

# The New York Review of Books

## The Secret Auden

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### 1.

W.H. Auden had a secret life that his closest friends knew little or nothing about. Everything about it was generous and honorable. He kept it secret because he would have been ashamed to have been praised for it.

I learned about it mostly by chance, so it may have been far more extensive than I or anyone ever knew. Once at a party I met a woman who belonged to the same Episcopal church that Auden attended in the 1950s, St. Mark's in-the-Bowery in New York. She told me that Auden heard that an old woman in the congregation was suffering night terrors, so he took a blanket and slept in the hallway outside her apartment until she felt safe again.

Someone else recalled that Auden had once been told that a friend needed a medical operation that he couldn't afford. Auden invited the friend to dinner, never mentioned the operation, but as the friend was leaving said, "I want you to have this," and handed him a large notebook containing the manuscript of *The Age of Anxiety*. The University of Texas bought the notebook and the friend had the operation.

From some letters I found in Auden's papers, I learned that a few years after World War II he had arranged through a European relief agency to pay the school and college costs for two war orphans chosen by the agency, an arrangement that continued, later with new sets of orphans, until his death at sixty-six in 1973.

At times, he went out of his way to seem selfish while doing something selfless. When NBC Television was producing a broadcast of *The Magic Flute* for which Auden, together with Chester Kallman, had translated the libretto, he stormed into the producer's office demanding to be paid immediately, instead of on the date specified in his contract. He waited there, making himself unpleasant, until a check finally arrived. A few weeks later, when the canceled check came back to NBC, someone noticed that he had endorsed it, "Pay to the order of Dorothy Day." The New York City Fire Department had recently ordered Day to make costly repairs to the homeless shelter she managed for the Catholic Worker Movement, and the shelter would have been shut down had she failed to come up with the money.

At literary gatherings he made a practice of slipping away from "the gaunt and great, the famed for conversation" (as he called them in a poem) to find the least important person in the room. A letter-writer in the *Times* of London last year recalled one such incident:

Sixty years ago my English teacher brought me to London from my provincial grammar school for a literary conference. Understandably, she abandoned me for her friends when we arrived, and I was left to flounder. I was gauche and inept and had no idea what to do with myself. Auden must have sensed this because he approached me and said, "Everyone here is just as nervous as you are, but they are bluffing, and you must learn to bluff too."

Late in life Auden wrote self-revealing poems and essays that portrayed him as insular and nostalgic, still living imaginatively in the Edwardian world of his childhood. His "Doggerel by a Senior Citizen" began, "Our earth in 1969/Is not the planet I call mine," and continued with disgruntled complaints against the modern age: "I cannot settle which is worse,/The Anti-Novel or Free Verse." A year after he wrote this, I chanced on a first book by a young poet, N.J. Loftis, *Exiles and Voyages*. Some of the book was in free verse; much of it alluded to Harlem and Africa; the author's ethnic

loyalties were signaled by the name of the publisher, the Black Market Press. The book was dedicated “To my first friend, W.H. Auden.”

A few years later I got a phone call from a Canadian burglar who told me he had come across Auden’s poems in a prison library and had begun a long correspondence in which Auden gave him an informal course in literature. Auden was especially pleased to get him started on Kafka. He was equally helpful to unknown young poets who sent him their poems, offering detailed help on such technical matters as adjectives and enjambment.

When he felt obliged to stand on principle on some literary or moral issue, he did so without calling attention to himself, and he was impatient with writers like Robert Lowell whose political protests seemed to him more egocentric than effective. When he won the National Medal for Literature in 1967, he was unwilling either to accept it in Lyndon Johnson’s White House during the Vietnam War or “to make a Cal Lowell gesture by a public refusal,” so he arranged for the ceremony to be held at the Smithsonian, where he gave an acceptance speech about the corruption of language by politics and propaganda.

He was always professional in his dealings with editors and publishers, uncomplainingly rewriting whole essays when asked—except on at least two occasions when he quietly sacrificed money and fame rather than falsify his beliefs. In 1964, for his translation (with Leif Sjöberg) of Dag Hammarskjöld’s posthumous *Markings*, he wrote a foreword that mentioned Hammarskjöld’s “narcissistic fascination with himself” and alluded almost invisibly to Hammarskjöld’s homosexuality, which Auden perceived as something entirely inward to Hammarskjöld and never acted upon:

A “thorn in the flesh” which convinces him that he can never hope to experience what, for most people, are the two greatest joys earthly life has to offer, either a passionate devotion returned, or a lifelong happy marriage.

He also alluded to Hammarskjöld’s inner sense of a messianic, sacrificial mission—something he seems to have recognized as a version of the messianic fantasy to which he had himself been tempted by his youthful fame as a revolutionary left-wing poet.

Auden had been Hammarskjöld’s candidate for the Nobel Prize, and was widely expected to win it in 1964. Soon after Hammarskjöld’s executors and friends saw Auden’s typescript, he was visited by a Swedish diplomat who hinted that the Swedish Academy would be unhappy if it were printed in its present form, that perhaps it could be revised. Auden ignored the hint, and seems to have mentioned the incident only once, when he went to dinner with his friend Lincoln Kirstein the same evening and said, “There goes the Nobel Prize.” The prize went to Jean-Paul Sartre, who refused it.

Two years later, *Life* magazine offered him \$10,000 for an essay on the fall of Rome, the last of a series by multiple authors titled “The Romans.” Auden’s typescript ended with his reflections on the fall of two empires:

I think a great many of us are haunted by the feeling that our society, and by ours I don’t mean just the United States or Europe, but our whole world-wide technological civilisation, whether officially labelled capitalist, socialist or communist, is going to go smash, and probably deserves to.

The editors refused to inflict this on their patriotic mass-market readership in the era of the *Pax Americana*, and asked Auden to rewrite it. He declined, knowing that the piece would be dropped and that he would be paid nothing. Scholars have known for years that he had written the essay—an editor rescued it from the files when it was about to be discarded—but no one seemed to know why it never appeared. Auden may have told the story only to one friend, Thekla Clark, who retold it in a documentary film, *Wystan: The Life, Love and Death of a Poet*, by Michael Buergermeister, which had its premiere in Oxford last year.

Auden had many motives for portraying himself as rigid or uncaring when he was making unobtrusive gifts of time,

money, and sympathy. In part he was reacting against his own early fame as the literary hero of the English left. In 1937, before he turned thirty, a London paper printed on its front page the news that he had gone to Madrid planning to drive an ambulance for the beleaguered Republic in the Spanish civil war. (He was instead put to work broadcasting propaganda, and, after visiting the front, quietly left, disheartened by some of the actions of his own side.)

In 1939 he left England for America, partly to escape his own public status. Six months later, after making a speech at a political meeting, he wrote to a friend:

I suddenly found I could really do it, that I could make a fighting demagogic speech and have the audience roaring.... It is so exciting but so absolutely degrading; I felt just covered with dirt afterwards.

He was disgusted by his early fame because he saw the mixed motives behind his image of public virtue, the gratification he felt in being idolized and admired. He felt degraded when asked to pronounce on political and moral issues about which, he reminded himself, artists had no special insight. Far from imagining that artists were superior to anyone else, he had seen in himself that artists have their own special temptations toward power and cruelty and their own special skills at masking their impulses from themselves.

In 1939, at thirty-two, he fell in love with Chester Kallman and thought of their relation as a marriage. Two years later, Kallman ended it because he could not endure Auden's wish for faithfulness. Auden reacted with murderous rage, probably toward Kallman, possibly toward the man with whom Kallman had been unfaithful. A few months later, he wrote in a verse letter to Kallman, "on account of you, I have been, in intention, and almost in act, a murderer."

By the time he wrote this, he had begun to sense that he had caused the break between them by trying to reshape Kallman into an ideal figure, an imaginary lover whom he valued more than the real one. What Auden had thought of as love for the younger man had been infected by *libido dominandi*, a lust for the power to transform him into someone else. This was a temptation that everyone experienced, but artists, he thought, were especially susceptible to it. He said in a lecture on Shakespeare's sonnets a few years later: "Art may spill over from creating a world of language into the dangerous and forbidden task of trying to create a human being."

Earlier, in his twenties, when he was trying to act as a political poet, he tried to write for a plural audience—that is, for a group or category of readers who shared similar interests. Later, he realized that he had always preferred to write as if addressing an individual reader. He might have thousands of individual readers, but he wrote as if speaking to one. "All the poems I have written were written for love," he said; "naturally, when I have written one, I try to market it, but the prospect of a market played no role in its writing."

A writer who addresses a plural audience claims to deserve their collective attention. He must present himself as the great modernists—Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, Pound—more or less seriously presented themselves, as visionary pioneers and cultural authorities, artist-heroes setting an agenda for their time and their nation. In contrast, a writer who addresses an individual reader presents himself as someone expert in his *métier* but in every other way equal with his reader, having no moral authority or special insight on anything beyond his art. Virginia Woolf, who thought much as Auden did about these matters, rebuked her readers for accepting an unequal relation with authors:

In your modesty you seem to consider that writers are of different blood and bone from yourselves; that they know more of Mrs Brown than you do. Never was there a more fatal mistake. It is this division between reader and writer, this humility on your part, these professional airs and graces on ours, that corrupt and emasculate the books which should be the healthy offspring of a close and equal alliance between us.

In an age when writers as different as Hemingway and Eliot encouraged their public to admire them as heroic explorers of the mind and spirit, Auden preferred to err in the opposite direction, by presenting himself as less than he was.

## 2.

By refusing to claim moral or personal authority, Auden placed himself firmly on one side of an argument that pervades the modern intellectual climate but is seldom explicitly stated, an argument about the nature of evil and those who commit it.

On one side are those who, like Auden, sense the furies hidden in themselves, evils they hope never to unleash, but which, they sometimes perceive, add force to their ordinary angers and resentments, especially those angers they prefer to think are righteous. On the other side are those who can say of themselves without irony, “I am a good person,” who perceive great evils only in other, evil people whose motives and actions are entirely different from their own. This view has dangerous consequences when a party or nation, having assured itself of its inherent goodness, assumes its actions are therefore justified, even when, in the eyes of everyone else, they seem murderous and oppressive.

One of many forms this argument takes is a dispute over the meaning of the great totalitarian evils of the twentieth century: whether they reveal something about all of humanity or only about the uniquely evil leaders, cultures, and nations that committed them. For Auden, those evils made manifest the kinds of evil that were potential in everyone. Looking out from the attic room in peaceful, rural Austria where he composed his poems, he wrote (in “The Cave of Making”):

*More than ever  
life-out-there is goodly, miraculous, loveable,  
but we shan't, not since Stalin and Hitler,  
trust ourselves ever again: we know that, subjectively,  
all is possible.*

“We,” that is to say, know collectively what is possible “subjectively” in the mind of each individual person.

In “September 1, 1939,” he dismissed the fantasy that anyone’s private life could be innocent of the evils that so obviously drove public life. Individual persons know subjectively—as if looking in a mirror—that they treat others as objects to be used, just as nations do:

*Out of the mirror they stare,  
Imperialism’s face  
And the international wrong.*

He observed to friends how common it was to find a dedicated anti-fascist who conducted his erotic life as if he were invading Poland.

Like everyone who thought more or less as he did, Auden didn’t mean that erotic greeds were morally equivalent to mass murder or that there was no difference between himself and Hitler. He was less interested in the obvious distinction between a responsible citizen and an evil dictator than he was in the more difficult question of what the citizen and dictator had in common, how the citizen’s moral and psychological failures helped the dictator to succeed.

Those who hold the opposite view, the view that the citizen and dictator have nothing in common, tend to hold many corollary views. One such corollary is that a suitable response to the vast evil of Nazi genocide is wordless, uncomprehending awe—because citizen and dictator are different species with no language they can share. Another corollary view is that Hannah Arendt, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), was offensively wrong about the “banality of evil,” because evil is something monstrous, exotic, and inhuman. The acts and thoughts of a good citizen, in this view, can be banal, not those of a dictator or his agents.

Auden stated a view like Arendt’s as early as 1939, in his poem “Herman Melville”:

*Evil is unspectacular and always human,  
And shares our bed and eats at our own table.*

He later quoted Simone Weil's *pensée* on the same theme, written around the same time: "Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring."

The view that the citizen and dictator have nothing in common has another corollary: the view that the dictator's victims are inherently innocent, not merely innocent victims of someone else's evil, but innocent in everything, so that even after the murderous dictator has been destroyed, their own actions, no matter how oppressive or unjust, may not be judged by the same standard as his actions. As victims of irrational hatred, they cannot imagine themselves acting on comparable hatreds. Against this fantasy of inherent innocence, Auden recognized that victims, no matter how guiltless in their own victimization, are tempted to become victimizers in turn. As he put it briskly in a song, "Many a sore bottom finds/A sorer one to kick."

Auden took intellectual pleasure in sorting people into types and anti-types. Much of his work dramatizes a distinction between gentle-minded Arcadians, who dream of an innocent past where everyone could do as they wanted without harming anyone else, and stern-minded Utopians, who fantasize, and sometimes try to build, an ideal future in which all will act as they should. He identified himself as an Arcadian, but he never imagined that Utopians, no matter how much he disliked being around them, were solely to blame for public and private injustice, and he always reminded himself that Arcadians were not as innocent as they thought.

In "Under Which Lyre," his 1946 Harvard Phi Beta Kappa poem, he made a similar distinction under different names. Instead of Arcadians and Utopians, he described the unending war for the human heart between the playful children of Hermes the trickster and the authoritarian children of law-giving Apollo, and he urged his fellow irresponsibles to resist Apollo's battalions. But he told a friend afterward, "I have a bit of Apollo in me too." He later told another friend that he had authoritarian impulses in himself that he despised but could never entirely abolish.

In his prose poem "Vespers," an Arcadian and a Utopian unwillingly perceive that each shares in the guilt of their civilization, that each is responsible for the "cement of blood" without which "no secular wall will safely stand." When the two encounter each other at a crossroads, neither speaks, but each knows what the other thinks:

*Both simultaneously recognize his Anti-type: that I am an Arcadian, that he is a Utopian.  
He notes, with contempt, my Aquarian belly: I note, with alarm, his Scorpion's mouth.  
He would like to see me cleaning latrines: I would like to see him removed to some other planet.*

Far from responding to Nazi genocide with wordless awe, Auden understood it as an extreme case of something all too comprehensible, the pandemic fantasy of building New Jerusalem in the real world:

Even Hitler, I imagine, would have defined his New Jerusalem as a world where there are no Jews, not as a world where they are being gassed by the million day after day in ovens, but he was a Utopian, so the ovens had to come in.

When Auden reviewed Isaiah Berlin's *The Hedgehog and the Fox* in 1954, he offered an alternative to Berlin's antithesis of hedgehogs who know one thing and foxes who know many. Improvising on *Alice in Wonderland*, he contrasted strong-minded Alices, confident in their moral rightness, with weak-minded Mabels, content to think as everyone else thinks. His antithesis had more to do with moral self-knowledge than with knowledge of the world.

Berlin was Auden's lifelong friend, and Auden was demurring gently at the Alice-like qualities he sensed in Berlin's book. One especially memorable statement by Berlin of the Alice-like views that Auden distrusted occurs in his later essay on Turgenev (printed, among other places, in these pages). Berlin wrote: "The dilemma of morally sensitive, honest, and intellectually responsible men at a time of acute polarization of opinion has, since [Turgenev's] time, grown acute and

world-wide.” Whatever Berlin intended, a sentence like this encourages readers to count themselves among the sensitive, honest, and responsible, with the inevitable effect of blinding themselves to their own insensitivities, dishonesties, and irresponsibilities, and to the evils committed by a group, party, or nation that they support. Their “dilemma” is softened by the comforting thought of their merits.

Auden wrote a poem about complacency and its pleasures, pleasures that he knew he shared, though he understood their delusions. The poem was “Lakes” (1952):

*Only a very wicked or conceited man,  
About to sink somewhere in mid-Atlantic,  
Could think Poseidon’s frown was meant for him in person,  
But it is only human to believe  
The little lady of the glacier lake has fallen  
In love with the rare bather whom she drowns.*

In the final stanza Auden wondered which kind of lake—“Moraine, pot, oxbow, glint, sink, crater, piedmont, dimple”—he would choose if he could own one, and ended on an ironic note of complacent pleasure: “Just reeling off their names is ever so comfy.” He first published the poem with no dedication; when he reprinted it a few months after reviewing *The Hedgehog and the Fox* he dedicated it “For Isaiah Berlin.”

Auden’s sense of his divided motives was inseparable from his idiosyncratic Christianity. He had no literal belief in miracles or deities and thought that all religious statements about God must be false in a literal sense but might be true in metaphoric ones. He felt himself commanded to an absolute obligation—which he knew he could never fulfill—to love his neighbor as himself, and he alluded to that commandment in a late haiku: “He has never seen God/but, once or twice, he believes/he has heard Him.” He took communion every Sunday and valued ancient liturgy, not for its magic or beauty, but because its timeless language and ritual was a “link between the dead and the unborn,” a stay against the complacent egoism that favors whatever is contemporary with ourselves. The book he wrote while returning in 1940 to the Anglican Communion of his childhood was titled *The Double Man*. It had an epigraph from Montaigne: “We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn.” He felt obliged to reveal to his neighbor what he condemned in himself.

#### Letters

*Why Auden Married* April 24, 2014