

# ESSAYS IN CRITICISM

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## THE EDITORIAL IMAGINATION

### I

## Authorship, Intimacy, and an Editorial Question about Auden

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THIS ESSAY IS ABOUT A TECHNICAL QUESTION that may interest at most a half-dozen scholarly editors: the question of what to include in – and exclude from – the volumes titled ‘Poems’ in an edition of W. H. Auden’s complete works that I have been preparing more or less for ever, and which is finally near the point of getting finished.

This is a boring question about editorial method, but boring questions about method sometimes have wider implications. Any defensible answer to the question seems to depend on one’s answers to somewhat larger questions. For example: What does it mean when someone acts as an author, creating objects that deserve to be called works of art, and how is this action different from writing letters to friends that may be artful in form and style, but were never meant for publication? Is there any difference between the author and the letter-writer that matters to that author’s editors and critics?

The answers to questions like these may in turn cast some light on other questions, including the vexed question of what it means to be a unique person who is different at every moment

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and in every social role, unique in selfhood, not merely as one of many possible intersection points of shared or common professional, social, economic, ethnic, and sexual categories.

Shortly after Auden died in 1973 I began planning two separate editions of his work: one a volume of *Collected Poems*, the other a multi-volume set with the possibly over-resonant title *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden*. The *Collected Poems*, published in 1976, was the product of a thought experiment. It tried to give material reality to something that could only be imaginary, that is, the edition that Auden would have prepared (a) with the intention that it would be published after his death, and (b) in the knowledge that he would never write anything else after he had prepared it. It included all the poems that he made clear he wanted to preserve, whether by having included them in his *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (1966), or by having printed them in his later books of verse, or, in the last years of his life, having sent them to friends under the heading 'Posthumous Poems', a title that made clear that he wanted those poems published, but, like Augustine praying for chastity, not just yet. When I visited Auden in Austria in 1972 he told me that he was planning a new collection and wanted to restore four poems he had excluded in 1966, and so the 1976 collection included his revised texts of those poems.

The *Collected Poems* presented Auden's work as it was in the year of his death, and it omitted many poems written in the first half of his life – until around the age of 33, in 1940 – but that he later resolved never to reprint. Other poems from his youth appeared in that collection in revised or abridged texts that, in his view, corrected the faults of their earlier versions. This left many of his best-known and most interesting poems inaccessible, so I supplemented the *Collected Poems* with a similar thought experiment: a book titled *The English Auden* that presented his work more or less as it might have been printed had he or someone else compiled an edition of it in 1939, the year Auden left Britain for America. The texts in *The English Auden* incorporated the revisions he had made by 1939, but none that he made later.

In his essays, Auden wrote repeatedly that human beings are both natural and historical beings: products partly of

impersonal biological processes, partly of voluntary personal choices. Accordingly, the *Complete Works* was conceived as something different from the *Collected Poems* and *The English Auden*. It was to be an historical record of Auden's works in the form they had when he wrote or published them. Works that he published in book form around the time of writing – for example, *Another Time* or *The Enchafed Flood* – are printed in the *Complete Works* in the texts and sequences that he chose for those books. Works that appeared only in periodicals, or in books edited by someone else, are printed in the state of the text they had in those periodicals or books. Auden's later revisions of his poems and prose are recorded in the notes, either in the form of lists of variants or, where the revisions are especially extensive, in the full later texts.

Works that Auden submitted for publication but, for whatever reason, were never printed, appear in the *Complete Works* in the texts that he sent to publishers or editors – for example, a poem he read in a BBC broadcast and submitted to *The Criterion* only to have it rejected by T. S. Eliot. (Auden had second thoughts about the poem, and transplanted a few lines of it into poems he published later.) I have tried to be as inclusive as possible by printing in appendices anything that Auden seems to have written for publication but abandoned before submitting it, such as his unfinished prose book from 1939, *The Prolific and the Devourer*. In 'Letter to Lord Byron' Auden wrote that poets, 'when to Minos brought, / . . . must utter their Collected Works, / Including Juvenilia'. In the hope that Minos will not demand more, I have included in the *Collected Works* only the juvenilia that Auden submitted for publication; Katherine Bucknell has expertly edited the rest in her edition, *Juvenilia: Poems 1922-1928*.

So – briefly – the policy of the *Complete Works* is to include everything that Auden seems to have written for publication. This policy has produced an edition that will fill ten volumes (eight of them already published), each with 600 to 1,000 pages. It excludes the often marvellous verses that Auden wrote to amuse his friends, either in letters or when inscribing a gift of a book, and it excludes his rapid prose *pensées* in three surviving journals, evidently written with no thought that they might be printed. I couldn't bear to leave this verse and prose in

unpublished darkness, but I hesitated to include them in a complete edition of his works. I sensed a clear distinction between writings meant for publication and writings meant only for himself or his friends, but I was uncertain whether this distinction made sense when compiling a complete edition.

Other editions that I very deeply admire, and from which I got much of my literary education, follow entirely different policies. The splendid series of Longmans Annotated English Poets, for example, includes every line of each of its poets' verses – unfinished scraps, juvenilia, verses written in visitor's books, and much more. The equally splendid recent edition of T. S. Eliot's poems, by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, does the same. It includes erotic verses written privately for Valerie Eliot, poems written in letters, rhymed addresses on postcards, and more. I treasure these editions, but I kept thinking that their method seemed inappropriate for Auden. And, having trained as an academic, I wanted to find some theoretical argument for what was largely an intuition.

Anyone faced with a conundrum like this one is well advised to consult at least one great genius, perhaps two. The genius who has always proved most helpful to me in such matters is Virginia Woolf. She has much to say about authorship and about persons, all of it convincing and illuminating. Her 1928 novel *Orlando*, for example, is about one person who has a great variety of selves. About a third of the way through the book Orlando, after sleeping deeply for seven days, wakes to find he has become a woman. (Virginia Woolf had no way of knowing that this was already becoming a medical possibility elsewhere in Europe; for her, it was still pure fantasy.)

Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity.

(And it is worth noticing that that Virginia Woolf uses 'identity' to mean something unique and singular, not, as the word mostly means today, something collective and shared.)

Later in the book, Orlando is still one person, but the narrator explains that she has multiple *selves*. Orlando, the historian-narrator explains,

had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, for a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have a thousand.

The narrator then lists about twenty different selves within Orlando, and alludes to a (fictional) speculation that the selves in any unique person number exactly 2,052.

Orlando, like her model, Vita Sackville-West, is a garrulous and unimpressive poet. But one or more of another person's selves might be a writer who produces novels, as did Virginia Woolf. In 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', Woolf justified the methods of her novel-writing self:

The writer must get in touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognizes, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to cooperate in the far more difficult business of intimacy.

This 'difficult business of intimacy' is of course something that occurs between the writer and a person the writer will never encounter face to face, someone remote in space and time, but with whom the writer nonetheless seeks intimacy. This is an intimacy of a special kind, very different from the kinds of intimacy that might be sought by a person's other selves.

Auden took a similar line on authorship. At 25, he said in an essay titled 'Writing', commissioned for a children's encyclopedia: 'writing begins from the sense of separateness in time, of "I'm here today, but I shall be dead tomorrow and you will be alive in my place and how can I speak to you".' Thirty years later, he wrote in the preface to *The Dyer's Hand*: 'All the poems I have written were written for love; naturally, when I have written one, I try to market it, but the prospect of a market played no role in its writing'.

Many academics are far too sophisticated to take seriously the thought that literature is a special form of intimacy. Academic discourse tends to think of literature in impersonal, collective terms, typically as something that almost everyone, it seems, calls 'cultural production'. It is of course true that works of literature *are* artefacts of cultural production, but true in the same trivial way that persons are artefacts of genetic production. It omits everything that makes a work interesting in itself, everything that makes it matter. The whole idea of literature as impersonal production rather than as a form of intimacy seems intellectually self-defeating, in the same way that it is self-defeating to ignore what Virginia Woolf has to say about anything.

Virginia Woolf once said something about collective thinking that seems relevant to these matters. She was writing (in a review of some stories by Ernest Hemingway) about people you overhear in a café talking fashionable slang. They talk slang, she said,

because slang is the speech of the herd, seemingly much at their ease, and yet if we look at them a little from the shadow not at their ease at all, and, indeed, terribly afraid of being themselves, or they would say things simply in their natural voices.

She was also describing, before the fact, what you see when you look a little from the shadow at an academic conference where the speakers, seemingly much at their ease, talk about cultural production.

If, like Virginia Woolf, and like W. H. Auden, you think of writing as the work of persons seeking intimacy with other persons, then many difficult editorial problems begin to untangle. When Auden wrote for publication, he was writing in the hope of something that might be called remote intimacy. He may have been writing for someone he loved, but he knew he would be overheard by readers unknown to him, readers to whom he nonetheless wanted to speak intimately, by whom he wanted to be heard intimately. This is what Yeats was doing when he wrote to Maud Gonne in 'Adam's Curse', 'I had a thought for

no one's but your ears' – and immediately sent off the poem to the *Monthly Review* so that the sound of it could be in everyone's ears.

In the 1930s, faced with the temptations of his own fame, Auden sometimes wrote as if he wanted intimacy, not with an individual reader, but with a collective audience. His introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (1938) says this:

Without a secure place in society, without an intimate relation between himself and his audience, without, in fact, those conditions which make for *Light Verse*, the poet finds it difficult to grow beyond a certain point.

Within a few years Auden seems privately to have repented in dust and ashes his wish to be intimate with an audience. Instead he wanted to write for individual readers. He might have many thousands of individual readers, but he hoped that each one would read him as if he had addressed that one reader alone.

His long poem 'New Year Letter', in 1940, speaks explicitly about these matters. At the close of the first of its three parts it briefly describes itself. It is 'This private minute for a friend', 'the dispatch that I intend', addressed to its dedicatee Elizabeth Mayer; and sent to one address, deliberately accessible to anyone who might open it – like an official letter sent 'under flying seal', meaning that the seal has been left open so that the letter may be read by whomever forwards it to its recipient:

Although addressed to a Whitehall  
Be under Flying Seal to all  
Who wish to read it anywhere,  
And, if they open it, *En Clair*.

Virginia Woolf's understanding of authorship gave half the answer to my editorial questions. The other half came from another great genius who thought about what it means to be an author and what it means to be a person: Søren Kierkegaard. For a few years in the early 1940s, Auden

interpreted the world in Kierkegaard's vocabulary, and for the rest of his life he retained much of Kierkegaard's perspective on authorship.

One of Kierkegaard's books is titled *The Point of View for My Work as an Author* – a title that connects the ideas of work and authorship and points towards the uniqueness and complexities of personhood ('my view'). The book insists on the distinction between the 'man' and the 'author', two separate figures who, not incidentally, sometimes bear the same name, but who sometimes bear different ones when an 'author' publishes his works, as Kierkegaard did, under a series of transparent pseudonyms.

For *qua* man I may be justified in protesting [Kierkegaard's religion], and it may be my religious duty to make a protestation. But this must not be confounded with authorship: *qua* author it does not avail much that I protest *qua* man that I have intended this or that.

This offers a second way of understanding how the poems that Auden published differ from the verses he sent to friends. His private verses were the writings of the man writing for the man's friends. His published poems were the works of an author writing in collaboration with the man, and writing for readers whom the man would never know.

So the edition of Auden's *Complete Works* seeks to include all the works of Auden's authorship, everything written by those of his selves who sought remote intimacy. Other selves within the same person wrote prose and verse partly in order to achieve a more directly personal intimacy. Those private selves wrote verse letters to friends and rhymed inscriptions in gifts of books. The public selves of his authorship typically signed themselves W. H. Auden. The selves who wrote for private intimacy typically signed themselves Wystan.

Because the writings of those private selves are too splendid to leave hidden, I began working a few years ago on a collection to be titled *Personal Writings: Selected Journals, Letters, and Poems Written for Friends*. As a sample of the private pleasures



I hope it will offer, here is a poem that Auden wrote on the fly-leaf of a copy of his book *The Double Man* (1940), which he gave to his friend Strowan Robertson in 1942 when Auden was teaching at the University of Michigan and Robertson was a graduate student there. He signed the poem 'Wystan Auden. May 1942'. (In 1943 Robertson directed in his Michigan apartment a private production of *The Queen's Masque*, a dramatic entertainment that Auden wrote to be performed there on Chester Kallman's birthday.)

Auden had been reading John Donne's poetry around the time he inscribed *The Double Man* for Robertson, and his dedicatory verses are a variation on the theme of Donne's 'Batter my heart, three-personed God'. Auden took for granted that Robertson would understand that his poem, in its use of feminine pronouns for 'the human soul', followed ancient tradition: *anima* is a feminine noun. His private self wrote the poem with less care and polish than his public self gave to the works of his authorship, but its moral intelligence and wit issue from the same person who contained both these selves:

The manner of the human soul  
 Is unconvincing on the whole  
 Like etiquette learned from a book.  
 Like English girls, she tries to look  
 Through others with a snooty eye  
 As if she would much rather die  
 Than speak or, worse, be spoken to,  
 And had important things to do.  
 Holding her hanky to her nose  
 She hurries on – but it's a pose;  
 For though her stare is blank and frosted,  
 She simply longs to be accosted.  
 So, Strowan, may this Double Man  
 Convey as loudly as it can  
 Its author's thanks that you compel  
 His doubleness to wish you well.

In Auden's doubleness, his private self wished well for his friends while his public one wished well for readers whom he never met.

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*This is the first in an occasional series of articles considering the editing of literary works, and the implications that editorial decisions may have for literary criticism.* – THE EDITORS