

THE CRITICAL ATTITUDES OF W.H. AUDEN

"As Well As Can Be Expected"

by

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To
CHESTER DUNCAN

with thanks

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

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

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Let History Be My Judge"

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

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

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

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

²Ibid., p. 30.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵Ibid., p. 49.

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

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

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

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

⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

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

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

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

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

⁸Ibid., p. 105.

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