The Double Man

Why Auden is an indispensable poet of our time.

By Adam Gopnik

When W. H. Auden died, in 1973, no one would have imagined that thirty years later he would come back as the poet of another age, our own. He seemed miserable and seedy then, having made a failed return to Oxford after two decades on St. Marks Place in the East Village and become the model of a modern poet who had lost his way and got stranded on an island of his own pet phrases. The obituaries, though large, mostly quoted his lyrics from the thirties: "As I Walked Out One Evening" or "Lullaby" ("Lay your sleeping head, my love, / Human on my faithless arm . . .") or, more brazenly, the line from "September 1, 1939"—"We must love one another or die"—which he had pointedly cut from his own canon. The body of poetry that he produced after his emigration to America, in 1939, was pretty poorly regarded—Philip Larkin, once a disciple, had written a brisk, common-sense dismissal of it as "a rambling intellectual stew," while the greatest American reviewer, Randall Jarrell, another apostate, referred to the later Auden manner as one of a man "who has turned into a rhetoric mill grinding away at the bottom of Limbo."

Yet, at the beginning of the new century, he is an indispensable poet. Even people who don't read poems often turn to poetry at moments when it matters, and Auden matters now. In the eighties, his lyric "Stop All the Clocks" became the elegy of the *AIDS* era, sold on bookstore counters, by the registers. In the nineties, Robert Hughes led off his memorable polemic against postmodernism "The Culture of Complaint" with a long,

marvelling quote from Auden's Christmas oratorio, "For the Time Being," where the liberal King Herod mourns the loss of rational consensus in the face of feckless sectarianism. In the past year, Auden has been everywhere, by the sheer force of popular will. Two of his lyrics about suffering and confusion—"Musée des Beaux Arts" and "September 1, 1939"—sprang to renewed life after last September 11th as the embodiments of our mood, posted on Web sites and subway walls. Even fashion models, and not just fashion models, now name their sons Auden, as they might ten years ago have called them Dylan, and pose with them on the cover of *Vogue*.

The odd thing is that Auden's poems are often saying the reverse of what we have now decided to hear. "Stop All the Clocks" was written as a jaunty, Noël Coward-like ironic pastiche of a mourning song, unmoored from grief—no more meant to be taken seriously as an elegy ("Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone"?) than "You're the Top" is to be taken seriously as a love poem. The quote from "For the Time Being" that Hughes used so effectively to warn against the mess the world can become in the absence of rationality was first meant to demonstrate the opposite—the rational voice, after all, is Herod's as he orders the massacre of the innocents. And "September 1, 1939," far from being a call to renewed conscience after a period of drift, is actually a call to irony and apolitical retreat, a call not to answer any call.

But, past a certain point, poets can't be misread, not by an entire time, no more than an entire family can misread a father: the homecoming noises in the hallway are the man; the accumulated impression is the poet. What matters is the sound he makes. Auden's emotional tone is our tone, even if his meanings are not always our meanings.

That Auden tone, the one that matters most now, was made in New York between 1939 and 1948, when Auden came to this city and made it his home. In those nine years, he underwent an extraordinary transformation, which implicated every line on his face. He entered as the smooth-faced mysterious druid of the English industrial landscape, the Marxist lyricist who spellbound a generation, and he emerged as the boozy, creased, garrulous Auden who lasted. He taught, loved, wrote more journalism than seems quite possible, and produced the four long poems that remain the astounding heart of his work: "For the Time Being," a Nativity

oratorio in modern dress; "New Year Letter," an abstract philosophical poem in Swiftian couplets; "The Age of Anxiety," a pastoral eclogue set in a New York bar and written in alliterative verse; and "The Sea and the Mirror," a commentary on Shakespeare's "The Tempest." At last, we have a big book in which we can step into the quarry of the ideas, good and bad, from which he mined those four poems, and that is the second volume of Princeton's complete edition of Auden's prose, edited by Edward Mendelson and called, simply, "Prose: Volume II, 1939-1948" ($45).

The essays are overwhelming in the number and variety of the subjects addressed, ideas aired, capital letters employed, and systems invented to prove a small point. When one recalls that they are merely the garden wall on which the ivy of the decade's poems grew, and that not even the whole wall is there—for instance, the recently collected lectures on Shakespeare and the long lecture series of 1948 on the imagery of the sea in Romantic poetry, "The Enchafèd Flood," are not included—they seem as lasting a monument to poetic energy allied to intellectual purpose as we possess. The essays are also a reminder of how many more places a poet could work out his worries in public fifty years ago. There are the now impossible to imagine short essays for *Mademoiselle* and *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue;* there are medium-length, middlebrow essays in the *Times Book Review;* there are long, chewy pieces for small magazines. There are lots of brief reviews for *The Nation*, and there are fine original essays on Tennyson and Kipling in particular, but for the most part these are review-essays. The reviewer is given a book on a subject—Baudelaire, Tennyson—by the editor, and gives back an essay not just, in the time-honored manner, on what the author should have thought about the subject, had he been as wise as the reviewer, but on what the subject should have thought about his own experience, had he understood it as well as the poet does. Not only is the biographer told what he should have thought about Tennyson and the Victorian age; Tennyson is told what he should have thought about the Queen.

Auden's mannerisms can be exhausting. Everything has to be explained in typologies, and usually in those capital letters. There are two eternal classes of men, six kinds of erotic love, four kinds of epic heroes. "As a European, Baudelaire inherited three main concepts of the human individual, two of them Greek and one Jewish," we read, and we feel for

Baudelaire: what if he had wanted other ones, Armenian or merely French? Some of this is a mistaken, donnish idea of playfulness—Auden's whimsy was second nature to him, while the camp manner he learned in New York (calling the Almighty "Miss God") was willed—but far more of it is a sign of a constant need to bring order to the disorderly. And, even among the absurdities, sentences and ideas sparkle. "For a complete life a man requires six kinds of love," the reader is told, and he sighs and starts to count his fingers with his chin. "For his wife, for his children, for his friends, for his neighbors, for his work, and for God." But then this leads to: "In our time, the secularization of belief . . . the atomization of society . . . tend to deprive him of all but the first. If the average man today is obsessed with sex, it is partly because it seems to him the only sphere in which he is a free agent, in which his failures and his triumphs are really his; hence if he fails here, he has achieved nothing with his life." Philip Roth's early heroes couldn't have put it better.

There are so many subjects, and so many typologies, that it is surprising to see how reliably, in the end, Auden returns to a single theme: the reconciliation of the Christian idea that salvation depends on indiscriminate universal love, exploding categories and communities, with the classical idea that only small circles of friends and lovers can console us for the world's evil. All the essays (and poems, too) might be gathered under a single heading: How to Love All Mankind, While Politely Keeping It Out of Your Garden.

Auden and Christopher Isherwood had come to New York together in 1939—before the war began, but when it was obvious that it was on its way. This was widely seen in England as a betrayal. Evelyn Waugh invented a pair of hypocritical left-wing poets in his war trilogy only to get at Auden and Isherwood. (This was unfair. When the war began, Auden tried to be useful.) In 1939, Auden held a position that can only just be suggested by that of Bob Dylan in 1967: indisputably the voice of his generation, he also wrote in a style so cryptic and allusive that the generation puzzled over what exactly it was that they were supposed to be saying. Something about war and doubt and sex and mining machinery . . .

Arriving in New York, Auden changed, and quickly. He found that it was possible to make a real living, if not by writing poetry then by being a poet. More important, he fell in love with two young Jewish men, Jesus of Nazareth and Chester Kallman of Brooklyn, and wanted to make the two loves one. His return to Christianity began with memories of his mother's Catholic piety, and was pushed forward by his experiences in Spain—where, as he explained, though a passionate Republican, he had been more shocked than he could have imagined by seeing all the churches in Barcelona closed.

Many poets had turned Christian in the preceding decades, of course; the example of Eliot was there before him. But Auden's Christianity was nearly the direct reverse of Eliot's. Where Eliot had looked to religion for order, authority, and tradition, Auden saw in it a radical levelling principle that eliminated hierarchies and distinctions between people—smart and stupid, even good and bad—and left them all sinners in a single boat. He wrote:

**{: .break one} ** The Catholic faith [i.e., the ideal Christian faith], while it condemns no temperament as incapable of salvation, flatters none as being less in peril than any other. In the same way [a Christian] has to make his public confession of belief in a church which is not confined to his sort, to those with whom by nature he feels at home, for in it there is neither Jew nor German, East nor West, boy nor girl, smart nor dumb, boss nor worker, Bohemian nor bourgeois, no elite of any kind; indeed there are not even Christians there, for Christianity is a way, not a state, and a Christian is never something one is, only something one can pray to become. **

Auden understood, with a clarity enforced by distance—he saw the shapes the blood was making, where up close one saw only the spill—that Europe's murderousness took a logical form. What had happened was not an outbreak of barbarism but the consequence of modern ideas, particularly the idea that the world could be made perfect by eliminating imperfections (the Jews, the bourgeoisie).

His Christianity offered, in contrast, no lost age of authority but a series of visionary moments—those Blakean moments when we intimate an order and numinousness in the universe which implies a divine order.

(Edmund Wilson dismissed Auden's faith, not entirely unfairly, as "the mythology and animism of childhood.") Again and again, his "vision" is one of remembered grace. "We are always entering paradise but only for a moment," he wrote. And when he invokes Jesus he does so in the language of the nursery rhyme and the fairy tale. In "New Year Letter," concluding his own Christian hymn, he writes:

***{: .break one} ** O Unicorn among the cedars, To whom no magic charm can lead us, White childhood moving like a sigh Through the green woods unharmed in thy Sophisticated innocence. ***

But this longing for the numinous was offset or at least complicated by the sex he got and the friends he made in those years. In early 1939, he fell in love with Kallman, a young and, apparently, very beautiful poet, the son of a Brooklyn dentist, and the early idyllic stretches of their affair inspired the most beautiful of modern love poems: "Warm are the still and lucky miles, / White shores of longing stretch away." Kallman was bright and warm and lucky, though not at all still, which turned out to be a problem. He was "out" in a way that Auden had never encountered before in someone he saw as a peer—with no self-doubt or even ironic self-inquiry about his sexual tastes. (Isherwood and Auden were out, too, but their outness consisted of remaining conspiratorially in, on the English principle that nothing is sexier than a secret society.) In two years, Auden went from the furtive English schoolboy's "buggerdom" to the bel-canto opera and camp of Greenwich Village and Fire Island. He and Kallman ended up in drag out on the Island, with Auden dressed up as a cardinal— a Firbank cardinal, but a cardinal.

Surrounded by other émigrés, Auden, who until that time had been very English, became in New York a European. This island unislanded him. His poems to Voltaire, Henry James, and Freud all date from his first two years in New York. (At the same time, he became much less "modern," leaving behind his earlier taste for cinema, pop music, "new styles of architecture," Pylons, and Bauhaus glass.) Fire Island, the New School, plenty of money from *Vogue,* and love with a dentist's son: to an Englishman abroad, it must have seemed like Paradise.

He was conscious in the forties that the world was as evil as it would ever be, but conscious, too, that he felt as happy as he would ever feel.

At one point, he had to have several teeth removed, and he claimed to have had a dream while under the anesthetic. "It's the second time I've had it," he said afterward. "It's all about Chester and salvation. Now I know I can't be damned. The margin of salvation is ever so slight . . . but it's there." Chester and salvation were his theme, and they light from below the essays from the forties. He was too intelligent to confuse the two; but he was too much in love with both not to think that there must be a family relation. This gave his Christianity a curiously worldly cast. Most Christian mystic-poets, from Dante to George Herbert, have accepted unworldliness as at least a poetic premise, or pose: our community of believers in here, your bad world out there. But Auden didn't want to do that, because he didn't feel that way about it. The traditional Christian said fuck the world and love thy neighbor; Auden said love the world and fuck thy neighbor, a related but a distinct thought.

There is in this position, though, a catch, and a rather big one. Catholicism is inclusive; Fire Island is exclusive. All religious circles are open; all circles of friends are closed. Auden tried, conscientiously, to square this circle many times, and the most strenuous ideas in the essays largely involve that effort. The first and easiest way to do it was the way it's usually done: by insisting that erotic and selfish love provided a glimpse of ideal love—"eros" became "agape." His love for Kallman made him upgrade this vision into the more comforting bourgeois notion that erotic love produces married love, which produces community. But soon this view came to seem complacent—and the beloved object proved unfaithful—and so it was replaced with a more romantic view. Erotic love might exist only on its own terms, rather than as a step toward ideal domesticity, but it was still possible, he believed, only within a Christian context, even if it was a Christian heresy. Which was better than nothing, but a heresy it remained, however you gnawed at it.

Perhaps, then, it was not the ideal lover, who in any case strayed, but the ideal community in which he strayed—what if that world, however absurd, was the real community of saints in, so to speak, drag? He played with that idea for a bit, but gave it up as too exclusive, and too conceited. What if, instead, the connection lay in the body itself, in sex; what if the human body was God's metaphor and its experiences the map of God's will? The English poet Charles Williams explored this idea, and Auden

seized on it almost before the ink was dry on Williams's poems. But that led right back to the first idea, that sex was God's way of making us religious, which seemed dubious enough . . . On and on the poet searches for a metaphor broad enough to contain his truth, wise enough to convince anyone else that it is one. (Mendelson, in his "Later Auden," teases out the life and death of these attempts with great sympathy.)

The truth was that the two terms could never be reconciled in argument. They could only be dramatized in poetry. And what finally strikes the reader of Auden's essays is how often what is exasperation in his prose becomes eloquent in his poetry: a tension between community—expressed in the idioms of cosmopolitan, urban charm—and ideal love, expressed in the abstract language of theology. The dramatization is the essential situation that recurs in each of his poems: a small group of friends or pickups clinging to each other for comfort, booze, sex, and understanding, holding theological conversations in the eye of a storm, and glimpsing in childhood a better condition, which they recognize as a paradoxical hope—we can't get back, we can. They can be the men on the street of "The Age of Anxiety," or the group invoked in "New Year Letter." In "For the Time Being," the most successful of these poems, they are at once participants in the Nativity story and drunken New Yorkers.

Above all, the tension is made beautiful in the poems by the play between the virtuoso glee of the comic versification and the serious religious and political ideas. In "New Year Letter," for instance, the Swiftian couplets with their reasonable good-humored rhythm play constantly against the frank Goya-like catalogue of the war's horrors:

**{: .break one} ** *Who, thinking of the last ten years, Does not hear howling in his ears The Asiatic cry of pain, The shots of executing Spain, See stumbling through his outraged mind The Abyssinian, blistered, blind, The dazed uncomprehending stare Of the Danubian despair, The Jew wrecked in the German cell, Flat Poland frozen into hell.* **

The effect of this fugue of sad speech and formal meter is not Brechtian irony but Augustan lucidity: the troubles of a time made momentarily lighter by being seen clear.

In the forties, Auden became a new kind of liberal. No one saw better the limits of liberalism, but what drew him to liberalism was exactly that he could see its limits. His liberalism was tied to his Christianity through its pessimism—about the perfectibility of man and the possibilities of happiness. "Man is not, as the romantics imagined, good by nature," he wrote. "Men are equal not in their capacities and virtues but in their natural bias toward evil. No individual or class, therefore, however superior . . . can claim an absolute right to impose its view of the good upon them. Government must be democratic, the people must have a right to make their own mistakes, and to suffer for them." In an uncanny moment of intellectual parallelism, in 1940 he wrote an essay, "Criticism in a Mass Society," that anticipates Karl Popper's soon to be written "The Open Society and Its Enemies," and uses the same descriptive vocabulary. "There are two types of society: closed societies and open," Auden writes. "When we use the word democracy we do not or should not mean any particular form of political structure; such matters are secondary. What we mean or ought to mean is the completely open society." (The vocabulary seems to derive in both cases from the philosopher Henri Bergson, who uses it, however, in a far more metaphysical way.) Auden shared Popper's sense that open societies were built on skeptical faith rather than on fatuous confidence. "We may not know very much, but we do know *something*," he maintained, "and while we must always be prepared to change our minds, we must act as best we can in the light of what we do know."

Auden, in a pregnant fragment, even glimpsed what may be the only rational theory of art in an open society: art, he writes, "is one of the most powerful means of transforming closed communities into open ones, in moving people from passion to desire." Instead of inflaming a passion, an incoherent and irrational want, the artist disciplines it to a desire, something exact. He takes a feeling and makes it into a thought—or, at least, a thought-through feeling. This is high-sounding, but it is plain truth. Why were so many, after 9/11, drawn to Auden's poems save that reading them helped us to make the overwhelming passions of the time—fear, rage—into specific desires: to have a voice, to affirm a truth, to speak to a friend, to love more wisely. "For art had set in order sense / And feeling and intelligence, /And from its ideal order grew/Our local understanding too."

His belief in this larger end for poetry, many people have supposed, led him to pontifical gesturing. This was the accusation that both Jarrell and Larkin levelled at him—that he had become in America a merely rhetorical poet, in love with the sound of his own hobbyhorses and abstractions. "An Elks' Convention of the Capital Letters" was how Jarrell dismissed Auden's ideas, which ended, he said, in "a vague humanitarian mysticism." There's something in this—Auden is abstract, and he can be vague. But the abstractions add up. Auden isn't rhetorical, just intellectual. The rhetorical imagination tries to replace real things with abstract categories. The intellectual poet tries to connect individual cases into a common class. Rhetoric attaches great emotion to what turns out to be, in the end, only a name. Intellect gives names to real emotions.When Auden talks, say, about the "Age of Anxiety," he is giving a common feeling a proper name.

The parallel, if slightly contradictory, accusation, produced by Auden's assertions that poetry "makes nothing happen," was that, by insisting on poetry as a game, he reduced it to a plaything. But Auden didn't believe that art was worthless. He believed that it was useless, a very different thing. It didn't save lives or change elections. What it did was be poetry—it offered an alternative to the insistences, the mechanized passions, of mass society. This may be why poets such as Joseph Brodsky worshipped him, while poets like Jarrell and Larkin, so close in other ways, became apostates. Auden, the Eastern Europeans saw, wrote about big public subjects but in a voice that undermined ideologies. Larkin and Jarrell, after all, never had to worry about rhetoric; Auden was the most rhetorical figure they knew. The Eastern Europeans knew what real empty rhetoric sounded like; they had heard it every day of their lives. They recognized Auden as something better than a rhetorical poet. They recognized him as a public poet.

Auden squared his circles the only way New Yorkers can, which is by living in squares and talking in circles. Few writers have ever managed to inhabit so many levels of life. Being everywhere at once while going nowhere in particular is what poets do, and Auden did it. Where journalists write about what people are arguing about in public, and novelists about what they are talking about in private, only poets seem able to show that what people argue about in public is identical to what they talk about in private, that what we are arguing about is the sum of

our own guilts, fears, anxieties, hopes. And only a handful of poets show that what people are talking about in public and what they are talking about in private is always a variant of what they say to themselves when they are alone, and that, Auden knew, is simply "I wish I were not." If he sometimes sounds in the forties as if he were speaking to us from a very high soapbox in a very big square, well, listen: we can hear him, still. ♦

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