Themes and Forms in W. H. Auden's Later Poems

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Twenty years after the death of Wystan Hugh Auden, aged sixty-six, his reputation in English poetry continues to grow. Auden early received the encouragement of T. S. Eliot, and after the publication of his *Poems* in 1930 his rise to prominence was steady and strong, until by 1947 with *The Age of Anxiety* he had become widely accepted as the eminent poet of his generation. He was then forty years old, and though he was to publish verse prolifically until his last few years, the consensus of critical opinion has been that his best work had been done by mid-century.

This may be true. Certainly, if devotees of English poetry today were asked which of Auden's poems were their favorites, most would choose titles from the 1930s and '40s, with perhaps a few titles running as late as the '50s, notably in *The Shield of Achilles* (1955). Ironically, some of these favorites would be poems which Auden himself came to exclude, in whole or in part, from his corpus, such as "Spain" (1937), "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939), "September 1, 1939" (1939).[1] Moreover, Auden made revisions, usually minor, in not a few of his poems through subsequent printings, changes which his readers might not care for as well as the original lines or phrases. He agreed with Valery's statement, "A poem is never finished, only abandoned," but added to it his own caution, "It must not be abandoned

too soon."[2] And in Auden's judgment that "The Sea and the Mirror" (1944) was his best work to date, many of his admirers would not concur. Subtitled "A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*," characters from the play speak each in a distinctive verse form, but somewhat more than half of the work, which is some forty pages long, is a long prose speech of Caliban to the audience.

Auden had always been a prolific writer, publishing in addition to the voluminous verse (including opera libretti) many book reviews and essays on a wide range of subjects.[3] After his fiftieth year, however, his production diminished in all fields. In his last fifteen years his poems number some eighty-five, not counting the two- to five-line poems under "Shorts I" and "Shorts II," and there are few poems longer than seventy lines, with by far most of them shorter than fifty and in lines of ten syllables or less. The fifteen poems of Auden's last year and a half (1972-73), again not counting "Shorts," comprise his smallest verse output in number of words. Thus Auden's later poems give a sense of the aging poet closing in and closing up, as if distancing himself from what is passing, yet with an old eagle's eye viewing what is left sharply, clearly, carefully, and culminating, as Mendelson says (SP, xvii), in "Archaeology," a series of haiku - like stanzas which affirm the future both in spite of and because of the past.

Appropriately, at age fifty Auden marks the professional turn in his life with a personal one. Having lived in many lodgings in several countries, he has at last a home of his own, with the purchase of a farmhouse in Austria. During his American period (he emigrated from England to New York in early 1939) he wrote most of his highly celebrated poems. Though he continued to visit and to spend months

in New York and in England for some years, including terms at Oxford where he was honorary Professor of Poetry, he now felt most at home and at ease at his Kirchstetten residence, especially when his old friend and lover Chester Kallman was with him.

This brief review of Auden's later poetry is an endeavor to assert its importance by stressing some of its themes and calling attention to certain examples. As to the forms of these poems, they are hardly different from those which Auden had used earlier, except that now one finds them employed in a verse of greater ease and graciousness than Auden had shown heretofore.

The themes of these poems are predominantly thanksgiving, praise, love and companionship. Of course the themes are not exclusive, but overlapping, and several poems contain at once two or more of them. They are instanced here because so many of the later poems reflect these themes in a postitve, affirmative tone and feeling, in contrast to their relative absence in Auden's earlier work or to the tone of skepticism and melancholy with which they had been presented.

Metrical forms continued to preoccupy him as a dedicated craftsman. He had written a memorable satire in free verse ("The Unknown Citizen" (1939), CP,252),[4] but almost all of his poems are stanzaic. Of so many kinds are the stanzas, both rhymed and unrhymed, varied in number of the lines and in syllable counts of corresponding lines, that even the most cursory perusal of the *Collected Poems* gives a sense of the poet's extreme technical virtuosity. Auden took pride in his achievements in form, claiming to have used every known metrical pattern (Bio, 419). But it was more than the pride of the virtuoso in technique for its own sake. Auden respected formal order and restriction in poetry as an essential

discipline to control content and feeling. With T. S. Eliot he believed that poetry should be not a pouring forth of emotions but an "escape from feeling," especially the stronger emotions, and should restrict or reform even the poet's thoughts. Thus he wrote in "Shorts II" : "Blessed be all metrical rules that forbid automatic responses, / force us to have second thoughts, free from the fetters of Self." (CP, 856) Here the alliteration draws tight the anapestic rhythm and stresses meaning. But within metrical rules and the quality of second thoughts the poet should aim to combine "the sober truthfulness of prose with a poetic uniqueness" of style. (Bio, 419) In this Auden succeeds.

Soon after moving to his Austrian home Auden began a series of twelve poems, each dedicated to a friend or friends, under the general title "Thanksgiving for a Habitat." (CP, 687-716) In the first-written of these, "VIII. Grub First, Then Ethics (Brecht)," about his kitchen, Auden asserts the basic, universal importance of food to all activities, and draws amusing inferences from serious images:"then surely those in whose creed / God is edible may call a fine / omelette a Christian deed." And "no wonder chefs mature into / choleric types, doomed to observe / Beauty peck at a master-dish,...." (CP, 705-6) For the other side of eating well, Auden ruminates on the privy room: "Not until our morning / Visit here can we / Leave the dead concerns of / Yesterday behind us, / Face with all our courage / What is now to be." (CP, 700) For friends John and Teckla Clark he keeps a comfortable guest room, and urges, "come when you can: / Your room will be ready." And at bedtime, "May you fall at once / Into a cordial dream, assured / That whoever slept in this bed before / Was also someone we like, / That within the circle of our

affection / Also you have no double." (CP,707-8) Of their living-room, he observes cozily to Chester, "I'm glad the builder gave / our common-room small windows / through which no observed outsider can observe us." (CP, 715) In "III. The Cave of Making," about his study room, Auden addresses his dead friend, the poet Louis MacNeice: "I ask you to stay at my elbow / until cocktail-time : dear Shade"; he apologizes for "this egocentric monologue," but bids acceptance of it "for friendship's sake." Such lines and many others to the same effect in "Thanksgiveing for a Habitat" reveal that the "sober truthfulness of prose" which Auden strove for could be, simply but very pleasantly, the truth of sincerity in one's description of place and mood, and in statement of opinion, recollection and wishes. Such poems are not merely good speech but speech at its best level of attention and care. It is speech in accord with what Robert Frost gave as a definition of poetry, and to which Auden subscribed: "untranslateable speech." (Bio, 419)

"Friday's Child," written in memory of the German philosopher Dietrich Bonhoeffer killed by the Nazis, reveals the poet speaking solemnly. Auden reflects on the mystery of freedom of human choice by which man can make himself godlike, as Christ and Bonhoeffer do by choosing self-sacrifice, or demonic by murdering. In this choice man's Mind is helpless and pitiful, "utterly banal": "It clearly cannot understand / What It can clearly do." It can kill a Christ, doubt that He could rise again, and yet believe in resurrection and Judgement Day for oneself. The poet concludes:

> Meanwhile, a silence on the cross,
> As dead as we shall ever be,
> Speaks of some total gain or loss,

And you and I are free

To guess from the insulted face
Just what Appearances He saves
By suffering in a public place
A death reserved for slaves. (CP, 675-6)

Thus, unable to make meaningful, moral choice or decision as to self-sacrifice and salvation, we are at last only "free / To guess": Why did He die such an improper death? Might He not at least have saved appearances by dying privately, respectably? Yet by capitalizing "Appearances" next to "He" the poet heightens the irony. In our blindness and unwillingness we, whom He saves, are as mere appearances compared to His reality.

Despite the final critical irony the overall mood of "Friday's Child" is one of a puzzled regret over human ungodliness blending into somber sorrow over failed awareness, act and love. Other memorials to the dead that Auden made in these years are not to honor a public figure,[5] but simply his friends. His "Elegy" for Emma Eiermann, his housekeeper in Austria since his arrival, is written entirely in the Japanese tanka form (five-line stanzas with syllable count 5-7-5-7-7). He reminds her how, when guests came whom she didn't approve of, she would sulk for days; yet he assures her, "how enchanting your shy grin, / your soft cat-language: / no, no, Frau E, dear oddling, / we shall always be grateful." (CP, 767) When Auden's American doctor of many years, David Protetch, died the poet memorialized him in a series of stanzas which are haiku in pairs (5-7-5, 5-7-5). Appreciating the doctor for advice "to shun / the sadist, the

nod-crafty, / and the fee-conscious," and for not advising about "my major vices, / my mad addictions," Auden is grateful too that Protetch showed him honesty (no "soothing fictions") and courage (the doctor was seriously ill). Auden concludes: "Dear David, / dead one, rest in peace, / ... condign / of our biased affection / and objective praise." (CP, 835-7) These latter elegies show the genial spirit in mourning, with a sincerity the stronger for coming through in colloquial tones, vivid details and startling verse forms.

Auden in his last years commemorates not only deaths but retirements, birthdays and other anniversaries — in short, a great variety of occasions: "Reflections in a Forest" (praise of trees), "Walks" (round his land and village), "On the Circuit" (his speaking tours), "Epithalamium" (his niece's wedding), "Profile" (self-portrait), "Bird-Language," "August 1968" (invasion of Czechoslovakia), "Epistle to a Godson," "Moon Landing," "Old People's Home," "A Shock" (he is frisked for weapons).

From 1965 to 1968 Auden wrote some 110 haiku and tanka (plus one limerick) which he collected under the title "Marginalia." (CP, 785-801) Though some of these appear slight in content, many reflect Auden's talents for aphorism, wit, humor, satire, and the revealing image. "In States unable / to alleviate Distress, / Discontent is hanged." "True Love enjoys / twenty-twenty vision, / but talks like a myopic." "*Post coitum homo tristis.* / What nonsense! If he could, / he would sing." "Thoughts of his own death, / like the distant roll / of thunder at a picnic." That Auden preserved so many of these short and sometimes slight poems throughout his career is understandable even apart from the fact that virtually all of them provide at least minimum pleasure to the eye and ear. He also

particularly wished that young and aspiring poets should read them. He believed that a poet should be writing as much, or at least as often, as possible, especially at a regular time each day, even if it seemed that nothing came worth saving, and he encouraged poets to choose not "free verse" but tight stanzaic forms both with and without rhyme. Fixed small forms like the haiku, tanka and even the limerick should be worked in. For practice the young poet was advised to write parodies of various serious poems or verses. It was important to keep the creative impulse alive and flowing and directed, and in time the poet would come to a surer sense of his preferred forms and styles. Additionally, would-be poets should acquire several languages and learn by heart thousands of lines of poetry in them; they should read no literary criticism, but study prosody and rhetoric and natural sciences; and should "be required to look after a domestic animal and cultivate a garden plot."[6] They might well also study cooking (perhaps, in need, to help keep themselves alive). Auden, keeping cats and now at Kirchstetten having a garden and a cook, enjoyed good food and drink with company. He spoke glowingly of "the mystery of a feast, / Where love is strengthened, hope restored, / In hearts by chemical accord." (CP, 839) He viewed the moon landing with a bleak eye, and prayed "that artists, / chefs and saints may still appear to blithe it" here below. (CP, 844)

In the last four years of his life, Auden's numbers of poems fall but his voice rises increasingly in lines of gratitude, praise, affection, while the crotchety notes diminish. At sixty-two, in "Doggerel by a Senior Citizen," (CP, 851-2) he remarks on the changes and inventions ("useful gadgets, but profane") in the world since his birth, and sees decline in ethics, learning, speech and art. He is not old-fashioned:

... Love, at least, is not a state
Either *en vogue* or out-or-date,
And I've true friends, I will allow,
To talk and eat with here and now.

Now in both haiku and in longer verses we have the sensation of receiving sometimes what has just come into the poet's mind, and in words just right: "The fire mumbles on / to itself, but allows us / to overhear it." "In moments of joy / all of us wish we possessed / a tail we could wag." (CP, 854) "To true Speech," Auden says, this world "is deaf," (CP, 855) yet for those who will listen, we feel, his words ring true. And he is always speaking: to "Loneliness" ("... safe from your haunting / only when soundly asleep." But soon, "Chester, my chum, will return. / Then you'll be through" CP, 866-7); "Talking to Dogs" ("...in dark hours / your silence may be of more help" CP, 868); "Talking to Mice" ("the most comely of all the miniature mammals" CP, 869) ; "Talking to Myself" ("Time, we both know, will decay You... / ... please, please, ... / ... bugger off quickly" CP, 872); "Lullaby" ("Let your last thinks all be thanks: / *...Sing, Big Baby, sing lullay* / *...Sleep, Big Baby, sleep your fill."* CP, 876); "Thank you, Fog" ("for a whole week at Christmas..." / "...our earth's a sorry spot, but / for this special interim, / so restful yet so festive, / Thank You, Thank You, Thank You, Fog." CP, 866-8); "Address to the Beasts" ("...you exhibit no signs / of knowing that you are sentenced. / Now, could that be why / we upstarts are often / jealous of your innocence, / but never envious?" CP, 891); "A Thanksgiving" ("*Hardy* and *Thomas* and *Frost*. / *...Yeats ... Graves*. / *...Brecht*. / *...Kierkegaard, Williams* and *Lewis* / *...Horace...* /

Goethe... / Fondly I ponder You all: / without You I couldn't have managed / even my weakest of lines." CP, 891-2) .

In "Archaeology," his final poem, Auden, as Mendelson says,[7] "delved into an unknowably remote past, yet —— as he prepared for his own exit from the world of time into an unknowable future —— he concluded with an affirmation." History, said Auden, is made "by the criminal in us: / goodness is timeless." (CP, 897)

In these later poems Auden leaves with us a friendly voice, one that welcomes and charms, and by turns informs and amuses and perplexes and astonishes us, who are, as it were, his guests new and old, lonely or companioned, who stop by. From a warm heart the poet speaks through a bright and sometimes dazzingly brilliant mind. If we do not always understand, though he does not explain he will pause with us, while we reflect or maybe reach for a reference book. And if we leave him only half-refreshed or half-aware, that is much, and if we have listened well we bear away at least a few lines, and that is surely enough to make us come back for more.

Notes:

1. *W. H. Auden* : *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson. London: Faber and Faber, 1979, pp. 51-5, 80-3, 86-9.
2. *W. H. Auden* : *A Biography*, Humphrey Carpenter. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1982, p. 330. Hereafter cited in the text as Bio.
3. See *W. H. Auden: Forewords and Afterwords.* Selected by Edward Mendelson. New York : Random House, Vintage Books, 1989; *W. H. Auden: The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays.* London: Faber and Faber, 1975; *W. H. Auden "The Map of All My Youth,"* ed. Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins. Oxford: Clarendon Press,

1990 (the essay by Edward Mendelson, "W. H. Auden: A Bibliographical Supplement," pp. 203-36) .

4. *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems,* ed. Edward Mendelson. New York: Random House, 1976; Vintage Books, 1991. Cited in the text as CP. This Vintage International Edition of 1991 contains minor corrections and is the one used here.
5. The "Elegy for J. F. K." (CP 754-5) is a slight piece in four haiku stanzas.
6. *W. H. Auden: The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (Note 3) , p. 77.
7. *Op. cit.* (Note 1) , p. xvii.