.

⁶⁸ Auden, Spender, and Isherwood in interview with Malcolm Muggeridge in 1961, quoted in Charles Osborne, *W. H. Auden: The Life of a Poet* (London, 1979), p. 255.

⁶⁹ 'Reality and Religion', p. 89.

⁷⁰ *Writers at Work*, p. 269.

And, gentle, do not care to know,
 Where Poland draws her eastern bow,
 What violence is done,
 Nor ask what doubtful act allows
 Our freedom in this English house,
 Our picnics in the sun.

(*CP*, 118)

The poem, at least, is a space where those questions can be articulated, even as it admits they were not asked at the time. Both poems bring different sorts of lives into ‘double focus’, conscious that in delineating the one, there is another which cannot be encompassed, let alone explained away, but which nevertheless demands that its presence be felt—as Quant says in *The Age of Anxiety*, ‘Separate systems that make no sense to each other’ (*CP*, 502).

* * *

‘What’s become of Wystan?’ asked a disenchanted Larkin in 1960:⁷¹ he, or his sub-editor, had Browning in mind: ‘What’s become of Waring | Since he gave us all the slip?’⁷² Auden did indeed slip the expectations of some of his readers: ‘If, by memorability, you mean a poem like “Sept 1st 1939”, I pray to God that I shall never be memorable again,’ he wrote to Naomi Mitchison after she criticised the omission of poems from his *Collected* volumes.⁷³ But there was nothing slippery or evasive about his reiterated attempts at definition and redefinition: his career turns around a remarkably open deliberation upon the true scope and purpose of poetry; and in that sense Auden gave no-one the slip. And nor did he slip: ‘He is a wonderful poet, and I cannot see this falling off that people talk about.’ Larkin was one of the poets who learnt a lot from him: the trajectory of ‘High Windows’ or ‘Here’, with their transcendent finales, is learnt from Auden’s ‘Nurse’s Song’ or ‘The Fall of Rome’; while a poem such as Larkin’s ‘Show Saturday’, say, is hard to imagine without the example of the later, essayistic, Auden manner. When Larkin and Auden met at a party at Faber’s Auden asked, ‘Do you like living in Hull?’ Larkin remembered replying: ‘I don’t suppose I’m unhappier there than I should be anywhere else. To which he replied, Naughty, naughty. I thought that

⁷¹ Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955–1982* (London, 1983), p. 123–8.

⁷² ‘Waring’, 1.1: Robert Browning, *Poetical Works, 1833–1864*, ed. Ian Jack (London, 1970), p. 387.

⁷³ 1 April 1967, quoted in Carpenter, *Auden*, p. 418.

was very funny.⁷⁴ His reply *is* very funny; but it also says something about the emphasis he naturally placed upon the validity and importance of thankfulness—even if the happiness for which we should be thankful is always overshadowed, a ‘Paradise | Lost of course’, and sometimes only even imaginable in the form of someone else’s experience. ‘Life remains a blessing, | Although you cannot bless’, Auden writes in his ballad, ‘As I Walked Out One Evening’ (*CP*, 135), which balances gratitude and clear-sightedness in an exemplary way—rather as, years later, he comes towards the end of his inaugural at Oxford with the observation that poetry should ‘praise all it can for being and for happening’ (*DH*, 60), in which the praise envisaged is at once jubilantly without bound and circumspectly within limit. Larkin, who had felt pity for a bereft sitting-room (in ‘Home is so Sad’), would have thought well of these closing lines from ‘Up There’, Auden’s poem about the attic, which gave a home to another of his paradisaical spaces, cherished while shadowed by the trouble of another life:⁷⁵

All it knows of a changing world it has to
 Guess from children, who conjure in its plenum,
 Now an eyrie for two excited sisters,
 Where, when Mother is bad, her rage can’t reach them,
 Now a schooner on which a lonely only
 Boy sails North or approaches coral islands.
 (‘Up There’: *CP*, 697)

⁷⁴ Larkin, *Required Writing*, p. 67.

⁷⁵ Cf. ‘Larkin’s Edens’, in Barbara Everett, *Poets in their Time: Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin* (London, 1986), pp. 245–57.