

THE SONNETS OF W. H. AUDEN

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

Chapter

I. THE SINGLE SONNETS 5

 Chronological Review of the Earlier Sonnets

 The Persona Sonnet

 The Paysage Sonnet

II. "IN TIME OF WAR" 40

 Contemporary Background

 The Fall of Man: Sonnets I-III

 Types of Men: Sonnets IV-IX

 The History of Evil: Sonnets X-XIII

 The War in China: Sonnets XIV-XX

 Individual and International Repercussions:

 Sonnets XXI-XXVII

III. "THE QUEST" 78

 Situations: Sonnets I-V

 Temptations: Sonnets VI-VIII

 Failures: Sonnets IX-XV

 Adventures: Sonnets XVI-XX

 "The Garden": Sonnet XX

CONCLUSIONS 102

BIBLIOGRAPHY 104

ABSTRACT 115

INTRODUCTION

In his recent Memories and Commentaries, Igor Stravinsky recalls planning The Rake's Progress with W. H. Auden in 1947:

When we were not working he would explain verse forms to me, and almost as quickly as he could write, compose examples; I still have a specimen sestina and some light verse that he scribbled off for my wife; and any technical question, of versification, for example, put him in a passion; he was even eloquent on such matters.¹

This verbal virtuosity figures high among Auden's talents, yet often goes unappreciated or is even disparaged. Some critics find verbal refinement an impediment to communication; others seem almost to resent Auden's apparent effortlessness. The sonnets provide a critical case in point: Justin Replogle, for example, has to see their "virtuosity" as "offset" by a finer quality.² Virtuosity itself would appear to be suspect for many of Auden's critics, as if nothing worthwhile can occur easily and spontaneously.

Auden's skill with form is not only unappreciated by many who have written about him, but also misunderstood. In his work, verse forms serve as more than a brilliant or pleasant exercise in language, as Hoggart suggests.³ They are more than simply a method of "curbing

¹Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, Memories and Commentaries (London, 1960), p. 157.

²Justin Replogle, Auden's Poetry (Seattle, 1969), p. 131.

³Richard Hoggart, Auden, An Introductory Essay (London, 1951), p. 34. (In his introduction to a 1961 collection of W. H. A., however, he finds more to admire about Auden's powers of versification.)

the purely subjective imagination," as Blair has said.⁴ On the contrary, in his best poems the form is at the heart of the poem and acts dynamically even in its conception. As Auden says, "The choice of a verse form is only half-conscious;" it acts with the poet's imagination, allowing him to say things he did not know he was capable of saying.⁵ In most of Auden's sonnets, the length and structure of the form, the very compression of the sonnet, help to shape the poet's thinking, and form and meaning coincide with and reinforce one another. It is hard to imagine many of them being anything but sonnets.

Ease of composition can, of course, be a hazard to the poet, as Auden himself more recently observes: "Rhetorical skill enables a poet to write a poem for which he has no genuine inspiration, whereas if he lacked that skill he would have left the poem unwritten."⁶ Sometimes Auden does spin off a sonnet without inspiration, particularly in the sequences, but on the whole, his sonnets are, as Spears says of "In Time of War," "wonderfully rich and varied,"⁷ and the virtuosity demonstrated in them deserves appreciation.

Auden uses the sonnet form frequently from his first volume in 1928 through 1940. As he works with the sonnet form, he perfects his

⁴John Blair, The Poetic Art of W. H. Auden (Princeton, 1965), p. 69. (In general, he is an enthusiastic critic, however.)

⁵W. H. Auden, "Alexander Pope," Essays in Criticism, I, 3 (1951), 217.

⁶W. H. Auden, "Shakespeare's Sonnets, I," Listener, LXXII, 1840 (1964), 9.

⁷Monroe K. Spears, The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island (New York, 1963), p. 149. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

own variations, and along with them come firm stylistic patterns: as Auden has remarked, "the style in which a poet writes is always greatly influenced by the particular verse form he is employing."⁸ The sonnets of 1936-1940, in particular, stand apart as a coherent group in which form, style, and content interact. Then, having mastered and perhaps exhausted his variations of the sonnet, Auden publishes no further sonnets until the late fifties. By then his interests have changed, and the three new sonnets are of a different nature.

In "Making, Knowing and Judging," his inaugural lecture for the chair of poetry at Oxford, he quotes a passage from Valéry which anyone who probes Auden's sonnets might keep in mind:

"The power of verse is derived from an indefinable harmony between what it says and what it is. Indefinable is essential to the definition. . . . The impossibility of defining the relation, together with the impossibility of denying it, constitutes the essence of the poetic line."⁹

Nevertheless, to presume to define this harmony is the task and method of the critic--and the purpose of this essay. It is also part of the thesis of this essay that Auden's sonnets have been too long ignored, both in themselves as poems worthy of close study of what they say, of their humanistic ideas, and as an opportunity to study what they are, a combination of form, content, imagery, and style. In this undertaking, Auden's own prose observations, until recently neglected by critics, help to illuminate his poetic process.

The discussion opens with a chronological presentation of Auden's

⁸"Shakespeare's Sonnets, I," p. 8.

⁹W. H. Auden, "Making, Knowing, and Judging," reprinted in The Dyer's Hand (New York, 1963), p. 35.

early sonnets, and then, as he uses the form more frequently, attempts to understand the sonnets through classification and analysis of types. The major part of the paper is devoted to a discussion of the two sequences.

Note on texts used: In the case of the individual sonnets, the (revised) Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1957 (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), where the poems are conveniently arranged in chronological order, is taken as text. When appropriate, attention is paid to revisions. In the case of the sonnet sequences, where later revisions and omissions have been extensive, the text of The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden (New York: Random House, 1945), in most cases the original text, is followed, and allusions are made to revisions when appropriate. Occasionally these titles are abbreviated as CSP and CP.

CHAPTER I

THE SINGLE SONNETS

Sonnets appear in the very first of Auden's volumes of poetry, Poems (1928), and the form re-emerges in his latest, City Without Walls (1969), with a single sonnet, "Song of the Rose." It would probably be impossible to guess with any wisdom why Auden concentrates so heavily upon the sonnet from about 1938 through 1940. He has been reading Rilke's sonnets, and the form is very much alive, with Hopkins, Hardy and Owen also among its recent practitioners. Whatever the reasons for his choice, the sonnet form leads him to develop a clipped and concentrated impersonal style when using it, in contrast to some of the longer poems and lovely songs of the later thirties. The brevity of the sonnet makes Auden's epigrams flourish, for every line must be as economical as possible. His tendency, too, to use the tangible as both subject and symbol is naturally encouraged in the compact sonnet, to the point that allegorization and personification are overworked. Similarly, a few words or phrases often give a narrative flash.

Many of his sonnets and longer poems at this time are constructed around a person, someone historically real or an imaginary type. For Auden, the sonnet is long enough for a brief biographical sketch, into which he can skillfully insert asides about the persona's environment. He does this particularly in the single sonnets to describe literary figures such as "Edward Lear" and in the sequences to present a series

of types of men and questers. Another repeated technique, though one much less often used for an entire sonnet, is that of conveying human qualities through landscape or place. Like the epigram, the allegorical place or paysage is an economical means of expression frequently found in the sonnets. In fact, the persona¹⁰ and paysage modes appear so frequently in the sonnets that it has been useful to organize the greater part of this chapter around them.

In the sonnets, Auden readily expounds political, psychological, and religious views. The conventional structures of the sonnet, the balanced division into stanzas or the breakdown into octave and sestet, also lend themselves to exposition, and when brevity is not desirable in presenting ideas, Auden has recourse to the sequence. Otherwise, fourteen lines is a comfortable limit on his didacticism. A lyrical mood is rare in the sonnets and, although it was a major theme of the time, love is not the central theme of many sonnets. However, the wealth of other themes and the fullness of their expression make an exploration of both content and style in the sonnets highly rewarding.

Chronological Review of the Earlier Sonnets

Auden's first sonnets appear in the 1928 Poems, hand-printed (in part) in an edition of forty-five copies by Auden's university friend, Stephen Spender. Facsimile reproductions of what is now a collector's item were made in 1964 of the copy in the George Elliston Collection of Twentieth Century Poetry at the University of Cincinnati. Even these

¹⁰The term persona is used in the general sense of characterization and does not refer to a mask or facade. Its use here is also distinct from that of Replogle and Blair.

copies are scarce and generally unavailable except in university rare book collections. In this tiny, thin, square volume with smudgy printing in the first half (done by Spender; the second half was finished professionally), one finds many of the strengths of the later poems, in spite of the typical early-Auden obscurity. Monroe K. Spears, in his The Poetry of W. H. Auden, is the first critic to take an interest in the variety of styles and techniques in the 1928 volume. He claims that "most of the styles that will dominate the later work can be seen plainly in this first volume" (27). To a certain extent the same can be said of the three sonnets in this volume in terms of the later sonnets.

Spears mentions and in part quotes one of the 1928 sonnets opening "On the frontier at dawn getting down," which he finds impenetrably obscure. Since it is probably not available to most readers in its entirety, I quote it here in full:

On the frontier at dawn getting down,
 Hot eyes were soothed with swallows: ploughs began
 Upon the stunted ridge behind the town,
 And bridles flashed. In the dog days she ran
 Indoors to read her letter. He in love,
 Too curious for the East stiffens to a tower;
 The jaw-bone juts from the ice; wisdom of
 The cooled brain in an irreverent hour.

At the half-close the muted violin
 Put cloth and glasses by; the hour deferred
 Peculiar idols nodded. Miles away
 A horse neighed in the half-light, and a bird
 Cried loudly over and over again
 Upon the natural ending of a day.

The obscurity here is typical of Auden at this time, as are the haphazard half-rhymes ("love" and "wisdom of," "deferred" and "bird"), the consonance ("dawn" and "down"), the striking diction ("stunted ridge"), and the rapid, compressed movement of the poem. The various metaphors used (dawn and dusk, landscape, heat and ice, and others) cloud rather

than illuminate the narrative and thematic elements. The topic seems to be the deferring of love, but the poem lacks coherence and no definite ideas are put across. This sonnet was not republished. An older friend of Auden's from his native town of Birmingham has recalled recently that Auden readily destroyed poems which seemed obscure to critic-friends,¹¹ and Christopher Isherwood has confirmed the same. Yet in spite of its weaknesses, this early sonnet is recognizably Auden's.

Another sonnet from the 1928 volume reappears in the dialogue of Paid on Both Sides (1930), with the first line, "Tonight when a full storm surrounds the house," changed to "Tonight the many come to mind." A sonnet only in the number of lines, this poem is republished just once more, in The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden (p. 144) under the title "Remember." It has some obscurities, mostly due to several elliptical lines, but the consistent imagery and tone unify the poem. Nonetheless, it is best understood in the context of Paid, which Auden must have already had in mind when he wrote the sonnet.

At the end of Paid, a marriage takes place between members of two murderously feuding families. The bride speaks the lines of this poem in support of her wish to end the feud by leaving the country. Arguing futilely that the dead should not influence the living, she envisions a gulf between the living and the dead: although vivid memories may return, the dead themselves do not. The understated cold storm metaphor suits this theme; although its strength is diminished by the change in the first line, one still feels the chill of these deaths, "born over by diverse drifts," in a suggestion of snow. Many of the lines are awk-

¹¹E. R. Dodds, "Background to a Poet: Memories of Birmingham, 1924-36," Shenandoah, XVIII, 2 (1967), 11.

wardly broken in a manner reminiscent of Old English poetry and also suggestive of hesitation in the speaker's voice.

When examined line by line, no part of the sonnet seems particularly admirable, but taken as a whole, a series of effective phrases adds up to a haunting poem. For example, the allusions to death are striking only in their cumulative effect of moving from blunt fact to philosophic statement: "astonishing end," "clean death," "Passed out," "Fallen upon the far side of all enjoyment, / Unable to move closer," and finally, "Enough to have lightly touched the unworthy thing." While not among the finest of Auden's earliest poems, somehow, as so often, Auden creates a memorable poem through "clumsy" speech.

The best known of the 1928 sonnets, entitled "The Secret Agent" in The Collected Poetry and in later collections,¹² provides an early use of the paysage mode, as well as being typical of Auden's sonnet form. To a certain extent, the Secret Agent is also a persona. Spears discusses this sonnet at some length, calling it a "Rilkean sonnet" because it uses the device of "Putting unidentified persons, indicated only by pronouns . . . in usually symbolic landscapes, with the sonnet beginning in the middle of an unexplained dramatic situation" (25). In "The Secret Agent," the landscape is enemy territory, described in terms at once actual and symbolic: "passes," a power dam, rail lines, telegraphic wires, unbuilt bridges. The persona is a trapped secret agent who tries to warn his side, gropes for help, and evidently will die in isolation.

¹²Collected Shorter Poems, 1927-1955 (1966), p. 22. The page references of single sonnets appear hereafter in the text (in parenthesis immediately following the first mention of the sonnet) and are taken from the 1966 (revised) Collected Shorter Poems unless otherwise indicated.

The two opening quatrains describe the alarming situation of the agent and the failure of society to prepare for the "trouble coming"; the sestet concludes with the agent being lost on the enemy side. This extended metaphor, in which the spy must contend with indifference on his own side as well as evil on the other side, suggests a number of broader parallels to individual and social difficulties. The dramatic, symbolic situation and landscape impress us with the isolation of the individual and the pull of the death instinct.

Chronologically, the next sonnet to be published is the well-known, much-discussed "Petition"; there is no need for another explanation of it here. It is typical chiefly in being a variation by a poet who is seldom static, even within a traditional form. It lacks Auden's usual octave-sestet division in thought and rhyme, using instead couplets of consonance. Auden omits this sonnet from the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, claiming in the Foreword that

A dishonest poem is one which expresses, no matter how well, feelings or beliefs which its author never felt or entertained. For example, I once expressed a desire for "New styles of architecture"; but I have never liked modern architecture. I prefer old styles, and one must be honest even about one's prejudices.

Similarly, in his recently published A Certain World: A Commonplace Book, excerpted in the May, 1970 Atlantic, he states that he "cannot accept the doctrine that in poetry there is a "suspension of belief." A poet must never make a statement simply because it sounds poetically exciting: he must also believe it to be true."¹³ "Petition," however, has been one

¹³"Auden in the Looking Glass," The Atlantic, May, 1970, p. 66. This appears to be a misquotation of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief," which has to do with Coleridge's poems of fantasy. I have not located this quotation in A Certain World (New York, 1970), however.

of Auden's most popular and widely anthologized poems, and one cannot help but be dismayed and puzzled by this rejection of a fine poem. Perhaps the criterion of scrupulous honesty is less relevant for the single poem read separately than for a group of poems or for the whole body of a poet's work. A poet who is not true to himself may well sound false and merely mechanically skilled in a whole volume, whereas any single poem in the group may succeed. Replogle seems to raise this very objection concerning the sonnet sequence "In Time of War," about which he hypothesizes, "Perhaps forced to meet a deadline while caught in a slump, Auden may simply have ground out the poems as best he could."¹⁴ This criticism will be considered in Chapter Two.

The next two sonnets to appear are more typical of Auden's most active period of sonneteering. The first, originally published in November, 1933 New Oxford Outlook, is entitled "The Climbers" in Collected Poetry (41) and the 1950 Collected Shorter Poems (56) and retitled "Two Climbs" in the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems (76). The later title emphasizes the division between octave and sestet in thought and time; the octave treats a mountain climb in the present which represents failure in life, and the sestet refers to an earlier metaphorical climb with the narrator and his lover, which represents the failure of love to reach outward. The mountainous paysage gives coherence, concreteness, and freshness to the theme. Consonance rather than rhyme is again used.

Much of the appeal of this sonnet must come from its frank and tolerant statement of human weakness. Alone and weary, the narrator climbs "the mountain of his fear" until he collapses with ironic lines

¹⁴Replogle, p. 129.

referring to the separation of man from nature: "Cooling my weariness in faults that flaunt / A life which they have stolen and perfected." Recovery from the loss of this separation from nature can be found in other people--but only if one is capable of love.

The second sonnet of 1933, originally V of "Five Poems" in the October, 1933 New Verse and later helpfully entitled "Meiosis" (77), is less plain in meaning and uses the *paysage* mode only in the sense of the body as a place. Strongly biological in theme and metaphor, it compares the repetition of human generations with cell division and conjugation, seeing love as both the trap and the agent of the movement of generations. In the octave, the older generation, "he," gives birth to the next generation, "you," through love, although the "snare" of love is forgotten in the struggle of the sex act (the seventeenth century sense of "their little death"). While the younger generation is freed by this love, the elder seems to assume responsibility, to "Work west and northward, set up building." Broad, dream-like allusions to Jungian notions further underline the universality of the theme. Jung's theory of psychic bisexuality may also explain the peculiar vision of "he" as mother, although the validity of a homosexual relationship perhaps might also be implied. The Jungian "all-night journey under sea" also suggests a universal quest for civilization ("building").

The sestet considers how the world is constricted and simplified for the young. It concludes with hope for greater truth and freedom with the new generation: hope "That hopeful falsehood cannot stem with love / The flood on which all move and wish to move." The curious negatives of the final lines, "hopeful falsehood" and "cannot stem with love," snarl the meaning, perhaps unjustifiably.

Both of these sonnets were republished in Look, Stranger! (London, 1936), along with the sonnets "What's the Matter?" "A Misunderstanding," and "Who's Who." "What's the Matter?" Collected Poetry, (143) was not republished in the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, perhaps because it later seemed too blunt. The octave is given in purely concrete terms: the first quatrain describes two human positions, in lines remarkable only for their diction ("soft receptive belly," "insolent spine relaxed"); the second quatrain indicates the life beyond the place where the lovers are lying. The sestet comments on the separateness of these lovers, but unfortunately relies on tiresome rhetorical questions.

"A Misunderstanding" (77), given the petulant title "Nobody Understands Me" in The Collected Poetry (72), ironically describes the difficulty of self-fulfillment, even when all goes as one has wished. The octave describes three seemingly unconnected meetings, which were "foretold" in the narrator's dream; the grimy boy at a garage, the tall botany professor, and the deaf girl at the green chateau are similar in that all three seem to expect him and express a need to advise him. In each relationship that forms, "The same misunderstanding would arise." Again Auden uses rhetorical questions, but these are more striking: "Which was in need of help? Were they or he / The physician, bridegroom, and incendiary?" Particularly curious is the putting together of healer, lover, and agitator--perhaps suggesting an ideal combination. Its connection to the three personae of the poem is as tenuous and evocative as the connection between dream and reality.

An easy colloquial diction marks these three 1936 sonnets, particularly "Who's Who" (78), a biographical sketch of an unidentified celebrity, and the earliest true example in a sonnet of what I call the

persona mode. By using a generalized, symbolic subject, Auden makes broad and indirect, yet penetrating observations, in this case contrasting public and private values. An ironic tension exists between the journalistic diction and homely details and the poem's profounder meaning. Who indeed is "the one . . . who lived at home" in tranquil self-containment, for whom the celebrity sighed? At face value, it seems to be a brother or lover; closer consideration of the contrast between this contented self-reliant homebody and the hyperactive celebrity suggests that the homebody may be an alter ego or unrealized ideal for the celebrity. The poem eludes definitive analysis and remains as puzzling as many human relationships.

Before ending this chronological introduction to Auden's early sonnets, i.e., through On This Island (1936), one more sonnet should be mentioned, if only for the sake of thoroughness. According to Spears's index, this sonnet first appears in the July, 1933 New Verse, the "Auden Double Number." Since Auden seems not to have intended to preserve this poem, I have not discussed it chronologically. But because it is difficult to locate, I reproduce it here, with an illegible word of the MS noted:

~~Poem~~ [title scratched out by Auden]

The fruit in which your parents hid [rid] you, boy,
 Their death, is summer perfect: at its core
 You grow already; soon you will not be
 One of the young for whom all wish to care.
 Having at last the matter for a story,
 For you will know what people mean by looking:
 Some you will beckon closer and be sorry,
 You will not have to guess at what is lacking.

But you are death this summer, we the hurt
 For whose profoundest sigh you give no penny
 Though, calmer than us all, you move our lives;
 Send back the writer howling to his art,
 And the mad driver pulling on his gloves
 Starts in a snowstorm on his deadly journey.

Somewhat enigmatic, this sonnet's theme seems close to Blake's notions of innocence and experience. The myth of the Fall, alluded to in the first line, is a theme Auden later develops extensively. Diction and syntax are extremely casual, and the consonantal rhyme often seems less than inevitable. Further evidence that Auden did not wish to save this poem may be found in the fact that the last three lines are altered and used at the end of "Journey to Iceland," a longer poem first published in 1936. The phrase "the young for whom all wish to care" also reappears in the longer poem. (Auden is known to have reassembled many of his early poems; Isherwood attributes Auden's early obscurity to this habit.)

The Persona Sonnet

Specific Biography

The following sections analyze the types or modes of sonnets Auden writes and postulate why he uses these modes. The discussion concentrates chiefly on examples of the persona and paysage modes, beginning with the personae of specific historic individuals, followed by those of general types. Chronological order is not followed, since these sonnets were composed at approximately the same time, i.e., between 1938 and 1940. Explications are more thorough from this point onward, because most of Auden's critics have neglected the sonnets after 1936 and, furthermore, because Auden's mature sonnet style emerges at this time.

"Luther" (193) provides an example of the persona sonnet based upon an historic period. The sonnet is less a biography than a portrayal of the Reformation, dramatically embodied by Luther. The main idea of the sonnet appears frequently in Auden's work: he sees the change in

belief which the Reformation brought about as a continuation of the Fall, in which a complex dualism further replaces the original unity. Auden believes that just as the Fall separated man from God and from nature and made a distinction between good and evil and spirit and matter, so the Reformation furthered the notion that flesh and the world are evil: "Flesh was a silent dog that bites its master."

In this sonnet theology becomes human and petty in the person of Luther dwelling upon the sins of man:

With conscience cocked to listen for the thunder,
He saw the Devil busy in the wind,
Over the chiming steeples and then under
The doors of nuns and doctors who had sinned.

Auden's phrasing bears much of the message: "conscience cocked" and "Devil busy" suggest shallowness and even triviality, as does the rest of the stanza. In the third stanza, Auden recapitulates the issues of the Reformation in three lines which are vigorous, if expository:

The fuse of Judgement spluttered in his head:
'Lord, smoke these honeyed insects from their hives.
All Works, Great Men, Societies, are bad.
The Just shall live by Faith . . .' he cried in dread.

The blandness of the following, concluding lines suggests the insidious way in which the Reformation has been accepted by ordinary people, who have no reason to share Luther's half-crazed dread, except that they demand excitement in their religious life:

And men and women of the world were glad,
Who'd never cared or trembled in their lives.

The sonnet deliberately oversimplifies and overstates, of course. Considering the complexity of the issues and the "message" about religion implied, the sonnet form may be too restrictive. Yet the brevity and the convention of introducing a new facet of the theme in each stanza force

the poet to be compact and intense in a way that he cannot be in a longer, discursive poem such as "In Sickness and in Health."

Most similar to "Luther" is "Montaigne" (193), although the latter is a gentler, less explicit poem, consistent with the persona being described. The historical figure is again seen in an historical context, albeit skepticism has a more timeless quality than the Reformation, especially when balanced by the notion, beautifully put here, that in such times as Montaigne's, "Love must be re-grown from the sensual child."

Unlike the two sonnets about historical figures, three sonnets about nineteenth century literary figures are more specifically biographic, giving little reference to their times. "A. E. Housman" (126), does allude to "the human situation" of the day, but entirely in relation to Housman the individual. In all three sonnets of this group, the more the reader knows about the personae, the more he can appreciate and grasp Auden's observations. Yet even without such knowledge, each sonnet gives the reader a definite impression of the persona, if few hard facts. Auden's own bias is not concealed; in writing about both Lear and Housman, Auden's sympathy is occasionally touched by a hardness close to contempt.

The most contemporary of the three, A. E. Housman (who died in 1936) is fully suggested, even within the limits of his strictly scholarly life: "In savage foot-notes on unjust editions / He timidly attacked the life he led." One line is perhaps slighting--"Kept tears like dirty postcards in a drawer"--while the rest of the sonnet suggests a measure of nobility. Rimbaud's life, of course, gives Auden more to work with, and he does so richly, from Rimbaud's adolescent creativity to his debacle with Verlaine to his later wanderings. While the metaphor of Rimbaud beginning to write poetry seems forced--" . . . in that child the rhetori-

cian's lie / Burst like a pipe: the cold had made a poet."--a later line epitomizes Rimbaud: "Verse was a special illness of the ear."

Auden's dramatic allegorical psychology shapes "Edward Lear" (127). To the reader familiar only with Lear's nonsense poetry, this poem may hold surprising information about Lear. Yet, whether one knows that Lear was epileptic and lonely, or whether one wonders if Auden imagines Lear's inner terrors, the sonnet nonetheless is a cogent psychological portrait. "Edward Lear" is a favorite of mine among the sonnets based on actual individuals, for it has a warmth and activity often lacking when Auden writes this concisely. The poem is pointed without being overly harsh; it is generally sympathetic toward a subject who might be used more satirically. The third stanza in particular generates a sense of whimsical motion in the spirit of Lear's drawings and verses. When Lear

. . . successfully reached his Regret

How prodigious the welcome was. Flowers took his hat
And bore him off to introduce him to the tongs;
The demon's false nose made the table laugh; a cat
Soon had him waltzing madly, let him squeeze her hand;
Words pushed him to the piano to sing comic songs;

And children swarmed to him like settlers. He became a land.

The final line, made more prominent by setting it alone, makes the institutionalizing of Lear (as a comic) concrete in terms of the paysage mode.

The sonnet embodies another of Auden's frequent themes during this period, that of the quest. Lear the man becomes a journey in which travel is guided by tears and the destination is Regret. The matter-of-fact phrasing and the coherence of the metaphorical level in the second stanza--"he was upset / By Germans and boats; affection was miles away"--allow Auden to make Lear's destination Regret with a capital R without

needing directly to explain what he means. The reader is satisfied simply by the inner logic of description in the sonnet. The attainment of Regret and the consequent escape into nonsense give an appropriate resolution of the fears Auden attributes to Lear in the first two stanzas. Lear emerges weak, silly, and likeable, and the reader may have gained some insights into and tolerance for the type of person he was.

Before proceeding to the general persona mode, some observations and speculations about the choice of the persona mode are in order. One can probably safely assume that the personae poems based upon actual individuals are at least partially inspired by contact with the works of the men, just as the beautiful, longer poems on Yeats and Freud are written in memoriam. We know, for example, that Auden wrote reviews of books about Rimbaud and Housman not long before he wrote the poems.¹⁵ The question becomes more complex, however, when the sonnets just discussed are considered together with the generalized personae, such as "The Composer," "The Novelist," "The Traveller," "The Diaspora," and many of the sonnets in "In Time of War" and "The Quest."

As tools or methods, both the persona and the paysage modes provide a means of controlling and making concrete his discursive, abstract ideas. They serve as vehicles for Auden's thought as well as entities in themselves. In Auden's drive to comprehend life, these modes may be a means of using his inheritance of Hardy's "hawk's vision" of the relation of individual life to local social life and to the whole of history. Auden says he learned from Hardy that the difference between the individual

¹⁵"Heretics," review of Arthur Rimbaud, by E. Starkie, The New Republic, Nov. 1, 1939, pp. 373-374. Review of A. E. H., A Memoir, by L. Housman, New Verse, January, 1938.

and society is so slight that they become equal and reconcilable when examined from a distance.¹⁶ Both the biographical and the generalized persona sonnets can be seen to portray not only a representative psychology and character, but also a relation to society and earth, as in "The Traveller":

The cities hold his feeling like a fan;
And crowds make room for him without a murmur,
As the earth has patience with the life of man. (CP, 55)

Each persona, then, not only exists for itself, but also focusses on a part which helps to throw light on the whole.

Furthermore, like most artists, Auden has thought considerably about the relationship between art and life. Although recently (1966) he comments that "the relation between Art and Life is far too complicated and mysterious to permit of anything more than tentative and improbable guesses,"¹⁷ during the period under study he was more venturesome and states clearly that what a poet thinks influences his art--and its validity. The private man cannot be separated from the public writer. In "Criticism in a Mass Society," for example, Auden says:

The statement, "Man is a fallen creature with a natural bias to do evil," and the statement, "Men are good by nature and made bad by society," are both presuppositions, but it is not an academic question to which one we give assent. If, as I do, you assent to the first, your art and politics will be very different from what they will be if you assent, like Rousseau or Whitman, to the second.¹⁸

¹⁶"A Literary Transference," The Southern Review, Summer, 1940, p. 83.

¹⁷Introduction to Nineteenth Century British Minor Poets, edited and selected by Auden (New York, 1966), p. 19.

¹⁸In The Intent of the Critic, ed. by D. A. Stauffer (Princeton, N. J., 1941), p. 137.

In a book review written a year earlier, Auden says that

The Weltanschauung of a poet is of importance in assessing his work, and that there is, after all, a relation, however obscure and misunderstood, between art and goodness the validity of a poet's beliefs depends on their power to coordinate his experience and the general experience of his time."¹⁹

While Auden has always distinguished between art and propaganda in theory, he does have a moralistic, preaching side, which he has striven to control in his poetry. A survey of some of his writings about the influence of the poet and his Weltanschauung upon readers shows that Auden has gradually come to expect less and less persuasion of any kind from poetry, insisting all along, however, upon the central importance of truth in poetry.²⁰

As early as the important 1935 introduction to The Poet's Tongue, Auden states that "poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear. . . ." ²¹ Poetry is not magic, to use Auden's later synonym for propaganda; it "makes nothing happen," but it can "persuade us to rejoice" and "Teach the free man how to praise," in the words of the 1940 Yeats elegy (Collected Shorter Poems, 142f). By 1944 he goes still further, stating,

¹⁹"Against Romanticism" (book rev.), New Republic, CII, 1315 (February 5, 1940), 187.

²⁰Replogle, on the other hand, finds Auden irritatingly inconsistent about whether art should entertain or moralize (pp. 173-176). In my view, however, Replogle simply cannot tolerate Auden's changing moods and tones. Blair, in contrast, comments on Auden's "remarkable consistency" in formulating his poetics (p. 36). Spears also notes the clarity of Auden's aesthetic theory on this point (p. 88).

²¹Ed. with John Garrett (London, 1935), p. ix.

somewhat paradoxically, "Baudelaire was right in seeing that art is beyond good and evil, and Tennyson was a fool to try to write a poetry that would teach the Ideal; but Tennyson was right in seeing that an art which is beyond good and evil is a game of secondary importance. . . ."22

A few years later Auden comes to see poetry as essentially "frivolous," a view not intended to denigrate poetry, but rather to keep it in perspective: only survival and love of God are truly serious. Most recently Auden says that if poetry "can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate" (The Dyer's Hand (New York, 1962, p. 27). Devotion to the spread of truth is the constant element of Auden's poetics. In this sense, he has always been didactic, but not propagandistic.

The personae permit Auden to express his beliefs, his Weltanschauung in poetry and yet keep from preaching. He can do so with topics like the personae because they have a real, objective existence which the poet must heed as he uses them to express his truths. There are many such topics possible for poetry, of course; in "Brussels in Winter," for example, the actual paysage describes the lonely condition of the city. Nonetheless, it is the esthetic theory which determines how he will treat a subject, not the subject itself.

Generalized Characterizations

Much of this section is given over to a detailed analysis of one of the best of the general persona sonnets, "The Composer" (125), in which the particular also expresses the general, i.e., one art illumi-

²²Introduction to A Selection of the Poems of Alfred Tennyson, ed. by Auden (New York, 1944), p. xix.

nates all the arts, yet primarily stays pertinently close to music. This sonnet is also taken as a model for full discussion of the form and techniques often used by Auden in the sonnet.

Auden has commented that, abstractly, he finds the Petrarchan to be a more beautiful form than the Shakespearean, for in the Petrarchan,

Having only two different rhymes in the octet and the sextet, each is bound by rhyme into a closed unity. The Shakespearean form, on the other hand, with its seven different rhymes, almost inevitably becomes a lyric of three quatrains, finished off by an epigrammatic couplet.²³

In his own sonnets, Auden compromises this abstract ideal, however, by generally breaking the Petrarchan octave into two quatrains and the sextet into two tercets, rhyming each stanza independently. This "compromise" is at least in part necessitated by the English language, which, he says,

compared with most languages . . . is so poor in rhymes it is almost impossible to write a Petrarchan sonnet in English that sounds effortless. In reading the best examples by Milton or Wordsworth or Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one is almost sure to find in at least one line that the concluding words do not seem inevitable, that is to say, the only word which would accurately express what the poet wishes to say. One feels it is there only because the rhyme demands it.²⁴

Although he often uses seven rhymes as in the Shakespearean sonnet, instead of the summarizing final couplet, Auden usually puts a concluding punch in the final two or three lines which affects the reading of the rest of the sonnet. Most of the sonnets of 1939-1940 follow the pattern

²³W. H. Auden, "Shakespeare's Sonnets, I" Listener, (July 2, 1964), p. 9.

²⁴Ibid.

of "The Composer:" abab cdcd efe ggf, with variations, of course, in the rhyme scheme of each stanza. Occasionally the stanzas are interlocked by rhyme. In "The Composer," the parallel use of feminine rhymes in the b, d, and e rhymes creates a technical unity. The last stanza is thus distinguished by the lack of feminine rhyme, making it a firm conclusion.

The sonnet form itself functions here to create a light tension between the formal pattern of the poem and the lyrical expression of the free outpouring of song. This tension reflects the apparent paradox that song is superior to poetry, and yet this poem shares some of the qualities of a song.

The first stanza differentiates among the arts:

All the others translate: the painter sketches
 A visible world to love or reject;
 Rummaging into his living, the poet fetches
 The images out that hurt and connect.

Such an abrupt opening makes the reader glance back at the title for clarity, but ^{it} suits Auden's rapid displacement of two other kinds of artists in the first six lines. Both painter and poet assemble parts of life to make their creations--a forced attempt to "translate" life into something over which voluntary control can be exercised, i.e., to love or reject, in contrast to music, which "invades." The feminine end rhymes and sound effect of "painter sketches" and "poet fetches" underscore in their ungainly lightness the inherent restrictions of painting and poetry. By using the words "rummaging" and "fetch" to describe the method of the poet, Auden suggests that poetry must remain clumsy because of its dependence upon life. The next stanza clarifies:

From Life to Art by painstaking adaption,
 Relying on us to cover the rift.

The dependence of painting and poetry upon an audience is emphasized as

well, heightening by contrast the independence of song--into which Auden immediately launches:

Only your notes are pure contraption,
Only your **song** is an absolute gift.

In a sonnet one conventionally expects a new topic to be introduced at the beginning of a stanza. In "The Composer," Auden rushes into a new topic in the middle of the second stanza, as if impatient to describe song as the purest art. Song is pure and perfect not because it is natural rather than artificial, but because it is an absolute rather than a partial art or contraption. Only music, only song exists as nothing but art, with no attempt to express part of life.

The octave offers a pessimistic view of the relationship between poetry and life. Paradoxically, however, Auden creates a song in poetry:

Pour out your presence, a delight cascading
The falls of the knee and the weirs of the spine,
Our climate of silence and doubt invading.

In this tercet, meter, rhyme, and diction and the absence of "images that hurt and connect" combine to create the freedom and purity of song. The lines turn on anapests without allowing the anapests to dominate the sound effects. In the first line, the anapestic current is broken by the feminine end rhyme "cascading," and the lightness of this line is carried on in the three anapests and many unstressed words of the next line. The third line follows the rhythm of the second, but again the run of anapests is braked by the unstressed ending of final word, "invading." The vowel sounds also suggest the rippling of song or its metaphor here, a stream. The long, sonorous "ou" in "pour" and "your," contrasts to the short "e" of "delight" and "weir" and the high-pitched "i" of "spine," "climate," "delight." The long "a" of "cascading" and "invading" help

to brake or balance the movement of vowel sounds just as they interrupted the anapestic movement. The diction and imagery are particularly beautiful, complemented as they are by harmony of forms. Song is given an abstract "presence" as "delight," and then is made concrete in the metaphor of a stream cascading through falls and weirs. Without sacrificing any of the clarity and pleasure of this metaphor, Auden suggests the physical, pure thrill of music by putting the falls in the knee, and the weir, in the spine. Nor is he content merely to suggest an involuntary physical response to music; he also continues the metaphor by figuring music as invading our "silence and doubt," which are further concretized in a characteristic use of "climate," a word which is more tangible and better delimited than a synonym such as mood or attitude.

The last stanza acts something like the concluding couplet of a Shakespearean sonnet, but is linked in the final line to the preceding stanza by rhyme and by recall of the imitation of song. The use of anapests in the middle line also implies continuation of the spirit of song:

You alone, alone, imaginary song,
Are unable to say an existence is wrong,
And pour out your forgiveness like a wine.

The ultimate value of the absoluteness of song, the "pure contraption," is then that it does not moralize about life because it is not an interpretation or translation, but exists for itself. Song pours out forgiveness blessedly, in an act of grace.

This closing stanza reminds the reader of Auden's ideas about the non-didactic nature of poetry, of his own effort not to adopt "the preacher's loose immodest tone."²⁵ Several years after the publication of the

²⁵New Year Letter (London, 1941), 1. 222 (CP, 271).

poem, Auden remarks that "the chief satisfaction in the creative act is the feeling that it is quite gratuitous."²⁶ One of the primary qualities by which Auden differentiates song from the other arts is that it is pure invention, removed from life like a game. He later compares poetry to a game.

Of the same genre as "The Composer" is "The Novelist" (124); both poems were among several sonnets published in the Spring, 1939 New Writing. Appropriately, "The Novelist" uses a plainer and clumsier diction than "The Composer," for it emphasizes the mundane qualities of the novel, whereas "The Composer" stresses the lyric in music. This sonnet has a light, even jocular note, from the first stanza giving some hackneyed, exaggerated ideas about the glory of poets to the conclusion, when the novelist is called upon to "Dully put up with all the wrongs of man." While a reader might be tempted to see the Ideal Poet in this Ideal Novelist, Auden has made the persona more accurate than symbolic. The poet does have a dash not suited to the novelist, whose greatness lies, paradoxically enough, in being "One after whom none think it worth to turn." Like "The Composer," "The Novelist" is actually less a persona than a means of commenting upon an art form. The persona mode is a flexible tool.

One sonnet which fails to fit into any classification is "Our Bias" (118), which first appears in Another Time (New York, 1940). The subject is time, but Time is not sufficiently personified for this to be a variation of the persona sonnet. Like several sonnets in "In Time of War," it puts man in contrast to animals and things, which display a

²⁶"Squares and Oblongs" in Poets at Work, ed. by Charles D. Abbot (New York, 1948), p. 167.

sureness and a station man lacks. But animals and things exist in the sonnet as symbols only, not as real objects, while man comes across with all his human bungling.

The Paysage Sonnet

Like the persona sonnets, the paysage or "moralized landscape" in the sonnets is also used frequently in longer poems. Geographical imagery which constitutes almost a full symbolic system appears in Auden's earliest poetry. He creates an allegorical map upon which "woods," for example, represent nature and man's innocent state in contrast to "the capital," representing the evils of civilization. Telegraph lines, railroad lines, and roads stand for communication, usually faulty, and summer resorts have a death-like significance as false escapes. Later, few of the sonnets retain these symbols in particular, but the animus for their use remains the same: an attempt to fit the old agrarian, paradisiacal ideals into the necessarily urban life of the present. Auden says as much in a 1937 review of a book on scouting:

Why should camp life be real life as opposed to artificial town life? Most of us have to live in towns and need to be taught how. All civilised life is artificial, i.e., it is life which is not ruled by the forces of Nature, but by one's own free will, and no one can use that properly who has not acquired self-knowledge and the habit of reason.²⁷

It is constructively ironical, then, that Auden often chooses metaphors from the landscape or paysage which is no longer part of the daily experience of most men. A fresh vision of nature, with a different significance infused into his poetry, may help Auden's readers to be aware of

²⁷"A Good Scout," Listener, XVII, Supp. 38 (December 8, 1937), p. xxiii.

the old agrarian ideal they still hold. In the sonnets, such imagery is most often found in "In Time of War."

Auden credits Edgar Allen Poe with being the first to create a "subjective paysage moralisé." Poe did so because he lived in America where nature had no widely agreed upon symbolic meaning.²⁸ But for an actual influence upon Auden's imagery, we must turn to Rilke. In a review of 1939, "Rilke in English," Auden, who must have been reading Rilke in German in the late 1920's, comments that "Rilke thinks of the human in terms of the non-human."²⁹ (In this review Auden notes the Rilkean landscape imagery in Spender's poetry without mentioning himself.) The casual reader of Rilke in translation, such as I, finds similarities between Rilke and Auden in landscape imagery, in biographical sketches of specific types, and in the rapid personification of an inanimate object (e.g., Rilke's "the impartial room"). Rilke on the whole, however, seems far more vibrant, emotional, and romantic than Auden; Auden evidently responded to certain elements in Rilke that were latent in himself. The following fragment from Rilke points up some of the similarities and differences:

Exposed on the hills of the heart. Look how small there!
 Look, the last hamlet of words, and, higher,
 (but still how small!) yet one remaining
 farmstead of feeling.

.....
 Again and again, however well we know the landscape of love.³⁰

²⁸Introduction to Poets of the English Language, IV: Blake to Poe (London, 1952), p. xxv.

²⁹In The New Republic, C, 1292 (September 6, 1939), 135.

³⁰Selected Poems: Rainier Maria Rilke, trans. J. B. Leishman (London, 1941).

The metaphors in this quotation might well be found in Auden--"hills of the heart," "hamlet of words," "farmstead of feeling"--as well as their expanded use in a "landscape of love," except that Auden is less inclined to take feelings as a topic. The spatial concept, the emphasis upon the perspective created by distance, also appears in Auden's work. But one rarely finds an exclamation point in Auden's work!

Hoggart finds Rilke to be a major influence upon the sonnets in two respects in particular: in the symbolization of abstractions otherwise difficult to express and in the tendency to jump into narration, leaving the reader to pick up the legend as he reads. In both Rilke and Auden, Hoggart finds the "same air of quiet control, the same unhurried and largely unrheterical assurance of tone, which come mainly from having firm symbols to manipulate."³¹ Spears goes so far as to call most of Auden's sonnets "Rilkean," as noted earlier in this paper.

For a successful, single example of the *paysage* mode used in a sonnet, I turn to "Brussels in Winter" (123), originally published in the Spring, 1939 New Writing. Although one might expect Auden's fondness for personae to be carried over to a non-human subject such as a city, it is not. For, while the strongest impression given is that of a heartless chill, the technique of paysage moralisé here is not personification. The city remains itself: what it is tells us about its inhabitants, just as the landscape does in the sestina "Paysage Moralisé." Brussels is cold, isolating, and unfeeling because its people are, yet Auden keeps city and people separate in his imagery. At its best the effect is strong and honest, with no false or dazzling personification. The *paysage* is

³¹Hoggart, 1961, p. 43.

presented in geographic terms:

Ridges of rich apartments rise tonight
 Where isolated windows glow like farms:
 A phrase goes packed with meaning like a van³²

This picture of desolate loneliness would be expected more in the country than in the city. The rich are separate not only from those beneath them, but from each other. For the stranger, every phrase overheard takes on disproportionate significance; the simile "like a van" creates an image of something not only "packed with meaning," but also moving swiftly away, so that no contact with it is possible.

Not all of the imagery succeeds as fully as in the third stanza, quoted above. The opening stanza presents a picture which sounds contrived and over-tidy:

Wandering the cold streets tangled like old string,
 Coming on fountains silent in the frost,
 The city still escapes you; it has lost
 The qualities that say "I am a Thing."

Auden's difficulties with this sonnet might be read into his revisions of it in 1966. In the first stanza, he changes "fountains silent" to "fountains rigid," rather a strong word for the mild Belgian winter; the purpose is undoubtedly to reduce the "s" sounds rather than to improve the image. He also removes the hint of personification from the last line by making it "The certainty that constitutes a thing." The second stanza contains two lines fully revised, and there are several other changes in diction for greater precision and poetic grace. Some of these changes are for the better--they are tighter and more economical--but "loom" in "Ridges of rich apartments loom tonight" sounds contrived, even though

³²Because of the many revisions, the original version is quoted here from the Collected Poetry, p. 152, and the revisions (CSP, 123) are discussed.

an overly alliterative effect is removed.

Other examples of the *paysage* mode used in the sonnet occur in a short sequence of five sonnets entitled "London to Hongkong," which appears in the first part of Journey to a War (1939), a travelogue on the Sino-Japanese war written with Christopher Isherwood in 1938. These sonnets are similar to "Brussels in Winter" and other sonnets of the *paysage* mode in using descriptions of physical places as a means of commenting upon human nature and society.

The order of these five sonnets is only loosely chronological in terms of the sea voyage, and Auden alters the order, substitutes one sonnet, and revises the whole series for the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems. They will be discussed here in their original order and wording, beginning with "The Sphinx." The Collected Poetry texts are used, although this brief sequence is not together there.

"The Sphinx" (CP, 33) is almost more of a persona than a *paysage*. It does convey a sense of large expanses of time and space: "Even the earliest conquerors saw / The face of a sick ape . . ." which "lies, turning / A vast behind on shrill America." The Sphinx refuses solace to its visitors: "The huge hurt face accuses, / And pardons nothing." While the self-containment of the Sphinx suggests a gulf in time, instead the eternal continuity of sickness and suffering is the main theme, appropriately introducing a group of sonnets written on the way to war.

Auden's revisions of this sonnet go in the direction of being more concrete and personal. "A Presence in the hot invaded land./ The lion of a tortured stubborn star" becomes "An ailing lion crouched on dirty sand. / We gape, then go uneasily away." The tercets are redivided into a quatrain and a couplet, which, as rarely happens in Auden's son-

nets, serves to epitomize the poem's main theme.

A truer example of Auden's *paysage* mode is found in the second sonnet, "The Ship" (CP, 132). As a *paysage* or place, the ship offers a microcosm of Western civilization. After describing the class divisions and preoccupations of the passengers, Auden remarks: "Someone perhaps is leading the civilized life." He further condemns Western civilization by likening it to the "barren plains" of the sea. In contrast to the pompous emptiness of Western non-civilization awaits the "septic East" of "a war, new flowers, and new dresses," toward which the ship travels.

The tone here remains neutral and flat, the observations dry, and the iambic hexameter almost prosaic. The real and threatening test of the final stanza comes in unexpected contrast to this blandness, and is not fully integrated with the rest of the sonnet:

Somewhere a strange and shrewd Tomorrow goes to bed
 Planning the test for men from Europe; no one guesses
 Who will be most ashamed, who richer, and who dead.

Auden frequently writes about the decadence of Western society during the thirties; he and his friends were anticipating destruction and doom if civilization were not regenerated. Although Auden was less politically involved than were many other writers of the time, and not, as discussed, a propagandist in his art, nonetheless he was concerned with alerting the West to its decline. He anticipates a grave test indeed in this and other sonnets in the series. Other poems of the period, such as "Danse Macabre," hold equally grim warnings.

Auden revises most of the sonnets in the "London to Hongkong" series to make them more concrete and closer to his own esthetic standards in 1966. He omits entirely "The Traveller" (CP, 55), probably because it does not bear the warning of doom that is the main message of the others.

Surely it deserves some place in the collection, however, for nothing "bad-mannered or boring" mars it, to use Auden's criteria from the Forward to the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems. Ironically, the traveler "seeks the hostile unfamiliar place," but instead finds a welcome everywhere he goes. The persona is firmly portrayed with a richness of suggestion about him and those like him. Technically, the poetic devices enhance the content. Although the iambic pentameter is more insistent in its rhythm and less like the spoken word than is usual in Auden's poetry at this time, in the octave it has a militant ring, which, along with the simple masculine rhymes, appropriately suggests the traveler's striving for the unusual. This rhythm is softened by feminine rhymes in the sestet, which describes the universal welcome the traveler receives. Gently satirical in tone, the sonnet closes quite beautifully with tolerance for tourists and all such pathetic questers:

The cities hold his feeling like a fan;
And crowds make room for him without a murmur,
As the earth has patience with the life of man.

Perception, imagination, and irony work together in the next poem of this original group, the paysage of "Macao" (CP, 18). The octave captures the color, complacency, and self-indulgence of Macao without moralizing: "Churches beside the brothels testify / That faith can pardon natural behaviour." The tone changes to a harsh irony in the sestet, when "The major sins by which the heart is killed" are exposed beneath the charming indulgence and corruption. Auden mocks the smugness and hypocrisy of Macao:

Religious clocks will strike; the childish vices
Will safeguard the low virtues of the child;
And nothing serious can happen here.

The word "Child" in Auden's lexicon at this time means the preconscious

or primitive and non-rational aspects of the human intelligence, thus suggesting that Macao lives on an infantile level. Once the sinister and frightening truth is revealed, the initial impression of harmless, child-like sin vanishes. As in the best of the persona and paysage sonnets, revealed are not only a particular city, but also universal human traits.

Some of the revisions of this sonnet show Auden's remarkable ability to improve his lines nearly twenty years after their original composition and yet retain the same meaning and purpose:

And bore these gay stone houses like a fruit,
And grew on China imperceptibly.

becomes

Its gay stone houses an exotic fruit,
A Portugal-cum-China oddity.

Because the revised lines are more frivolous and more accepting of the condition of Macao, they better serve to entice the reader into enjoying the initial superficial impression of the city. Similarly, revisions in the sestet make the meaning clearer, but do not alter it.

The fifth sonnet of the original "London to Hongkong" series, "Hongkong 1938" (CP, 62), likewise assumes a neutral and impersonal tone, not intended to cover the irony. Against the polished veneer of Hong Kong, the theme of indifference to events appears in the lines "off-stage, a war / Thuds like the slamming of a distant door." The revisions, until the conclusion, generally make the description more particular and hence more visually concrete; for example, "substantial men of birth and education" becomes "Their suits well-tailored and they wear them well." (CSP, 120).

What distinguishes this sonnet from the observant irony and cool amusement or hard warnings of the others comes in its final two lines. Ultimately the portrait of Hong Kong leads to this broad philosophical comment:

We cannot postulate a General Will;
For what we are, we have ourselves to blame.

in the 1939 version. Perhaps unexpectedly considering his work at this time, Auden changes these lines in the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems to lines which would be non-committal and bemused out of context, but which have a sinister cast in this series:

Each has his comic role in life to fill,
Though life be neither comic nor a game.

In the "Foreward" to the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, Auden has this to say about his revisions:

Critics, I have observed, are apt to find revisions ideologically significant. One, even, made a great to-do about what was in fact a typographical error. I can only say that I have never, consciously at any rate, attempted to revise my former thoughts or feelings, only the language in which they were first expressed, when, on further consideration, it seemed to me inaccurate, lifeless, prolix or painful to the ear.³³

But this is clearly an ideological change. Auden appears still more self-contradictory if we look again at the passage in the 1966 Foreward discussing the "dishonest" poems which he discards. Auden implies that entire poems were thrown out whenever philosophical revisions were needed and that his limited revisions were for aesthetic reasons only. Most likely he did not intend to restrict himself in this way; in any event here is an obviously philosophical as well as aesthetic revision, and one worth exploring, in spite of Auden's admonition.

³³p. 16.

The 1939 ending firmly makes man responsible for himself, something many poems then and later imply. In political and social terms, the lines suggest the responsibility of all men for the imminent disaster or "test." The original lines place the same responsibility upon individuals for their personal lives; no intervening God or predetermined pattern controls either individual or national destiny. Auden suggests that national life reflects the total activities of personal lives. And the underlying assumption is, of course, that something can be done to alter and improve life if man will only take the responsibility for doing so.

While the new lines do not directly contradict the original, they no longer imply that man can control his destiny. The words "comic role" in the context of this war suggest that men are small parts, even puppets, in the larger whole of life. And "Life" in the revised lines comes across as deadly rather than simply a serious arena for the acting out of responsible individuals. The new ending turns on the word "comic," also used in the second stanza: "Here in the East the revised to "our" bankers have erected / A worthy temple to the Comic Muse." In its broadest sense, comedy means avoiding the moral issues of good and evil and attending only to the more superficial aspects of social life. In revising the lines, Auden implies that we are not entirely responsible for the social role we play in life. A similar implication about predestination appears in the 1966 revision of "The Useful" (CSP, XIII, 184).

In addition to revising the conclusion to this sonnet, Auden rearranges the sequence in the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, so that this sonnet no longer has the last word. The sonnet used in the 1966 edition helps to cushion the change elsewhere in the series from optimistic re-

sponsibility to pessimistic helplessness by more hopefully concluding with: "We learn to pity and rebel." This sonnet, "A Major Port," will be considered in its original context in "In Time of War," the major sonnet sequence of Journey to a War.

If these five sonnets are reviewed as a group, some general characteristics of Auden's paysage mode technique stand out, chiefly the way he uses seemingly objective descriptions of places in order to make pointed observations about the human community. Through the paysage mode, the poet can make his abstract ideas and criticisms at once tangible and subtle. Other characteristic qualities include the habitual, thoroughly unromantic detachment of feeling from object or scene being described and the absence of an obvious moral stance, even though most of his observations concern moral situations and issues. Rather than forcing his views, Auden sticks to ironically neutral descriptions, which are not, however, as free of bias as they seem. While facts and things appear to speak for themselves, Auden actually speaks through them. His choice of details, however, makes it difficult to accuse him of preaching. No one would deny that the lines

Ten thousand miles from home and What's-her-name,
The bugle on the Late Victorian hill
Puts out the soldier's light . . .

from "Hongkong 1938" accurately portray a typical wartime occurrence, nor would the reader be likely to take issue with such innocuous and humorous labels as "Late Victorian hill." Yet from these lightly colored details, and from the final line of each of these sonnets, the reader gains an overall impression of impending doom. For another example from the same poem, here is the second stanza:

Only the servants enter unexpected;
Their silence has a fresh dramatic use:
Here in the East the bankers have erected
A worthy temple to the Comic Muse.

Except for the satirical jab at the world of finance, nothing is objectionable or obviously biased in the lines above. The juxtaposition of physical facts simply makes a point of incongruities of life and of the need to understand and perhaps alter ourselves and our society. But essentially Auden leaves the reader to draw these conclusions for himself.

CHAPTER II

"IN TIME OF WAR"

Auden's major sonnet sequences, "In Time of War" and "The Quest," belong to an old tradition going back to Petrarch's sonnet sequence to his mistress, Laura. In England, Thomas Watson introduced the idea of a sequence of poems with his Hecatomparchia, or A Passionate Century of Love, published in the late sixteenth century. It contains no sonnets, but it inspired Sidney to write the sonnet sequence Astrophel and Stella a decade later. Sidney's sequence, which contains several songs as well as sonnets, initiated a wave of sonnet sequences late in the sixteenth century, including Spenser's Amoretti. These sequences were dedicated to ladies, usually of appealing charms, but stony hearts.

Love remains the subject of the sonnet until the end of the sixteenth century. Donne and then Milton are both notable in their flexibility with both form and subject matter of the sonnet. Few sonnets appear in the Augustan period, but the form re-emerges in the later eighteenth century. Wordsworth, a great sonneteer, wrote over five hundred sonnets. The sonnet sequence was revived by the Victorians with Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's The House of Life. George Meredith published a sequence of sixteen-line poems.

Considering Auden's interest in the sonnet form in the late thirties, it is not surprising that he should choose a sequence of sonnets for a sustained, yet varied expression of his ideas. The sonnet sequence

suits his thinking at the time of Journey. In comparing and contrasting "In Time of War" and the long poem "Commentary," which accompanies the sonnets and expresses many of the same ideas, the reader will find the sonnets more polished, more concrete, and more vibrant in meaning and imagery than the longer poem. Auden also seems to find the sonnets more suited to the expression of universal notions; the long poem refers more often than the sonnets to current events and attitudes. For me, the "Commentary," in spite of a number of fine passages, is too long, too assured in its convictions, too definite, and too lacking in tension to be completely satisfying. It cannot compete with the open feeling of many of the sonnets, with their immediacy and compassion--or scorn. (These observations are not meant to apply to the bulk of Auden's longer poems, of course.)

Contemporary Background

"In Time of War," initially published in Journey to a War (1939), contains prose narration by Christopher Isherwood and verse by Auden. It is the second travelogue on which Auden collaborates; the first is Letters from Iceland (1937). Iceland was remote from European politics, however; it was a place from which to observe at a distance, whereas China was engaged in an historically significant war with Japan. Auden does not actively seek involvement in politics by going to China, and he takes a long perspective on what he learns there.

A biographical aside on Auden's personal history at this time might now be in order, for in the year of Journey's publication Auden moves to the United States. He has said little about his reasons for the change other than he felt stifled by the traditions of Europe, but

some understanding of the controversy over his move may throw light on his poetry of the time.

Auden wrote frequently, if usually obliquely, on political themes during the thirties. An investigation of the reminiscences of some of his compatriots and colleagues during this period--writers such as Cecil Day-Lewis, Stephen Spender, Julian Symons, John Lehmann, and Michael Roberts--reveals that one of their preoccupations was with the proper relationship between poetry and politics. One gains the impression from these writers that Auden was considered a leader in the movement to cleanse England and Western civilization through the written word and to rebuild it according to the intuition of poets. Julian Symons recalls the key-notes of chaos, catastrophe, and rebirth that directed the poetic intentions of the period. He says he can read Auden's poetry of the early thirties and still feel the "old excitement." For Symons, Auden's poems "promised something that time and society and human weakness have denied."³⁴ He still believes that Auden "abandoned" the cause.

It seems more likely, however, that Auden's poetry was never as propagandistic or even politically concerned as his contemporaries assumed. There is considerable criticism in it, but no program. As a rule, Auden's poems tend to reflect the political attitudes of the time rather than to comment upon or to shape them. When a course of action is advocated, it is on the individual level, as in the 1930 "Let History Be My Judge":

As for ourselves there is left remaining
Our honour at least,
And a reasonable chance of retaining
Our faculties to the last.

³⁴The Thirties (London, 1960), p. 14.

Evidently, Auden's role in the political movements was misconstrued by his colleagues, Auden himself believing that poetry could not be used to persuade, at least not directly. In the introduction to The Poet's Tongue in 1935, Auden states that poetry may illuminate, but not dictate. Even the melodrama On The Frontier,³⁵ with its over-simplified symbolism, examines the situation, but does not take sides. While Spain (1937) glorifies the struggle for freedom, it nonetheless lays the burden of the outcome not upon individual fighting men, but upon the life force. In his "Foreward" to the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, he even claims that Spain took its strength from rhetoric rather than conviction. At no point does Auden provide the kind of leadership his colleagues seemed to have anticipated. Perhaps if they had read his poems more closely for what he was actually saying rather than for what they expected him to be saying, they would have been less shocked at his switch in citizenship. Recent literary critics have found considerable continuity in Auden's thought, including the new interest in Christianity which follows his move.

Not surprisingly, then, "In Time of War" looks largely to the universal elements of war, not to the particular issues. The main themes he concentrates on are eternal ones, such as the necessary evil of civilization and the distinction between truth and lie. The perspective is historical, ranging broadly from the Fall up to the present. The first four sonnets deal with the earliest history of man: I distinguishes man from animals; II treats the finality of the Fall; III the difficulties inherent in being human, and IV the "natural" man as against the city man. The next four sonnets consider different kinds of leaders and their

³⁵With Christopher Isherwood (New York, 1938).

failures. From IX through XIII, it becomes more difficult to group the sonnets according to topic. Number IX, cast in terms of class division, is in fact about psychological choice and repression. X suggests the history of Christianity; XII, the cyclical history of civilization. Number XI, based on the myth of Ganymede, helps to explain the evil of civilization described in XII. Number XIII offers a feeble hope for the enduring buoyancy of man in spite of the continuing power of evil. From XIV through XXVI, Auden comes closer to the Chinese War, though generally still seeking the universal elements. The last sonnet draws together the major themes and imagery of the sequence in a masterful conclusion. (Text used is that of the 1945 Collected Poetry, pp. 319-334, with reference made to revisions when suitable.)

The "In Time of War" sonnets form a coherent body of poetry, in both content and style. By repeating a number of stylistic techniques, Auden helps to unify the comments he makes about the nature of man through the ages; repeated patterns in the prosody underscore the connections in the content of the sonnets. For example, nine of the twenty-seven sonnets begin with the indefinite pronoun "he" or "they," and another five easily could with minor changes. While each of these pronouns is developed into a distinct persona, the approach nevertheless gives continuity to the personae and what they represent. Similarly, a majority of these sonnets begins on a positive or at least a neutral note and ends with a negation or disaster in the last line or stanza, some key last words being "envied," "oppressor," "hated," "trembled," and "ravished." Conversely, those sonnets which open with a negative observation tend to close on a more optimistic note. Hence Auden gives a balanced view of life through style as well as statement, with the weight on the

pessimistic side.

Sudden, unusual personification is another repeated stylistic device. "Museums stored his learning," "the groping searchlights," or "a telephone is speaking"--such phrases give the clue that Auden measures some of the meaning of existence by the objects in the environment, both by what they are and by the symbolic significance he gives them. Paysage elements convey the relationship of man to nature, with the same elements repeated often enough to take on a particular meaning in this sequence, for example, waters (streams, fountains) are part of the natural order from which man is alienated by the Fall, and the mountains are the shaping necessities of our life.

Nearly every sonnet has some degree of rapid narration; Auden's emphasis is upon becoming, not being. The individual personae of the narratives have universal gifts or, more usually, failings: the pilots never realize the contradiction inherent in the bombing; the bard becomes self-conscious; solipsism leads to self-oppression. The personae portraits thus have more than intrinsic interest. The point of most of the narratives, too, is generally that of the concluding sonnet: that we must exercise our will in order to keep our freedom in the face of necessity.

In 1936, Auden remarks that "Personally, the kind of poetry I should like to write but can't is 'the thoughts of a wise man in the speech of the common people.'"³⁶ In many respects, the sonnets of "In Time of War" seem to try to fulfill this ideal, with the result that the common speech obscures many of the poetic merits. Diction and syntax, particularly in the original version, are plain, uncomplicated, journal-

³⁶"Poets, Poetry, and Talk," The Highway, XXIX (December 1936), 44. Quoted by Blair, Auden, p. 22f.

istic, and often rather flat, but do convey the impression that these sonnets are of and for the common man. Particularly tiresome in this imitation of common speech are the long series of lines beginning with "And" Most of these are corrected in the 1966 edition, with very little loss of the everyday effect, which is carried well enough by the selection of metaphors and details. An inordinate number of lines break between two clauses in the middle of the line, whether by a comma, a conjunction or an understood conjunction, creating a choppy effect. Again, the speech of the common man is approximated, but at the expense of being tedious and distracting from the thoughtful content.

While some of the "In Time of War" sonnets which sound determinedly common and anti-poetic are merely dull, at least in part, and while often the rhetorical devices, particularly personification, tend to be over-used by repetition throughout the sequence, at their best these sonnets touch the universal through the commonplace. Some sonnets are diminished by ordinariness; others gain their dignity through it.

The Fall of Man: Sonnets I-III

Sonnet I fittingly introduces man as the creature of innate difficulty in living. The octave describes--without glorification--the simplicity and fullness of the animal kingdom:

So from the years the gifts were showered; each
 Ran off with his at once into his life:

 They were content with their precocious knowledge,
 And knew their station and were good for ever.

Robert Bloom has referred to this sonnet as "an Audenesque and Darwinian paraphrase of Genesis" and calls attention to Auden's use of animal quali-

ties as a "major means of delineating human nature."³⁷ The main point of the octave is the singleness of identity and action, "the station," that Auden attributes to each animal and vegetable. In contrast, in the sestet comes man, "a childish creature," who can assume any features and who lacks clarity, simplicity, and conviction in his actions. In this sonnet it seems man never led the unified life of the animal world, that man is innately perverse in his pride and hence is from the beginning without a station. Auden describes the non-human world with whimsy; for man he shows both compassion and impatience with man's uncertain condition. Several distinctly human characteristics are brought out: the capacity for assuming different moral positions ("fake with ease a leopard or a dove," significantly revised in 1966 to "fake, as chance fell," a leopard or a dove" [my italics], indicating again a more fatalistic philosophy in the later version); the difficulty of uncovering truth; and the difficulty of loving. Bloom also notes that the use of the grammatical singular for the universal condition "catches precisely the note of woeful loneliness that Auden wants."³⁸ It is not the best sonnet of the sequence, but its moderation and accuracy make it a fine introduction to the nature of man.

The second sonnet, one of the finest of the sequence, is considerably more complex than the first and contains many of Auden's preoccupations during the late thirties and early forties. Its major topic is the Fall of man, the "childish creature," who leaves the Garden in pride and self-confidence, but then must learn to cope with his new relation

³⁷Robert Bloom, "W. H. Auden's Bestiary of the Human," Virginia Quarterly Review, XLII, 216 and p. 211.

³⁸Ibid., p. 217.

to nature and himself. A number of Audenesque techniques make this poem on a traditional theme fresh and stimulating: concrete expression of his psychological insights, original imagery for the familiar Fall-related topic of readjustment to nature, and the reaching-out to universal implications in the concise last stanza. Some of the imagery introduced in Sonnet I reappears, but acts more incisively here. The sonnet as a whole is carefully polished in imagery, structure, and theme; for the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, Auden altered only a single word and some punctuation.

From the first stanza, Auden refers to man in the plural, evidently meaning the first human couple, who are more like proud rebellious children than the parents of the human race. Authority is unsuccessful in limiting behavior; like stubborn children, "they" follow their own notions:

They wondered why the fruit had been forbidden;
It taught them nothing new. They hid their pride,
But did not listen much when they were chidden;
They knew exactly what to do outside.

As in Paradise Lost, when all nature shudders the moment Eve accepts the forbidden fruit, so here man's relation to nature changes radically from comfortable harmony and perhaps unity to the wildness--and isolation--of freedom outside the Garden. "They" become distinct from, not a part of, the natural order. They must now seek self-mastery to replace their former innocence and simplicity:

They left: immediately the memory faded
Of all they'd learnt: they could not understand
The dogs now who, before, had always aided;
The stream was dumb with whom they'd always planned.

This stanza makes clear what the first sonnet did not: the consequence of the Fall was divided consciousness in place of the single

animal consciousness.³⁹ Auden says elsewhere that "the development of self-consciousness in man marked a break with the rest of the organic world."⁴⁰ Loss of communication with dogs exemplifies the break in man's relationship with the animal world. Severed from nature, man has lost his original companionship and aid from animals and must assume full responsibility. In this sonnet sequence, streams, fountains, and water represent the natural order of the universe; it is in flux, but essentially constant. After the Fall, the stream no longer speaks to man; he must learn again to understand his environment. We shall see that Sonnet III continues this theme of man's new relationship to nature. Its lines "The fountain's utterance was itself alone; / The bird meant nothing; that was his projection," also underscore the new role of man as the interpreter of nature rather than one of her unthinking parts.

In Sonnet II, the proud, childish men in the Garden before the Fall are described in the first stanza, and their separation from nature after the Fall, in the second. The sestet describes the search for maturity and readjustment, first in individual terms and then in social and political terms:

They wept and quarrelled: freedom was so wild.
In front, maturity, as he ascended,
Retired like a horizon from the child;

The dangers and the punishments grew greater;
And the way back by angels was defended
Against the poet and the legislator.

Particularly pleasing in these stanzas is the simile used to describe the

³⁹Cf. W. H. Auden, "Psychology and Art Today," in The Arts Today, ed. by Geoffrey Grigson (London, 1935).

⁴⁰"The Good Life," in Christianity and the Social Revolution, ed. by John Lewis, et al. (London, 1935), p. 37.

pursuit of maturity. Maturity remains always just beyond reach, like the horizon which seems to retreat as one approaches, particularly if one has the primitive outlook of a child, as Auden considers man to have in these first sonnets.

The last two lines are reminiscent of the end of Paradise Lost, as the angels block the return to Eden, though not with Milton's "dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms." Auden's concern is that poets and politicians accept the burden of the Fall, perhaps even see it as the "Fortunate Fall," and try not to recover the supposed primal innocence, as too many poets and politicians, particularly in the contemporary welfare state, attempt to do.⁴¹ Auden says much the same thing in his introduction to Poets of the English Language, I: we must "discover a unity . . . or we shall surely die by spiritual despair and physical annihilation." It is not a nostalgic search, however:

Luther and Descartes, to whatever brink of disaster we may have allowed them to push us, stand, like the angels about Eden, barring the way back from an unintelligible dualism to any simple one-to-one relation. That way lies, not the Earthly Paradise, but a totalitarian hell.⁴²

Once he has become self-conscious and distinguishes spirit from body, man has to live with this dualism and cannot return to a preconscious unity.

Sonnet III continues the theme of man's discovering the unhappy difficulty of being human. In the first stanza, man, now referred to in the singular "he," finds himself isolated from nature. He learns of the

⁴¹The phrasing of the last line is reminiscent of Shelley's romantic vision of poets as "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," which Auden has called the "silliest remark ever made about poets" (In "Squares and Oblongs," p. 177), and a description of "the secret police, not the poets" (In The Dyer's Hand, p. 27).

⁴²p. xxx.

power of language in the second stanza:

The bird meant nothing; that was his projection

Who named it as he hunted it for food.
He felt the interest in his throat, and found
That he could send his servant to the wood,
Or kiss his bride to rapture with a sound.

The third stanza describes man using these discoveries to breed "like locusts" until he has choked the world "and to his own creation became subject." As a capsule history from the Garden to the twentieth century A.D., this sonnet is remarkable not only in encompassing the major social problems of the present ---over-population, greed, oppression--- but also in giving a cogent if partial explanation of how man has imprisoned himself in the present. No distinction is made here between individual and society; their psychology and misery are one. The final stanza shows the impotent rage of man who cannot properly use his potential:

And shook with hate for things he'd never seen,
And knew of love without love's proper object,
And was oppressed as he had never been.

In revealing man's abuse of human powers, Auden is most original in fusing the individual and society, but the various parts of the sonnet do not fuse together as successfully. The clearest message of the sonnet is that man has populated the earth without love and consequently has oppressed himself. Auden leaves too much up to the reader, however, in not making the connection between the initial domination through the power of speech and the eventual self-oppression through abuse of powers. That we admire and respond to the poem is a tribute not to any inherent logic, but to its accurate depiction of emotions universally shared, especially in the last stanza.

Types of Men: Sonnets IV-IX

Sonnets I-III have to do with the Fall of man from the Garden; they are philosophical-psychological studies and do not particularly fit into the paysage-persona frame of analysis. Sonnets IV-VIII have to do with the types of men who have since inhabited the earth and fall into the persona category. Sonnet IX stands alone.

Sonnet IV provides a transition between the Fall and persona groups. It describes the "natural man," and the error made, again by poets and rulers, when the natural man is believed to have inherited the unity of the Garden of Eden. Although Auden typically retains an apparent neutrality of attitude toward his subject, he nonetheless puts across his opinions of man in nature and of those who glorify him. He shows the farmer—shepherd archetype to be the prisoner of nature, not its easy communicant. The natural man has no freedom, but is governed by earth and seasons. He may be preferred over his city (read "civilization") cousins who lack even this restricted stability, but he should not be falsely revered for the qualities for which we habitually praise him:

The townsman thought him miserly and simple,
The poet wept and saw in him the truth,
And the oppressor held him up as an example.

Auden's revision of the second line quoted above makes the meaning still clearer: "Unhappy poets took him for the truth," underlining again his rejection of the romantic fallacy that a return to the natural life, as imagined in the Garden of Eden, is possible.

This is not one of Auden's richest sonnets; it serves rather to make its point in the ongoing sequence of ideas. Most notable are Auden's cunningly neutral expressions which at first make the reader uncritically

join in the praise of the natural man. The idea that "The mountains chose the mother of his children, / And like a conscience the sun ruled the days," sounds pleasing, especially in contrast to the city cousins, until put into the context of the sestet. The consonantal rhymes of the sestet help to make it a unit of thought in which the natural man is identified for what he is--"in likeness," not in harmony, with earth.

In the continuation of types of men, Sonnet V could be entitled "The History of a Leader." The leader flares into brief prominence, then falls into insignificance. The content of this sonnet is unoriginal; its psychology is sound, but simple. Most interesting for the purposes of this essay are the extensive revisions made in the 1966 CSP, where the nouns are more specific; the verbs, more active; the adjectives, less common; and the whole is more concrete and succinct.

Sonnet VI considers the idealist and his attempt at self-purification in the pursuit of Truth. Using a medieval metaphor, Auden creates a questing figure who has luckily predicted the future by using superstitions. Then the quester falls "in love with Truth before he knew her" and woos her "in solitude and fasting," scorning "those who served her with their hands." (Auden has this cerebral quest take place in "imaginary lands.") The quester at last looks into the eyes of Truth and, in a moment of revelation,

Saw there reflected every human weakness,
And saw himself as one of many men.

Although occasionally ambiguous enough to lead the reader astray, the strengths of this sonnet nonetheless outweigh its weaknesses. One strength is the universally appealing metaphor of the quest. Another lies in the genuine narrative interest generated and the development of

"suspense" in the revelation of the nature of Truth. While reminiscent of the "belle dame sans merci" theme, even in the final lines, this sonnet has a more global theme, however. The conclusion not only surprises, but includes the reader, who must also be "one of many men" and see himself reflected. It is a humbling but compassionate poem, devoid of pomposity or mockery.

Sonnet VII looks at a singer-prophet and his loss of the prophetic gift. A vivid simile and a rush of words express the relation between the man and his followers: "Their feeling gathered in his like a wind / And sang: they cried--'It is a God that sings'--." These lines form a succinct, understated, yet masterful comment about the relation between popular feeling, prophet, and religion. How the poet changes from a man at one with the people to a man filled with hatred and fear is explained in psychologically simple terms: When vanity makes the poet look only to himself as the source of song, he loses spontaneous creativity, and with it his rapport with his fellow man. The loss is twofold; Auden is at least as concerned about the failure of human relationships as he is about the failure of poetry in this sonnet. A good, but not a perfect sonnet, this one mostly interests us, as so often in Auden, for its content. It can be looked upon primarily as a comment on the poetic gift, or, in this sequence, as a specific example of the fall of man through pride. Auden chose it for his Selected Poetry (New York, 1959), entitling it "The Bard."

Sonnet VIII could be called "The False One," for the subject of the sonnet abuses his gifts and then is estranged from earth and love. The singular "he" of this sonnet actually represents the history of all men, whose wealth and knowledge have been purchased at the price of wisdom,

peace, and love. As in VI and VII, the natural honesty and wholeness of life in the Garden of Eden are sorely lacking. Without being among the most memorable of Auden's sonnets, it is readable and thought-provoking, plain and direct without being dull or didactic. The harsh and even blasphemous nature of some of the ideas and imagery puts them bitingly closer to twentieth century experience. Work, religion, learning and wealth have become mechanical, man-dominated and meaningless:

And strangers were as brothers to his clocks,
And with his spires he made a human sky.

Philosophically, the fullest statement comes in the last three lines telling what is missing in this lonely, misused life: he "lived expensively and did without, / And could not find the earth which he paid for."

In contrast to Sonnet VIII, which seems to have been written so that any casual reader of the prose of Journey could enjoy and profit from it, Sonnet IX is less straightforward. In part a mental landscape, it contains elements of the paysage mode. On a literal level, the poem investigates the relations between living and dead, but with enough obscurity to suggest there is an elusive figurative level of meaning as well. This sonnet was omitted from the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, perhaps because this figurative level does not hold completely together.

If "they" is taken to mean those who died, we see in the first stanza a strange and puzzling juxtaposition of good and bad consequences of deaths: oppression is gone, but egoism is strengthened. The second stanza continues the theme more clearly and more positively; here "the kingly and the saintly" dead still influence us and are associated with "woods and oceans," the more innocent and natural parts of society for Auden. They represent the ideals we unsuccessfully try to attain, but

sadly cannot. The sestet suggests a metaphor of the unconscious in its description of the dead as accessible for restoration, as if their ideals were buried in our collective unconscious. Some lovely lines grace this sonnet, particularly in the second stanza, but on the whole too many obscurities and ambiguities remain unresolved for it to be a successful poem.

The History of Evil: Sonnets X-XIII

Sonnets X-XIII generally form another group, centering around a long overview of evil throughout history. Sonnet X covers the Christian epoch and its apparent decline. Sonnet XI ironically treats a divine effort to use power; Sonnet XII considers the eternal presence of evil; Sonnet XIII refers to history itself.

Sonnet X, dealing with Christ and Christianity, is omitted from the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, perhaps because it seems at once more contrived and more slack than Auden's better work, or perhaps because Auden found it "lifeless" or "prolix" (to quote from his 1966 Foreward) and not worthy of preservation. Auden defines good poetry as "memorable speech" in the introduction to The Poet's Tongue⁴³; there are several memorable phrases in this prosaic sonnet, especially the provocative final stanza telling what happened to the churches ("courts") when Christ Himself was ignored in them:

To fear and greed those courts became a centre;
The poor saw there the tyrant's citadel,
And martyrs the lost face of the tormentor.

If this sonnet as a whole is disappointing in contrast to Auden's better

⁴³p. v.

efforts, at least it should not be too severely criticized for being the simple, popular expression of ideas that it is evidently intended to be. Its colloquial diction and tangible imagery effectively bring an otherwise remote myth closer, with, for example, such plain, yet original lines as "He felt familiar to them like their wives."

Sonnet XI, entitled "Ganymede" in the Selected Poetry edition (1959), ironically portrays a divine and, by implication human, power. In ancient mythology, Ganymede is a handsome Trojan youth whom Zeus, disguised as an eagle, carries off to become one of the immortals. In Auden's sonnet, Ganymede fails to respond to the overtures of Zeus's dove, but does take up with Zeus's messenger, from whom he learns "many ways of killing." Irony lies at the heart of the sonnet. The hypocritical god returns in the form of the predator eagle when his peaceful dove fails to persuade and rationalizes:

Surely His duty now was to compel;
For later he would come to love the truth,
And own his gratitude.

In many respects, it reflects modern political evil.

Exasperatingly, this sonnet initially seems to promise more than close scrutiny yields. Once the ironic comment upon power is grasped, little is left to uncover, although the difficulties of the sonnet imply the presence of more than one level of allegory. However, there is no irony in the use of the myth; no allusion to the conflicting ideas of nobility and preying which the eagle has symbolized in Western culture; no tension in distinguishing between the ancient and Christian deities. The narration of events in the sonnet is difficult to follow, even with the later revisions. It is not clear whether Zeus's messenger and the eagle are the same, or whether Zeus appears as an eagle and later sends

a messenger, as it seems in the 1966 version. What makes this a worthwhile and even good sonnet is the unexpected use of an unfamiliar myth to make a point, and to make it as a lively and psychologically cogent narrative. Auden himself must think highly of this sonnet to have included it in the 1959 Selected Poetry.

Sonnet XII, which is also included in the Selected Poetry, carries forward the notion of the continuity of evil, developed in Sonnets X-XIII. In metaphor and historical period, it goes back to the medieval atmosphere of Sonnet VI. Sonnet X alludes to the presence of the evil of tyranny in its observation of the demise of the church, and Sonnet XI notes the appeal of the truculent eagle for a youth bored and indifferent to peace and "fatherly embraces."

In Sonnet XII, Auden describes a time when vigilance against the vicious powers relaxes, only to have them return, mercilessly. It is one of Auden's finer sonnets: original, full, and a little enigmatic, and was written well before the journey to China. Its breadth is suggested by the two entirely different titles Auden has given it. Originally, according to Spears, it was "The Economic Man" in the June-July, 1936 New Verse, a title difficult to apply without a good imagination and a critical attitude toward twentieth century capitalism. Its Selected Poetry title, "A New Age," ironically underscores the idea that evil is irrepressible.

The sonnet opens with a remarkable, albeit typical, incongruity of style. On one hand, the "deliverer" is epitomized with deft insight:

And the age ended, and the last deliverer died
In bed, grown idle and unhappy; they were safe:

But on the other hand, the force from which the people have been delivered

is described in terms of folklore and primitive superstitions made specific:

The sudden shadow of the giant's enormous calf
Would fall no more at dusk across the lawn outside.

The second stanza continues this medieval atmosphere with allusions to the terrors of the superstitious that are again made tangible--and entirely worth quoting:

They slept in peace: in marshes here and there no doubt
A sterile dragon lingered to a natural death,
But in a year the spoor had vanished from the heath;
The kobold's knocking in the mountains petered out.

The third stanza brings in a degree of complexity and enigma, while continuing the medieval theme:

Only the sculptors and the poets were half sad,
And the pert retinue from the magician's house
Grumbled and went elsewhere.

Significantly, sculptors, poets, and magicians are the first to be affected by the "deliverance" from evil; their loss liberates the evil powers. The fourth stanza continues the narrative, leading to the return of the supposedly vanquished powers and a consequent upheaval:

The vanquished powers were glad

To be invisible and free: without remorse
Struck down the sons who strayed into their course,
And ravished the daughters, and drove the fathers mad.

The notion of doomed complacency expressed here is a familiar one, and this is the expected dramatic development and logical conclusion of the sonnet. The reader is nonetheless left pondering a number of impressions of the power of the magical in human life and of the need for risk and even for the threat of unknown or superstitious dangers such as giants and gnomes. For, when knowledge and reason make the monsters harmless and sterile, leaving sculptors, poets, and magicians with nothing to

do, when, in other words, the real world seems to be under man's control, then the power of evil reappears, stronger than ever. Reason, science, technology, whatever it is called, may seem to conquer the evil forces, but evil is actually only "invisible and free." An example contemporary to the poem might be the Chinese War, an evil which man, with all his advanced knowledge, was unable to prevent. At the same time, magic and art have been dropped from civilized life just when, by this sonnet's reasoning, they are most needed. The sonnet bears a degree of nostalgia as well for the simpler ages when man accepted the mysterious as a part of his life, and was less presumptuous and more truly creative. Much of my discussion is impressionistic, fired by a sonnet which embodies philosophical wisdom, narrative interest, an extended and delightful metaphor, fine use of poetic techniques, and a wealth of impressions to carry away.

The opening of Sonnet XIII provides some of the most nearly lyrical lines in this philosophical sequence. The first stanza sings the praises of the vegetable and animal aspects of man, albeit with reservation in the opening words, "Certainly praise." The second stanza acknowledges the power of the unjust and of the universal "Fairly-Noble unifying Lie," i.e., the lie that life is good. The sestet is reminiscent of "The Sphinx" in its view of grief through history. Neither "the quick new West" nor the "passive flower-like people" of China is true or correct in its pursuits. What Auden seems to be insisting upon in Sonnets IX-XIII is that man naturally finds his species an object of praise and hope, but that these hopes prove ill-founded when one examines the actual historical achievement of man. Unless one considers his poems as a whole, the innate perversity of man in the Garden described in Sonnets I and II and the subsequent unhappiness and evil described in later sonnets make Auden appear

to be a pessimistic poet. One must look at the overall thrust and tone of his work to see his faith that the true and the good do lie within man's reach, if only he can find a way to them. In this sonnet, in spite of the outward despair, the compassion for the fallen and the quiet comment on man's endurance indicate Auden's hope for the ultimate promise of the human race.

The War in China: Sonnets XIV-XX

Auden the journalist comes to life in the next seven sonnets. The preceding sonnets reflect upon the nature and history of man; Sonnet XIV brings us up abruptly to the Sino-Japanese War, although what Auden chooses to say about this war could be said about any in our time:

Yes, we are going to suffer, now; the sky
Throbs like a feverish forehead; pain is real.

Auden is probably well-advised to omit this overly prosaic, blunt, heavily allegorized, and even occasionally trite sonnet from the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems.⁴⁴ The sestet does, however, serve an ideological place in the sequence in its insistence upon the "private massacres" taking place "Behind each sociable home-loving eye," implicating everyone in the war and denying a distinction between individuals and society. This sonnet also throws the human race back upon itself, bringing in the geographical metaphor of the mountains, which stand for the non-moral influence of the earth.

The mountains cannot judge us when we lie:
We dwell upon the earth; the earth obeys
The intelligent and evil till they die.

⁴⁴Spears, however, chooses this as one of the few sonnets from "In Time of War" he discusses. He notes the "interpreting of war as objectification of inner phenomena, a sort of moralized psyche" (149).

The mountains may choose the mate of a peasant who lives under their shadow (Sonnet IV), but the mountains and the earth have only a passive relationship with man; they are his dwelling place and his servant. The contrast between the ugly pain of the octave and the detached commentary of the sestet, however, makes the reader feel that the parts of the sonnet hardly belong together.

Sonnet XV was also omitted from the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, probably because so many of the similes are forced and unnatural, especially in the octave. Furthermore, his ideas about evil have changed by 1966. In the sonnet, Auden observes that not only have flyers chosen to violate their own ethics by bombing, but also that the bombing itself may come to influence their lives more than they suspect. From this particularization, Auden proceeds to the general rule that has been developing in these sonnets: that man has a choice of goals--to master himself on earth or to return to an only apparently innocent preconscious level of helpless existence. The former offers a true freedom; the latter, self-imprisonment.

In contrast to the structural difficulties of Sonnets XIV and XV, Sonnet XVI is conspicuously straightforward and coherent. The octave describes the behind-the-lines planning of the war through personification and representative details: "Here war is simple like a monument: / A telephone is speaking to a man." The second stanza describes the isolation and terror of the soldier in homely terms: "living men . . . / Who thirst at nine who were to thirst at noon." The realistic specifics of this sonnet stand in contrast to the emblematic mountains, water and islands of other sonnets.

While the sestet is less immediately concrete, it strongly conveys

the sinister nature of war, concluding with:

And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now:
Nanking, Dachau.

There is none of Auden's frequent intellectual attempt tolerantly to view both sides here; his condemnation is stark, and the sonnet is the better for it.

During their tour as journalists, Auden and Isherwood usually visited local hospitals and became acquainted with their English-speaking staff. Sonnet XVIII is entitled "Surgical Ward" in the 1959 Selected Poetry. In this poem Auden describes the experience of being wounded, concluding with his belief that few experiences in life can be subjects for actual empathy, and pain is not among them--a most empathic view! The third stanza is particularly noteworthy for its harmony of content, tone, and diction. After describing the isolation of a wounded man in pain, Auden continues:

For who when healthy can become a foot?
Even a scratch we can't recall when cured,
But are boist'rous in a moment. . . .

The incongruous light-heartedness of these lines perfectly makes Auden's point about the isolation of suffering. The final lines about what can be shared--"Only happiness . . . / And anger, and the idea of love"--are not developed, but are nonetheless fitting and provocative. Auden can and does pack his better sonnets with epigrammatic insights and asides which expand them beyond their fourteen lines.

The persona mode clearly reappears in Sonnet XVIII, about the significance of the life of the common soldier. Compassion, one of Auden's most outstanding characteristics, comes across strongly in this poem, also one of his most optimistic about the purpose of war.

Far from the heart of culture he was used:
 Abandoned by his general and his lice,
 Under a padded quilt he closed his eyes
 And vanished. He will not be introduced

When this campaign is tidied into books:
 No vital knowledge perished in his skull;
 His jokes were stale; like wartime, he was dull;
 His name is lost for ever like his looks.

He neither knew nor chose the Good, but taught us,
 And added meaning like a comma, when
 He turned to dust in China that our daughters

Be fit to love the earth, and not again
 Disgraced before the dogs; that, where are waters,
 Mountains and houses, may be also men.

This sonnet first appeared in the July 2, 1938 issue of The New Statesman and Nation under the title "Chinese Soldier." The revisions made for Journey, published a year later, and for the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems almost twenty years later, reflect Auden's constant effort to avoid preaching in his poetry, while at the same time remaining, in Spears's words, "unblushingly dedicated in the old-fashioned manner to the instruction and improvement of the largest possible audience" (337). The first two lines of the original sestet read "Professors of Europe, hostess, citizen, / Respect his boy. Unknown to your reporters" In the Journey version, this assertive apostrophe is dropped for "He neither knew nor chose the Good, but taught us, / And added meaning like a comma" In the 1966 version, even this much of a lesson is replaced by the inappropriately academic and unusual: "Though runeless, to instructions from headquarters / He added meaning like a comma" Auden's chief purpose for poetry has always been to arouse and to enlighten; to inform without preaching has been one of his most lasting struggles.

As an aside on the gap between the literal and the metaphorical mind, I mention that when Auden presented this poem to some Chinese army officers, they objected that no Chinese general would abandon his men, and in translating changed the line to "The rich and the poor are continuing to fight." Incidentally, it is the only poem of Auden's referred to by Isherwood in Journey.

The geographical metaphor which serves Auden so well appears at the end of "The Chinese Soldier," where "waters / Mountains and houses" represent the raw materials of civilization and remind us that the war is believed to be fought to save man. The geographical metaphor is suggested in the following sonnet as well, although XIX is about the destructive rather than constructive side of war.

Entitled "Embassy" in the 1959 Selected Poetry, this sonnet contrasts, as do several in this section of the sequence, the distance between those in control of the war and those immediately affected by its horrors. Against the background of clearing mountain peaks, Auden presents a vignette of servants, or outsiders, watching the meeting of the diplomats who plan the war. The mountains, which are always described as being close to the common man, lie at a distance, providing a setting merely rather than the substance of life for the diplomats. The civilized life of these diplomats looks, in the clearer, revised language, "a picture of the way to live."

The sestet is harsh, and, since it does not touch on ultimate causes, fatalistic:

Far off, no matter what good they intended,
The armies waited for a verbal error
With all the instruments for causing pain:

And on the issue of their charm depended
A land laid waste, with all its young men slain,
The women weeping, and the towns in terror.

More than any other, this sonnet reflects the social experiences of Auden and Isherwood in China--the rush of parties and gracious entertainment which continued as if the war were not taking place. Isherwood's prose suggests he was excited and flattered by it all; Auden evidently found the incongruity less acceptable.

Sonnet XX, at once one of the most abstract and the most fully personified of the sequence, opens with the arresting lines:

They carry terror with them like a purse,
And flinch from the horizon like a gun;

Spears quotes these lines as an example of "the vice of overfacility, of making tricks of style mechanical" (156), but the poem as a whole does convey the hopeless feeling of man's inability to grasp his place in either present or future time. The octave describes a frightened and uncomprehending "They," evidently the Chinese; the sestet joins "them" to "us," evidently the Westerners, and questions whether future ages will grasp any continuity between our time and theirs. However, there is some looseness of diction, particularly in the sestet, and some strained rhetorical questions, which may help to explain why Auden omits this sonnet from the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems.

Individual and International Repercussions:

Sonnets XXI-XXVII

The next group of sonnets generally investigates the larger effects of the war. While in many respects Sonnet XXI develops the isolation described in XX, its basic theme concerns the break that war makes with familiar civilization. The revisions from the original show Auden's later wish for more compactness and for full strength from each line. Sometimes Auden's revisions tend to be overdone, with the striving for

effect, and possibly the abandonment of the popular audience, all too apparent. Here, however, the slackness in diction is taken up without making the poem too taut. The Journey version of the first stanza is almost prosaic:

The life of man is never quite completed;
The daring and the chatter will go on:
But, as an artist feels his power gone,
These walk the earth and know themselves defeated.

The 1966 revised stanza is fuller and more precise, although less homely and common, and somewhat slick:

Our global story is not yet completed,
Crime, daring, commerce, chatter will go on,
But, as narrators find their memory gone,
Homeless, disterred, these know themselves defeated.

In the first line, the vague "life of man" is changed to the equally sweeping, but fresher "global story." In the second line, specific nouns replace two articles and a conjunction, making the line sound crowded and forced; in the third line, a representative part takes the place of a more generalized but also more personal, whole. In the fourth line, "Homeless" and "disterred" are more exact, but less concrete adjectives replacing a phrase. The 1966 version is the most recent of a number of changes in this poem between its first appearance in the Autumn 1938 New Writing and Journey.

The original title of this sonnet, "Exiles," refers to the theme as much as to the subject matter, for the alienation is not only from one's country, but also from one's culture, or from the myths and illusions of one's culture. The first stanza, quoted above, introduces the exiles and their feeling of defeat; the second stanza touches on the losses which have alienated them. The third stanza uses a fine example of a psychological metaphor:

Loss is their shadow-wife, Anxiety
 Receives them like a grand hotel; but where
 They may regret they must

The unexpected personification of Anxiety receiving the exiles "like a grand hotel" perhaps derives its effectiveness from its concrete, yet general suggestiveness, which leaves the reader free to use his own associations and images.

The final stanza has been revised as much as the first, and again greater precision strengthens the poem. It fails to continue the psychological analysis suggested in the previous stanza, however, and simply describes the isolation of the exile in a forbidden country, without friends or freedom.

In Sonnet XXII, Auden turns cynical, objecting that individuals and nations are indifferent to world events. Popular songs are taken as reflections of public sentiment. The first stanza refers to the rhythmical, primitive appeal of song to the heart and muscles. The second stanza emphasizes the content of songs:

They mirror every change in our position,
 They are our evidence of what we do;
 They speak directly to our lost condition.

Having stated these ideas about songs, Auden turns to songs popular in this year of war and finds them far removed from the realities of China and Austria.

While neither a moving nor deeply thoughtful poem, this sonnet, and others like it, should not be depreciated for being "easy" and "common," for they serve Auden's desire to inform readers. This sonnet uses just enough of a riddle to make the reader feel some sense of accomplishment in working out that "they" refers to songs, and there is a special poignancy in putting the dying and parting lovers together among those who

respond to song in spite of their situation. Nonetheless, diction, syntax and rhythm are particularly prosaic here.

The opening of Sonnet XXIII, describing defeat, is reminiscent of Auden's early poems in which spiritual struggles are conceived in military terms, although the war here is real as well as symbolic. The first six lines sadly develop the defeat until "we regret that we were ever born" (revised in the 1966 CSP to the less drastic "When Generosity gets nothing done"). We are then admonished to "think of one, / Who through ten years of silence worked and waited," before coming into his full power. This "one" lives in Muzot, and he was rewarded by the feeling of completion before his death. Unfortunately, the ordinary reader will not be able to locate Muzot in standard reference works, and without identification of it, the poem remains hopelessly vague and even baffling. If the purpose of the poem is to honor patience and diligence, it probably fails, leaving the reader feeling irritated or foolish. As Auden himself says, riddle is a valuable element in poetry, but obscurity is a vice.⁴⁵

In Sonnet XXIV, Auden again exalts the common man, the child of natural surroundings, and, perhaps more in this sonnet than in any of the others, the common man becomes a metaphor for the good lying in the unconscious of us all. In line with several other sonnets on political leaders, the first six lines comment critically upon the unloved tyrants who can find immortality only in stone monuments. In contrast are those simple good men whose descendants we are. "Earth grew them as a bay grows fishermen / Or hills a shepherd; they grew ripe and seeded." In Sonnet IV, Auden cautions against the romantic notion that men close to

⁴⁵"A Contemporary Epic," Encounter, II (February, 1954), p. 68.

the soil are innately innocent, pure, and happy like the inhabitants of the Garden of Eden. Here he says that because simply good men have existed, there must be good in us which can be cultivated. The Journey versions says directly that we have been able to revive the good seeds planted by these ancestors--or latent in our unconscious, as in Sonnet IX. The revision in 1966 puts it more cautiously: "in our blood, / If we allow them, they can breathe again." Particularly fine is the last line, which captures the gentle spirit of the good folk and the unconscious good elements underlying perverse man: "Happy their wish and mild to flower and flood."

Structurally, this sonnet provides a clear and definite contrast between the civilization of the city, in which the rulers are less wicked and tyrannical than pitiful and guilty, and the goodness that is close to the earth, or to man's primitive preconscious nature. Once again made pessimistic by civilization and its obvious ills, Auden still finds an intuitive source of optimism in the common man close to the mountains and waters, without, however, indulging in fallacious inspiration from him. A similar theme appears in Sonnets IX, XIII, XVIII, and XXVII, as well as in many longer poems, including more recent works like "Lauds" at the end of *Horae Canonicae* series.⁴⁶ Auden thus takes an almost paradoxical stand on the nature of man, finding him on one hand innately perverse enough to fall from the Garden, and on the other, a creature of potential goodness. This theme of man's double nature is pursued most fully in the appropriately titled The Double Man (New York, 1941, edition of New Year Letter.)

⁴⁶In The Shield of Achilles (London, 1955).

Auden includes Sonnet XXV of the "In Time of War" sequence in the "London to Hongkong" group in the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, under the title, "A Major Port," but also it has a fitting place here toward the end of the longer sequence. The first stanza provides an excellent example of Auden's ability to say much in a brief compass. The poem opens abruptly, as if responding to a verbal challenge: "Nothing is given: we must find our law." The line is perhaps too blunt and too confident for the older Auden, who in the 1966 revisions changes it to "No guidance can be found in ancient lore," a change which also improves the rhyme. From this introduction, the stanza becomes visual and concrete and packed with implications:

Great buildings jostle in the sun for domination;
Behind them stretch like sorry vegetation
The low recessive house of the poor.

In so describing the actual scene, Auden uses several words which have definite connotations in this context. The "great buildings" (later changed to "banks"), "jostle" merely; they do not need to struggle in their sufficient security. Behind this facade live the poor, who are not even rank weeds, but only weak "vegetation." Although the first line of the second stanza, "We have no destiny assigned us," asserts man's free will, the phrase "low recessive" reminds us of the inherited fate of the poor. ("The poor" does not seem to have the symbolic meaning of repressed or preconscious instincts here, although such an interpretation would not be entirely inconsistent with the rest of the poem.) The second stanza asserts the "equality of man" in spite of these class differences by referring to the common illness and death to which all are subject, a reminder of la condition humaine. While occasionally the objects or things Auden refers to in his sonnets exist as objects or as symbols only, here,

as so often, the buildings stand for themselves as well as having a symbolic meaning, e.g., the hospitals are a legitimate part of the landscape as well as reminders of human frailty.

The sestet returns more closely to the effects of tyranny and war. "Children are really loved here, even by police," Auden says, meaning "children" both literally and as representing the non-animal, primitive good in man, as in earlier sonnets. Rulers are again made human in the isolation of power. "They speak of years before the big were lonely," followed by the puzzling note "And will be lost," which was later changed to the more definite "Here will be no recurrence."

The final stanza, unlike any other sonnet closing by Auden, relies on the arrangement on the page to express its divided ideas:

And only
The brass bands throbbing in the parks foretell
Some future reign of happiness and peace,

We learn to pity and rebel.

After the optimistic note, the poem concludes with the law for which Auden is looking in the opening: pity first and then rebellion for change.

Sonnet XXVI is omitted from the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, and wisely enough, since this minor penultimate poem destroys some of the momentum that the sequence otherwise carries to its conclusion. This sonnet is too loose in diction ("yes, but how wrong"), too deliberately contrary ("it's the selfish who sees / In every impractical beggar a saint."), and too limited to one level of meaning to deserve such an important place in the sequence. The theme is of a "little workshop of love," assigned to a minor place in a "daring plan," but nevertheless the only project to survive disaster. The central idea is welcome in

the context of this sequence, but the mechanical and commercial terminology seems out of place, as does the vagueness of the allusions.

Such a weak poem should not be permitted to detract from the well-wrought final sonnet, XXVII, which draws together and fulfills the themes of the entire sequence. (Auden seems not to think so, however, for the concluding sonnets follow a different order in 1966.) Sonnet XXVII is about Eden, Utopia, and reality. It looks back to the innocent ideals of the garden, ahead with the contemporary technological dream, and then looks closely at man's necessary present condition.

The sonnet opens with an apparent nostalgia for Eden or at least for its more contemporary substitute, the South. For a Northern poet capable of bristling with intellectual chill, Auden is notably sympathetic toward the Southern idyll:

Wandering lost upon the mountains of our choice,
Again and again we sigh for an ancient South,
For the warm nude ages of instinctive poise,
For the taste of joy in the innocent mouth.

In a surge of pleasure, the reader recalls not only classic descriptions of Eden, but also Keat's "Ode to a Nightingale" and the "country-green, / Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth" yearned for there.

The revisions of this first stanza are worth noting: the first line, made more specific with a better sensuous contrast, becomes, "Chilled by the Present, its gloom and its noise." In the second line, "Again and again" becomes "On waking," a change which brings this stanza close to a poem written in 1949, "Prime," a longer poem which describes the loss of Paradise each day upon awaking from the still innocence of pure body to the necessary acts of civilization. This sonnet, however, is simpler, more direct, and less intellectualized than the longer, more intricate

nature of man's civilized constructions. The same metaphors appear in Sonnet XVIII, in which a soldier dies "that where are waters, / Mountains and houses, may be also men." Streams and houses are both to be differentiated from the nature of man, however; man is like neither the creations of nature nor of himself. That is, neither nature nor the most perfect of man's creations--music--provides man with a model of what he can be. Neither Eden nor Utopia is a realizable goal; being human, man is necessarily free from faultless motion. He, like the shepherd in Sonnet IV ("He stayed and was imprisoned in possession"), has much of his life determined by his surroundings and era, a basic Marxist tenet. This sonnet offers a general guide for man on earth after the Fall. The lost instincts and warm Southern innocence are replaced by a life of awareness of imperfectibility and the stringent demands of free will.

While this sonnet seems a fitting conclusion to "In Time of War," in the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems, Auden places three sonnets after it. These are XXIII ("When all the apparatus of report") and XXIV ("No, not their names," changed to "Who needs their names"), both of which treat the idea of success, the former that of an individual and the latter, that of the common simple men, and, last, the original dedicatory poem of Journey, "To E. M. Forster." This last will be discussed here, for it is one of Auden's best sonnets in the persona mode and also a firm conclusion to "In Time of War," provided that one is familiar with Forster's works. It appears out of any context on page 53 of The Collected Poetry.

It may be a fault of "To E. M. Forster" that one must be acquainted with the English novelist's works in order to appreciate the sonnet. The final stanza, in particular, is almost unintelligible unless one has

read at least Howards End. This "fault" is also a strength, however, for Auden has written a sonnet so close to the spirit of Forster that one work informs and enhances the other.

The first stanza alludes to a line from Howards End; near the end of the novel when the characters finally face the truth and are reconciled to it, Helen says, "The inner life had paid after all," referring to her and her sister's thoughtful and self-searching approach to life. Auden here pays tribute to Forster's ability to bring out truth in his novels, whether the reader wishes to learn the truth or not. Auden repeats this in striking metaphors in the second stanza:

As we run down the slope of Hate with gladness
You trip us up like an unnoticed stone,
And just as we are closeted with Madness
You interrupt us like the telephone.

These homely similes come close to recreating the way Forster can draw the reader into accepting an evil character, then suddenly, yet subtly, expose the character's malignity--for example, Philip's sister in Where Angels Fear to Tread, who seems merely shallow and foolish until her capacity for evil comes out in stealing the infant.

The theme is expanded in the sestet, which concludes the sonnet with a line as provocative as Howards End itself. Miss Avery, Auden seems to be telling us, represents those irrational, unconscious elements which come up unexpectedly into our real, active lives. Seemingly a harmless eccentric, Miss Avery rearranges the stored furniture at Howards End with the effect of predicting and perhaps shaping its future habitation. She unsheathes the sword which kills, and then in her crazy way, carries it out into the open. With such irrational forces as Miss Avery at work, we should be wary of joining the "jolly ranks of the benighted / Where

Reason is denied and Love ignored," even though we may not understand the origins of truth and love. The sonnet in many ways is as mysterious and suggestive as Forster's novels and clearly is not one of those written for a popular audience.

CHAPTER III

"THE QUEST"

Before beginning the study of "The Quest," mention should be made of the four sonnets which appear in the notes to the New Year Letter. The first, entitled "The Diaspora" in The Collected Poetry (55), footnotes the line "The Jew wrecked in the German cell," one of a string of allusions in the Letter to pre-World War II losses to totalitarianism. This sonnet extols the tenacity of the Jews and predicts the horrendous future of anti-Semitism: ". . . all they had to strike now was the human face." In contrast to the regular two quatrains and two tercets of the "In Time of War" sonnets, "The Diaspora" uses four tercets (the third and fourth were originally joined) of a developing theme, finished off with an heroic couplet with a new, concluding idea, which is nonetheless connected to the preceding tercet by enjambment and by rhyme.

The second sonnet of the notes, "Nietzsche,"⁴⁷ follows Auden's most typical sonnet form and the persona mode, although cast as an apostrophe to the philosopher. While this poem makes some penetrating historical observations, it falls apart with the overdrawn "is / This tenement gangster with a sub-machine gun in one hand / Really the Superman. . . ," and appears only in the Letter notes. The other sonnets are those about Luther and Montaigne, printed without stanza breaks.

⁴⁷Letter, p. 96.

The last of Auden's major efforts with the sonnet is the sonnet sequence "The Quest," published as part of the New Year Letter (or The Double Man in the New York edition). Just as the immediate experience of the Chinese War provides a point of reference for the many themes in "In Time of War," so the theme of man as quester unifies the personae of the later sequence. The theme of the quest figures in a number of earlier poems as well, such as "Doom is dark," "As He Is," "Lady, weeping at the crossroads," and "Atlantis," and in plays such as The Dog Beneath the Skin and The Ascent of F-6. A literate, witty, and pointed statement of the quest comes near the end of the Letter:

Aloneness is man's real condition,
That each must travel forth alone
In search of the Essential Stone,
The 'Nowhere-without-No' that is
The justice of societies.
Each salesman now is the polite
Adventurer, the landless knight
GAWAINE-QUIXOTE, and his goal
The Frauendienst of his weak soul;
Each biggie in the Canning Ring
An unrobust lone FISHER-KING. (CP, 311, 11. 1542-1552)

"The Quest" was first published in the November 25, 1940 New Republic, where Auden gives it this introduction:

The theme of the Quest occurs in fairy tales, legends like The Golden Fleece and The Holy Grail, boys' adventure stories and detective novels. These poems are reflections upon certain features common to them all. The "He" and "They" referred to should be regarded as both objective and subjective.

The terms objective and subjective as Auden uses them above refer to external and internal, the outer man and his inner spirit. A new religious perspective, mostly Kierkegaardian, infuses the sequence, without, however, commitment to any doctrine and with considerable emphasis placed upon the difficulties of the religious quest. While the approach is still narrative, the style is no longer common and simple. Instead, the fourteen lines

are as fully packed as possible, and there is also more variety in meter, rhyme, style in this sequence. As in "In Time of War," many of the subjects of these sonnets are "he" and "they," with the personae here even more non-specific, generalized, and symbolic than in the earlier sequence. "The Quest" also shares the tendency to personify objects and abstractions as well as people, although the level of animation is not so high. One or two sonnets, perhaps "The City" or "The Average," could have come from "In Time of War," but, on the whole, the content, imagery, syntax, and diction are different.

Situations: Sonnets I-V

In the original publication in The New Republic and in the Collected Poetry, Auden helpfully entitles these sonnets; in the New Year Letter and the Collected Shorter Poems, he does not. The Collected Poetry text (251-262) is used here. It is the same as in the Letter, except that the titles are kept. The first sonnet, "The Door," refers to the mental passage between the conscious and the unconscious. A vivid example of how Auden uses poetic imagery for intellectual ideas, the poem makes a case for a change in attitude toward the awesome unconscious. As the longer work "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" more fully expresses and Sonnet IX of "In Time of War" touches upon, this sonnet puts forth Auden's conviction that with more understanding and less fear, the unconscious can be a source of wonder rather than difficulty. In this sense Spears surely misses the point when he summarizes the theme as "that most of our troubles, political and personal, stem from the unconscious" (138).

The first two stanzas of "The Door" do, however, turn the unconscious into a source of impoverishment rather than enrichment. The Alice

in Wonderland metaphor runs through the sonnet, and the first stanza emphasizes the irrational, the tyrannical, the enigmatic, and the foolish encountered in the world of the unconscious:

Out of it steps the future of the poor,
Enigmas, executioners and rules,
Her Majesty in a bad temper or
The red-nosed Fool who makes a fool of fools.

This is the unconsciousness out of control, at its ugliest. The second stanza enlarges on this aspect of the unconscious, but is uglier still, for the Alice metaphor is not used:

Great persons eye it in the twilight for
A past it might so carelessly let in,
A widow with a missionary grin,
The foaming inundation at a roar.

The first two lines of this stanza express the commonplace fear of facing what the unconscious holds and probably do not surprise the reader. The third line, however, is a typical Audenesque epigram--startling, suggestive, economical. The widow and the missionary merge into a ghastly leer which nonetheless has the look of truth. In the last line of this stanza, fear of the unconscious reaches a peak.

The door continues to be physically real as well as symbolic in the third stanza. Should the door happen to open, however, it reveals the unconscious as a "wonderland" in the sunshine. This wonderland may still be frightening--Alice cries in surprise and relief upon realizing the tininess of the unconscious self, usually imagined to be vast. The Alice metaphor sets the stage for the element of mystery and innocence in the Quest, and the sonnet as a whole introduces a thoughtful and tolerant tone.

The second sonnet, "The Preparations," lacks this tolerance, however, and takes a harsher attitude toward men's inability to deal with

themselves. Ostensibly, the subject is a scientific safari for which all situations are anticipated and prepared except the men's own impulses. A seemingly simple sonnet, its philosophical content can easily be overlooked. Nonetheless, Auden has a way of striking home; for example, in describing the preparations, he ironically challenges the way in which we attempt to gain control of our environment while ignoring our inner selves. He is not without grim humor in so doing:

A watch, of course, to watch impatience fly,
Lamps for the dark and shades against the sun;
Foreboding, too, insisted on a gun
And coloured beads to soothe a savage eye.

What underlies such foreboding, Auden implies, is the proper subject for preparations for a genuine quest. Existentially, "Unluckily they were their situation."

The final lines of this sonnet may be read with either pessimism or optimism: pessimistically, and more easily here, one sees the latent capacity of men for evil; optimistically, one sees that conscious powers of self-awareness could make men strong. "The Door" suggests that the relative tininess of the unconscious mind makes conscious strength at least possible. Here the personae are unable to assume responsibility:

One should not give a poisoner medicine,
A conjurer fine apparatus, nor
A rifle to a melancholic bore.

This choice of examples suggests that the finest and deadliest of human achievements can be abused by the withdrawn as well as by the aggressive. Here, as often in the sonnets, is a polished capsule observation--this one of contemporary civilization and its capacity for good and evil.

The third poem is not a sonnet, but, remembering that many Renaissance sonnet sequences contain poems of other lengths, Auden should be forgiven this irregularity. This poem calls for an awareness of the

direction our lives are taking, that is, an awareness of life as a quest. The first stanza briefly indicates two lives which lead to ruin. The metaphor is geographical as well as biographical, a melding of the passage and persona modes. The second stanza questions whether an individual is predestined for ruin or can be saved. The first two stanzas embody a common misconception about the Freudian viewpoint, that some are "So orientated, his salvation needs / The Bad Lands and the sinister direction," that some are the pawns of their unconscious minds. The tone is pessimistic, and life appears to be cheap, as Auden emphasizes with his diction: "flashes on," "rowdy life," "torpor," "glitter."

The third stanza returns to Auden's belief that men have more power to achieve than they realize. A combination of irony, cynicism, and hope, the final message is that the Quest "should take no time at all," yet most will take as long as they can. "Our Bias" is preferring "some going round / To going straight to where we are" (CP, 118).

Some of the same thoughts appear in a book review written in December, 1939, which illuminates both sonnet sequences:

We have become obscene night worshippers, who, having discovered that we cannot live exactly as we will, deny the possibility of willing anything and are content masochistically to be lived, a denial that betrays not only us but our daemon itself That is why Darwin, Hegel, Marx, Freud, Jung, whatever modification we shall have to make in their theories, and they will be many, are so important to us. They indicate the line--and it is one which poetry has always followed, except when it has degenerated into academism or nonsense--along which the day can be reconciled with the night, Freedom with Destiny. For beneath all their local and timely errors, they agree upon a common and fundamental truth which is this: . . . in the last analysis we are lived, for the night brings forth the day, the unconscious It fashions the conscious forebrain, the historical epoch grows the idea; the subject matter creates the techniques--but it does so precisely in order that it may itself escape the bonds of the determined and the natural. The daemon creates Jacob the prudent Ego, not for the latter to lead, in self-isolation and contempt, a frozen attic life of

its own, but to be a loving and reverent antagonist. . . .⁴⁸

This is also in line with Auden's psychology of the Fall, in which man's perverse demon, or id, causes him to leave the Garden, but in which the ego or conscious self is man's challenge and hope in achieving a balance between freedom and necessity. Shortly after this period of sonneteering, Auden takes a more truly religious line; the above is the best statement in prose of his religious philosophy at this time.

"The Pilgrim," originally entitled "The Traveller," is fourth in the sequence. A well-wrought poem, it fuses a study of the inner and outer and the conscious and the unconscious to three metaphors: the medieval religious quest, the Freudian construct of id, ego, and super-ego, and Auden's own paysage. The interplay of several levels of meaning enriches the first stanza in particular. The reader's initial impression might be that of a child abed imagining the world outside, but a closer reading reveals a metaphor of the mind:

No window in his suburb lights that bedroom where
A little fever heard large afternoons at play:
His meadows multiply; that mill, though, is not there
Which went on grinding at the back of love all day.

An analysis of the symbolism here might run as follows: the bedroom is the chamber of the mind; the suburb is the region between consciousness and unconsciousness, as in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"; the window would allow the intrusion of the external world; the fever is the throb of life, or perhaps the id, which in the past, but evidently not in the present, "heard" the external "large afternoons." "His meadows multiply" suggests broad expanses for the Pilgrim to explore on his quest,

⁴⁸"Jacob and the Angel," The New Republic, CI, 1308 (December 27, 1939), 292-293.

and since there is no window to the outer world, this must refer to inner exploration, perhaps even of the unconscious. The mill suggests steadiness, as does its "grinding," and the lack of the mill perhaps indicates the loss of security. A similar image appears in the "Epilogue" to the New Year Letter, in an evocation of desolation and death: ". . . the old / Folly becomes unsafe, the mill-wheels rust, and the weirs fall slowly to pieces." (Letter, 186). The metaphors of quest, landscape, and psychic structure are all here, with the emphasis on the last.

In the second stanza, the quest takes on the dimensions of the medieval tribulations, with psychic structure and paysage underlying:

Nor all his weeping ways through weary wastes have found
The castle where his Greater Hallows are interned;
For broken bridges halt him, and dark thickets round
Some ruin where an evil heritage was burned.

The prosody, as well as the imagery, recalls an earlier age, particularly in the first line where the alliteration and meter are characteristic of Old English poetry. What is being sought, however, is not the Sangrael of Auden's time, but the Pilgrim's own "Greater Hallows." The way back to one's own sacred center is arduous; if this be the quest of the ego for strength and identity, as it seems to be, then the superego, or unconscious, irrational master conscience, has blocked passage back to the sacred secrets, has burned the "evil heritage" which it might be helpful to know, and has laid thickets around the ruin.

The sestet is timeless rather than medieval in imagery and diction. As in "In Time of War," child stands for man's primitive self. Auden alludes to the civilizing institutions:

Could he forget a child's ambition to be old
And institutions where it learned to wash and lie,
He'd tell the truth for which he thinks himself too young.

If the Pilgrim could forget, in other words, the way in which civilization has wanted him to mature and could gain knowledge of his unconscious self, then he could find the truth.

The final stanza suggests that the goal of the quest is self-mastery through understanding of the unconscious and its heritage from individual and cultural past:

That everywhere on the horizon of his sigh
Is now, as always, only waiting to be told
To be his father's house and speak his mother tongue.

Auden has strung out a succession of metaphors here, yet the sonnet coalesces into a universal quest. The medieval pilgrim metaphor of the second stanza could seem out of place were Auden less careful to make the rest of his diction and imagery timeless, appropriately making the most buried part of the human psyche alluded to that which has the more ancient metaphor.

The charm of the fifth poem, "The City," lies in the perfect concurrence of its literal and figurative levels of meaning. The reader's mind simultaneously follows both the narrative level, which is particularly graphic in the final stanza, and the symbolic, philosophic level. The theme is the corrupting force of civilization. The country and the villages stand for childhood innocence and individuality; the city, for adult society which undermines the individual. There is a secondary theme on the nature of necessity, which in the country is primitively believed to be absolute, but in the city is seen to be a matter of each individual's reaction to civilization. Also introduced here is the theme of temptation, to be elaborated upon in the following three sonnets. Auden has a remarkable ability to make his imagery specific and revealingly human in even the briefest allusions to representative per-

sonae. In this sonnet, for example, those who succumb to the civilizing temptation take on an ugly cynicism at the end of the sonnet. They

sat in the sun
During the lunch-hour round the fountain rim;
And watched the country kids arrive, and laughed.

Temptations: Sonnets VI-VIII

The three temptations of the next three sonnets allude to the three temptations of Christ in the wilderness. "The First Temptation" describes one who submits to the first temptation of Christ, that of miracle. In this case, however, these miracles are fantasied by the persona, who imagines magical powers instead of dealing with his inner grief. In time, he cannot live without this distorted image of himself.

The "miracles" performed by the persona are made of airy grandeur only. He joins a "gang of rowdy stories," not of rowdies, and sublimates his desires. Hungers are ascetically turned into Roman food; the symmetry of the town (read "civilization") becomes an attractive park; "All hours took taxis; any solitude / Became his flattered duchess in the dark." Soon he cannot live with anything less than these fantasies:

But if he wished for anything less grand,
The nights came padding after him like wild
Beasts that meant harm, and all the doors cried Thief;

The imagery of the third stanza, above, represents the uncontrolled impulses of the unconscious. Denied their fantasies, these unconscious "nights" seem to pursue him stealthily. That doors, whether literal or figurative, cry thief, is a guilty reflection of his attempt to shut out truth. These metaphors succeed not only because they fit into Auden's figurative patterns, but also because their emotional connotation--"wild / Beasts that meant harm"--is strong and appropriate.

The final stanza shows his reaction to Truth even when approached kindly by Her:

And when Truth met him and put out her hand,
He clung in panic to his tall belief
And shrank away like an ill-treated child.

And so the individual who succumbs to the first temptation and believes himself capable of miracle loses the capacity for maturity and remains a child, a creature dominated by the id and unable to develop his ego.

In the Grand Inquisitor scene of The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoyevsky summarises the three temptations of Christ as the Temptations of miracle, mystery, and authority. This summary provides a helpful way of looking at these three sonnets, even though Auden and Dostoyevsky use the three temptations as the basis for quite different theological-psychological investigations. In the first temptation, Christ could have assuaged his hunger by the miracle of turning stones into bread; in Auden's sonnet, spiritual hungers are assuaged by fantasies of miracles. In the second Biblical temptation, Christ could have leapt from the temple, for it had been prophesied that he would be saved by the mysterious power of God. In Auden's sonnet "The Second Temptation," the persona seeks the mystery of union with the "Uncreated Nothing," through severance from his flesh. This is the temptation of the mystic, the medieval denial of materialism, as well as the sin of hybris with which Christ was tempted. Auden gives his version an unusual twist by putting the sestet from the point of view of the flesh:

And his long suffering flesh, that all the time
Had felt the simple cravings of the stone
And hoped to be rewarded for her climb,

Took it to be a promise when he spoke
That now at last she would be left alone,
And plunged into the college quad, and broke.

The abrupt ending of the sonnet presumably indicates the drastic consequences of the temptation to separate soul from body, flesh from mind.

"The Third Temptation," like the others, is essentially the temptation of hybris, in this case the lure of power and authority. In the first stanza, however, the persona seems to look only out, never into himself:

He watched with all his organs of concern
How princes walk, what wives and children say;
Reopened old graves in his heart to learn
What laws the dead had died to disobey.

He "reluctantly" concludes, however, that love and pity are useless, and goes on to the peak of worldly success as "the king of all the creatures." His pitiless success bears unhappy consequences with it, however, as the last four lines of the sonnet disclose:

Yet, shaking in an autumn nightmare, saw

Approaching down a ruined corridor,
A figure with his own distorted features
That wept, and grew enormous, and cried Woe.

With the grotesque disproportions of a nightmare, fear and grief dominate the apparently successful man, implying that love and pity must be cultivated, not denied. The truth hauntingly reappears like "wild / Beasts that meant harm" in "The First Temptation." Each of these three sonnets describes an individual failure without drawing general conclusions, but the thread which runs through is that of selfish isolation and an inability to look outward toward others or inward to one's self. What saves these sonnets from being as didactic as they may seem in explication is their strong narrative interest.

Failures: Sonnets IX-XV

The next sonnet, "The Tower," somewhat more positively allows for human success, but also carries warnings. The tower represents achievement, and Auden describes the eccentric and self-sacrificing paths to what is called achievement in terms that are slightly irreverent:

This is an architecture for the odd;
Thus heaven was attacked by the afraid,
So once, unconsciously, a virgin made
Her maidenhead conspicuous to a god.

In the sestet Auden points out that too much denial for the sake of achievement can be fatal: "For those who dread to drown, of thirst may die / Those who see all become invisible." Genius must be wary and not lost contact with life and love, nor be caught by magic. The sonnet speaks for itself; explication and quotation are almost superfluous. It is not, however, tiresomely simple, for the imagery, particularly the personification of the second stanza, is fresh, and the sound effects, particularly the hushed long vowels and the sibilants of the last stanza, are evocative of the meaning.

The next sonnet is similarly straightforward, but the unusual allegory of the quest employed deserves fuller comment, as does the semi-satirical tone. "The Presumptuous" are those who notice only part of what is needed to succeed in a quest. In the humorous, deliberately prosaic words of the first stanza,

They noticed that virginity was needed
To trap the unicorn in every case,
But not that, of those virgins who succeeded,
A high percentage had an ugly face.

The unobservant presumptuous do not succeed on their quest; they are

. . . stuck halfway to settle in some cave
With desert lions to domesticity;

Or turned aside to be absurdly brave,
And met the ogre and were turned to stone.

It seems that what it takes to succeed on a quest is a special determination, such as proving oneself a hero in spite of a broken leg, or an "exiled Will which to politics returns / In epic verse," as in "The Tower." One needs a neurotic drive or a deficiency to compensate for; merely to go through the motions of a quest is not enough. This is a simple sonnet, but one enriched by the medieval allusions to unicorns, lions, and ogres. One could also assume the use of Auden's psychological metaphors here, in which case the ogre would be the paralyzing force of repressed unconscious desires.

Almost the same point is made again in the following sonnet, "The Average." It is in the familiar persona genre, a brief sketch of an individual who undertakes a false quest and is frightened to see during his adventure "the shadow of an Average Man / Attempting the Exceptional. . . ." In most of this poem, the figurative language and the prosody are as average as the subject of the poem, yet the expected punch at the conclusion does not fail us: the roar of silence, the glare of the desert, and the shock of truth at the sight of one's own shadow are tangibly and visibly present.

The twelfth sonnet, "Vocation," reflects a nearly universal disillusionment with youthful ideals. The persona of the sonnet wishes to be a martyr, but the only place available for him is "Among the tempters for a caustic tongue / To test the resolution of the young." Simple as the story element is here, small subtleties lend interest and some depth;

for example, the official taking names is "amused" at the dismay of the tardy would-be martyr. The tempter, for another example, has some devastating duties, such as to "shame the eager with ironic praise."

The final stanza looks at the new tempter's reaction to his role. It has five lines, preceded by three tercets, in a kind of inversion of the usual sonnet pattern. There is a loose interlinking of rhymes in the three tercets, but the rhymes as well as the content of the final stanza stand alone:

Though mirrors might be hateful for a while,
Women and books should teach his middle age
The fencing wit of an informal style
To keep the silences at bay and cage
His pacing manias in a worldly smile.

In some respects, this sounds like Auden the author of the New Year Letter. The vocation involved becomes that of living with one's fate. The best one may be able to do is to live with the beast within. Auden's thinking becomes increasingly fatalistic around 1940; will power is no longer readily assumed.

The thirteenth sonnet, "The Useful," looks for some degree of usefulness among the most unlikely characters. The first stanza describes how an excess can perversely lead to its opposite: "The over-logical fell for the witch / Whose argument converted him to stone." In the second stanza, those whose excesses destroy them are redeemed by an increase in their "instrumental value" in the service of others:

As agents their effectiveness soon ceased;
Yet, in proportion as they seemed to fail,
Their instrumental value was increased
To those still able to obey their wish.

The pronoun reference of "their" in the fourth line above is uncertain both in the original and in the 1966 revision, which reads "For one pre-

destined to attain their wish" (in line with other changes in meaning, however). Finally, the third stanza urges a desperate logic in which anyone serves: "Wild dogs compel the cowardly to fight, / Beggars assist the slow to travel light." It is hard to know just how to take this sonnet, for its content is incongruous with its apparent message, yet the poem is neither comic nor satiric. The last stanza in particular has the poignancy of, to quote the last line, the madmen's "Unwelcome truths in lonely gibberish."

A number of these sonnets suggest the philosophy of Kierkegaard, whose writings are known to have engrossed Auden at this time. The fourteenth sonnet, "The Way," for example, is analogous to Kierkegaard's description of the knight of faith:

A man can become a tragic hero by his own powers--but not a knight of faith. When a man enters upon the way, in a certain sense the hard way of the tragic hero, many will be able to give him counsel; to him who follows the narrow way of faith no one can give counsel, him no one can understand. Faith is a miracle, and yet no man is excluded from it; for that in which all human life is unified is passion, and faith is a passion.⁴⁹

In this context especially, "The Way," a humorous religious sonnet, would seem irreverent were the reader not accustomed to Auden's levity with the sacred--and to his earnestness behind it. Using an offhand manner, Auden in seven couplets suggests some of the fallacies in assuming easy success in the quest, the first being book-learning:

Fresh addenda are published every day
To the encyclopaedia of the Way.

Linguistic notes and scientific explanations,
And texts for schools with modernised spelling
and illustrations.

⁴⁹Fear and Trembling, in A Kierkegaard Anthology, ed. by Robert Bretall (New York, 1946), p. 134.

But, as Kierkegaard says in Concluding Unscientific Postscript, "Faith constitutes a sphere all by itself, and every misunderstanding of Christianity may at once be recognized by transforming it into a doctrine, transferring it to the sphere of the intellectual."⁵⁰

The third through fifth couplets allude to the Grail legend, albeit in general terms rather than following a specific romance. The fish, symbol of life and divinity in both the ancient and Christian eras, fits generally into this context. However, the only story I know of about a stranded fish comes from Indian cosmogony, when Manu protects and later receives protection from a fish, and I know of it only through Jessie Weston.⁵¹ Similarly, while the Perilous Chapel is the goal of several of Arthur's knights, none seeks the Triple Rainbow, although the ideas of the Trinity and of Jehovah's promise to man after the deluge do fit into the context. The Astral Clock must measure spiritual change, outside of time, although the phrase is too celestial to suit Kierkegaard's emphasis on inwardness.

The two final couplets question the source of common advice about the quest, that from men of little passion in the quest and particularly that obtained "By observing oneself and then just inserting a Not." Self-denial alone is shown to be of little avail by Kierkegaard's knight of infinite resignation (Fear and Trembling).

A more traditional theological outlook returns in "The Lucky," which deals with the problem of free will, an issue implicit in the many of the

⁵⁰In Reality, Man, and Existence: Essential Works of Existentialism, ed. by H. J. Blackham, Bantam Matrix Editions (New York, 1965), p. 44.

⁵¹From Ritual to Romance, Doubleday Anchor Books (New York, 1957), p. 126.

poems of "In Time of War" and in "Vocation" and the revised "The Useful," but here most directly formulated. In the first stanza, a series of commonplace incidents occur contrary to plan and "luckily" lead the way to significant discoveries. In the second stanza, a lively speech bursts from the happy and proud Oedipus before his moment of truth. With honesty--or false modesty--he refuses credit for his successes and claims that life is governed by chance:

"A nonsense jingle simply came into my head
And left the intellectual Sphinx dumbfounded;
I won the Queen because my hair was red;
The terrible adventure is a little dull."

In the final couplet, a new character, Failure, speaks of the torturous questions of free will, predestination, faith, and Grace:

"Hence Failure's torment: 'Was I doomed in any case, / Or would I not have failed had I believed in Grace?'" Auden makes this couplet into an epigram by using the rhyme scheme abcacb defdfe gg. In the context of the Oedipus story, even such a brief nod at complex questions is not as capricious as it might seem. This sonnet does, furthermore, indicate the transition to a religious point of view that is to come in the early forties.

Adventures: Sonnets XVI-XIX

"The Hero," the next sonnet, continues in the ironic vein, but makes a serious point without an explicit, philosophical statement. Another of Auden's polished biographical sketches, it uses selected fragments of information to reveal a persona. The Hero's humility contrasts sharply with the prototype of pride in the preceding stanza, Oedipus. Uninterested in fame, the hero is treated with condescension by those who have not fulfilled their quests. In the sestet, Auden

gives a wonderfully illuminating portrait through some homely details reminiscent of "Who's Who":

The only difference that could be seen
From those who'd never risked their lives at all
Was his delight in details and routine.

For he was always glad to mow the grass,
Pour liquids from large bottles into small,
Or look at clouds through bits of colored glass.

This persona is doubtless intended to be Kierkegaard's knight of faith. In Fear and Trembling, Kierkegaard says the knight of faith

. . . . takes delight in everything, and whenever one sees him taking part in a particular pleasure, he does it with the persistence which is the mark of the earthly man whose soul is absorbed in such things. . . . one might suppose that he was a clerk who had lost his soul in an intricate system of book-keeping, so precise is he.⁵²

Another of Kierkegaard's works, Sickness unto Death, seems to be reflected in the seventeenth sonnet, "Adventure," a study of the solitude and despair of the religious quester. The sonnet opens obliquely by referring to certain groups excluded from society, particularly the outlaws and the ill. As Kierkegaard notes, the man in search of his eternal soul often feels a need for solitude--it is a sign of spirit, of a deeper nature--"but in our age it is a crime to have spirit, so it is natural that such people, the lovers of solitude, are included in the same class with criminals."⁵³

Now no one else accused these of a crime;
They did not look ill: old friends, overcome,
Stared as they rolled away from talk and time
Like marbles out into the blank and dumb.

The risks of this adventure, of facing despair, are abundantly clear in

⁵²In A Kierkegaard Anthology, ed. by Bretall, pp. 119-120.

⁵³In Sickness unto Death, Ibid., p. 363.

this sonnet. In a few phrases that sketch a narrative and a despair, Auden does what Kierkegaard does in many paragraphs. One of the greatest fears is the loss of freedom in surrendering oneself to the spiritual quest for an "Absconded God," who seems absent from our times. As Auden notes with irony, "Successful men know better" than to undertake such a quest.

"Adventure" provides the background for the eighteenth sonnet, "The Adventurers," in which, reminiscent of the fruitless self-denial of Kierkegaard's knight of infinite resignation, the wrong kind of quest horribly fails through self-willfulness. As Kierkegaard says, "The despair which is the passageway to faith is also by aid of the eternal: by the aid of the eternal the self has courage to lose itself in order to gain itself. Here on the contrary it is not willing to begin by losing itself, but wills to be itself."⁵⁴ These adventurers are like ascetic mystics in the desert wilderness who not only fail, but also leave behind a distorted inspiration for others.

The heedless, uncaring momentum of the adventurers comes through in the arresting opening metaphor: "Spinning upon their central thirst like tops, / They went the Negative Way toward the Dry." Remarkable--and typical--of these lines is the striking blend of the physical (spinning tops) with the philosophical. (The negative way for Kierkegaard is the erroneous attempt to construct or will one's own eternal self.) The harsh, ill-considered self-denial of these adventurers, whether taken literally or symbolically, leads only to greater and greater denial, which Auden describes in unpleasant enough terms: "They emptied out their

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 366.

memories like slops / Which made a foul marsh as they dried to death." But this negativism creates "monsters," and the loveliness of finite life is lost. These adventurers can only praise the Absurd until death, instead of being helped toward faith by the Absurd. In contrast, Kierkegaard's knight of faith participates in both the finite and the infinite.

Almost inadvertently, the adventurers sow seeds of inspiration for others--for painters, barren wives, and bur[~]ing virgins. As in "The Useful," everything serves a purpose, however ironically and paradoxically. But here the irony is harsher: the "grotesque temptation" unfortunately becomes "some painter's happiest inspiration"; asceticism leaves a false well of "pure cold water" for the superstitious--the final failure of the ascetic adventurers. That Auden chooses failures in the religious quest probably indicates that he is not yet committed to Christianity.

The penultimate sonnet, "The Waters," differs in style and diction from the others. The usual meter of these sonnets is the familiar iambic pentameter, with variations freely made, especially for the sake of a colloquial effect. In "The Waters," the line is a regular iambic tetrameter, creating a slightly mocking effect. The periodic construction of some of the sentences gives them an incongruous importance, as does the stilted diction ("apperception," "vectors of their interest"). Only the final couplet breaks this mold.

In the first stanza, Auden very nearly calls poets, prophets, and wits liars as he satirizes the falseness of their quests:

Poet, oracle and wit
 Like unsuccessful anglers by
 The ponds of apperception sit,
 Baiting with the wrong request
 The vectors of their interest;
 At nightfall tell the angler's lie.

The fault lies not in the introspection, but in the cool, solely intellectual baiting. The lie, of course, is to themselves.

Still more despised are "the saintly and the insincere." In a continuation of the water metaphor, they are seen trying to preserve themselves against external forces by clinging to "rafts of frail assumption," but are instead overwhelmed. As in "The Way," this is similar to Kierkegaard's rejection of doctrine. The concluding couplet, following two stanzas of six lines each, returns to the easy iambic pentameter and less formal diction of the preceding poems and recommends closeness to nature--if it is possible:

The waters long to hear our question put
 Which would release their longed-for answer, but.

But, man permanently lost his unity with nature at the time of the fall. The appeal to nature, "the waters," moves away from Kierkegaard and closer to the final sonnet, "The Garden."

"The Garden": Sonnet XX

The quest sequence concludes where "In Time of War" began, in the Garden, although in the former the Garden is the origin of primitive existence whereas in the latter the Garden offers a place of termination as well as beginning. A recurrent topic in Auden's poetry, even at present, the Garden makes an excellent final topic for this sequence.

The octave deals with the Garden as beginnings; the sestet, as endings. The sonnet opens with a description of the Garden as it is:

Within these gates all opening begins:
 White shouts and flickers through its green and red,
 Where children play at seven earnest sins
 And dogs believe their tall conditions dead.

As often in the best of Auden's poetry, the imagery creates the desired emotional impression in the reader even if he does not immediately grasp the symbolism. The "gates" of the Garden recall the "Door" of the first sonnet and allow the suggestion, which Auden does not care to press or enlarge, that the Garden lies within the chamber of the mind. The colors of the second line are luminous in their simplicity; white undoubtedly stands for purity--an insistent purity which "shouts" as well as "flickers" through the green of nature and the blood-red of man. That children, still symbolizing the preconscious human, play at sins which are earnest rather than deadly emphasizes the innocent state of the Garden, although the phrase "earnest sins" is somewhat facile. The last line is less clear, but it does indicate a change from the first poem in "In Time of War," where "fish swam as fish," that is, each animal accepted his given state. Here, in contrast, dogs have fantasies of freedom in wishing their "tall conditions," or masters, dead. In other words, this is the imagined, longed-for Eden, not the original, pure Eden.

In the second stanza, adolescence is seen as the time of breaking away from the unity and harmony of the Garden, but love provides a way of gaining another unity:

Here adolescence into number breaks
 The perfect circle time can draw on stone,
 And flesh forgives division as it makes
 Another's moment of consent its own.

Quite in contrast to Kierkegaard's despair, the sestet seems to promise the serenity of the Garden to all at death; all will find as well a resolution of their burdens and wishes. The Garden is munificent to

those who have been deprived:

All journeys die here; wish and weight are lifted:
Where often round some old maid's desolation
Roses have flung their glory like a cloak

And those who have not been deprived find their old lives united with and
washed away in the beauty of the Garden which gives them new direction:

The gaunt and great, the famed for conversation
Blushed in the stare of evening as they spoke,
And felt their center of volition shifted.

Humanistic and compassionate, this sonnet is an honest conclusion from a
poet who, with all his doubts and concerns about human nature and achieve-
ment, remains essentially optimistic and helpful.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the opportunities offered by studying Auden's sonnets is that of seeing what happens when a skilled versifier and fine poet uses the same form repeatedly. In his case, we occasionally see some examples of over-facility or off-handed ease, usually when colloquialism, personification, or other rhetorical manners are overworked. Most of these are in "In Time of War"; "The Quest" achieves a greater diversity within the sonnet framework, and one rarely has the impression of careless invention there. Although Auden is an accomplished rather than a great sonneteer, there are a number of sonnets which can be read with his finest poems, and only a few which cannot be read with pleasure. In the sequences, each sonnet's worth should be judged in context, where the developing themes and imagery of the whole sequence enrich the individual sonnets. This is as true of "In Time of War," where the nature and potential of man are probed, as it is of the ongoing "Quest."

The sonnets seem to have been an appropriate choice of form for the ideas expressed in them. At this time Auden is abandoning his hope of reaching a popular audience, and so while some sonnets are direct and straightforward, others are richly textured and enigmatic. The sonnet form is restrictive enough to contain his didactic impulses, yet flexible enough to allow for diversity of technique. Its brevity encourages him to indulge his fondness for epigrams, suggestive and inclusive epithets, and sudden personification, yet does not impede

his freedom with colloquial diction and varied meter. The persona and paysage modes are prominent because they fit his thinking at this time, yet are economical enough for the sonnet. Structurally, Auden's sonnet is balanced between octave and sestet, or developed toward the final tercet or couplet. Either way, the reader becomes accustomed to his technique and anticipates the concluding punch, which is varied from the intellectual to the emotional to the concrete so that rather than becoming mechanical, it is usually fresh and arresting.

The sonnet sequences permit the full development of themes without making the demands of a long poem on the general reader. Auden can shift mood from skeptical to grateful to grim, and the reader's familiarity with the form and consistent presentation helps him to respond to the changing face of the sonnets. And respond we do, to the compassionate and the cerebral, to the riddling and the colloquial, and to the quest of self implicit in reading the poetry of W. H. Auden.

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ABSTRACT

of

The Sonnets of W. H. Auden

by

Margery H. Johnson

The purpose of this essay has been to analyze the sonnets of W. H. Auden and the interaction of form, content, and style that evolves during the years 1936-1940, when he composed the majority of his sonnets. Critics have paid little attention to Auden's sonnets, and so there are few allusions to critical materials in this thesis. Auden's own prose has been more useful.

The Introduction sets forth the general purposes of the thesis. The first chapter, on the single sonnets, begins by discussing the effect of the sonnet form on Auden's sonnet style. The earlier sonnets are reviewed in chronological order, and the following sections look at the frequently used persona (real or imaginary biography) and paysage modes as a means of analyzing many of Auden's sonnets. Sonnets illustrative of each mode are explicated fully, and both modes are seen to provide a means of controlling and making concrete abstract ideas and of making generalizations through particulars. Auden's belief that art should teach the truth without being propagandistic is also discussed, and Rilke's influence on Auden's imagery and style is considered. One sonnet is thoroughly analyzed as an example of Auden's

prosody.

Chapter two discusses the sonnet sequence "In Time of War," beginning with its historical background and Auden's misunderstood position as a politically oriented poet. The sonnets are discussed for the developing themes of man on earth after the Fall, of the history of civilization, and of the nature of man and his free will and willfulness. The common speech character of syntax and diction is discussed, and major imagery is identified, particularly the persona and paysage modes and the Freudian psychic structure. About half the poems are seen to be based in a general way upon the war, but the interest and value of the sequence is not topical. Revisions and omissions made for the 1966 Collected Shorter Poems are taken as the basis of much of the analysis of Auden's prosody and esthetics.

Chapter three discusses "The Quest" and its predominant themes, imagery, and techniques, noting changes made from the earlier sequence. Each sonnet is analyzed and its place in the sequence and in the quest legend is discussed. The main form of questing is seen to be the examination of the inner self. The influence of Christian, Freudian, and, particularly, Kierkegaardian ideas is considered.

The brief section, "Conclusions," draws together the main critical points stated or implied in the thesis concerning Auden's choice and use of the sonnet and sonnet sequences and his success with them. The bibliography is intended to be a record of research and is not limited to works mentioned in the footnotes and text. It does not include all collateral reading done for the thesis, however.