

## Richard Johnson: W. H. Auden

Auden, W. H. (21 Feb. 1907-29 Sept. 1973), poet, was born Wystan Hugh Auden in York, England, the son of George Augustus Auden, a physician and public health officer, and Constance Rosalie Bicknell, a nurse. Both his grandfathers were Church of England clergymen. His father was originally in private medical practice; when Auden was eighteen months old, the senior Auden became school medical officer for the city of Birmingham. Thus Auden grew up in a large industrial town and in a family that was comfortably off, though no more than that. His father's intellectual interests were broad and included history, archeology, and philosophy; his mother was devoutly religious and loved music. Both parents' interests were reflected in Auden's later life.

Auden was educated in boarding schools and at Oxford University, where he began by studying biology and then switched to English. (English was a new subject at Oxford at that time--1926--and switching was unusual and difficult.) Almost immediately after his graduation in 1928, he became recognized as the most talented of his generation of British poets, indeed as the voice of a new generation. Besides his precocious gifts as a versifier and phrasemaker in many forms and idioms, Auden gave voice to the deepest themes of his generation: concern over political and economic crises, suspicion of aestheticism, Marxist and Freudian understandings of self and society, and distrust of established authority, whether in literary, political, religious, or personal life. Bourgeois society was in its death throes, he believed, its fatal illness manifest in psychosomatic ailments, failed relations, and decaying institutions. The job of the artist was to help pave the way for a revolution that would destroy the old order and would free individuals for rebirth.

This, at least, was the message many readers heard in Auden's earliest works, *Poems* (1930), *The Orators* (1932), and several plays coauthored with Christopher Isherwood. With such messages, they also found a poet of stunning talent. The writer and critic Clive James asks, "Was there ever a more capacious young talent? It goes beyond precocity." He continues:

The plainest statement he could make seemed to come out as poetry. . . . It was a Shakespearean gift, not just in magnitude but in its unsettling . . . characteristic of making anything said sound truer than true. In all of English poetry it is difficult to think of any other poet who turned out permanent work so early--and whose work seemed so tense with the obligation to be permanent. (*Times Literary Supplement*, 12 Jan. 1973, p. 25)

Immediately after leaving Oxford, Auden spent a year in Weimar Germany and then returned to England as a teacher and, later, a documentary film writer. In 1935, his homosexuality notwithstanding, he married Erika Mann, daughter of the German novelist Thomas Mann. She, an actress and journalist, was a vehement anti-Nazi, and the marriage was solely for the purpose of obtaining British citizenship for her.

Auden also traveled a great deal during the 1930s, writing travel books--hodgepodes of verse, journalism, photographs, and personal reflections--about his trips to Iceland (with the poet Louis MacNeice) and (with Isherwood) to China, where he observed the war resulting from Japan's invasion of Manchuria. Like other European artists and intellectuals, he spent

some time in Spain during the civil war there and wrote one famous and controversial poem about it, "Spain 1937." Although Auden was highly esteemed by the British left, his attitude toward politics, and particularly toward Communist politics, was becoming more and more skeptical.

As general war in Europe approached, Auden, to the amazement of many people, emigrated to the United States (with Isherwood). Some saw this act as desertion of the home country at the time of its greatest peril. A great deal was happening to Auden personally, spiritually, and intellectually at this time, and to his poetry. Despite his status as a spokesman for rebelliousness against all forms of authority, Auden had been for several years moving toward a religious conversion, a process that was completed during his first two years in the United States: for the rest of his life he was regular and devout in his worship. Unlike T. S. Eliot, however, who had also gone through a conversion, Auden did not become a respectable churchman but retained his generally eccentric and bohemian style of life.

At about the same time, Auden fell in love with a young college student, Chester Kallman. It was a lifelong attachment, both profound and troubling for Auden. Auden was devoted to Kallman; Kallman, less so to Auden. For the next thirty and more years the attachment continued, and for much of the period the two lived together.

In America Auden turned again to teaching, as well as to lecturing, reviewing, and editing. He taught at various institutions, his longest stint being at Swarthmore College. During the 1940s he published several long poems, including *The Double Man* (1941), *For the Time Being* (1944), and *The Age of Anxiety* (1947). In 1945 *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* appeared, fixing his reputation as a major poet. It also created controversy, for several reasons. Most noticeably, his poems were arranged not in chronological order but alphabetically by first lines and by categories. He omitted some early poems, drastically changed a few others, and made many minor emendations. Poems that were originally published without titles--as was his practice in the thirties--now received them, and some of the titles seemed to undercut political messages of the originals. All in all, a number of critics and other readers felt that Auden had marred some of his best early work, as well as blurring the lines of his own development.

Perhaps the most notorious example involved a poem from Auden's first year in the United States. At the time of the German invasion of Poland, he wrote "September 1, 1939." As time went on, however, not only in the *Collected Poetry of 1945* but in later collections, he first tinkered with some of the most stirring lines of the poem, then excluded a whole stanza ("All I have is a voice . . ."). Finally he stopped including the poem at all (although the original version is now included in posthumously published volumes). Auden's stated reason for its exclusion was that the whole poem, but particularly the line ";We must love one another or die" was "infected by an incurable dishonesty and must be scrapped."

The poetry written by the American Auden disappointed some of the most avid admirers of the English Auden. With at least some justice, they saw the poet whose early gifts could be described as Shakespearean becoming more cerebral, more traditional, more formal and less experimental, more predictable, more rhetorical, and more abstract. Nonetheless, Auden quickly became not only one of the most widely read poets in America but an influential cultural presence. For years he selected the winner of the Yale Younger Poets award, which gave him the opportunity to boost the careers of poets with a dedication to craft and to the careful use of language. He lectured widely; he was one of the judges (along with two Columbia University professors, Lionel Trilling and Jacques Barzun) of an important

intellectual book club (the Reader's Subscription, subsequently the Mid-Century Book Society); and he reviewed regularly for influential publications, such as the *New Republic*, *Encounter*, and the *New York Review of Books*.

At the end of World War II Auden returned to Europe (somewhat improbably with the rank and uniform of army major, though he was still a civilian), participating in the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey. In 1946 he became a U.S. citizen. By the time of his return from Europe, he was able to live off his literary work and did no more full-time teaching. He was established not only as a poet but as a person resembling an old-fashioned man of letters, whose taste and reading, as well as whose writing, helped shape American culture at a time of enormous growth in the institutions of culture: literary reviews, publishing houses, book clubs, and the academic study of literature.

Auden was still in many ways a European, however; he referred to himself as "not an American, but a New Yorker," and his existence was clearly cosmopolitan and international. Beginning in 1948 Auden spent summers on the island of Ischia, near Naples, Italy; from 1957 until his death he frequently went to Kirchstetten, near Vienna, Austria, where he owned a house (celebrated in a series of poems published in 1965, "Thanksgiving for a Habitat") and where he died. From 1956 until 1961 he was professor of poetry at Oxford University (an elected position carrying honor and some duties, but not a full-time commitment).

What did he contribute to American history in the period of his residence, from 1939 to 1973, from the beginning of World War II until almost the end of the war in Vietnam? First, he had an enormous range of interests: history; philosophy; psychology; literature in many languages, both classical and modern; music (he wrote librettos for operas by Igor Stravinsky and Benjamin Britten); cooking; medicine; and almost anything else. Second, he contributed a quick intelligence that expressed itself equally in memorable verse and in witty, unencumbered prose. Third, at a time when the dominant assumptions of American criticism emphasized a severe separation between literature and personal life, literature and history, and literature and politics, Auden--though he partially agreed with these assumptions--brought a sense of the existence of literature in social and cultural history, and thus an image of a poet not simply as a craftsman of artifacts but also a humane thinker and commentator.

As a poet, as a critic, and as a man of letters, Auden affected British and American poetry by pulling the experimentalism and difficulty dominant in early twentieth-century modernism (in the poetry, for example, of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens) toward a kind of traditionalism and formalism. In this his influence was enormous. A subtler but even more important effect comes from the fact that Auden was both British and, in his tastes and reading and many of his friendships, broadly European. The tradition that Auden fostered in American poetry (not without many countermovements in reaction to it) was large and inclusive, not merely British or American, but international. Whatever his intentions in emigrating, he left England as it was losing its position of preeminent world power and came to the United States as it was beginning its period of undisputed preeminence in the world. Auden's time in America was also a time in which American intellectual, cultural, and scientific life was enriched by an extraordinary infusion of European talent. Though much of this emigration was from Germany and Central Europe, Auden was part of the flow and gave voice to an enlarged cultural understanding. Many of his closest friends and collaborators--Stravinsky, the philosopher Hannah Arendt, the psychologist Wolfgang Köhler, the Mann family, his close friend Elizabeth Mayer, and countless others--were part of this massive demographic movement. Auden did not so much become an American as bring to America, and synthesize in his verse, a broadly European culture, which was cosmopolitan and shaped

by the darkened vision of Nazism, Stalinism, and World War II.

Perhaps one of the best--certainly one of the most generous--assessments of Auden comes from the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, who learned English partly by reading Auden's poems while imprisoned in Siberia, and whose first stop upon being exiled from the Soviet Union was Auden's house in Austria. Brodsky talks of "the man whom I consider the greatest mind of the twentieth century: Wystan Hugh Auden"; and writes of him:

Whatever the reasons for which [Auden] crossed the Atlantic and became an American, the result was that he fused both idioms of English and became--to paraphrase one of his own lines--our transatlantic Horace. One way or another, all the journeys he took--through lands, caves of the psyche, doctrines, creeds--served not so much to improve his argument but expand his diction. (*Less Than One*, p. 382)

The reference to Horace is carefully considered. During the early days of the Roman Empire, while Virgil celebrated its imperial power and Ovid explored its old myths from his place of exile, Horace retired to his farm to write carefully fashioned lyrics that enriched the language. This is what Brodsky refers to when he talks of Auden's journey serving to expand his diction. Auden's foremost goal--and what many, like Brodsky, would consider his enduring legacy--was to be, as Auden says of W. B. Yeats in his famous elegy for that poet, "one by whom language lives."

**Publication Status:**

Excerpted Criticism [1]

**Publication:**

- Private group -

**Criticism Target:**

W. H. Auden [2]

**Author:**

Richard Johnson [3]

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