

THE CRITICAL ATTITUDES OF W.H. AUDEN

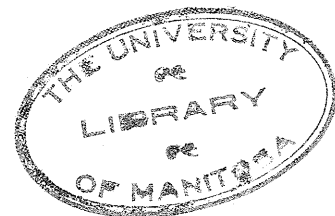
"As Well As Can Be Expected"

by

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To
CHESTER DUNCAN

with thanks

Since the external disorder, and extravagant lies,
The baroque frontiers, the surrealist police;
What can truth treasure, or heart bless,
But a narrow strictness?¹

¹Dedicatory page, Look, Stranger! London: Faber and Faber, 1935.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. THE CRITIC IN AN OPEN SOCIETY.....	10
III. AESTHETIC AND ETHICAL.....	24
IV. THE ARTIST.....	41
V. ART.....	51
VI. SECOND-RATE ART.....	64
VII. LIGHT VERSE.....	71
VIII. AUDEN'S ATTITUDES.....	80
IX. CONCLUSION.....	93
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	96

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Let History Be My Judge"

I have assumed as axiomatic that a creation, a work of art, is autotelic; and that criticism, by definition, is about something other than itself. Hence you cannot fuse creation with criticism as you can fuse criticism with creation. The critical activity finds its highest, its true fulfilment in a kind of union with creation in the labour of the artist.¹

Although Eliot refers to that work of "critical labour" that the artist does, "the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing"² his creative work, I intend a wider sense when I say that the critic-artist W. H. Auden has achieved the fusion of critical activity and creative activity in a way that few critics or artists have done. This achievement is the more remarkable in view of the fact that criticism today faces the most difficult problems that have ever presented themselves.

Critics of the past were relatively lucky. Perhaps it is crude to reduce the history of criticism to one or two pages,

¹T. S. Eliot, "The Function of Criticism," Selected Essays, London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1932, pp.30-31.

²Ibid., p. 30.

but a review of the general tendencies should serve to confirm my argument: that the critics of the past were not faced with the same kind of complexities which stand as barriers to the modern critic. Plato limited himself to a definition of poetry and a consideration of its moral value in his Republic. Poetry was imitation, a copy of a copy of the Ideal, neither very truthful nor beneficial. The artist was considered as a craftsman, possibly acting under divine inspiration. Aristotle agreed that poetry was imitation and set himself to a careful classification and dissection of the various types of poetry (tragedy, epic, etc.). Since the poetry itself was steeped in the tradition of the society for which it was written, controversial questions seldom arose. As T.S. Eliot says:

Aristotle did not have to worry about the relation of drama to religion, about the traditional morality of the Hellenes, about the relation of art to politics; he did not have to struggle with German or Italian aesthetics; he did not have to read the (extremely interesting) works of Miss Harrison or Mr. Cornford, or the translations of Professor Murray or wrinkle his brow over the antics of the Todas and the Veddahs.³

Acting as a combination Emily Post and Dale Carnegie of poetry, Horace in his Ars Poetica issued a handbook for would-be poets. Longinus considered the ways and means of achieving the sublime and avoiding the ridiculous.

³"A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," Selected Essays, p. 44.

Even when conflict arose, as it did in the sixteenth century in England, the issues at stake were still clear. It was a case of either-or. Thus Sir Philip Sidney wrote his Defense of Poesy as a reply to Stephen Gosson's School of Abuse, which contained "a pleasant invective against Poets, Pipers, Players, Jesters etc." Sidney defended his free privilege to write poetry, and based his arguments on the ancients. The poet was a maker (ποιητήν), still divinely inspired; his purpose was to teach and delight (aut prodesse aut delectare). Even this hints at some awareness of the questions, how poetry happens, and what it is for. But there was no problem:

Any reader of Sidney's Apology for Poetry can see that his misonousoi against whom he defends poetry are men of straw, that he is confident of having the sympathy of his reader with him, and that he never seriously has to ask himself the questions, what poetry is for, what it does, or whether it is desirable.⁴

"The two real problems of specific interest which occupied the attention of Elizabethan critics," according to Eliot, were "the problem of dramatic form and the problem of verse technique."⁵ The problems of communication and of the relationship between poet and reader did not exist.

Our first analytical criticism appears in Dryden's Essay of Dramatic Poesy, wherein he writes his judgment of specific works. His evaluation of the work of Shakespeare and Jonson

⁴T. S. Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, London: Faber and Faber, Limited, 1933, p. 24.

⁵Ibid., p. 49.

was based on the classical unities. Pope issued a handbook of criticism (An Essay on Criticism), urging writers to "follow the ancients" ("to copy nature is to copy them"). Dr. Johnson wrote his criticisms of the poets, and profusely illustrated his statements with concrete examples. Addison brought the Augustan Age to a close with a resounding note of sustained mediocrity. He made Paradise Lost available^{to} and fashionable ^{with} genteel people, and attempted, in his papers on Wit and Imagination, by definitions to create a common ground of meaning between the poet and his readers. "...It is suggestive as the first awareness of the problem of communication; and his whole discussion of the nature of imagination, however fruitless for the purposes of literary criticism, is a very interesting attempt at a general aesthetics."⁶

Thus far it had been easy. Sidney, Dryden and Pope wrote for an élite, a cultivated society whose attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs they knew. Their criticism was part of their art.

The important point to notice, though, is this:
Each poet knew for whom he had to write,
Because their life was still the same as his.
As long as art remains a parasite
On any class of persons it's all right;
The only thing it must be is attendant,⁷
The only thing it mustn't, independent.

When Dr. Johnson abandoned the system of patronage, a problem arose which was solved by the artist in his necessity. Dependent now upon the whole of society for his living, the artist

⁶Ibid., p. 61.

⁷"Letter to Lord Byron," Part III, Letters from Iceland, London: Faber and Faber, Limited, 1937, p. 104.

continued to write for that portion of society which he knew, and which would support him. For by this time, more than one level of culture existed, because of the spread of literacy among the lower classes.

Until the great Industrial Revolution
The artist had to earn his livelihood:
However much he hated the intrusion
Of patron's taste or public's fickle mood,
He had to please or go without his food;
He had to keep his technique to himself⁸
Or find no joint upon his larder shelf.⁸

The Romantic Movement brought the theory of creative imagination, and an emphasis both in criticism and art upon the personality of the poet. Critiques of another's work were largely founded on the critic's subjective reaction to and interpretation of the work in question, witness Coleridge's Hamlet. Hazlitt discovered a kind of critical impartiality that enabled him to detach his personal feeling for an author from his evaluation of the author's work. Nevertheless it is true that "the romantic definitions of the poet and the poetic imagination...define, not the writer, but the hero about whom he writes, which for the Romantic are combined in the same person."⁹ Indeed, the her^oφ-as-subject approach reached its culmination in the criticism of Walter Pater. Burning with a hard, gemlike flame, Pater tended to turn the subjective approach into a parody of itself. To him, the criticism almost

⁸Ibid., p. 105.

⁹Poets of the English Language, IV, The Viking Press, New York: 1950, p. xv.

became the work of art, and was certainly more important. He bathed his sensibility in the wire-like waves of Botticelli's "Birth of Venus." Thus, by the time we get to Pater, we find the critic and artist writing only for those who were 'with' him.

A new class of creative artist set up
 On whom the pressure of demand was let up:
 He sang and painted and drew dividends,
 But lost responsibilities and friends.¹⁰

Matthew Arnold introduced "disinterestedness" as a necessary qualification of the critic. He was aware of the widening out of society and of the disintegration of any coherent set of beliefs. Because of this he wished to make known the current of true and fresh ideas, against the background of which the author would write, and from whose stream he could draw his material. Arnold was among the first to ask the questions: "What is a poem?" and "What is poetic truth?" (Actually his answers were not very satisfactory. They were practical and not theoretical. He used what he called the "touchstone" method and said "This is an example of quality in poetry.") It was Arnold who made the comment about the man and the moment. He said that "for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man

¹⁰"Letter to Lord Byron," loc. cit.

is not enough without the moment."¹¹ The rôle of the critic was to create the moment, by making known and available the "best that is known and thought in the world."¹²

The problem of the man and the moment is as difficult to-day as it was when Arnold stated it, perhaps even more so. The man, the genius in any age, is a constant, but the moment, the current of ideas, has disintegrated. Modern criticism is trying to create the moment, not only to enable the man to create the master-work of literature, but also to enable the man's audience to understand and appreciate what he has already done and is doing.

The major premiss upon which modern criticism is based is the "dissociation of modern sensibility."¹³ The term is intended to describe the ~~complete~~ lack of continuity in the belief and order of modern society. There are splits and gaps and voids which make it necessary for the modern critic to ask and answer questions which seldom, if ever, faced the critics of the past.

Since Dr. Johnson's time the reading public has continued to grow. Literature has split into two levels for this vast audience. The two may be roughly classified as 'popular' and 'highbrow.' The relatively small number of the minority who cling to the highbrow is a matter of deep concern to the conscientious

¹¹Matthew arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," The Portable Matthew Arnold, New York: The Viking Press, 1949, p. 238.

¹²Ibid., p. 248.

¹³Robert Wooster Stallman, "The New Critics," Critiques and Essays in Criticism, ed. R. W. Stallman, New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1949, p. 488.

critic, whose duty it is to make art available to the people. But the background of this split makes this duty almost a super-human task. The gaps and voids of this background make it practically impossible for the artist to write for anyone but his friends, among whom he may number the critic. The critic, to make the artist's work available to the public, almost has to become an artist to communicate it. "The lack of communication between artist and audience proves the lack of communication between all men; a work of art only reveals the lack."¹⁴ ^{The situation} ~~It~~ is a vicious circle.

The gaps and voids mentioned above may be summed up as the loss of tradition. There is a lack of knowledge of the best that has been known and said in the world, and of the particular knowledge on one's own heritage; there is a lack of social order and of convention, and a lack of belief, the community of ideas and faith. Nothing, then, can be assumed. The critic must ask and answer the fundamental questions, such as, what is an artist? what is Art? what value has Art? what is the relation between the artist and his work? between the artist realized and his public? what is artistic truth?

If the critic must answer these questions, what must the artist do while he waits for the answers to be established? If he is at all serious about his work, it is likely he will attempt to answer them himself. The fact is, he is practically forced to

¹⁴"Criticism in a Mass Society, "The Intent of the Critic, ed. Donald A. Stauffer, Princeton University Press, 1941, p. 135.

do so, in order to keep on writing. Thus the man begins to create the moment for himself.

Such a man is Wystan Hugh Auden. That he has a deep concern with the questions just stated is evidenced by the fact that he deals with them in his poetry as well as in his prose. He is a true artist-critic, ^{one} a solution to our vicious circle. An examination of ^{his} aesthetic theory and of the questions he asks and the answers he gives should be worthwhile for several reasons.

In the first place, his critical ideas are exciting ^{expressed.} by ¹Secondly, they bulk so large in his poetry that a consideration of them should offer some insight to ^{its} his readers. For Auden does not merely make direct statements about art in his work, though he does that too. His techniques often embody his theory. Third, a consideration in detail of one modern critic should throw some light on modern criticism as a whole. Once the reader is acquainted with one aesthetic theory, he has at least a point of reference by which he can judge others. Finally, Auden's work is so recent that his essays have not been gathered within the pages of a single book (except, of course, The Enchafèd Flood, a series of three essays on the romantic spirit). Instead, they are scattered throughout various periodicals and anthologies ranging in date from the early thirties up to 1951. This, then, is an attempt to present a coherent ^{exposition} ~~organization~~ of Auden's critical attitudes as they appear in his work.

CHAPTER II

THE CRITIC IN AN OPEN SOCIETY

"Which Side Am I Supposed To Be On?"

Being considered as something akin to a blood-relative of Auden's because of my apparent familiarity with his attitudes on numerous unrelated subjects ranging from cakes in Iceland¹ to the merits of walking as opposed to taking the car,² I was asked recently if I knew the reason why Auden moved from England to America (1939) and became an American Citizen (1946). I answered that I thought the reason was to be found in Auden's theory of open and closed societies. The key to his critical attitudes also lies in that theory.

The description of the closed and of the open society, and of the critic's rôle in a democracy today, is given in an article, "Criticism in a Mass Society," which appeared in 1941.³ This is not to imply that Auden's theories have not developed or changed since then. His early thinking had a pinkish cast such as char-

¹He likes them, though not in such quantities as do the Icelanders.

²For the good of one's soul, it is better to walk. It is an ethically correct choice.

³In The Intent of the Critic, ed. Donald A. Stauffer, Princeton University Press, 1941.

acterised the young intellectual socialists of England of the early thirties, but it soon washed out. His relatively continuous straight line of thinking and consistent attitudes have been supplemented by one thing. A growing religious sense had added wisdom to his early intuitive wit. I hasten to state this now, because it may appear that Auden's ideas, like Topsy, simply grew, in some sort of an intellectual vacuum. There has been change and development. What I intend to describe is what has emerged, persistently and consistently, as related groups of ideas.

Auden prefaces his remarks in "Criticism in a Mass Society" by pointing out that there is no such thing as a completely closed or a completely open society, but that there are approximations to each. Evolution has tended to be from the more closed to the more open type of society, but this evolution is not uniform. Some sections of society tend to become open sooner than others. The closed society is perhaps best described as a cross between a feudal village and an Ant-State as it appears in a Hollywood-produced animated cartoon designed to show how sweet is the American Way. It is isolated, economically autonomous and independent. There is no trade, either of commodities or culture, between it and other societies. Its demands are stated and met on the subsistence level. Occupationally it is non-specialized; industrially it is non-mechanized.

The way of life of the closed society is based on an unquestionable tradition; "the right thing to do is inseparable

from the right way of doing it."⁴ Thus, for a woman, it is the right thing to bake bread. The right way to bake the bread is in the community oven. For a man, it is right to grow crops. The right way to grow crops is to sow the recommended seed in land assigned to him with the recommended tools. A kind of freedom is attainable through the ^{acceptance} ~~awareness~~ of "causal necessity." The woman is free to serve her family bread, but before her plan is realized, she must let herself be governed by the time it takes for the yeast to work, the baking time, and the schedule that lets her know when the community oven is free for her to use. The man, similarly, is free to reap his harvest if he remembers and does not let himself be cheated by drought, hailstorms, or locusts. There is little distinction made in the educational system between vocational or technical training and religious or cultural training. "Education ends with puberty; to be mature means to be socially normal."⁵

The ideal open society is exactly the opposite. There is freedom of trade and of choice. Cultural and material exchange takes place freely. It is a mechanized and an occupationally specialized society. Every individual is responsible, not to the group, but to himself, for what he does, yet he has a social

⁴op. cit., p. 129.

⁵loc. cit.

responsibility as well, because he is useful and needed. Every individual must choose for himself the right thing to do and the right way of doing it. Education is designed to make the individual aware of who he is and of what he wants to do. There is no such thing as normality. "Maturity would be regarded as an ideal goal that is never reached."⁶

The closed and open societies may be tagged Fascist and Democratic, but Auden does not want to consider them from a political point of view. He is interested in them for the background they provide for the critic and the artist. He chooses the open society or the democracy as his favored background for several reasons. In the first place, societies tend more and more to be open, if only physically. A society which trades freely and which is mechanized cannot truthfully be called a closed society. The critic and the artist, for whom there is no prescribed right thing to do or right way of doing it, would be a contradiction in the closed society. As a matter of fact, Auden says that the artist is the only person living in a completely open society today.⁷

⁶Ibid., p. 131.

⁷Both their unique position in society and the unique nature of their work conspire to make artists less fitted for political thinking than most people. As citizens they are the only people for whom a capitalist democracy is a completely open society." "Notes," New Year Letter, London: Faber & Faber, 1941, p. 82.

Finally, he claims that "we have to adapt ourselves to an open society or perish."⁸ He has taken what he believes to be the winning side.

I have used the word ideal in the Platonic sense rather than in any complimentary sense, but I ^Cwould say "the ideal open society" and imply some praise. Surely ^Tthe advantages to the critic are obvious. Other cultures are readily available to him. Because it is an occupationally specialized society, it is possible for him to find his vocation. In a world which adores no ~~bossy~~^{bossy*} goddess Normality, he is free to set up other criteria, absolutes like Maturity, ^{which} ~~that~~ may be striven for ^fit never reached. As a socially responsible individual, he may make his appeal to other individuals.

Yet there is one problem that confronts the critic in the more or less open society of a capitalist democracy that makes the open society a little less than ideal. The lack of a true community presents the critic with two tasks from the outset. A group of individuals today comprises a public, not a community. There is no common bond of interest among them. Each feels himself unique and out of touch with his contemporary fellows as with those of the past. His frame of mind, were it conscious and spoken, would sound something like this: "All I know is right here and now and me. Try and show me different." What general

⁸"Criticism in a Mass Society," op. cit., p. 129.

appeal can Art make, falling like good seed among the thorns of a thousand such bristling attitudes?

Our inheritance from past cultures is perhaps better known by the word tradition. By tradition, Auden says, "we mean a consciousness of the whole of the past in the present."⁹ This is exciting,¹⁰ because the average attitude today associates the word traditional with the word conventional in a definitely pejorative sense. It smacks of Victorianism, mothballs, and a 1902 copy of Emily Post. It is in the face of this attitude that modern criticism becomes so important, in Auden's opinion. "The importance that criticism and belles-lettres take today can be understood only if we recognize these two characteristics of our society: the tendency toward individuation of experience, and the change in the meaning of the word tradition."¹¹

The critic, then, has two tasks (in Auden's own words):

Firstly he must show the individual that though he is unique he also has much in common with all other individuals, and then must teach him how to see the relevance to his own experience of works of art which deal with experiences appar-

⁹Ibid., p. 132.

¹⁰And has been since 1919, when T. S. Eliot in an essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," said: "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence...This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity." Selected Essays, p. 14.

¹¹"Criticism in a Mass Society," op. cit., p. 133.

ently strange to him...And secondly a critic must attempt to spread a knowledge of past cultures so that his audience may be as aware of them as the artist himself....¹²

Thus the critic must serve as a combination Professional Hostess and Baedeker. He has to introduce the reader, who may be a Winnipeg lawyer, to a work, say, about a southern white-trash farmer, and show him why the meeting may be valuable to him. And he has to be a mine of information, doling out historical tid-bits from the world panorama of art. Even as the modern office-building becomes a thing of interest and importance to the clerk and the elevator boy as well as to the architect when its use of a Corinthian frieze is pointed out to them, so a contemporary poem may become as ^{significant} ~~important~~ and interesting to the reader as to the poet when the influence of Anglo-Saxon verse on its form is made known. It is through the efforts of the critic that this knowledge becomes as much the property of the audience as of the artist.

It is readily seen, then, that the rôle of the critic in a contemporary capitalist democracy is an important one. Faced with the difficulties of his two-fold task, the critic must not only give a good account of his own philosophy and his critical attitudes, but he must also be held responsible for the development of taste in others. Auden says that before he reads any critic, he wants to know his philosophic beliefs.¹³ And there

¹²~~see. cit.~~ Ibid., p. 133

¹³Ibid., p. 142.

are four pre-suppositions that Auden expects in the critic who accepts the democratic assumptions. I shall list them with some comment.

1. The critic who assumes that absolute values exist but that our knowledge of them is always imperfect will judge a work of art by the degree to which it transcends the artist's personal and historical limitations, but he will not expect such transcendence ever to be complete, either in the artist or in himself.¹⁴

It is an indication of Auden's charm as a critic that he states his belief in an absolute in this way. A critic may assume that it exists, and, our knowledge of it is always imperfect. He knows that an arbitrary assertion of an absolute criterion's existence would be too Cartesian, simply because our knowledge of it is always imperfect. The field of criticism is established at once, not as the abode of right and wrong, but of greater and lesser degrees of a kind of truth. A distinction drawn between two works of art is nice, in the Jamesian sense of the word. It is all a matter of appreciation. The critic, then, will judge a work of art by the degree to which it transcends the artist's personal and historical limitations; that is, by the degree to which it attains to some sort of absolute. I feel that this absolute in one sense is intimately related to the idea of tradition. Tradition, we remember,¹⁵ (according to Auden), is a consciousness of the whole of the past in the present. The person

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 144-145.

who does not possess this consciousness will presumably possess no sense of absolute values either, because the past we are conscious of is that part of the past which has emerged to us as valuable. That which is valuable to many different minds in different countries and different ages must possess some absolute value. The writer who does not possess this consciousness, possessing no sense of absolute values, will be bound by his personal and historical limitations and so will accept them prima facie. He will be a 'popular' writer, possibly a Time reporter, a victim of journalese. Or he will utterly refute his personal and historical limitations, and so will be bound by them in a different way. He will be a good 'modern' writer, possibly a selection of the Book of the Month Club, a victim of the blues.

The sin of the popular writer is an accidia that accepts the social values of his day as absolute; the sin of most good modern writers is a pride that perceives their imperfections in these values and revolts against them, but in so doing, adopts as final values which are opposites but also partial, the mirror image of what it attacks. A writer is great--there are no perfect writers--in the degree to which he transcends both simple acceptance and simple revolt, so that later generations are conscious in reading him less of his relevance to his age and more of his relevance to themselves.¹⁵

Because it is all a question of degree, the critic will not expect such transcendence ever to be complete, either in the artist or in himself. Conscious of the whole of the past, he will attempt to establish to what extent the artist will become part of the

¹⁵"The Fabian Figaro," The Commonwealth, 37, October 23, 1942. p.12.

consciousness of the past in the present of later generations.

2. Assuming the unity of truth he will realize the interdependence of ethics, politics, science, esthetics, etc., and do his best to acquire as all-round a culture as possible--keep them all in mind without being dominated by any one of them.¹⁶

Again it is Auden's attitude to the absolute that is striking. Imperfect as our knowledge of absolute values is, it would be dangerous to attempt any compartmentalization of it. Therefore the critic assumes the total unity of truth; hence, the interdependence of the various dialectics. Each dialectic--ethical, political, scientific, aesthetic--even at best is but an approximate description of one aspect of the whole. No critic, then, is justified in developing his knowledge in one field while leaving the others fallow. The cultural breezes of the open society will fly tares into his cultivated plot.

In a review of a critical book on Gerard Manley Hopkins, Auden has mentioned two functions of criticism. It is the second of these functions which throws light on the discussion at hand: "the second and more important function of criticism (is) the fostering and development of taste...."¹⁷ Before I attempt to draw a conclusion from this, I think it is worthwhile to consider what T. S. Eliot has to say on the development of taste in poetry.

It should be clear that the 'development

¹⁶"Criticism in a Mass Society," op. cit., p. 145.

¹⁷"Gerard Manley Hopkins," a review of a book by E. E. Phare, The Criterion, 13, April, 1934, p. 497.

of taste¹⁸ is an abstraction. To set before oneself the goal of being able to enjoy, and in the proper objective order of merit, all good poetry, is to pursue a phantom, the chase after which should be left to those whose ambition it is to be 'cultivated' or 'cultured,' for whom art is a luxury article and its appreciation an accomplishment. For the development of genuine taste, founded on genuine feeling, is inextricable from the development of the personality and character. Genuine taste is always imperfect taste--but we are all, as a matter of fact, imperfect people; and the man whose taste in poetry does not bear the stamp of his particular personality, so that there are differences in what he likes from what we like, as well as resemblances, and differences in the way of liking the same things, is apt to be a very uninteresting person with whom to discuss poetry. We may even say that to have better 'taste' in poetry than belongs to one's state of development, is not to 'taste' anything at all. One's taste in poetry cannot be isolated from one's other interests and passions; it affects them and is affected by them, and must be limited as one's self is limited.¹⁸

Keeping in mind the qualifications which surround the term 'development of taste' that Eliot mentions, we take note of two points in particular. Genuine taste is always imperfect taste. Exactly. Taste is defined as "the power of discerning and appreciating beauty, order, congruity, proportion, symmetry, or whatever constitutes excellence, esp. in the fine arts and belles-lettres; critical judgment; discernment."¹⁹ Beauty is an absolute value. Auden has already admitted that our knowledge of

¹⁸The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, pp. 35-36.

¹⁹"taste", #7, Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, Springfield: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1916, p. 2116, col.1.

absolute values is imperfect. Hence, our ^{recognition} ~~discernment~~ of an absolute value, such as beauty, is imperfect.

One's taste in poetry cannot be isolated from one's other interests and passions; it affects them and is affected by them, and must be limited as one's self is limited. Surely if a critic realizes that aesthetics are only a part of the whole unity of truth and attempts to fill in his knowledge of these interdependent ^{CS} ~~dialections~~ of ethics, politics, and science, in short, to acquire as all-round a culture as possible, surely he will be less limited? And if he keeps them all in mind without being dominated by any one of them, that is, if he keeps his interests and passions as enlightened and as free from prejudice as possible, perhaps his discernment of beauty will be a little less imperfect. This, then, is the prerequisite, the preparation he must make in order to perform his function. He must foster and develop his own taste in order to foster and develop taste in others.

3. (Admitting original sin, he will not)
believe in his own infallibility, or cause others to believe in it.
...he will conceive of art, like life, as being a self-discipline rather than a self-expression. He will see artistic freedom and personality as dependent upon the voluntary acceptance of limitations which alone are strong enough to test the genuine intensity of the original creative impulse.²⁰

The surprising union of sanity and humility in the man strikes ~~kes~~ us. Auden's recognition of original sin forestalls any charges of priggishness or pomposity, which, without this, might

²⁰"Criticism in a Mass Society," loc. cit.

justly have been thrown at him. Neither for the critic nor the artist will this man reserve the Great Master's Study, for he knows that both are fallible and must wait and be grateful for a corner of the kitchen table.²¹ The critic, like all men, is possessed of original sin; that is, he is not perfect. And since he is not perfect he is not infallible. In spite of his all-round culture he will be affected by his other interests and passions; hence his discernment of beauty, his taste, will be imperfect. Recognizing this fact, the critic must make sure that others recognize it too. He can foster and develop taste; he must not dictate it.

The statement about art and artistic freedom will explain itself in another chapter. It is interesting to note, ~~in passing,~~ however, what may already have been recognized, that Auden demands, not a theory but an attitude in a critic. Thus, an artist will be considered from the point of view of Art--he will be good in proportion to the degree to which he transcends his personal and historical limitations and attains to some approximation of an absolute, whatever his means--and not from the point of view of a catch-word. A catch-word theory is too arbitrary; it is bound by the theorist's personal and historical limitations. Auden has pointed out that "it is always wise to remember that, if a certain

²¹"Squares and Oblongs," Poets at Work," ed. Charles D. Abbott, New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1948, p. 176.

critical theory fails to do much with a certain kind of poetry, the fault may lie in the theory, not in the poetry."²²

4. Accepting his responsibility, he will see his position of influence as an accident, an inheritance which he does not deserve and which he is incompetent to administer.
 ...the final aim of every critic and teacher must be to persuade others to do without him, to realize that the gifts of the spirit are never to be had second-hand.²³

We have seen that the responsibility of the critic is to foster and develop taste. Because he is imperfect and fallible, he will recognize the fact that he is incompetent to administer his position of influence. He will not be an arbiter of taste, but a rule-of-thumb guide. We recall again Auden's review of Miss Phare's book about Hopkins, where he says that "critics have two duties, to arouse interest in others, and to make that interest self-supporting and self-developing....To arouse interest the critic must advertise, i.e., he must quote with as little comment as possible...."²⁴ ~~In other words,~~ The critic's job will be, as Matthew Arnold suggested, to make known and available the best that is known and said in the world. Given a key to, or touchstone of 'taste', individuals in an open society are free to earn their gifts of the spirit.

²²Poets of the English Language, II, p. xxxii.

²³"Criticism in a Mass Society," loc. cit.

²⁴loc. cit.

CHAPTER III

AESTHETIC AND ETHICAL

"Make Up Your Mind"

Auden has been careful to distinguish between the aesthetic and the ethical, as he sees them. The distinction, drawn under the influence of Kierkegaard, forms the foundation of his attitude to art. The real originality of his definitions lies in their application and in the illustrative examples introduced in connection with them. Especially interesting is Auden's concern with the correct attitudes of these two dialectics and the dangers ensuing if their attitudes are confused.

Imagine a young man tormented by fantasies of cutting women's throats. He is horrified and tries to suppress them. This method fails. They get worse. He suffers till, in his despair, he goes to a psychologist and with his help unravels his complex and is 'cured', i.e. the fantasies cease and his desire for women becomes 'normal'. Presently he falls in love with a married woman. Now he suffers again, torn between desire and conscience, but this time no psychologist can help him. He has to choose: Shall I or shall I not break up this home?-- and the decision lies with his will and with his will alone. In a sense his suffering is worse than before, since it is less painful to endure what you do not like but know you cannot prevent than

to do what you do not like when you know
you could do otherwise.¹

This story illustrates Auden's distinction between the aesthetic and the ethical treatment. In the beginning the young man suffers from a tribulation. His mental complex is a trial, a burden about which he can do nothing but is obliged to endure. His second dilemma brings him face to face with a worse problem. He now suffers from a temptation. Two paths of action are open to him. He can break up the home and live with the woman he loves, to be haunted for the rest of his life by guilt (which he must endure) for injuring another man (not to mention breaking a few moral and legal rules, should he dispense with the formalities of church and state). On the other hand, he can renounce the woman and live unhappily without her. He must choose and act on one of the two possibilities. The necessary treatment in the first case, passive endurance, is aesthetic; the necessary treatment in the second case, active choice, is ethical. Auden acknowledges his debt to Kierkegaard in a note that will explain this distinction a little more fully:

As far as I know, Kierkegaard was the first to distinguish accurately between tribulations, all the troubles that come upon us from without and can't be disposed of by acts of will but can only be endured, that is, treated aesthetically; and temptations, all the internal conflicts that must not be endured but solved in action by the will, that is, treated ethically. Further he was the first to include among tribulations, not only physical disasters like

¹"Notes," New Year Letter, pp. 132-133.

flood, fire, and famine, but also all images, impulses, feelings of guilt that arise from the subconscious.²

Aesthetics, according to the illustration above, appears to be the description of the treatment of tribulations. Auden actually defines aesthetics as "the rules of a game."³ A game is defined as "any action or series of actions that can be done perfectly."⁴ Aesthetic behavior, then, is essentially frivolous. It involves endurance, in the case of a tribulation, and it involves skill, in the case of the game. (The inference is that one may become skilled at enduring.) But it does not involve the will. There may seem to be a contradiction in Auden's attitude here: the tribulation is imposed from without and must be endured, that is, treated aesthetically; the rules of the game are arbitrary, and need not be entered upon. But the rules, and not the entering, are what are to be treated aesthetically. The rules, though arbitrary, are for the time being unavoidable. Of course, they may be disobeyed, but that is not important. "The rules of a game give it importance by making it difficult to play, a test of skill."⁵

How does this attitude toward aesthetics fit in with the dictionary definition? Aesthetics is "the theory of philosophy

²Ibid., p. 132.

³Ibid., p. 89.

⁴~~Ibid., p. 89.~~ loc. cit.

⁵"Squares and Oblongs," op. cit. p. 168.

of taste; science of the beautiful in nature and art."⁶ Auden defines art as "the most difficult game conceivable to man."⁷ Surely it is apparent that aesthetics is the rules of the game of art, that it is indeed the science of the beautiful, and that it is all a matter of skill. Efficiency, the successful exercise of one's skill, would be the criterion of that game; enjoyment of one's skill, the reward. "Granted that a game is innocent, the test of whether one should play it or not is simply whether one enjoys playing it or not, because the better one plays, the more one enjoys it."⁸

It is the tendency of the sciences, Auden says--and this would include psychology--to change tribulations into temptations, "an insoluble problem of passive endurance to a soluble problem of conduct, the unpleasant into the evil."⁹ The individual in the open society where science has to a large extent accomplished this transformation must solve his problems "in action by the will," that is, treat them ethically. In other words, he is free to choose. This is a direct contrast to the individual in the closed society where the right thing to do is inseparable from

⁶"aesthetics, "Webster's Dictionary, p. 37, col.1.

⁷"Notes," New Year Letter, p. 89.

⁸"Squares and Oblongs," loc. cit.

⁹"Mimesis and Allegory," English Institute Annual, 1940, Columbia University Press, 1941, p. 14.

the right way of doing it and where one's problems therefore would automatically be treated aesthetically. Life in the open society is a series of choices. Choice is obligatory and continually expressed. Not to do anything is still to choose, for every action, even the action of doing nothing, has its consequences. It is choosing and not the choice that is ethical. One must go on or go under. Freedom in the open society thus becomes "Consciousness of necessity."

Ethics, then, may be defined as the description of the treatment of life in the open society--the solutions in action by the will to the temptations which that life presents. This explanation can be made simpler: aesthetics are the rules of a game, essentially frivolous; ethics are the rules of life.

The gulf between frivolity and seriousness, between choosing to obey the rules of a game which it does not matter whether you play or not, and choosing to obey the rules of life which you have to live whether you like it or not and where the rules are necessary for they do not cease to exist if you disobey them but operate within you to your destruction, this gulf is so infinite that all talk about children's games being a preparation for adult life is misleading twaddle.¹⁰

Auden is insistent about this gulf between ^{the}aesthetics and ^{the}ethics¹. The one involves skill, the other involves the will, "the only serious possession of men...in other words their love, and the only serious matter is what they love, themselves or God and their neighbor."¹¹ It is obvious that questions like this do

¹⁰"Squares and Oblongs," op. cit., p. 171

¹¹Ibid., pp. 168-169.

not arise in a game. Yet too many people view life, Auden feels, from an aesthetic point of view. Life is not a question of skill:

Life is not a game because one cannot say: 'I will live if I turn out to be good at living.' No, gifted or not, I must live. Those who cannot play a game can always be spectators, but no one can be a spectator of life; he must either live himself or hang himself.¹²

Thus far it is clear enough--the distinction between aesthetics and ethics, the fact that life is not a game. But the passage quoted directly above continues, bringing up a point that Auden has not made clear. He says:

...and in living well, i.e. in loving one's neighbor, the pleasure pain criterion does not apply. If the Good Samaritan is asked why he rescued the man who fell among thieves, he may answer: 'because I like doing good,' but this answer will be a joking reproof to the interrogator for asking silly questions when he already knows the answer, which is that to love my neighbor as myself is an order and whether I enjoy obeying an order or not is irrelevant. If pleasure and pain were relevant, then the Good Samaritan would simply be more gifted at loving than the Levite, and the whole thing would be a game.¹³

The answer of the Good Samaritan has been a joking reproof because it was an aesthetic answer. Enjoyment is the criterion of a game (the better one plays the more one enjoys it). But the obedience to an order is surely not ethical but moral behavior. Auden has said that the aesthetic treatment of a problem was

¹² Ibid., p. 169.

¹³ Ibid., p. 169. loc. cit.

passive endurance and the ethical, ^{active} choice. The ethical action, then, lies in the choosing, not in the choice. The Good Samaritan had a choice to make: to pass by the victim of thieves without offering to help him, or to stop and give him aid. He chose to stay and help. The acknowledgement that there was a choice to make, and the choosing, were ethical. The fact that he chose to help rather than to pass on was surely moral.

We have defined ethics as the solutions in action by the will to the temptations of life. But what about the moral content of those solutions? Perhaps the dictionary definition of ethics will help us: "the science of moral duty; more broadly, the science of the ideal human character...moral principles, quality, or practice, a system of moral principles."¹⁴ Auden has something to say about morality. In the first place he defines goodness in much the same terms as did Socrates, from the point of view of efficiency: "anything or creature is good which is discharging its proper function, using its powers to the fullest extent permitted by its environment and its own nature...."¹⁵ Then Auden splits the ranks of goodness, saying that "there are two kinds of goodness, 'natural' and 'moral'. An organism is naturally good when it has reached a state of equilibrium with its environment...any change towards a greater freedom of action

¹⁴"ethics," Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language, p. 753, col. 3.

¹⁵"Morality in an Age of Change," The Nation, 147, No. 26, December 24, 1938, p. 688.

is a morally good change."¹⁶

The individual in the closed society is naturally good according to these explanations.. The right thing for him to do is dictated by tradition, and he knows the right way of doing it; he is in a state of equilibrium with his environment. The change to the open society, where a greater freedom of action is allowed is a morally good change. But Auden says that "moral good passes into natural good. A change is made and a new equilibrium stabilized."¹⁷ Similarly, "just as moral good passes into natural good, so, conversely, what was natural evil tends with every advance in knowledge to become moral evil."¹⁸ That is, once one has gained the freedom to know better, he cannot continue to act as he did. What was unconscious evil becomes conscious evil and is therefore to be condemned. On the other hand, unconscious good is not to be praised. Action based on law or habit is not moral. Choice is obligatory and must be continually expressed. "Freedom" as a famous definition has it,¹⁹ 'is consciousness of necessity'...morality is only possible in a world which is constantly changing and presenting a fresh series of choices. No society is absolutely good, but some are better than others."²⁰ (It will be noted that Auden continues to make clear his prefer-

¹⁶~~loc. cit.~~ Ibid., p. 688.

¹⁷loc. cit.

tr. ¹⁹ I believe this definition originated with Engels.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 689.

²⁰loc. cit.

ence for the open society.)

There seems, ~~therefore~~, to be little distinction made by Auden between ethics and morality. Ethical treatment is action by the will, that is, choice. Moral behavior is only possible in a world which is constantly presenting a fresh series of choices. But there must be a link missing in Auden's chain of reasoning. Was the young man who loved the married woman morally good when he made his choice, no matter what his choice was? Would the Good Samaritan have been equally moral if he had chosen to pass on the other side?

Perhaps the answer to this problem lies in Auden's borrowed definition of freedom, the "consciousness of necessity." The rule is, as he said in the parable above, "to love my neighbor as myself," and that rule must be obeyed, whether we enjoy it or not. We are free to disobey the law, but if we do, it will continue to operate to our own destruction. Like Adam, we are free to disobey God and lose Paradise, or obey Him Who is the source of our freedom. We are free to choose our own salvation or damnation. "We are," as Auden has said in one of his poems, "articled to error...We live in freedom by necessity."²¹ The relative 'goodness' or 'badness' of an action is of less importance to Auden than the fact that we are acting--upon our will, upon a choice consciously made. That is what is ethical; that is what is moral.

²¹Sonnet XXVII, "In Time of War," The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, p. ~~334~~. New York: Random House, 1945, p. 334.

However, there is something besides the aesthetic and the ethical or moral, and it lies beyond their bounds, though it possesses qualities of both. That something is the religious (to give an abstract name to what will, in our case anyway, turn out to be the Christian Faith). Either aesthetics or ethical is too bald. There are situations in this world which requires treatment other than despairing endurance or specific choice. As an example of such a situation, Auden suggests marriage:

It is required for a Christian marriage, therefore, that the bride and bridegroom shall come to the altar in the state which they thereupon promise to continue, i.e. before they can choose to love, love must first of all have chosen them. First comes the esthetic immediacy, which to the Ethical is irrelevant, then the vow, taken by each, to love each other till death, which to the Esthetic is absurd. But it is precisely the combination that makes marriage a religious sacrament, the proof of which is that it can neither be conceived in the timeless abstraction of the Ethical, nor in the fore-shortened time of the Esthetic.²²

Romantic love is for the moment and fleeting; conjugal love is a day-to-day venture. Conjugal love involves the link we thought was missing in the illustrations we quoted. Our young man has already felt the aesthetic immediacy of his love for the married woman, and that will carry him through his affair with her while he decides what to do about it. Let us presume to solve his problem by our version of the end of his story. He will choose to make an honest woman of her by engineering her divorce and marry-

²²"Preface to Kierkegaard," The New Republic, 110, May 15, 1944, pp. 685-686.

ing her. In so doing, he has been ethical and something more. For he has promised to continue to choose to love her. It is the same with the Good Samaritan. At one time he must have chosen to acknowledge the rule that thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Now he has chosen to abide by that rule. It is likely that in the future he will continue to choose to observe it. Perhaps this was not necessary to explain, but the explanation was necessary for me, to satisfy my (I hesitate to use the word) moral sense. Auden has left nothing out.

Thus satisfied, let us return to our simple definitions. Aesthetics are the rules of a game; ethics are the rules of life. The one involves skill, passive endurance; pleasure is its criterion. The other involves active choice; pleasure or pain is irrelevant, but the moral sense is implicated. One must be careful not to judge something ethical from the aesthetic point of view. Such a judgment, in Auden's estimation, is all too frequent.

(To witness an act of ~~un~~selfishness or
hatred--say a man beating his wife--makes
one angry or unhappy. To witness an un-
talented act like a clumsy man wrestling
with a window-blind or a bad line of poetry
makes one laugh (if no serious suffering
is involved). Indeed there are few better
ways of spending a hilarious evening than
in recalling the worst lines in English
poetry.²³

Here is the essential difference between the aesthetic and the ethical in action. The first action, of course, is morally wrong,

²³"Squares and Oblongs," op. cit., p. 170.

and should, as it usually does, make one angry or unhappy. The second action is unskillful and should only rouse laughter. Perhaps it is easier to see this distinction in a negative example such as this. Too often is a woman considered a paragon of virtue because her household is orderly and her children clean and well-dressed. That is an aesthetic judgment. Evaluation of her 'goodness,'^{*} morally speaking, should depend upon whether her children are also her husband's. Similarly, a man is often judged 'a good man' because he holds his liquor well and drives a big, beautiful car. His business ethics, whether he cheats his clients or pads his expense account, should also be taken into consideration.

It is interesting to note the prevalence of this attitude: that surface beauty and order are tokens of a corresponding ~~sp~~ spiritual state. Most fairy tales, traditional and modern, deal respectively with the ugly, wicked old witch and the nasty battle-axe of a mother-in-law as the villain of the piece. Spenser's Una is beautiful and good; Milton's Sin and Death are ugly and evil. It may be argued that this ~~one:one~~ relationship is shifting today, at least in popular literature. Scarlet O'Hara is beautiful, but bad, and she is a little lamb of heaven when compared with Amber, who is beautiful and SINFUL. The Hunchback of Notre Dame is ugly and good. Before we drop this interesting speculation, it is only fair to admit that either combination, that is, beautiful and good, ugly and wicked; or beautiful and wicked, ugly and good, is too simple. If all works of art were written on this basis alone, they would achieve about the same depth and

subtlety as East Lynne or The Drunkard possess. Perhaps Auden's concern with it is merely justification of his own untidy ways. Like Bathless Groggins (and Samson) he can say: "My strength is as the strength of ten because my heart is pure."

Auden's concern with the confusion of the aesthetic and the ethical points of view is wholly or partially the subject of several of his poems or prose pieces, and we are bound to trace it. Echoes of Auden's disapproval of the confusion are caught here and there throughout his poetry:

Around them boomed the rhetoric of time,
The smells and furniture of the known world
Where conscience worshipped an aesthetic order
And what was unsuccessful was condemned....²⁴

In For the Time Being a Semi-Chorus requests aid for those who have been deluded by Romantic Art into making aesthetic judgments and choices in their daily lives:

Joseph, Mary, pray for those
Misled by moonlight and the rose,
For all in our perplexity.
Lovers who hear a distant bell
That tolls from somewhere in their head
Across the valley of their dream--²⁵

and for those whose lives have been judged from an aesthetic viewpoint:

Joseph, Mary, pray for all
The proper and conventional^{one}
Of whom this world approves,²⁶

and for those who fear that they will not arrive because their

²⁴"Kairos and Logos," The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, p. 11.

²⁵London: Faber and Faber, 1945, p. 81.

²⁶Ibid., p. 82.

daily choices do not give them the sense of immediacy that aesthetics gives and ethics never will:

Blessed Woman,
Excellent Many,
Redeem for the dull the
Average Way,
That common ungifted
Natures may
Believe that their normal
Vision can
Walk to perfection.²⁷

Depravity: A Sermon "is concerned with two temptations: the constant tendency of the spiritual life to degenerate into an aesthetic performance; and the fatal ease with which Conscience, i.e. the voice of God, is replaced by 'my conscience,' i.e., the Super-Ego...."²⁸ In this prose piece Auden speculates on the effect upon the imagination of the messianic complex, that "three-syllable-whisper: 'You are God.'"²⁹ The individual, thus self-persuaded, attempts to make the rules, to order his own life. But what is supposed to be a spiritual order degenerates into an aesthetic performance. Efficiency and skill are his criteria.

I should like just to try and
imagine for one moment what the world
would be like if this lunacy with its
grim fanatic theories were to spread
over the civilized globe. I tell you
there would exist a tyranny compared
with which a termite colony would seem
dangerously lax. No family love. Sons
would inform against fathers, cheer-

²⁷Ibid., p. 83.

²⁸in The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, p. 242.

²⁹Ibid., p. 246.

fully send them to the execution cellars. Mothers would send their daughters to the mines. No romance. Even the peasant must beget the standard child under laboratory conditions. Motherhood would be by licence. Truth and Beauty would be proscribed as dangerously obstructive. To be beautiful would be treason against the State, Thought a sabotage deadly to the thinker. No books, no art, no music. A year of this, I say, and even the grass would cease to grow, flowers would not risk appearance, heifers would not dare to calve.³⁰

In other words, human beings would be like the pawns in a chess game, to be sacrificed for some higher gain. There would be no books or art or music because all creative activity would be directed towards the formation of one's own life instead. Auden grants no mercy to such self-centred activity. One should not order one's own life aesthetically:

His life was like a poem. If so, he was a very great scoundrel who said to himself in early life: "I will explore every possibility of sinning and then repent on my death-bed," Faust? Exactly. Marlowe was not as intelligent as Goethe but he had more common sense. At least he knew that Faust went to hell. Faust is damned, not because he has sinned, but because he made a pact with the Devil, that is, like a poet he planned a life of sin beforehand.³¹

This is very close to the worst and most dangerous confusion of the aesthetic and the ethical that can be made; that is, to

³⁰Ibid., p. 246.

³¹"Squares and Oblongs," op. cit. pp. 179-180.

presume that a state can be created the way a work of art is created.

¶ The frightful falsehood which obsessed the Greeks and Romans and for which mankind has suffered ever since, was that government is a similar activity to art, that human beings are a medium like language out of which the gifted politician creates a good society as the gifted poet creates a good poem.

A society which really was like a poem and embodied all the esthetic values of beauty, order, economy, subordination of detail to the whole effect, would be a nightmare of horror, based on selective breeding, extermination of the physically or mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars.³²

Two poems illustrate this theory of creative politics in action.

A Fugal-Chorus in For the Time Being praises Caesar who has conquered Seven Kingdoms: the Kingdom of Abstract Idea, the Kingdom of Natural Cause, the Kingdom of Infinite Number, the Kingdom of Credit Exchange, the Kingdom of Inorganic Giants, the Kingdom of Organic Dwarfs, and the Kingdom of Popular Soul.³³

Caesar is praised because he is efficient, skillful, and above all, successful. If he were judged correctly, that is, ethically, he would not be praised. He might, as a ruler, have increased freedom of action. This would have been the greatest thing he could have done, for we remember that any change towards a greater freedom of action is a morally good change. As it is, he has decreased freedom of action and made pawns of human beings. He

³²Ibid., p. 178.

³³ pp. 87-90.

is, therefore, to be condemned.

"Epitaph^{on} ~~of~~ a Tyrant" is another illustration of creative politics in action. It is a thumbnail sketch of a ruler who based his government on aesthetics rather than on ethics:

Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;
When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,³⁴
And when he cried the little children died in the streets.

This is the perfect and horrible result when the aesthetic treatment is carried to its logical extreme in the field of ethics.

The question may have arisen: what connection has all this with Auden's critical attitudes? I hinted at the beginning of this chapter that the careful distinction that Auden makes between the aesthetic and the ethical is the foundation of his attitude to art. I do not intend to say more here because I want the following chapters to be, if not a surprise, at least interesting.

³⁴The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, p. 99.

CHAPTER IV

THE ARTIST

"Nobody Understands Me"

If aesthetics are the rules of a game and art is the most difficult game conceivable to man, then the artist is the gamesman. Efficiency, skill, success, are his criteria; enjoyment is his reward. This is perhaps the simplest way of introducing the subject of Auden's attitude to the artist. Actually, the theory must be broken down into several sections. There are several questions which must be answered: why does the artist play the Game; that is, why does he create? what kind of enjoyment does he get out of it? what is his position in the open society of a capitalist democracy? what problems does he face in society today?

There is a distinct development in Auden's attitude to the artist. In an earlier article commenting on the importance of Freud in art, Auden says:

The popular idea of the artist as socially ill adapted has been a constant one, and not unjustified. Homer may have been blind, Milton certainly was, Beethoven deaf, Villon a crook, Dante very difficult, Pope deformed, Swift impotent, Proust asthmatic, Van Gogh mental, and so on.¹

¹"Psychology and the Arts To-Day," The Arts To-Day, ed. Geoffrey Grigson, London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1935, p. 2.

And he goes on to point out that the system of patronage, as practiced in one form or another throughout the ages--even now we pay artists whom we prize highly--is proof that society thinks the artist, or what he produces, is worth paying for.

No artist, however 'pure,' is disinterested: he expects certain rewards for his activity, however much his opinion of their nature may change as he develops; and he starts from the same point as the romantic and the day-dreamer, from emotional frustration in early childhood.²

The brilliant child is different from other children: he reads too much and develops myopia or asthma, from improper breathing. ("Myopia, deafness, delayed puberty, asthma--breathing is the first independent act of the child--are some of the attempts of the mentally awakened child to resist the demands of life."³) His physical development is comparatively retarded. As he grows older, he becomes acutely aware of the difference between himself and other people, a difference which he feels is to his discredit. Auden has put a hint of this in a poem:

Even the ablest could recall a day
Of diagnosis when the first stab of his talent
Ran through the beardless boy and spoilt the sadness
Of the closed life the stupid never leave.⁴

²Ibid., p. 4.

³Ibid., p. 6.

⁴"Pascal," The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, p. 87.



Naturally, an effort is made to compensate for any real or imagined inferiority. If the child can do one thing better than other people can, if he can create something, he will feel justified.

From weathered outcrop
To hill-top temples, from appearing waters to
Conspicuous fountains, from a wild to a formal vineyard,
Are ingenious but short steps that a child's wish
To receive more attention than his brothers, whether
By pleasing or teasing, can easily take.⁵

It is a matter of all too human pride:

Just because our pride's an
Evil there's no end to,
Birthdays and the arts are
Justified, for when
We consciously pretend to
Own the earth or play at
Being gods, thereby we
Own that we are men.⁶

Later, our child, grown-up, will realize that his first reaction has been adolescent. Then he will feel superior because he understands why he is doing what he is doing. Result: the scientist or the artist; that is, if he is lucky. Auden says that there are five solutions to a situation of danger and difficulty:

- 1) To sham dead: The idiot.
- 2) To retire into a life of phantasy:
The schizophrenic.
- 3) To panic, i. e., to wreak one's
grudge upon society: The criminal.
- 4) To excite pity, to become ill:
The invalid.

⁵"In Praise of Limestone," Nones, New York: Random House, 1950, p. 13.

⁶"Many Happy Returns," The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, p. 69.

5) To understand the mechanism of the trap: The scientist and the artist.⁷

The adolescent reaction mentioned above Auden has elsewhere labeled catharsis: "...wherever there is a gift, of whatever kind, there is also a guilty secret, a thorn in the flesh and the first successful poems of young poets are usually a catharsis of resentment."⁸

But the question may be asked, why do they turn to writing? Can they not get the feeling of power and eliminate the feeling of guilt by becoming unquestioned leaders in the field of business, or of religion? Perhaps, but "the chief satisfaction in the creative act," Auden says, "is the feeling that it is quite gratuitous,"⁹ The creative act is a pure act of choice. In other words, it is like a game. The individual does not have to play it unless he wants to. Aesthetic rules, we remember, are arbitrary and self-imposed. The artist has complete freedom, and not just the freedom which is a consciousness of necessity.

This freedom is very satisfying. The genius, or exceptional person, emotionally frustrated in childhood, decided to get one up on society. As an artist he has become free, important and powerful. Yet in spite of all this, one wonders whether he would be "happier" otherwise. In any case, is it all merely an accident?

⁷"Psychology and Art To-Day," ~~p. 2.~~ op. cit., p. 2.

⁸"The Rewards of Patience," Partisan Review, 9, July-August, 1942, p. 337.

⁹"Squares and Oblongs," op. cit., p. 167

Great masters who have shown mankind
 And order it has yet to find,
 What if all pedants say of you
 As personalities be true?
 All the more honour to you then
 If, weaker than some other men,
 You had the courage that survives
 Soiled, shabby, egotistic lives,
 If poverty or ugliness
 Ill-health or social unsuccess
 Hunted you out of life to play
 At living in another way;
 Yet the live quarry all the same
 Were changed to huntsmen in the game....¹⁰

Artists have had the moral courage to survive "soiled, shabby, egotistic lives, poverty, ugliness, ill-health, and social unsuccess." In the note to this line, Auden quotes from Margaret Mead, Growing Up in New Guinea,¹¹ to point out the relativity of "social unsuccess." He uses Kierkegaard to enlarge upon "hunted you out of life:"

A man cannot in reason embark upon the voluntary (the requirements of which are higher than the universal requirements) unless he has an immediate certainty that it is required of him in particular....In order really to be a great genius, a man must be an exception. But in order that his being exceptional should be a serious matter he himself must be unfree, forced into the position. There lies the importance of his dementiaHe must be isolated if he is to be great and no man can freely isolate himself; he must be compelled if it is to be a serious matter.¹²

It would seem that the goddess Normality, though a relative

¹⁰New Year Letter, Part I, ll. 99-112

¹¹"Notes," New Year Letter, pp. 87-88

¹²Ibid., pp. 88-89.

criterion and not much to be admired, is a necessary evil because it is at once the backdrop against which the genius proves to be an exception, and the curtain between him and other people that leaves him in front of the footlights, isolated, forced into the position. Genius is a constant and is not the product of Normality, nor of the age in which it exists, but it seems that the genius realized is.

Suffering is not the cause of genius, but the guardian angel, the means by which its possessor is compelled to make the use of his talent a serious matter, the limits which make his freedom a reality.¹³

The fellow in front of the footlights does not just stand there. He begins to perform, and very well. In fact, he becomes a star. The live quarry, then, is changed to a huntsman in the game. The man who began by being chased because he did not own a riding suit has found himself a horse, has found also that he rides very well and joins the game.

Becoming a "serious matter" (to use Kierkegaard's term, see above), one would imagine, is a process which does not include much happiness. The exceptional person who is isolated, as Kierkegaard recommends he should be, must be very lonely. Yet the loneliness is forced upon him because of a relative standard of comparison. He does not conform to the masses. In the case of a capitalist democracy today it is Normality, mentioned above,

¹³"The Fabian Figaro," op. cit. p. 12.

which isolates the genius. And Normality is a remnant of the closed society (to be normal is to be socially mature).

Normality, it should be explained, plays a large rôle in Auden's own artistic life; hence it is understandable why it should enter into his theory of the artist. Normality is the product of Hooper ratings, Gallup Polls, movie moguls, and advertising men. It is known in idealized terms in the capitalist democracy in which Auden lives as the American Way, and it has a fascination and a horror all its own:

Athletic, extrovert and crude,
 [To it,] ~~its~~ to work in solitude
 Is the offence,
 The goal a populous Nirvana:
 [Its] shield bears this device: Mens sana
 Qui mal y pense.

Today [its] arms, we must confess,
 From Right to Left have met success,
 Its banners wave
 From Yale to Princeton, and the news
 From Broadway to the Book Reviews
 Is very grave.

[Its] radio Homers all day long
 In over-Whitmanated song
 That does not scan,
 With adjectives laid end to end,
 Extol the doughnut and commend
 The Comm^{an} Man.

[Its] too, each homely lyric thing
 On sport or spousal love or spring
 Or dogs or dusters,
 Invented by some court-house bard
 For recitation by the y^{ea}rd
 In filibusters.

To [it] ascend the prize orations
 And sets of fugal variations
 On some folk-ballad,
 While dietitians sacrifice
 A glass of prune juice or a nice
 Marsh-mallow salad.

Charged with [its] compound of sensational
 Sex plus some undenominational
 Religious matter,
 Enormous novels by co-eds
 Rain down on our defenceless heads
 Till our teeth chatter.¹⁴

But Auden feels that, in a converse way, it has a good effect. It is, as we have already said, the instrument by which the exceptional person is isolated so that his being exceptional is a serious matter.

It ^{may} already have been noticed that in many ways Auden's attitudes are akin to those of the eighteenth century. He has a balanced compound of reason and sanity that is classical in its strictness and clarity. (Pope ranks high among his favorite poets.) One is even justified in wondering why a man with such a predilection should choose the open society. Surely the eighteenth century had a closed society? The answer to our unspoken question is that Auden realizes that one cannot go back. Two centuries have passed between the eighteenth century and now. A closed society today would be accompanied by too much wrong to make it right. It would be, and we have seen it in this century, a dictatorship. The answer for the world today, Auden feels, is the open society. The artist in such a society must do what he can, even though "the cost of keeping one's artistic integrity is as high as the reward which the world will offer to make one lose it."¹⁵ There are, however, compensations for this difficulty.

¹⁴"Under Which Lyre, A Reactionary Tract for the Times" (Phi Beta Kappa Poem, Harvard, 1946), Nones, pp. 67-68.

¹⁵"Henry James and the Artist in America," Harper's Magazine, 197: July, 1948, p. 39.

The artist is freer than most people:

Both their unique position in society and the unique nature of their work conspire to make artists less fitted for political thinking than most people. As citizens they are the only people for whom a capitalist democracy is a completely open society....The successful artist...is always an anarchist at heart, who, like a peasant proprietor, hates all government for whose interference he has no personal cause to see the necessity....Now, just as the artist, qua citizen, is the only person for whom society is really open, so qua artist, i.e. in relation to what he does, he is the only person who is really a dictator. Works of art really are closed societies, and they are made (except for drama and architecture) by the artist alone, without any social assistance.¹⁶

The artist, qua citizen, lives in an open society because he has complete freedom of choice. He is fairly mature (adult, in fact) simply because he "understood the mechanism of the trap." But he is an anarchist at heart because, free and socially responsible himself, he makes and abides by his own laws, and sees no necessity for government restrictions. On the other hand, qua artist, he is a dictator. In the field of aesthetics he can "play at being a god." Either way he is slightly detached from society today. He is in the world but not of it. The fact remains, however, that he is what he is because of the world.

Because of the world--more particularly, because of the

¹⁶"Notes," New Year Letter, pp. 82-83.

American ideal of Normality--the artist, in Auden's opinion, arrives at sensitivity and understanding. Cyril Connolly tells us that Auden believes

...(somewhat masochistically) that the peculiar horrors of American--its brashness, music at meals, and racial hysteria--by being emphasized there to a degree not found in other countries, force the onlooker into a rejection of the world which might otherwise come too late.¹⁷

Exactly. In his introduction to Henry James' The American Scene, discussing The Great Good Place (which is, in Auden's eyes, the state of mind at which the artist should arrive), Auden agrees with James that it is nearer than we suspect:

Yes. Nearer everything. Nearer than James himself, perhaps, suspected, to the 'hereditary thinness' of the American Margin, to the 'packed and hoisted basket' and 'the torture rooms of the living idiom,' nearer to the unspeakable juke-boxes, the horrible Rockettes and the insane salads, nearer to the anonymous countryside littered with heterogeneous dreck and the synonomous cities besotted with electric signs, nearer to radio commercials and congressional oratory and Hollywood Christianity, nearer to all the 'democratic' lusts and licenses, without which, perhaps, the analyst and the immigrant alike would never understand by contrast the nature of the Good Place nor desire it with sufficient desperation to stand a chance of arriving.¹⁸

¹⁷"Introduction," Art on the American Horizon, ed. Cyril Connolly, 93-4: October, 1947, p. 11.

¹⁸The American Scene, by Henry James, New York: Scribner and Sons, 1946, pp. xxii-xxiii.

CHAPTER V

ART

"Through the Looking Glass"

Art is the most difficult game conceivable to man and its rules are known as aesthetics. / It must follow then, that art is not life, since life is no game. Yet many people confuse art with life; that is, they mistake the aesthetic for the ethical, as we have already pointed out in Chapter III. Auden has taken care to emphasize two things: that art is not like life and that the value of art is different from what people assume it to be.

Art in intention is mimesis
But, realized, the resemblance ceases:
Art is not life, and cannot be
A midwife to society,
For art is a fait accompli:
What they should do, or how or when
Life-order comes to living men,
It cannot say, for it presents
Already lived experience
Through a convention that creates
Autonomous completed states:
Though their particulars are those
That each particular artist knows,
Unique events that once took place
Within a unique time and space,
In the new field they occupy,
The unique serves to typify.
Becomes, though still particular,
An algebraic formula,
An abstract model of events
Derived from dead experience,
And each life must itself decide

To what and how it be applied.¹

Auden has commented on the danger of argument in verse, saying "it will make the ideas too clear and distinct, more Cartesian than they really are."² In the passage quoted above, in a nutshell of twenty-three lines, we have the basic tenets of Auden's attitude to art. If we qualify and develop them with reference to other statements Auden has made, perhaps they will not be too Cartesian and will serve as a guide to us.

Art, then, according to Auden, in intention is imitation of life, but "realized," there is no further resemblance to life. Auden has commented that "in the first place we expect art, in some way or other, to be like life though we may severally mean very different things by 'like' and by 'life'....The very name 'art' implies that it is in some way or other unlike life."³ I guess that the kind of imitation Auden intends here is that of a mirror. A mirror throws back a reflection similar to, but not exactly like the subject in front of it. Apart from the fact that the image in the reflection is not three-dimensional, positions are reversed. My guess is justified by a hint in "The Sea and the Mirror." Caliban, projecting himself into the rôle of the audience, addresses Shakespeare:

You yourself, we seem to remember, have
spoken of the conjured spectacle as 'a mirror
held up to nature,' a phrase misleading in its

¹New Year Letter, Part I, ¹¹pp. 76-98.

²Poets of the English Language, vol. III, p. xiii.

³"Mimesis and Allegory," op. cit., p. 3

aphoristic sweep but indicative at least of one aspect of the relation between the real and the imagined, their mutual reversal of value, for isn't the essential artistic strangeness to which your citation of the sinisterly biased image would point just this...?⁴

If values are reversed, then Art is not like life. Given its impetus (as the mirror requires something to reflect), it creates a world of its own. We have said that the artist, *qua* artist, is a dictator. His work of art is a closed society which he has created according to his own absolute laws. As a closed society, it allows^{no} free exchange between its age and itself, or between any age and itself. Once created, it detaches itself from history and exists as a separate cosmos. Thus, art cannot be a midwife to society. Since it is not like life, its answers will not apply to life.

This has been a complicated discussion corroborating the simple statement that art is essentially entertainment. It is a game to be played by the artist; it is a spectacle to be enjoyed by the layman. It is frivolous; it is detached from history and politics; it is not the magic wand that will transform Cinderella's pumpkin into a carriage and bring her love, riches, and happiness. It has, in fact, almost no effect whatsoever. Auden has been emphatic in repeating this idea. He has been what people want to do with art, and he wishes to make it clear that art is not to be treated like a magic incantation: with subtle lighting, a haze of incense, and an attitude of homage. The state of mind Auden is fighting is made clear in the observation with which he concludes "Squares and Oblongs:"

⁴For the Time Being, p. 39.

The present state of the world is so miserable and degraded that if anyone were to say to the poet: "For God's sake, stop humming and put the kettle on or fetch handages. The patient's dying," I do not know how he could justifiably refuse. (There is, of course, an inner voice which says exactly this to most of us, and our only reply is to pretend to be extremely hard of hearing). But no one says this. The self-appointed Nurse says: "Stop humming this instant and sing the Patient a song which will make him fall in love with me. In return I'll give you extra ration-cards and a passport;" and the poor Patient in his delirium cries: "Please stop humming and sing me a song which will make me believe I am free from pain and perfectly well. In return I'll give you a pent-house apartment in New York and a ranch in Arizona."

To such requests and to the bribes that go with them, the poet can only pray that he will always have the courage to stick out his tongue, say, like Olaf, the conscientious objector in Cummings' poem, -- "There is some s. I will not eat," -- and go ^{on} humming quietly to himself.⁵

¶ Auden has said that "no artist, not even Eliot, can prevent his work being used as magic, for that is what all of us, highbrow and lowbrow alike, secretly want Art to be."⁶ Yet he has repeatedly insisted that this should not be; that art is frivolous and nothing more:

For art is a product of history, not a cause. Unlike some other products, technical ^{on}conventions for example, it does not re-enter history as an effective agent, so that the question whether art should or should not be propaganda is unreal.... ...if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed,⁷ the history of man would be materially unchanged.

⁵op. cit., pp. 180-181.

⁶"The poet of the Encirclement," Literary Opinion in America, ed. Morton Dauwen Zabel, Harper Bros., N. Y., 1951, p. 259 (from The New Republic, vol. CIX, October 25, 1943, pp. 579-581.)

⁷"The Public vs. the Late Mr. W. B. Yeats," The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment, ed. Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, Gordon McKenzie, University of California, New York: 1948, p.171 (from an article dated 1939).

.
 For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
 In the valley of its saying where executives
 Would never want to tamper; it flows south
 From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
 Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
 A way of happening, a mouth.⁸

.
 Art, as the late Professor R. G. Collingwood
 pointed out, is not Magic, *i.e.*, a means by
 which the artist communicates or arouses his
 feelings in others, but a mirror in which they
 may become conscious of what their own feelings
 really are: its proper effect, in fact, is
 disenchanting.⁹

.
 ...I do not mean to suggest that art is of sacred
 importance. On the contrary, I know that along
 with most human activities,¹⁰ it is, in the pro-
 foundest sense, frivolous.

Art the game is a fait accompli, an accomplished fact. It
 cannot say what men should do or how they should order their
 lives because "it presents /Already lived experience/Through a
 convention that creates /Autonomous completed states." That is,
 it presents that which is already past and can therefore have
 no^{Therapeutic} effect on man's future. The mirror will reflect only what has
 been put before it. The seed of a work of art is like the stim-
 ulus or "cue" mentioned by Hans Spemann,¹¹ or like the germ
 Henry James¹¹ describes as the "vital particle," the "grain of
 gold," which something, some "virus of suggestion" unearths.

⁸"In Memory of W. B. Yeats," The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, p. 50.

⁹"The Poet of the Encirclement," p. 259.

¹⁰"Henry James and the Artist in America," op. cit. p. 40.

¹¹Whom Auden quotes to illuminate the lines (83-86) referred to above, "Notes," New Year Letter, pp. 84-86

The seed or cue or germ is bound to develop in only one way, according to its own nature. This puts art on a deterministic basis.

Motionless, deep in his mind, lies the past the
poet's forgotten,
Till some small experience wake it to life and a
poem's begotten,
Words its presumptive primordia, Feeling its field
of induction,
Meaning its pattern of growth determined during
construction.¹²

Art, therefore, cannot govern life because life cannot be determined, unless one lives it like a poem, and Auden has already commented on that (see Chapter III).

The particulars of the autonomous completed state, that is, of the work of art, are known to every artist. Auden inserts a poetic comment on lines 87 and 88 of *New Year Letter*:

Who managed in the Spanish War
Not only to write well but be
Of some use to the military?
Was it not the three or four
Lonely specialists in whose
Soul and body learning why
People kill and how they die,
The ethics of defeat, the sense
Of sanctity in violence,
Aroused as genuine pleasure as
That complex desolation which
Made Proust go slumming all his life
Among the idle and the rich,
Or those awkward daughters of
The country vicar's wife
Upon whose sly ambition once
Jane Austen with a kind of love
Sharpened her intelligence?¹³

Those who managed to write well in the Spanish War were those who

¹²Ibid., pp. 86-87.

¹³Ibid., p. 87.

were acquainted with and sensitive to the particulars. They experienced the genuine pleasure that Proust derived from his "complex desolation," and Jane Austen from what she saw. Auden tries to prove by mentioning Proust and Austen in the same illustration that these particulars really are known to each particular artist. Each develops his own differently. The novelist, as he says, must

Become the whole of boredom, subject to
Vulgar complaints like love, among the Just

Be Just, among the Filthy filthy too,
And in his own weak person, if he can,
Must suffer dully all the wrongs of Man.¹⁴

The seed or germ may be different and the product may be different, but the process (a profession of sensitivity) is the same. Each case is unique, because each artist, naturally, draws on his own individual experience--"Unique events that once took place/Within a unique time and space." But "in the new field they occupy" in the finished product, "the unique serves to typify." Though still particular, dealing with the "idle and the rich" or with "those awkward daughters of /The country vicar's worried wife," it becomes like an algebraic formula. Thus in poetry:

X is good.
This I must say
Because I am
In love today.

I know for you
X is a pain.
This does not hold
For Betty Jane.

¹⁴"The Novelist," The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, p. 39.

And yet to you
 Y is so good,
 If I said 'No,'
 I'd be quite rude.

We must conclude
 X equals Y.
 That both are good
 We can't deny.¹⁵

Reduced, it becomes: X equals g

Y equals g

Therefore X equals Y

The finished product is "an abstract model of events," detached now from the concrete, "derived from dead experience." Experience is dead because it is like a tribulation: it is past and cannot be changed.

The particulars, then, with which each artist is acquainted, are the subject of art. Auden emphasizes the fact that these particulars are unlimited. He says that "everything that we remember no matter how trivial: the mark on the wall, the joke at luncheon, word games, these like the dance of a stoat, or the raven's gamble, are equally the subject of poetry....We shall do poetry a great disservice if we confine it only to the major experiences of life."¹⁶ Since art, "like all kinds of truth, is one of the pleasures of free men,"¹⁷ it is only fair that freedom be extended to its range of subject matter. And since, as Auden has said, it has no material effect on history and is, after all,

¹⁵"Is it Valid?" The Collected Poetry of Betty Jane McKenty.

¹⁶Introduction, The Poet's Tongue, An Anthology chosen by W. H. Auden and John Garrett, London: 1936, p. vii.

¹⁷"Henry James and the Artist in America," op. cit., p. 39.

in its profoundest sense, frivolous, it does not matter what its subject matter is, for it is beyond good and evil. Art is not life; therefore no moral or ethical reward's are immediately available. Art is an abstract model of events derived from the past, from dead experience:

When we say that art is beyond good and evil, what we really mean is that "good" and "evil" are terms which can only be applied to our conscious choices, but not to the past, because it cannot be undone, or to the world outside ourselves, because it is not our own property. We do not mean that art has no moral effect, but only that the latter depends upon our individual responses.¹⁸

A work of art is like a parable. Each individual must interpret it for himself. We said dead experience was like a tribulation because it is past and cannot be changed. Yet if that experience is set forth in a parable, perhaps a new aspect of it will come to light that will enable us to see it with different eyes. "For if past events cannot be altered, our attitude toward them can. They can be accepted; their relation to each other and the present can be understood."¹⁹

Perhaps our image of the mirror will help to make this clear. Art is not like life, but more like a mirror-image of life. Art is not magic, but a mirror whose proper effect is disenchanting. The average individual who suffers from a blighted love affair (she said "No,") has a subconscious desire for a magic formula, a poem, a work of art, that will put things to rights. But, as Auden says:

¹⁸Mimesis and Allegory," op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 14.

If art were magic, then love lyrics
would be love charms which made the Cruel
Fair give one her latch key. In that case
a magnum of champagne would be more artistic
than a sonnet.²⁰

Through art the mirror, however, if he be receptive, Love's victim will find himself an answer telling him (depending on the work of art he has chosen for his parable) that a) Love is a product of the imagination, b) Women are fickle, c) He has become mellow in his suffering, an adequate compensation, or d) 'Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. "In intention, at least, (art) is a mirror in which the speculator sees reflected himself and the world, and becomes conscious of his feelings good and bad, and of what their relations are to each other."²¹ In all fairness it must be admitted that our individual will end up as confused as he began, because he has not ceased to look in art for THE answer to his problem.

...When there is a public, there arises the paradox of a tremendous demand for art in the abstract but an almost complete repudiation of art in the concrete. A demand because works of art can indeed help people along the road of self-development, and the public feels more helpless than ever; a repudiation because art can only help those who help themselves.²²

I have been trying to make clear the rather indefinite distinction that Auden has drawn between the effectiveness and in-

²⁰"Squares and Oblongs," op.cit., p. 175.

²¹"The Question of the Pound Award," Partisan Review,^{16,} May 1949, p. 513.

²²"The Rewards of Patience," op. cit., p. 336.

effectiveness of art. Although Art cannot be a midwife to society, it can play a rôle in the life of the individual. Only the individual can decide what that rôle shall be. Art may heighten his existence and become something more important than it is because

...Time can moderate his tone
When talking to a man alone....²³

Auden introduces this idea near the beginning of New Year Letter. As World War II was starting, as earth saw "Suspended hatred crystallize/In visible hostilities,"²⁴ Auden and his friends were enjoying a passacaglia by Buxtehude, their minds

...a civitas of sound
Where nothing but assent was found....²⁵

Auden may be criticized for choosing someone as precious as Buxtehude, but that is not the point. The contrast between public conflict and private peace is what is important. Art will not give an answer to the public, but it can play a significant rôle in the life of the individual. What Auden is trying to describe here is one of those perfectly lucid moments such as is usually only enjoyed by the young when in love or gazing at a sunset, and by the old in bereavement. It is a moment of consciousness, or self-consciousness.

The artist like every other kind
of "highbrow" is self-conscious, i.e., he is

²³New Year Letter, Part I, ^{11.}pp. 30-31.

²⁴Ibid., ^{11.}pp. 40-41.

²⁵Ibid., ^{11.}pp. 50-51.

all of the time what everyone is some of the time, a man who is active rather than passive to his experience. A man struggling for life in the water, a schoolboy evading an imposition, or a cook getting her mistress out of the house is in the widest sense a highbrow. We only think when we are prevented from feeling or acting as we should like. Perfect satisfaction would be complete unconsciousness. Most people, however, fit into society too neatly for the stimulus to arise except in a crisis such as falling in love or losing their money.²⁶

This idea fits in exactly with the aesthetic point of view that Auden has tried to make clear. Aesthetics is the treatment of tribulations; in other words, it is the organization of attitudes.

For art had set in order sense
And feeling and intelligence,
And from its ideal order grew
Our local understanding too.²⁷

Art can make the individual self-conscious, like the artist.

Every man adopts^{to} food
A scientific attitude,
When he wants to kiss his wife
Leads a politician's life,
And, so far as it is known,
Is an artist when alone.²⁸

Art has become the intelligent pleasure of the individual's moments of being (Qv). Its ideal order, an abstract model of events, does not give the answer, but the algebraic formula may aid the individual's attempt to find the answer. "Each life must decide/To what and how it be applied." Art may be applied

²⁶"Psychology and Art To-Day," op. cit., pp. 4-5.

²⁷New Year Letter, Part I, ^{11.} pp. 52-55.

²⁸"Notes," New Year Letter, p. 80.

but not employed. "Poetry may illuminate but it will not dictate."²⁹

This is not the whole story. Auden has commented:

I. A. Richards is right, I think, in his account of how art organizes attitudes, but the criterion by which we judge the value of such an organization lies outside art.³⁰

There is something that cannot be described. Art, the algebraic formula, the fait accompli, which is no midwife to society, the game ruled by aesthetics, is still indefinable. In the formula X equals Y , there is no hint of their personal feelings. Do they love or hate? A poor example, but it gives us a question mark. Art is all that Auden has said it is, but perhaps his ideas have emerged too clear and distinct, more Cartesian than they really are. Let us add, as Auden, I think, would have us do, that indefinable something which makes Art more than a game, more than an algebraic formula, more than a fait accompli. Let us add a question mark.

²⁹Introduction, The Poet's Tongue, p. x.

³⁰"Mimesis and Allegory," op. cit., p. 18. (The underline is mine.)

CHAPTER VI

* SECOND-RATE ART

"Something Is Bound To Happen"

It is a sobering experience for any poet to read the last page of the Book Section of the Sunday Times where correspondents seek to identify poems which have meant much to them. He is forced to realize that it is not his work, not even the work of Dante or Shakespeare, that most people treasure as magic talismans in times of trouble, but grotesquely bad verses written by maiden ladies in local newspapers; that millions in their bereavements, heartbreaks, agonies, depressions, have been comforted and perhaps saved from despair by appalling trash while poetry stood helplessly and incompetently by.¹

Like all good critics today, Auden has been forced to acknowledge the existence of 'popular' literature--second-hand, second-rate art that comforts and entertains millions. His acknowledgement is sweeping in its denunciation. He includes official art, cushion-poetry, and calendar-quickies. They are the property of the devil:

All vague idealistic art
That coddles the uneasy heart,
Is up his alley....²

This kind of art is frankly, even blatantly, the cure-all, the patent remedy, the magic carpet to power, glory, and the love of

¹"Squares and Oblongs," op. cit., p. 178.

²New Year Letter, Part II, ll. 590-592.

women. This is the kind of art that the middle-brow refers to when he says: "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like," and quotes: "It takes a heap o' livin' in a house to make it home," with the comment that it has "soul."

Yet the closest Auden has approached to bitterness in his denunciation is in the passage quoted above. Most of the time, he dismisses popular literature with an easy humour. There are two reasons for such an apparently tolerant attitude. Actually, it is not in the least tolerant, but heavily laden with charming snobbery. One reason is that the presence of such literature provides him with subject-matter for his poetry. It is a subject which invites the slick and easy generalization at which Auden is so adept.

...they are back,
Grown insolent and fat
On cheesy literature
And corny dramas....³

It invites also examination of the devotees of such literature. Auden has seen that the reason for their devotion goes deeper than mere entertainment value. A discussion between the shepherds in For the Time Being will bring this to light.

THE FIRST SHEPHERD

We observe that those who assure us their education
And money would do us such harm
How real we are just as we are and how they envy us
For it is the centreless tree
And the uncivilized robin who are the truly happy
Have done pretty well for themselves.

THE SECOND SHEPHERD

Nor can we help noticing how those who insist that
We ought to stand up for our rights
And how important we are keep insisting also
That it doesn't matter a bit

³"Cattivo Tempo," Nones, p. 50.

If one of us gets arrested or injured, for
It is only our numbers that count.

THE THIRD SHEPHERD

In a way they are right.

THE FIRST SHEPHERD

But to behave like a cogwheel
When one knows one is no such thing

THE SECOND SHEPHERD

Merely to add to a crowd with one's passionate body,
Is not a virtue.

THE THIRD SHEPHERD

What is real
About us all is that each of us is waiting.

THE FIRST SHEPHERD

That is why we are able to bear
Ready-made clothes, second-hand art and opinions
And being washed and ordered about:

THE SECOND SHEPHERD

That is why you should not take our conversation
Too seriously, nor read too much
Into our songs;

THE THIRD SHEPHERD

Their purpose is mainly to keep us
From watching the clock all the time.⁴

These shepherds have been behaving ethically. They have continually made the choice to keep on looking after their sheep. But it is dull work, and, as we observed in Chapter III, ethics will never give any satisfying sense of immediacy. Each of these men is waiting for something to happen. They have not, and this is to their credit, attempted any aesthetic ordering of their lives.

⁴pp. 92-93.

While they wait, they endure ready-made clothes, second-hand art and opinions. This second-hand art must comfort them in their loneliness and weariness until what they are waiting for has occurred. (It must be explained that they are waiting for a miracle, an extra, indefinable something that will free their spirits from the parallel, endless roads of ethics and aesthetics. That something we interpreted in terms of the Christian dogma in Chapter III)⁵ When their Average Way has been redeemed, then their songs will be at play.

SIMEON

Because in Him the Flesh is united to the Word without magical transformation, Imagination is redeemed from promiscuous fornication with her own images. The magic conflict of Virtue with Necessity is no longer confined to the Exceptional Hero; for disaster is not the impact of a curse upon a few great families, but issues continually from the hubris of every tainted will. Every invalid is Roland defending the narrow pass against hopeless odds, every stenographer Brunnhilde refusing to renounce her lover's ring which came into existence through the renunciation of love.

.

Nor is there any situation which is essentially more or less interesting than another. Every tea-table is a battlefield littered with old catastrophes and haunted by the vague ghosts of vast issues, every martyrdom an occasion for flip cracks and sententious oratory.

Because in Him all passions find a logical In-Order-That, by Him is the perpetual recurrence of Art assured.

CHORUS

Safe in His silence, our songs are at play⁵

⁵Ibid., pp. 109-111. (The *italics* *are* ~~underline~~ is mine)⁵

A sense of immediacy will be restored, and, through the normal enlargement of opportunity, imagination will be applied to one's own life. Through the dramatic objectification of art, the individual may learn.

This discussion brings us to the second reason why Auden treats second-rate art with such tolerance. As seen above, he views it as a necessary evil on the way to an enlightened attitude to art. Not only that, it provides those who have already 'arrived' with a standard of comparison.

O how the devil who controls
The moral assymmetric souls,
The either-ors, the mongrel halves
Who find truth in a mirror, laughs.
Yet time and memory are still
Limiting factors on his will;
He cannot always fool us thrice,
For he may never tell us lies
But half-truths we can synthesize:
So, hidden in his hocus-pocus,
There lies the gift of double-focus,
That magic lamp which looks so dull
And utterly impractical,
Yet, if Aladdin use it right,
Can be a sesame to light.⁶

Cushion-poetry and all vague idealistic art are up the Devil's alley, yet Auden says: "The Devil, indeed, is the father of Poetry, for poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings. The poetic mood is never indicative."⁷ This is not Manichaeism, but something else. Auden does not intend to say that Art in its concrete form is evil while its statement is

⁶New Year Letter, Part II, ^{ll}~~pp~~: 819-833.

⁷"Notes," New Year Letter, p. 119.

good. I think the key to this apparent confusion lies in the phrase, "the gift of double-focus." The devil capitalizes on "hocus-pocus," half-truths that mislead the weak who turn to vague idealistic art to be coddled. But hidden in this hocus-pocus lies the gift of double-focus, and that gift is the secret of real Art. Here is a revelation of Auden's Christian charity. On the dedicatory page of New Year Letter, Auden quotes from Montaigne:

We are, I know not how, double
in ourselves, so that what we
believe we disbelieve, and cannot
rid ourselves of what we condemn.⁸

Second-rate art is the expression of part of the duality of man. Auden cannot condemn it wholesale. It is a part of the eternal human scheme of things. The poetic mood is never indicative; it is historic present.

Must we--it seems oddly that we must--
remind you that our existence does not, like
hers [the Muse's], enjoy an infinitely in-
dicative mood, an eternally present tense,
a limitless active voice, for in our
shambling, slovenly makeshift world any
two persons, whether domestic first or
neighborly second, require and necessarily
presuppose in both their numbers and in all
their cases, the whole inflected gamut of
an alien third since, without a despised or
dreaded Them to turn the back on, there
could be no intimate or affectionate Us to
turn the eye to; that, chez nous, space ~~to~~'s
never the whole uninhabited circle but always
some segment, its eminent domain upheld by two
co-ordinates. There always has been and always
will be not only the vertical boundary, the
river on this side of which initiative and
honesty stroll arm in arm wearing sensible
clothes, and beyond which is a savage else-
where swarming with contagious diseases, but

⁸loc. cit.,

also its horizontal counterpart, the railroad above which houses stand in their own grounds, each equipped with a garage and a beautiful woman, sometimes with several, and below which huddled shacks provide a squeezing shelter to collarless herds who eat blancmange and have never said anything witty.⁹

Surely this word picture is expressive of Auden's attitude: his sensitivity to and tolerance of humanity, the double man.

Either-or will not lead the way to the whole truth. Each is a mongrel half of the whole truth. Any sweeping generalization is accompanied by its mirror image, as true and as partial. Second-rate art is not deliberately deceitful, but it is only in possession of half-truths. If the individual will cultivate the gift of double-focus, as Art has done, he will be able to encompass good and bad alike. To know good, one must know evil. Audenⁿ seems to have adopted Milton's argument. Thus the Devil's property, the very existence of Sunday-supplement art, gives significance to Art. The struggle to attain a double-focus is the exercise required by the magic lamp of Art. Used correctly, that lamp can be a means to enlight^{en}ment. Surely it will not do, then, for Auden to banish the Devil and his official art too sternly:

Lame fallen shadow, retro me;
Retro but do not go away....¹⁰

⁹"The Sea and the Mirror," op. cit., p. 36.

¹⁰New Year Letter, Part II, ll. 411-412.

CHAPTER VII

LIGHT VERSE

"Please Make Yourself At Home"

Curiously enough, the lowbrow often has a much less inhibited attitude to verse than, shall we say, the middlebrow, as is evidenced by the popularity of limericks and those little moral and ~~consolatory~~ verses which are syndicated in the newspapers.¹

The last part of this statement appears to be a direct contradiction to that which we quoted in Chapter VI. In the earlier reading, we found that Auden condemned syndicated slush and the reverence paid it. I suggest that Auden is not guilty of inconsistency so much as he is guilty of repetition. Those little moral and consolatory verses which are syndicated in the newspapers, as a phrase, is so pat that he probably could not resist using it, even though he had already dismissed Sunday-supplement poetry. For Auden evidently intends to distinguish the levels of Art's audience--these levels may be classified highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow--and would not be likely to run two levels (middlebrow and lowbrow) together. Art, real Art, with a capital A, is the property of the highbrow. Second-rate art belongs to the middlebrow. The art of the lowbrow is more difficult to define. It shares certain characteristics with both the highbrow

¹Introduction, Poets of the English Language, I, p. xxiii.

and the middlebrow, and in some ways is more admirable than ^{either} ~~both~~. Light verse, and what it stands for--comic art, satire, social statement--is perhaps the best simple term for lowbrow art, and it ranks with the highbrow in its integrity and in the successful accomplishment of its purpose.

Auden has selected an anthology of light verse.² In his introduction to the book, he discusses light verse seriously, as an art form, and gives us a key to one of the most charming aspects of his critical attitudes. He starts by saying:

Behind the work of any creative artist there are three principal wishes: the wish to make something; the wish to perceive something, either in the external world of sense or the internal world of feeling; and the wish to communicate these perceptions to others. Those who have no interest in or talent for making something, i.e. no skill in a particular artistic medium, do not become artists; they dine out, they gossip at street corners, they hold forth in cafes.³

The word gossip gives us our clue. Gossip is creative. It is a game, like art, with certain rules which must be observed, if success is to follow. Gossip is social statement, like art. "All art is based on gossip--that is to say, on observing and telling."⁴ And gossip is based on that human quality which the Great Master must share with the scribbling mass--"the vulgar curiosity of the police-reporter."⁵ Light verse could be des-

²The Oxford Book of Light Verse, Oxford University Press, 1938.

³op. cit., p. vii.

⁴"In Defense of Gossip," The Living Age, 353, February, 1938. p. 536.

⁵Introduction, The American Scene, p. v.

cribed as gossip treated under two sets of rules: the rules of art and the rules of gossip. It appeals to the lowbrow immediately because it satisfies his curiosity. It tells him everything he wants to know. The question may arise, why then, is not all art immediately available? If it is based on curiosity, on observing and telling, why are there varying degrees of difficulty in the finished product, and why are there corresponding degrees or levels of appreciation in the product's public?

When the things in which the poet is interested, the things which he sees about him, are much the same as those of his audience, and that audience is a fairly general one, he will not be conscious of himself as an unusual person, and his language will be straightforward and close to ordinary speech. When, on the other hand, his interests and perceptions are not readily acceptable to society, or his audience is a highly specialized one, perhaps of fellow poets, he will be acutely aware of himself as the poet, and his method of expression may depart very widely from the normal social language.⁶

The latter case hints at some of the reasons why art may be difficult; the first case describes the social conditions which make for light verse. Just as there is no fillip in it for the gossip when the victims of his juicy stories are unknown to his listener,^{so} the poet finds it difficult to write light verse when his ideas are not known or easily recognizable to his reader. Light verse requires a certain homogeneity in the society for which it is written, if it is, not merely to succeed, but to be written in the first place.

Auden includes three kinds of poetry in his anthology of

⁶Introduction, The Oxford Book of Light Verse, pp. viii-ix.

light verse:

- (1) Poetry written for performance, to be spoken or sung before an audience (e.g. Folk-songs, the poems of Tom Moore).
- (2) Poetry intended to be read, but having for its subject-matter the everyday social life of its period or the experience of the poet as an ordinary human being (e.g. the poems of Chaucer, Pope, Byron).
- (3) Such nonsense poetry as, through its properties and technique, has a general appeal (Nursery rhymes, the poems of Edward Lear).⁷

It will be noted that the first two kinds can be labeled gossip or social statement. The latter comes closer to being Comic Art. The charm of the critic who makes such classification is becoming apparent. Here is a man who recognizes the fact that "a great many people dislike the idea of poetry as they dislike over-earnest people, because they imagine it is always worrying about the eternal verities."⁸ And he has set himself to combat the innate fear of art that too many people have, by putting art where it belongs, on the level of human existence and human behavior. Auden has expressed everything for us in familiar terms: the critic is an individual in the free world today trying to help other individuals earn the gifts of the spirit; the artist is a neurotic; art is a game and life is not. He has made fun of second-rate art, and surely ridicule is the strongest weapon against such an enemy:

By night our student Underground
At cocktail parties whisper round
From ear to ear;

⁷Ibid., p. ix.

⁸Introduction, The Poet's Tongue, p. vii.

Fat figures in the public eye
Collapse next morning, ambushed by
Some witty sneer.⁹

And now he is trying to emphasize the fact that art can be fun, that it is human. "Poetry is no better and no worse than human nature; it is profound and shallow, sophisticated and naïve, dull and witty, bawdy and chaste in turn."¹⁰ If people would only realize this, then they would no longer be afraid of "difficulty" poetry. They would, as Auden has done, make room for everything:

By all means let us touch our humble caps to
La poésie pure, the epic narrative;
But comedy shall get its round of claps, too.
According to his powers, each may give;
Only on varied diet may we live.
The pious fable and the dirty story
Share in the total literary glory.¹¹

Such catholicity of taste is rare today. One would do well to emulate it.

Auden, as we have already noted, has recognized the existence of several levels of appreciation in the public. Real art seems to have suffered a certain etiolation because of the relatively small numbers of its supporters.

Because it's true Art feels a trifle sick
You mustn't think the old girl's lost her kick.¹²

Perhaps ^{one of} the highest recommendations a critic may receive today is that he is ^{cheerful.} ~~optimistic~~. For in an age when the voice of the professional moaner is not alone in his claim throughout the land

⁹"Under which Lyre," Nones, p. 69.

¹⁰Introduction, The Poet's Tongue, loc. cit.

¹¹"Letter to Lord Byron," Part III, op. cit., p. 101.

¹²Ibid., p. 107.

that there is nothing new under the sun and that it was better in the old days, it is refreshing to hear a hearty laugh, warm praise, and constructive theories about the immediate present and future of literature. This is Auden's special charm.

"Light verse can be serious. It has only come to mean vers de société,¹³ triolets, smoke-room limericks, because, under the social conditions which produced the Romantic Revival, and which have persisted, more or less, ever since, it has been only in trivial matters that poets have felt in sufficient intimacy with their audience to be able to forget themselves and their singing-robes."¹³

Poetry has come a long way from the song the minstrel sang in the hall, surrounded as he was by the lord and his retinue and the household retainers alike. Art existed on only one level then, and its range was extremely limited. The tenant-farmer or serf shared his lord's appreciation and knowledge of, as well as interest in, literature. "In the Middle Ages, just as wealth was more evenly distributed, so was culture. The sum-total was less and therefore enormous superiorities were less possible."¹⁴

Thus, light verse, in Auden's sense of the term, was the ^aonly typical kind of verse. As society has developed and stratified, so has poetry. And now, as Auden has implied, people automatically associate light verse with the unserious, with the deliberately humorous.

Lightness depends upon the frame of mind of the poet, upon

¹³Introduction, The Oxford Book of Light Verse, pp. ix-x.

¹⁴G. G. Coulton, Medieval Panorama, Cambridge University Press, McMillan, 1946, p. 575.

the relation between himself and his audience, and not upon the subject, matter. It is a matter of treatment. Auden himself has written a great deal of light verse. Indeed, he has developed a mastery of the occasional style. His most recent book, Nones, is really a collection of occasional poetry. In his Collected Poetry, there is a section labeled "Songs and Other Musical Pieces," and they are all good examples of light verse: "As I Walked Out One Evening," "Now the Leaves Are Falling Fast," "Over the Heather the Wet Wind Blows," "Say This City Has Ten Million Souls," "Victor was a Little Baby," "Miss Gee"¹⁵ is a fine example of light verse, the embodiment of Auden's critical theory. It is supposed to be set ^{to} the tune of "St. James Infirmary."

Let me tell you a little story
About Miss Edith Gee;
She lived in Clevedon Terrace
At Number 83.

She'd a slight squint in her left eye,
Her lips they were thin and small,
She had narrow sloping shoulders
And she had no bust at all.

She'd a velvet hat with trimmings,
And a dark-grey serge costume;
She lived in Clevedon Terrace
In a small bed-sitting room.

She'd a purple mac for wet days,
A green umbrella too to take,
She'd a bicycle with shopping basket
And a harsh back-pedal brake.

The Church of Saint Aloysius
Was not so very far;
She did a lot of knitting,
Knitting for the Church Bazaar.

¹⁵The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, pp. 209-213.

Miss Gee looked up at the starlight
 And said: "Does anyone care
 That I live in Clevedon Terrace
 On one hundred pounds a year?"

Miss Gee dreams of the Vicar of Saint Aloysius. Miss Gee goes
 to the doctor:

She bicycled down to the doctor,
 And rang the surgery bell;
 "O, doctor, I've a pain inside me,
 And I don't feel very well."

Doctor Thomas looked her over,
 And then he looked some more;
 Walked over to his wash-basin,
 Said, "Why didn't you come before?"

Doctor Thomas sat over his dinner,
 Though his wife was waiting to ring;
 Rolling his bread into pellets,
 Said, "Cancer's a funny thing.

"Nobody knows what the cause is,
 Though some pretend they do;
 It's like some hidden assassin
 Waiting to strike at you.

"Childless women get it,
 And men when they retire;
 It's as if there had to be some outlet
 For their foiled creative fire."

Miss Gee goes to the hospital and lies "in the ward for women/
 With the bedclothes right up to her neck." Miss Gee is "cut in
 half" by Mr. Rose the surgeon.

Mr. Rose he turned to his students,
 Said: "Gentlemen, if you please,
 We seldom see a sarcoma
 As far advanced as this."

They took her off the table,
 They wheeled away Miss Gee
 Down to another department
 Where they study Anatomy.

They hung her from the ceiling,
 Yes, they hung up Miss Gee;
 And a couple of Oxford Groupers
 Carefully dissected her knee.

Light verse can be serious.

Light verse has one real disadvantage. "Lightness is a great virtue, but light verse tends to be conventional, to accept the attitudes of the society in which it is written."¹⁶ In other words, it seems that the conditions that make light verse possible also tend to make it conventional, in Auden's sense of this word. I think Auden in his own poetry has avoided this tendency. His light verse is fresh and exciting. Perhaps, then, the remedy to this disadvantage lies within the powers of the individual poet. If he has wit, he can lift himself above the morass of conventionality. However, the society for which he writes must take part of the responsibility. Again we find Auden planting reasons to justify his choice of the open society, where the individual is mature enough to realize that maturity is an ideal goal which can never be reached. "For," Auden says, "poetry which is at the same time light and adult and not servile or conventional can only be written in a society which is both integrated and free."¹⁷

¹⁶Introduction, The Oxford Book of Light Verse, p. x.

¹⁷Ibid., p. xx.

CHAPTER VIII

AUDEN'S ATTITUDES

"Leap Before You Look"

I'm setting up my brass-plate as a critic,
I make no claim to certain diagnosis,
I'm more intuitive than analytic,
I offer thought in homeopathic doses
(But someone may get better in the process).
I don't pretend to reasoning like Pritchard's
Or the logomachy of I. A. Richards.¹

It seems that after a disclaimer like this, made relatively early in his career, Auden has felt free to say anything he pleases. The result has been a collection of brilliant, sweeping generalizations about art and life and people and criticism. His ideas have not been original, although their expression has. Auden's early work was influenced by, indeed was a product of, Marx and Homer Lane. He has borrowed from, or been influenced by (and I cite three whose ideas may have been recognized in this thesis), T. S. Eliot, Freud, and Kierkegaard. The novelty and apparent originality of Auden's ideas have depended upon the speed with which he picks them up and develops them in his own work. He has consistently been avant-garde. This is not to accuse Auden of being a weather-vane, turning with the intellectual

¹"Letter to Lord Byron," Part III, op. cit., p. 99.

breezes with no thought of consistency or relevance to his own work. He has merely been quick to adapt new ideas to his own basic critical attitudes. His development has been enriched, not patched.

The real justification for any inconsistency of which Auden may be accused lies in his humility. He has said that a critic must recognize the fact that he is not perfect, and that his theories are not the only ones. "All theories are one-sided generalizations, and are replaced by their opposite half-truths."² No theory is in possession of the whole truth. If a different approach is used, perhaps more light will be thrown upon the problem in question. Let us remember, too, that Auden is a poet as well as a critic.

The writing of poetry is always a more complex thing than any theory we may have about it. We write first and use the theory afterwards to justify the particular kind of poetry we like and the particular things about poetry in general which we think we like.³

So much by way of apology. Now let us see how some of the theories Auden has put forth fit in with his approach to art.

Auden uses what has been called in modern criticism the socio-historical approach to poetry. In his studies of various poets, he has spent some time dealing with their lives and the society and historical period in which they lived. We have noted that Auden has been much concerned with the kind of society in which

²"Pope," From Anne To Victoria, ed. Bonamy Dobrée, Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1937, p. 97.

³Ibid., p. 96.

the critic and poet should live today. He places great importance upon the background. Genius, we remember, is a constant, but the genius realized is a product of his environment. In an article on Lord Byron, Auden explains this attitude:

The study of a poet's biography or psychology or social status cannot explain why he writes well, but it can help us to understand why his poetry is of a particular kind, why he succeeds at one thing and fails at another.⁴

And Auden has been consistent in this attitude:

If we are to understand his contemporary success, if we are to appreciate the nature of his poetry and its value, we must understand the age in which he lived.⁵

.

It's possible a little dose of history
May help us in unravelling this mystery.⁶

He realizes its importance:

The important and complicated relation between an artist and the age in which he lives has been the downfall of many an excellent critic. Some, denying its importance, have regarded works of art as if artists--and critics too--lived exclusively in the timeless and spaceless world of the spirit; others, denying its complexity, have assumed that a work of art is a purely natural product, like a pebble on a beach, totally explicable in terms of its physical causes.⁷

⁴"George Gordon Byron," Fifteen Poets, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1941, p. 294.

⁵"Pope," op. cit., p. 90.

⁶"Letter to Lord Byron," Part III, op. cit., p. 103.

⁷Introduction, Intimate Journals, by Charles Baudelaire, translated by Christopher Isherwood, Hollywood: Marcel Rodd, 1947, p. 13.

But he does not push it too far:

In attempting to trace the relations between a poet's work and the age in which he lived, it is well to remember how arbitrary such deductions are.⁸

And he can justify it:

If biographies of writers are justifiable-- and there is much to be said for the view that their own works contain all that is relevant-- it is because, in their case, the ways in which they accept and revolt against their immediate situation are peculiarly easy to watch, and the acceptance of and revolt against the immediate is the central human problem of free will.⁹

There is another stock technique that Auden uses in his studies of individual poets. He evaluates their poetry from the point of view of efficiency. This approach, too, can be explained. We remember that art is a game, the criterion of which is success. Auden says that

...the spectacle of anything well done, whether it be a feat of engineering, a poem, or even an outburst of impassioned oratory, must always give pleasure.¹⁰

Auden, then, always notices the successfulness and skill of the gamesmen whom he studies. The instrument with which they play the game of poetry, of course, is language. Auden has described the poet as, "before everything else, a person who is passionately in love with language."¹¹

⁸"John Skelton." The Great Tudors, ed. Katherine Garvin, London, 1935, p. 56.

⁹"The Fabian Figaro," The Commonweal, 37, October 23, 1942, p. 12

¹⁰"The Public vs. the Late Mr. W. B. Yeats," The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment, p. 170.

¹¹"Squares and Oblongs," op. cit. p. 171.

"Why do you want to write poetry?" If the young man answers: "I have important things I want to say," then he is not a poet. If he answers: "I like hanging around words listening to what they say," then maybe he is going to be a poet.¹²

Words are the tools of the game, and Auden takes note of the efficiency with which these tools are used. He has said that Tennyson is one of the most stupid poets that ever lived, but also one of the most efficient.¹³ This concrete approach to the evaluation of poetry is consistent in Auden. He says that "in lyric-writing what matters more than anything else, more than subject-matter or wisdom, is diction...."¹⁴

Thus, in his critiques of individual poets, Auden starts with a brief review of their lives and then proceeds to an analysis of their success, broken down into mechanical terms like diction, metre, rhythm, stanza forms, etc. But then he always adds something extra and special. Even the early reviews Auden wrote for The Criterion, contain something personal and electric. For Auden is more than a critic. He is an artist as well. He brings to his consideration of art a combination of charity, humility, humor, and common sense, plus a sense of the dignity of his own calling. In any discussion of a writer, more

¹²~~see cit.~~ Ibid., p. 171.

¹³Introduction, Tennyson, selected by W. H. Auden. London: Phoenix House Limited, 1946, p. x.

¹⁴"Yeats: Master of Diction," The Saturday Review of Literature, 22:7, June 8, 1940, p. 14.

than biography and analysis emerges. Statements about art and life are made with sweeping dramatic grace. One must examine them before one can recognize their consistency with Auden's basic tenets. Thus:

A great poet. To deserve such an epithet a poet is commonly required to convince us of three things: firstly a gift of a very high order for memorable language, secondly a profound understanding of the age in which he lived, and thirdly a working knowledge of and sympathetic attitude toward the most progressive thought of his day.¹⁵

The three pre-requisites necessary for the title of 'great poet' fit in with Auden's attitudes. Language is the instrument with which the game is played. As for the relation between the poet and the age in which he lives, we remember (from Chapter II) that Auden said that a writer must avoid both simple acceptance of and simple revolt against the age in which he lives. This is another way of saying that a writer must attempt to transcend his personal and historical limitations, and he can only do so by understanding "the mechanism of the trap."

The third pre-requisite of a great poet is a little more difficult to justify. Auden himself has exhibited just such a "working knowledge of and sympathetic attitude toward the most progressive thought of his day." We have said that he has been avant-garde with respect to his critical attitudes. He has been even more so with respect to his poetry. Thus we find in Nones:

Cerebrotonic Cato may

¹⁵"The Public vs. the Late Mr. W. B. Yeats," op. cit., p. 169.

Extoll the Ancient Disciplines,
But the muscle-bound Marines
Mutiny for food and pay.

Caesar's double-bed is warm
As an unimportant clerk
Writes I DO NOT LIKE MY WORK
On a pink official form.¹⁶

I will admit that reference to the cerebrotonics and to the well-known current fact that no self-respecting American likes his job is not quite a working knowledge or sympathetic attitude toward the most progressive thought of the day. Auden at times seems to be fingering the currency of modern idiom just for fun. He is, and I think he would readily admit that he is, guilty of attitudinizing. But then, that does not matter. His fun is justified because art is a game, after all. Auden has said that only stupid people have no affectations. At least his attitudinizing is aware and amazingly sensitive.

But this sympathetic attitude required is not to be explained simply in terms of modern idiom. I think that Auden intends a mutual interaction between the artist and the society in which he lives, a situation something like the conditions which make for Light Verse. For in those conditions, though they may tend to produce work that is conventional, a working knowledge of and a sympathetic attitude toward the progressive thought of the day are possible. Surely then Auden's three pre-requisites of the great poet, so neatly outlined, can be justified in terms of his basic critical attitudes.

This has been an attempt to prove that Auden's glib state-

¹⁶"The Fall of Rome," Nones, p. 32.

ments are actually founded upon a basic pattern of thought. His slick and easy generalisations are to his aesthetic structure as those trick windows are to the modern building. Depending upon the angle from which they are viewed, they are opaque or transparent. Auden's catchy expression often ^{beguiles the eye from} ~~obscures~~ the statement.

Eccentricity of emotion or diction, the elevation of private fancy over public judgment, are to be as condemned in poets as is the refusal of an individual member to accept the general verdict of the House of Commons.¹⁷

This is Auden's way of upholding tradition or convention. We recall (from Chapter II) that tradition is a consciousness of the whole of the past in the present. This consciousness should be an attribute both of the critic and the artist. Auden, therefore, will condemn eccentricity in a poet, because it does not conform to convention. Originality is not excluded, but eccentricity is. Originality, says Auden, ^mmeans the capacity to find in any other work of any date or locality clues for the treatment of one's own personal subject matter.¹⁸ It means to look at the past with the eyes of the present, to incorporate the past into the present. It does not allow for the elevation of private fancy or for eccentricity of emotion or diction; it does allow for new combinations which may attain to some sort of an absolute, and therefore, to some kind of value. Tradition is reconcilable with,

¹⁷Introduction, Poets of the English Language, III, p. xxiv.

¹⁸"Criticism in a Mass Society," op. cit. p. 132.

even necessary to, such a definition of originality.

...in poetry as in life, to lead one's own life means to relive the lives of one's parents and, through them, of all one's ancestors; the duty of the present is neither to copy nor to deny the past but to resurrect it.¹⁹

(double-space) It is not a restrictive point of view. It is the fresh, exciting attitude of a critic-artist.

Auden has commented on his own art:

For I relapse into my crimes:
Time and again have slubbered through
With slip and slapdash what I do,
Adopted what I would disown,
The preacher's loose immodest tone;
Though warned by a great sonneteer
Not to sell cheap what is most dear,
Though horrible old Kipling cried
'One instant's toil to Thee denied
Stands all eternity's offense,'
I would not give them audience.
Yet still the weak offender must
Beg still for leniency and trust
His power to avoid the sin
Peculiar to his discipline.²⁰

Auden is a self-conscious artist. He is not speaking of ^Art in the abstract now, but of his own work. In regard to his "slip and slapdash" work, he refers in the noted ^S to a statement of Cyril Connolly's:

As Cyril Connolly has pointed out in his brilliant book Enemies of Promise, the characteristic vice of the writer to-day is overproduction, and the major cause of overproduction is a need for money. Failing a private income or a complaisant patron,

¹⁹"Yeats as An Example," The Permanence of Yeats, James Hall and Martin Steiman. New York: The McMillan Company, 1950, p. 345.

²⁰New Year Letter, Part I, ll. 220-232.



he must either take some non-literary employment and write in his spare time or reduce his standard of living. The conditions of modern employment, however, are such that really his only choice lies between overproduction and living very simply indeed.²¹

The implication is that the need of rent-money is the reason for Auden's slip and slapdash. Overproduction, that is, production faster than the rate at which Art can be produced, is the necessary result of the artist's desire for food and clothing today. In a later note in New Year Letter, Auden writes: "Description of a prominent literary critic: 'He wanted to write poetry and ended up with seven jobs.'²² The note was a comment on the line: "And play for safety all their lives."²³

At first I thought this was an excuse on Auden's part, a kind of apology for carelessness. However, he does not have to apologize. He is possibly his own ^{severest} ~~worst~~ critic. He prefaces his Collected Poetry with the following remarks:

In the eyes of every author, I fancy, his own past work falls into four classes. First, the pure rubbish which he regrets ever having conceived; second--for him the most painful--the good ideas which his incompetence or impatience prevented from coming to much (The Orators seems to me such a case of the fair notion fatally injured); third, the pieces he has nothing against except their lack of importance; these must inevitably form the bulk of any collection since, were he to limit it to the fourth class alone, to those poems for which he is honestly

²¹"Notes," New Year Letter, p. 93.

²²Ibid., p. 136.

²³New Year Letter, Part III, 1. 1274.

grateful, his volume would be
too depressingly slim.²⁴

Apologies are not necessary in face of such a preface. Auden cannot be accused of having "played for safety." He has been consistently outspoken and daring in his statements. Samples of his advice to others:

Happy Birthday, Johnny,
Live beyond your income,
Travel for enjoyment,
Follow your own nose.²⁵

.

Thou shalt not live within thy means
Nor on plain water and raw greens.
If thou must choose
Between the chances, choose the odd;
Read The New Yorker, trust in God;
And take short views.²⁶

We notice that Auden has accused himself of adopting the "preacher's loose immodest tone." Taking this as an inversion, we may read it as a general rule that Auden would make: that the poet should not preach. This, of course, is consistent with Auden's attitude to art. Art is not the Gospel truth, no guide to life, liberty, and the pursuit of women. No artist should attempt to make it so by preaching. For one, who, as an artist, has so much power of a sort, it is a humble attitude to take. Auden also seems to think he is guilty of having "sold cheap what is most dear," and of having at times shirked his labours. If this is true, he shares

²⁴Preface, The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden.

²⁵"Many Happy Returns," Ibid., p. 72.

²⁶"Under Which Lyre," Nones, p. 70.

his guilt with other poets. The average poet, in Auden's estimation:

Is unobservant, immature, and lazy.
 You must admit, when all is said and done,
 His sense of other people's very hazy,
 His moral judgments are too often crazy,
 A slick and easy generalisation
 Appeals too well to his imagination.²⁷

I think Auden believes this only half-heartedly, just as he believes in his own crimes. The poet can justify any of these charges which Auden lays against him. Poetic ^ILicense: he requires, above all, an aesthetic whole.

Finally, Auden, a "weak offender" begs for leniency and trusts in "his power to avoid the sin/^B Peculiar to his discipline." The note to these lines takes the form of a poem:

Isolation, the Ivory Tower,
 What do they mean, these catchwords of the hour?
 Of course every man is alone in his gift
 Round which the endless clouds of error drift.
 To stand on top of his talent and make out
 More and more of the landscape round about
 Is a job that's more than sufficient to tax him:
 Something of everything is a rotten maxim.²⁸

"His discipline" is the Ivory Tower of a poet's sensitivity, which tends to isolate him. Isolation is the sin. The artist may be alone in his gift; he will be surrounded by clouds of error (only let him be aware of the fact--it will keep him humble). But he must not capitalize on his solitude. From the vantage-point of his Ivory Tower he can see more of the landscape about him and will be valuable to the others as a look-out. It is a difficult

²⁷"Letter to Lord Byron," Part I, op. cit., p. 20.

²⁸"Notes," New Year Letter, p. 94.

task. He must be careful not to spread himself too thin,
 ("Something of everything is a rotten maxim"). And in order
 really to be valuable to the others, he must be prepared to
 leap off his Tower.

The sense of danger must not disappear:
 The way is certainly both short and steep,
 However gradual it looks from here;
 Look if you like, but you will have to leap.

Tough-minded men get mushy in their sleep
 And break the by-laws any fool can keep;
 It is not the convention but the fear
 That has a tendency to disappear.

The worried efforts of the busy heap,
 The dirt, the imprecision, and the beer
 Produce a few smart wisecracks every year;
 Laugh if you can, but you will have to leap.

The clothes that are considered right to wear
 Will not be either sensible or cheap,
 So long as we consent to live like sheep
 And never mention those who disappear.

Much can be said for social savoir-faire,
 But to rejoice when no one else is there
 Is even harder than it is to weep;
 No one is watching, but you have to leap.

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.²⁹

²⁹"Leap Before You Look," The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden, pp. 123-124.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

"Not All the Candidates Pass"

A constant aesthetic problem for the writer is how to reconcile his desire to include everything, not to leave anything important out, with his desire for an aesthetic whole, that there shall be no irrelevancies and loose ends. The picture has to be both complete and framed.¹

Because Auden is an artist, the same aesthetic problem has presented itself to him in criticism as in poetry. He has constantly had a desire to include everything, but also to trim off the edges so that the result will be neat. One might say, slick but not streamlined. The result has been a collection of pat statements and fresh attitudes which are annoying to some by their apparent presumption. If one realizes why Auden's critical attitudes seem arrogant, perhaps some allowance may be made. His recognition of original sin and his acknowledgement of the essential frivolity of his vocation imply that he possesses humility.

This thesis, then has not been the whole story. If it has been too slick and easy, it is because the writer has faced the same aesthetic problem under which Auden has labored, and has attempted to solve it in the same manner. One could write another presentation of Auden's critical attitudes, and barely touch on what has been touched so lightly in this one. The best of us

¹ The Enchafèd Flood, New York: Random House, 1950, p. 66.

are only ~~an~~ possession of half-truths, mongrel versions of the real Truth.

The real Truth, or at least a closer approximation to it, only emerges to later generations. Removed from the society in which the writer lives, and in possession of more knowledge of his personal life² than is available to his contemporaries, they are able to see more clearly the value of and the reason for his writing as he did.

At last the secret is out, as it always must
come in the end,
The delicious story is ripe to tell to the
intimate friend;
Over the tea-cups and in the square the tongue
has its desire;
Still waters run deep, my dear, there's never
~~A~~ smoke without fire.

Behind the corpse in the reservoir, behind the
ghost on the links,
Behind the lady who dances and the man
who madly drinks,
Under the look of fatigue, the attack of mi-
graine and the sigh
There is always another story, there is more
than meets the eye.

For the clear voice suddenly singing, high up
in the convent wall,
The scent of elder bushes, the sporting prints
in the hall,
The croquet matches in summer, the handshake,
the cough, the kiss,
There is always a wicked secret, a private
reason for this.³

²This is almost as true as it has been in other ages, in spite of the tremendous numbers of autobiographies and personal success stories today.

³The Ascent of F-6, London: Faber and Faber, 1936, Chorus, Act II, Scene v, pp. 120-121. (The ~~underlines~~ *italics* are mine).

There is perhaps another story which does not meet the eye now, because Auden is still living. In my opinion, he will continue to do so.

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