

INTRODUCTION

AFTER his five-year term as Professor of Poetry at Oxford ended in 1961, Auden thought of himself as having withdrawn from the public eye, while, at the same time, he began to say more in public about his inner self and his private history than he had ever done before. “Every work of art is, in one sense, a self-disclosure”, he wrote in 1963, and for the rest of his life, until his death at sixty-six in 1973, he declared himself a champion of privacy while revealing, in direct and indirect ways in prose and verse, the secrets of his inner life. *A Certain World*, the book of quotations and commentary that he published in 1970, was, he wrote, “a sort of autobiography”. He kept insisting, in the opening paragraphs of essays and reviews, that he disapproved of all biographies of writers and artists, that collections of writers’ letters were deplorable invasions of their privacy, and that knowledge of a writer’s life could reveal nothing about the writer’s work. In almost every case, he then made a special exception for the book he was writing about, sometimes without acknowledging that he had done so.

As a professor at Oxford, living at his old college, Christ Church, for a few weeks each year from 1956 through 1960, he had been a great public success. He had charmed students and dons alike, and his humility and humor had disarmed the enmity even of those who had never forgiven him for leaving England for America in 1939. But he had the same mixed feelings about his success that he had had in the 1930s when he was celebrated as the rising poet of the English Left, and was again relieved when he could drop his public role. In 1940 he published a book review on the Spanish Civil War in which he recalled that a few years earlier he had tried, “more in theory than in practice”, to submerge himself in mass political action, only to realize that he had been hoping that world events could solve for him a “personal problem” of his own—implicitly but clearly a failure to love—and that he now realized that his personal problem could be solved only after he accepted the loneliness of personal isolation rather than dissolving himself in group life and public action. In the early 1960s, as in the early 1940s, he withdrew from the public eye in order to comprehend and renew his private life.

Around 1960 he began writing poems in which he addressed himself, or some aspect of himself, in the second person. The first, addressed to his own body, was titled “You.” In 1961, a few months after his professorship ended, he wrote another second-person poem, “A Change of Air”, about

This introduction covers both this volume and Volume VI.

his inner journey away from his public role. The poem opens with a sense of “estrangement between your name and you”—that is, between the name by which you are known to others and the person whom you are to yourself—and he advises for himself a “change of air”. The kind of change that the poem recommends has nothing to do with movement to some other location; instead it is a choice to become private and still—“To go elsewhere is to abstain from movement”—while your outer self becomes, in others’ eyes, as uninteresting and unexceptional as anyone else’s. You enter an “average elsewhereishness” where your name and self are no longer estranged because your name gives you no special status; your name matches what you see in a mirror and your self is nothing more than your visible acts, “How you behave in shops”. You will, eventually and inevitably, make a “public reappearance”, but the interval when you were “elsewhere” will leave no visible record, merely a “wordless / Hiatus in your voluble biography.”

Auden wrote many words about the “wordless hiatus” in his life after his professorship. In 1962 an editor asked him to participate in one of a series of “symposia” in which a poet supplied a poem; three other critics and poets commented on it; and the poet then responded to the others’ comments. Auden offered “A Change of Air”. He had never before committed himself to write about one of his own poems, and he chose to write about the one poem in which he publicly announced his invisible withdrawal.

The comments he received—from George P. Elliott, a novelist, poet, and professor; Karl Shapiro, a poet much influenced by early Auden; and Stephen Spender, his old friend—were uniformly uncomprehending. So Auden, in his reply, explained at length how the poem came to be written and what it was about. The “basic theme” was “the contrast between a person’s inner and outer biography”:

It is, surely, a general experience that those events in a person’s life which to other people seem decisive and with which biographers are concerned are never the same as those moments which he himself (or she, herself) knows to have been the crucial ones: the inner life is undramatic and unmanifestable in realistic terms.

The poem, he explained, was a parable about a “successful sojourn elsewhere” by someone who has “reintegrated his persona with his ego”, the outer and inner aspects of himself. He did not explicitly claim to have been writing about his own experience, but it was impossible to imagine that he was writing about anyone else’s. The crucial events in his own life, he implied, had always been ones that occurred inwardly, and in the essays and reviews he wrote during the next few years, he proceeded to record them in detail. When he finished *The Dyer’s Hand* (1962), the book of essays that included many of his Oxford lectures, he thought it contained, he said in

a letter, “all the autobiography I am willing to make public”. He almost immediately began making public much that he had omitted.

He also took pains to plant private information where he could be certain it would be made public in the future. When Monroe K. Spears, an American academic, wrote the first scholarly book about his work, *The Poetry of W. H. Auden: The Disenchanted Island* (1963), Auden showed his gratitude for Spears’s intelligence and care by writing to him that his 1956 poem “There Will Be No Peace” was “one of the most purely personal poems I have ever written”, and that his 1948 poem “A Household” was a “self-portrait” in which he “tried to apply the same trinitarian analysis of personality to myself as I applied to Eliot in my *New Yorker* review of [Notes] *Toward a Definition of Culture*”. “Don’t tell anyone”, he wrote, knowing perfectly well that scholars may conceal private information but will never destroy it. Two years later, having written a pseudonymous piece, “Behaviour, Action and Enchantment”, for an obscure magazine published by the Student Christian Movement, he reported it to Spears, assuring that its authorship would someday be made public. He may have been unconscious of his motives in revealing such things to Spears, but, around the same time, he wrote a will naming Spears as one of his literary executors.*

A few of his public revelations were trivial, for example, “the last line and a half [all he could remember] of the first poem I ever wrote, a Wordsworthian sonnet on Blea Tarn in the Lake District”. Others went deeper. In 1963, the introduction he wrote for *The Protestant Mystics*, an anthology edited by his friend Anne Fremantle, was a lightly disguised autobiographical account of three visionary experiences of his own. He organized the essay according to what seemed to him “four distinct kinds of mystical experience”, the visions of Dame Kind (impersonal nature), of Eros, of Agape, and of God. He described the benefits and temptations that accompanied each of the four visions, and made clear in indirect ways that he had experienced the benefits and temptations of the first three, while remaining doubtful that the fourth could ever be real.

All four visions, he wrote, shared some features in common. They could not be induced at will; they seem to be a revelation of reality in which the visionary says, “a veil was lifted and I saw what really is”; they are “totally different” from the experience of “seeing things” that are not physically present; they are always shaped in part by the character and experience of the person who experiences them; and while they are “blessings and a good”, yet if someone should take a visionary experience “as a sign of superior merit”

*The other was the American poet William Meredith. Later, in 1972, he asked me to be his literary executor, a change to which Spears and Meredith assented. In the same way that he had told Spears about his pseudonymous essay, he told me he had written the unsigned review of the Strauss-Hoffmannsthal letters in the *TLS* (*Prose IV*, p. 348).

or “idolize it as something he cannot live without, then it can only lead him into darkness and destruction.”

Of the Vision of Dame Kind he wrote that its objects may be inorganic or organic, but they “are all non-human, though human artifacts like buildings may be included”:

The basic experience is an overwhelming conviction that the objects confronting him have a numinous significance and importance, that the existence of everything he is aware of is holy. And the basic emotion is one of innocent joy, though this joy can include, of course, a reverent dread.

Readers who remembered from his long poem “New Year Letter” (1940) the lines about his childhood experiences among the lead-mines at Rookhope, County Durham, would recognize the vision, which he had experienced at the age of twelve:

In *Rookhope* I was first aware
Of Self and Not-self, Death and Dread:
Adits were entrances which led
Down to the Outlawed, to the Others,
The Terrible, the Merciful, the Mothers:
Alone in the hot day I knelt
Upon the edges of shafts and felt
The deep *Urmutterfurcht* that drives
Us into knowledge all our lives . . .

About the vision of Eros, he began almost dismissively by writing that vast numbers of people in the West imagine they have experienced it when in fact they were merely driven by the urges of sex. So “one is sometimes tempted to doubt if the experience is ever genuine, even when, or especially when, it seems to have happened to oneself.” The poems Auden wrote in 1939 and 1940 about his love for Chester Kallman had pointed quietly toward the vision he had experienced in 1939, at the age of thirty-two:

Perhaps the roses really want to grow,
The vision seriously intends to stay;
If I could tell you I would let you know.

The immediate effect of his vision, Auden suggested in his introduction, had been his sudden ability to write copiously and well about subjects other than love itself: the vision of Eros “usually releases a flood of psychic energy for actions which are not directly concerned with the beloved at all. When in love, the soldier fights more bravely, the thinker thinks more clearly, the carpenter fashions with greater skill.”

In Auden’s case, the vision ended abruptly after two years, in 1941, when Kallman, unable to tolerate Auden’s wish for mutual fidelity, ended their

sexual relations. In the year that followed, in his Christmas Oratorio, “For the Time Being”, Auden looked back at his lost vision, disguising its private meaning by portraying instead a Christmas vision of the incarnate Christ, a vision accessible to anyone:

To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.

His 1963 introduction says nothing about the loss of the vision of Eros, only about its glories. He links the erotic vision—of divinity embodied in a beloved person—with the Christian doctrine of incarnation. Plato’s argument in the *Symposium* that the lover ascends from beautiful persons through beautiful ideas to beauty itself leaves Auden “bewildered” because Plato seems “unaware of what we mean by a person”. He imagines himself addressing Plato’s shade:

It is quite true, as you say, that a fair principle does not get bald and fat or run away with somebody else. On the other hand, a fair principle cannot give me a smile of welcome when I come into a room. Love of a human being may be, as you say, a lower form of love than love for a principle, but you must admit that it is a damn sight more interesting.

Dante’s account of seeing Beatrice and hearing a voice say, “Now you have seen your beatitude”, is “much more comprehensible”.

Auden’s essay arranges the four kinds of vision in a hierarchy, starting with the vision of inhuman nature, then the erotic vision of a single loved person, then the vision of Agape that embraces a community of persons, and finally the vision of God. In his own experience, however, the chronology of the visions differs from this hierarchy, so the sequence of visions in the essay differs from the sequence in his life. He experienced the third vision in the essay, the vision of Agape, before he experienced the second, the vision of Eros. His vision of Agape occurred in 1933, when he was twenty-six. In his introduction, he wrote of the vision of Agape that, because he could find no account of it among the selections in the anthology, “I shall quote from an unpublished account for the authenticity of which I can vouch”—an unmistakable statement of his authorship, as no one can vouch for someone else’s report of an inward experience.

His account recalls a “fine summer night in June 1933” when

I was sitting on a lawn after dinner with three colleagues, two women and one man. We liked each other well enough but we were certainly not intimate friends, nor had any one of us a sexual interest in another. . . . We were talking casually about everyday matters when, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, something happened. I felt myself invaded by

a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly—because, thanks to the power, I was doing it—what it means to love one’s neighbor as oneself. . . .

I recalled with shame the many occasions on which I had been spiteful, snobbish, selfish, but the immediate joy was greater than the shame, for I knew that, so long as I was possessed by this spirit, it would be literally impossible for me deliberately to injure another human being.

Attentive readers would remember that Auden had written a poem—later titled “A Summer Night 1933”—that began “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” and responded elliptically to his delight in the company of his “colleagues” in the “windless nights of June”.

About the fourth kind of vision, the “direct encounter of a human soul with God”, Auden wrote in his introduction: “No one could be less qualified than I” to discuss or describe it, and he listed his many reasons to doubt the reports of such visions that made up the bulk of Anne Fremantle’s collection.

Since 1948 Auden and Kallman had lived together in a nonsexual relation in which they collaborated on opera libretti and translations. They wintered in New York and summered in Europe, first in Italy, later in Austria. In 1963–64, Kallman left New York permanently and began wintering alone in Athens while continuing to summer with Auden in Austria. Alone in New York early in 1964, Auden again wrote an essay with a disguised autobiographical account of the vision of Eros, but this time in an intensely bitter tone.

The nominal subject of his essay was Shakespeare’s sonnets. He began by complaining that “more nonsense has been talked and written, more intellectual and emotional energy expended in vain, on the sonnets of Shakespeare than on any other literary work in the world.” All attempts to identify the biographical origin of the sonnets are futile, as are all other attempts to trace literary works to biographical causes. Biographies can be written about writers who had interesting lives, but only if “the biographer and his readers realize that such an account throws no light whatsoever upon the artist’s work.” All artists know this: “most genuine artists would prefer that no biography be written,” and “they would also prefer, were it practically feasible, that their writings be published anonymously.”

More than halfway through the essay, as if he had forgotten his own objections, Auden sketched a biographical account of the sonnets: “I think the *primary* experience—complicated as it became later—out of which the sonnets to the friend sprang was a mystical one.” He then described the vision of Eros, much as he did in *The Protestant Mystics*, before returning to Shakespeare:

The story of the sonnets seems to me to be the story of an agonized struggle by Shakespeare to preserve the glory of the vision he had been

granted in a relationship, lasting at least three years, with a person who seemed intent by his actions upon covering the vision with dirt.

As outsiders, the impression we get of his friend is one of a young man who was not really very nice, very conscious of his good looks, able to switch on the charm at any moment, but essentially frivolous, cold-hearted, and self-centered, aware, probably, that he had some power over Shakespeare—if he thought about it at all, no doubt he gave it a cynical explanation—but with no conception of the intensity of the feelings he had, unwittingly, aroused.

This is a severely one-sided portrait of Kallman from mid-1939 through mid-1941, the years when Auden, dazzled by the vision of Eros, had convinced himself, despite Kallman's promiscuity, that they had entered into a marriage. Auden had worn a wedding ring at the time, and wrote an elaborate poem about marriage, "In Sickness and in Health".

A year later, in 1965, he wrote another poem about his adolescent vision of Dame Kind, "Amor Loci"; in his pocket diary he called it "the Rookhope poem". The desolate place offers no conventional charms, but "To me, though, much: a vision / not (as perhaps at / twelve I thought it) of Eden"; to Auden now, the vision it offers is a negative vision of a God, a vision entirely unlike the visions of God that he had vigorously doubted in his introduction to *The Protestant Mystics*. His own *amor loci*, his love for a landscape too desolate to offer anything in return, makes it possible for him to imagine "by analogy" a divine love that will not withdraw even from those who, like himself, respond to it as Shakespeare's young man responded to Shakespeare's love, by "covering the vision with dirt":

How but with some real focus
of desolation
could I, by analogy,
imagine a Love
that, however often smeared,
shrugged at, abandoned
by a frivolous worldling,
does not abandon?

Auden's essays and reviews in the last dozen years of his life are most vivid and memorable when he writes explicitly about others' lives or elliptically about his own. He was especially fascinated by artists and writers who were more or less monstrous or obsessive, who exemplified intellectual temptations that he himself had experienced and refused (Goethe, Kierkegaard, Wagner). He enjoyed writing about the saintly (Henry Mayhew, Dorothy Day), the aesthetic (Oscar Wilde, A. E. Housman, Max Beerbohm), and the sexually eccentric (J. R. Ackerley, Denys Munby). He wrote enthusiastically

about the byways of Christian theology and classical myth, partly because theological language was for him one of the most effective means of writing about secular reality, and it enabled him to explore his deepest concerns about the meaning and value of body and mind without embarrassing himself and his readers with explicit confessions.

He professed to disapprove when a writer's letters were published, just as he professed to disapprove of biographical studies. In 1963, he began his review of a collection of Oscar Wilde's letters: "The mere fact that a man is famous and dead does not entitle us to read, still less to publish, his private correspondence." It was, he continued, permissible to publish a famous person's letters only in the case of a "born letter writer . . . to whom letter writing is as natural and 'impersonal' a form of literary composition as poetry or fiction", or men of action "whose decisions have affected the history of the society in which they lived."

Writers and artists, however, are another matter. Some of them have been born letter writers as well, but the average productive poet or novelist or dramatist is too busy, too self-centered, to spend much time and trouble over his correspondence; if and when he does, the letters are probably love letters and, since knowledge of an artist's private life never throws any significant light upon his work, there is no justification for intruding upon his privacy.

But he found cause to make an exception in the case of Wilde's letters:

Is their publication justified? Somewhat to my surprise, I find myself saying yes. . . . Wilde was, both by genius and by fate, primarily an "actor," a performer. . . . From the beginning Wilde performed his life and continued to do so even after fate had taken the plot out of his hands. Drama is essentially revelation; on the stage no secrets are kept. I feel, therefore, that there is nothing Wilde would desire more than that we should know everything about him.

At the time he wrote this, Auden had begun writing poems that, like his autobiographical essays, told or suggested "everything about him". From 1962 through 1964 he worked on "Thanksgiving for a Habitat", a sequence of poems about the rooms of his house in Austria, with many personal details about his life with Kallman in the sitting room ("The Common Life"); his habits in the bath ("Encomium Balnei"), the lavatory ("The Geography of the House"), and the study ("The Cave of Making"); and his unwilling solitude in the bedroom ("The Cave of Nakedness"). He wrote to Christopher Isherwood: "For the first time I have felt old enough and sure enough of myself to speak in my own person." "Thanksgiving for a Habitat" became the first of the two parts of his collection *About the House* (1965); the opening poem in the second part was his equally self-revealing "A Change of Air".

The more he made himself the subject of his poems, the more he refused to claim any special status as a model, leader, or example. The special temptation faced by a publicly successful artist like himself was, he thought, self-enchantment. In “The Cave of Making” he invoked the saving spirit of his old friend Louis MacNeice

to break the spell of our self-enchantment when lip-smacking
 imps of mawk and hooley
write with us what they will . . .

Mawk and hooley were the temptations to write about oneself in a way that pitied or idealized oneself while in fact reducing oneself to a faceless instrument with whom falsehoods and clichés write what they will. The kinds of personal revelation that escaped those temptations were possible only through parable and indirection.

At the heart of Auden’s understanding of the language that he wielded with confident authority was his sense that it was always an inadequate echo of a greater and inexpressible truth. Speech, he wrote in “The Cave of Making”, is “a shadow echoing / the silent light”. Like Goethe, he continued, he knew that “Speech can at best . . . bear witness / to the Truth it is not”, but, also like Goethe, “he wished it were”—that is, knowing as Goethe did that speech could not be true, he still hoped to speak as truthfully as he could. In contrast “the francophil / gaggle of pure songsters / are too vain” to wish that their words could be true, because they conceive their imaginative speech to be the creation of an artist-hero, and superior to mere reality.

In circuitous ways, Auden paid a price for his self-examination and for his judgements of himself. In 1963 he was commissioned to translate Dag Hammarskjöld’s posthumous *Markings* into English; he and Hammarskjöld had been on friendly terms, and they had talked in close but not intimate ways over private dinners together. In the introduction he wrote to *Markings* Auden pointed to some of Hammarskjöld’s personal traits that Auden recognized because he had experienced them himself. He alluded tactfully to Hammarskjöld’s homosexuality (which he seems never to have acted upon, and which was invisible to his conventional friends):

An exceptionally aggressive superego—largely created, I suspect, by his relation to his father—which demands that a Hammarskjöld shall do and be better than other people; on the other hand, an ego weakened by 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. Consequently, a feeling of personal unworthiness which went very far, for it led him, it would seem, to undervalue or even doubt the reality of the friendship and sympathy which must always have been

offered him in plenty. Consequently, too, a narcissistic fascination with himself.

Auden also elliptically suggested that when Hammarskjöld came to have faith in God, he also began to think of himself in the role of a messiah:

Two themes came to preoccupy his thoughts. First, the conviction that no man can do properly what he is called upon to do in this life unless he can learn to forget his ego and act as an instrument of God. Second, that for him personally, the way to which he was called would lead to the Cross, i.e. to suffering, worldly humiliation, and the physical sacrifice of his life.

Both notions are, of course, highly perilous. The man who says, "Not I, but God in me" is always in great danger of imagining that he is God, and some critics have not failed to accuse Hammarskjöld of precisely this kind of megalomania . . .

Twice, in his mid-twenties and again in his early thirties, Auden had been tempted by a fantasy of himself as a public moral leader. The doomed messianic fantasies of the climber Ransom in Auden and Christopher Isherwood's play *The Ascent of F 6* (1936) signal his furious rejection of this fantasy the first time he experienced it; a trace of the second episode survives in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" where Auden imagines himself as the poet who can "Make a vineyard of the curse: and "Teach the free man how to praise." Auden saw in Hammarskjöld a similar psychological fantasy that coexisted with the great political sanity and moral intelligence that was visible to the world.

Auden had been Hammarskjöld's candidate for the Nobel Prize. In 1963, when George Seferis won the prize, Auden was one of three finalists, and was widely expected to win in 1964. Then, in the spring of that year, Hammarskjöld's executors and his friends in the diplomatic service were horrified and offended by Auden's introduction when they read it in typescript. A high Swedish official visited Auden in New York and hinted that the Swedish Academy would be distressed if his introduction should be printed as written. Auden refused to rewrite it, and, that evening, said to his friend Lincoln Kirstein, "There goes the Nobel Prize." (The 1964 prize went to Jean-Paul Sartre, who refused it.)

One reason Auden wrote elliptically about himself was his understanding that language could not render truth directly but could nonetheless point toward truth through indirection. Hammarskjöld's *Markings* included many haiku; translating them into English, Auden saw how effective this highly artificial form—seventeen syllables in three lines—could be in rendering personal truth in indirect ways. His first poem in haiku form seems to have been "Iceland Revisited", written in April 1964, a few weeks after he finished translating *Markings*. In it, he writes about himself in the third person, saying

things about his mind and character that personal dignity had always forbidden him to say in first-person style:

He hears a loudspeaker
Call him well-known:
But he knows himself no better. . . .

Snow had camouflaged
The pool of liquid manure:
The town mouse fell in. . . .

A blizzard. A bare room.
Thoughts of the past.
He forgot to wind his watch.

Auden used the third person for almost all his haiku about himself. He experimented with the second person in an early example (“A dry sad day. / What pirate falsehood / Has beheaded your stream of Truth?”) and in a rhymed poem (in a form invented for the occasion) in which he imagined himself reduced to tears of shame on Judgement Day when God recites to him “the poems you would / have written, had / your life been good”.

Late in 1964, for once abandoning his customary indirection, Auden wrote a detailed account of his early years, not as a separate essay but woven into a review in the *New Yorker* of autobiographies by Leonard Woolf and Evelyn Waugh, under the title “As It Seemed to Us”. He divided the review into sections headed “Heredity”, “Parents and Home Life”, “War”, “School”, “University”, “Money”, “Religion”, “Events and Acts”, and “Change”, each built on the differences and similarities among Woolf’s, Waugh’s, and his own experience. His justification for this autobiographical method was that “no one can read an autobiography which describes a time, a country, a class familiar to him without starting to compose his own, and I can review Mr Woolf’s *Beginning Again* and Mr Waugh’s *A Little Learning* only as I have read them; that is to say, as a participant”. He gave himself permission to write directly about himself only in the course of writing with equal attention to others.

Many of his recollections more or less paralleled those he found in Woolf and Waugh, but he took the trouble to report events in his own life that had no counterpart in theirs:

Neither Mr Woolf nor Mr Waugh seems to have indulged in a kind of daydreaming that was of immense importance to my childhood. Between the ages of six and twelve, I spent a great many of my waking hours in the construction and elaboration of a private sacred world, the basic elements of which were a landscape, northern and limestone, and an industry, lead mining.

Some sections of his autobiographical review began with brief chronologies of events, including crucial events in his own religious life at ages thirteen, fifteen, and thirty-three: “1920, period of ecclesiastical *Schwärmerei*. 1922, discovers that he has lost his faith. 1940, returns to the Anglican Communion.” For the first time, and almost in passing, he publicly acknowledged his homosexuality. “Many boys”, he reports, “can remember some adult, neither a schoolmaster nor a relative, who took an interest in them and taught them something not in the school curriculum”: Evelyn Waugh, for example, recalls an older man who taught him script.

The corresponding figure in my life I had to meet clandestinely—my housemaster having forbidden me to see him, and not without reason, for he was a practicing homosexual and had, I think, been to prison. Why he should have taken a shine to me I cannot imagine, since I was a very plain boy. He made advances, which I rejected, not on moral grounds but because I thought him unattractive. Instead of dropping me, however, he continued to give me books and write me long letters full of encouraging and constructive criticism of my juvenile verses. I owe him a great deal.

Auden wrote in his foreword to *The Dyer's Hand* that he had written his poems for love but had “never written a line of criticism except in response to a demand by others for a lecture, an introduction a review, etc.; though I hope that some love went into their writing, I wrote them because I needed the money.” Enough love went into their writing that he was willing to lose the money rather than say something he did not believe. In 1966 *Life* magazine, planning a series of articles on the history of Rome, commissioned him to write six thousand words on the fall of the empire, for which he was offered ten thousand dollars, far more than he had ever received before. After much labor and extensive reading, he prepared a typescript, titled “The Fall of Rome”. It concluded with his 1947 poem “The Fall of Rome”, preceded by a few paragraphs of reflections that make the same point that the poem had made about the fall of two civilizations:

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.

Like the third century the twentieth is an age of stress and anxiety. In our case, it is not that our techniques are too primitive to cope with new problems, but the very fantastic success of our technology is creating a hideous, noisy, over-crowded world in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to lead a human life. In our reactions to this, one can see many

parallels to the third century. Instead of gnostics, we have existentialists and God-is-dead theologians, instead of neo-platonists, devotees of Zen, instead of desert hermits, heroin addicts and beats (who also, oddly enough, seem averse to washing), instead of mortification of the flesh, sado-masochistic pornography; as for our public entertainments, the fare offered by television is still a shade less brutal and vulgar than that provided by the amphitheatre, but only a shade, and may not be for long.

The editors of *Life*, unwilling to inflict anything of the kind on their millions of readers, asked Auden to rewrite it. He refused, as he had refused to rewrite his essay on Hammarskjöld. The essay was rejected and he was paid nothing.

Around this time, he began to devise new ways of writing autobiographies while insisting he disapproved of them. In 1965, after compiling and revising his work for his *Collected Shorter Poems 1927–1957* (1966), he wrote a foreword contrasting the generally chronological arrangement of the book with the very different arrangement he had used twenty years earlier:

In 1944, when I first assembled my shorter pieces [published in America in 1945 as *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden*, in different form in Britain in 1950 as *Collected Shorter Poems 1930–1944*], I arranged them in the alphabetical order of their first lines. This may have been a silly thing to do, but I had a reason. At the age of thirty-seven I was still too young to have any sure sense of the direction in which I was moving, and I did not wish critics to waste their time, and mislead readers, making guesses about it which would almost certainly turn out to be wrong. Today, nearing sixty, I believe that I know myself and my poetic intentions better and, if anybody wants to look at my writings from an historical perspective, I have no objection.

In other words, his poems were not timeless aesthetic objects existing in the realm of art but events in his personal history partly provoked by the history of the world around him.

After finishing his Oxford professorship, Auden no longer wanted academic commitments or prominent public roles. He gave occasional lectures and earned money on more or less annual lecture tours like the one commemorated with ironic gratitude in his poem “On the Circuit” in 1963. At some point in the 1960s he turned down an offer of a year at Harvard as the Charles Eliot Norton Lecturer, saying he had no work in prospect that he could use for the required six lectures. In 1966, however, when a committee at the University of Kent invited him to give the first T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures, he felt obliged to accept, guessing or knowing that Eliot’s widow Valerie had engineered the invitation behind the scenes out of friendship for him and in order to give stature to the lectureship.

Unlike his lively and well-crafted Oxford lectures, many of them rewritten for *The Dyer's Hand*, and unlike his densely argued Page-Barbour Lectures at Virginia in 1949 that he published as *The Enchafed Flood*, Auden's Eliot lectures were, for the most part, subdued and workmanlike affairs. He declined the university's suggestion that he lecture about Eliot's work, saying, "I know how distressed as well as amused he was at becoming the source of a critical heavy industry." Instead, he continued, politely but unanswerably, "What I think he would like me to do is to present some views of my own on topics with which he was himself concerned." He chose as a general title *Secondary Worlds*, derived from J. R. R. Tolkien's distinction between the real or primary world and the secondary worlds of fiction and myth, and a variation on Auden's recurrent theme that speech is no more than an echo of truth.

Introducing his four lectures from the podium in 1967, and in the book version of them that appeared in 1968, Auden claimed only that the first, "The Martyr as Dramatic Hero", dealt with a topic with which Eliot was concerned:

The hero of his first full-length play was a historical martyr, Becket; Harry, the hero of *The Family Reunion*, though we are not told what happens to him, decides to take up a way of life which may well lead, as a similar decision by Celia, the heroine of *The Cocktail Party*, actually does, to martyrdom.

The focus of this first lecture was Charles Williams's play *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*. Williams had been Eliot's friend, and his play was the second of the Canterbury Festival Plays, following Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

Auden revered Eliot as a poet and friend, but in essays and reviews that he wrote during Eliot's lifetime, he had disputed, with the greatest possible courtesy, Eliot's aesthetics and theology. In a review in 1953 he had questioned Eliot's treatment of exactly the theme of martyrdom that Auden had now chosen for the subject of his first lecture in Eliot's honor: "I am absolutely certain that Mr Eliot did not intend us to think that [in *The Family Reunion*] Harry is called and not John because John is stupid, or that [in *The Cocktail Party*] Celia is called and not Lavinia because she is of a higher social class, but that is exactly what the comedy convention he is using is bound to suggest." The unspoken point of Auden's lecture was that Eliot had also been mistaken about martyrdom in *Murder in the Cathedral*, and that Eliot's religion, as expressed in his prose, poetry, and plays, was distorted by an unchristian aestheticism that confused religious value with such things as status and style.

Auden described Eliot's Thomas à Becket and Williams's Thomas Cranmer as entirely different types of martyr-heroes. "As a character", Auden wrote, "Becket is the stuff of which epic heroes are made, utterly fearless, combative and very conscious of his natural *arête*." Eliot's audience, that is, could

recognize in Becket none of their own ordinary human motives. Williams's Cranmer, in contrast, is a more complex and recognizable figure. After devoting his life to the Protestant cause under Henry VIII and Edward VI, he recanted under Queen Mary in the hope of escaping death:

To liberal historians of the last century, Cranmer's motive for recanting seemed simple: fear of being burned alive. Political events in this century have taught us that recantation can be more complicated. A convinced Marxist, committed to the view that the Communist Party is always right, rises to high position in the party, and becomes its official theoretician; suddenly the leaders of the party decide that there must be a switch in the party line; overnight, his theories become Trotskyite, bourgeois, or what-have-you. If he refuses to agree that his theories were wrong, then he must deny his basic premise that the party is always right. Substitute the Prince for the party, and the situation is Cranmer's.

Williams's Cranmer later renounces his recantation, realizing that he will be executed anyway, that he had not saved himself by recanting. Auden explains: "In the light of certain death, he realizes that he must die for what he had lived for, namely words." In Auden's reading of the play, Cranmer gives his life for language, his greatest love; but a sacrifice made for words is not the same as a sacrifice made for truth by a martyr who values truth more than life. At the very end of the play, Auden points out, Cranmer admits to his own conscience that, had the pope offered to spare his life in exchange for serving the Catholic cause, he would have accepted the offer. His martyrdom is equivocal, not exemplary.

A further unspoken point of Auden's lecture is that Williams was a deeper psychologist and moralist than Eliot was, and that he had written more profoundly about choice, sacrifice, and martyrdom. Eliot had in fact chosen a subject that was emotionally stirring but evaded the issues that his play pretended to raise: "The question that worries me about Becket", Auden said, "is whether his murder was not too accidental to warrant being called martyrdom."

About his three further Eliot Lectures, Auden acknowledged that the relation between their subject matter and Eliot's interests "is less direct and may seem to some non-existent." The second lecture, "The World of the Sagas", concerned the Icelandic poems and tales that Auden had loved as a child and which Eliot seems never to have read. Auden justified his subject by saying that the relation between art and the social world of everyday experience—a problem for every artist—is uniquely illuminated by the unornamented realism of the sagas. Again, the unspoken point seems to have been Auden's dispute with Eliot's aesthetic, with Eliot's portrayal of the real social world as inherently sordid, something to be escaped or satirized. The sagas, in contrast, achieve artistic excellence through a realism so unironic

and extreme that one of them was recognized only in the twentieth century as a fictional story, not a historical one. “The originality and excellence of the sagas is still a miracle”, Auden said. “I do not think that in what they set out to do even the greatest realistic novelists of the nineteenth century have surpassed them.”

Of the subject of his third lecture, “The World of Opera”, Auden said: “Eliot never wrote about music and, much to my regret, never wrote an opera libretto, but from the verse-play, in which he took a life-long interest, to the opera libretto is a short step.” Auden omitted to say that it was a step that he himself had taken because he thought that verse plays like Eliot’s could no longer be written successfully. In 1961, in an essay on opera, Auden wrote:

Dramatic poetry, to be recognizable as poetry, must raise its voice and be grand. But a poet today cannot raise his voice without sounding false and ridiculous. The modern poetic dramatist seems faced with these alternatives: either he writes the kind of verse which is natural to him, in which case he produces little closet dramas . . . or, if he wishes to write a public drama, he must so flatten his verse that it sounds to the ear like prose.

Readers would have recognized the first alternative as the one chosen by Yeats, the second as the one chosen by Eliot. “Neither alternative seems to me satisfactory”, he continued, so he had turned to writing libretti for opera, the medium that he called in his lecture “the last refuge of the High style”. Ten years earlier, in 1951, a few weeks after the première of *The Rake’s Progress*, the opera by Stravinsky for which he and Kallman had written the libretto, Auden had written in a review of Eliot’s *Poetry and Drama*:

I am not quite convinced . . . that it is necessary to accept the *verismo* of the contemporary West End play . . . as a premise for all poetic drama even if Mr Eliot feels it to be for his own. I think of two dramatic forms, the pantomime and the opera, which, though totally unrealistic, compete successfully with prose drama for popular appeal and, far from presenting an “unreal world,” are, at least to me, a better “imitation” of life as we experience it subjectively than any naturalistic reflection can hope to be.

Of his fourth and last lecture, “Words and the Word”, Auden said that it concerned questions that Eliot, as a poet writing in the twentieth century and “also a Christian”, must have asked himself: “What difference, if any, do my beliefs make, either to what I write, or to my conception of my vocation? Secondly, in what ways do the problems of a Christian writing in this century differ from those of a Christian writing in earlier periods?” Auden’s answers summarized his own thinking about language and responsibility as

it had developed over forty years. He focused first on the moral obligation to speak in the first person, and on the theology of first-person speech implied by the biblical account of the creation: “Every human being . . . is at one and the same time both an individual member of the biological species, *Homo sapiens*, . . . and a unique person, with a unique perspective on the world”. He then explored at length what it means to be “persons, who can, now and again, truthfully say *I*”, and, in the most impassioned paragraphs of his four lectures, he distinguished between different ways in which language can be used, for better or worse, to enchant others. One is White Magic, through which the poet, himself enchanted by persons or things, shares his enchantment with others but has no wish to enchant them into giving up their freedom. The language of advertising, mass media, and propaganda, in contrast, are forms of Black Magic, wielded by a magician who is “perfectly cold”:

He has no enchantment to share with others but uses enchantment as a way of securing domination over others and compelling them to do his will. He does not ask for a free response to his spell; he demands a tautological echo.

In all ages, the technique of the Black Magician has been essentially the same. In all spells the words are deprived of their meanings and reduced to syllables or verbal noises. This may be done literally, as when magicians used to recite the Lord’s Prayer backwards, or by reiterating a word over and over again as loudly as possible until it has become a mere sound. For millions of people today, words like communism, capitalism, imperialism, peace, freedom, democracy, have ceased to be words, the meaning of which can be inquired into and discussed, and have become right or wrong noises to which the response is as involuntary as a knee-reflex.

It makes no difference if the magic is being employed simply for the aggrandizement of the magician himself or if, as is more usual, he claims to be serving some good cause. Indeed, the better the cause he claims to be serving, the more evil he does. . . . Propaganda, like the sword, attempts to eliminate consent or dissent and, in our age, magical language has to a great extent replaced the sword.

Auden had never quite made himself into a propagandist, but, a few years earlier, one of his poems had been put to cold-hearted political use. In 1964, Lyndon Johnson’s election campaign broadcast a television commercial in which Johnson, helped by a literate speechwriter, presented himself as a peacemaker by borrowing inspiring phrases from Auden’s “September 1, 1939” about children, the dark, and the need to love one another or die. Auden had already rejected this poem—in 1963 he permitted an editor to reprint it in an anthology, together with “Spain” and a few others, on condition that the book made clear that he considered them “to be trash which

he is ashamed to have written”—but he was unable to prevent it from being used as Black Magic.

More recently still, in the foreword he wrote in 1965 for his *Collected Shorter Poems*, he renounced all his earlier poems that he judged “dishonest” because they had expressed, “no matter how well, feelings or beliefs which its author never felt or entertained.” The last lines of his poem “Spain” (“History to the defeated / May say alas but cannot help nor pardon”), which equated “goodness with success”, right with might, were an act of particularly dark magic: “It would have been bad enough if I had ever held this wicked doctrine, but that I should have stated it simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective is quite inexcusable.”

Toward the end of his fourth lecture, he gestured toward the silent truth that language can never embody, while insisting—against Eliot’s idealizing, Platonist sense of an ineffable truth beyond the physical world—that truth is always “concrete”, always inherent in the world shared by human beings:

if the Word was indeed made flesh, then it is demanded of men that their words and their lives be in concord. Only he who is true can speak the truth. Truth is not ideal or abstract, but concrete.

Such a belief, he said, has many consequences. One of them “is to call into question the art of poetry and all the arts”; art is always a fabrication, never a direct statement of truth. Another is that “there is no comprehensible relation between the moral quality of a maker’s life and the aesthetic value of the works he makes”; the sources of every artist’s art “are what Yeats called ‘the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart’, its lusts, its hatreds, its envies”.

After saying at length what art cannot do, Auden closed with a modest claim for what it can do. As always, when he made such diffident claims, he ignored the aesthetic merits of art and spoke instead of the ways in which it serves our relations with other persons living and dead:

The utmost an artist can hope to do for his contemporary readers is, as Dr Johnson said, to enable them a little better to enjoy life or a little better to endure it. Further, let us remember that, though the great artists of the past could not change the course of history, it is only through their work that we are able to break bread with the dead, and without communion with the dead a fully human life is impossible.

Around the same time that he was writing insistently about the artist’s obligation to truth, he had begun writing in a parallel way about human responsibility to inhuman nature. In 1965 he ended a commissioned essay on the twentieth anniversary of the first atomic explosions with the warning: “Our world will be a safer and healthier place when we can admit that every time we make an atomic bomb we corrupt the morals of a host of innocent neutrons below the age of consent.” His extravagantly anthropomorphic meta-

phor made a serious point that recurred in his later prose, and that he also made in a poem written the same year, "Epithalamium", which identified God as the being who, among other things, "numbers each particle / by its Proper Name".

While he was writing about the opposition of artist and propagandist, he had been caught up, like most other writers in America, in arguments for and against the Vietnam War. In 1965, despite the private feelings against Johnson and the war that he expressed only to close friends, he was repelled at the thought of presenting himself again, as he did in the 1930s, as someone to whom others should look for political guidance or inspiration. He teased his politically pious friends by telling an interviewer that he was "the only New York intellectual who supports President Johnson in Vietnam". This was not what he said when he went into print a few months later, in 1966, in his contribution to a gathering of statements titled *Writers Take Sides on the Vietnam War*. After insisting that writers have no special authority to pronounce on political matters, he wrote in a way that was more concerned with truth telling than with propaganda:

It goes without saying that war is an atrocious corrupting business, but it is dishonest of those who demand the immediate withdrawal of all American troops to pretend that their motives are purely humanitarian. They believe, rightly or wrongly, that it would be better if the Communists won.

My answer to your question is, I suppose, that I believe a negotiated peace, to which the Vietcong will have to be a party, to be possible, but not yet, and that, therefore, American troops, alas, must stay in Vietnam until it is. But it would be absurd to call this answer mine. It simply means that I am an American citizen who reads *The New York Times*.

He said much the same thing in letters to friends, but came to see that he was overcompensating in public for his private contempt for Johnson and his policies. When he was told in 1967 that he had been awarded the National Medal for Literature, he told a friend that he had at first worried about it "because I didn't want to receive it in the White House; on the other hand, I did not want to make a Cal Lowell gesture by a public refusal." (Robert Lowell's and other writers' public gestures against the war, he thought, were driven more by narcissism than by principle.) After learning that he could accept the award at the Smithsonian Institution, he wrote an acceptance speech that made, in the local political context, pointed use of the same paragraphs he had written about Black Magic in his Eliot lectures a few months before but which had not yet appeared in print.

From this time on, he made no pretense of evenhandedness about the war. "Vietnam is ghastly", he wrote to a friend in 1968; if the choices in the election that year were to be Johnson and Nixon, "I don't see how one can

vote at all". Before this, he had made a habit of lecturing apolitical friends about their civic duty to vote. In 1972 he wrote in a review, "I wholeheartedly sympathize with those draftees who, instead of registering as CO's publicly burn their draft cards or abscond to Canada".

In 1966, around the time he agreed to deliver his Eliot Lectures, Auden had begun to plan what he called a "scrapbook", later a "commonplace book", of quotations that he had been collecting for many decades. He spent a year or more compiling it, and writing intermittent commentary, in 1967–68, and it appeared in 1970 as *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book*. The publisher of the book reported that Auden told him, "it is surely the only autobiography I'll ever write"; his description in the preface, "a sort of autobiography", was slightly more diffident.

A few years before, his title *Secondary Worlds* had pointed to the contrast between the worlds of fiction and the primary world shared by everyone; his new title pointed to the ways in which each person creates a unique private world that partly overlaps with the shared, primary world. The final sentence of *A Certain World* was a quotation from Augustine about the distinction between unique personal worlds and the shared common one: "The truth is neither mine or his nor another's; but belongs to all whom Thou callest to partake of it, warning us terribly, not to account it private to ourselves, lest we be deprived of it." While the book was going through the press, he wrote a poem, "Doggerel by a Senior Citizen", which began with a less dignified statement of the same distinction: "Our earth in 1969 / Is not the planet I call mine".

As he had done when collecting his poems in 1944, Auden organized *A Certain World* in alphabetical order, again partly in order to conceal or half-conceal its revelations of his personal history. The alphabetical sequence comprised two hundred topic headings, from "Accidie" to "Writing", implicitly telling a parabolic story, not an autobiographical one, that begins in stasis and ends in action. But the contents, although not arranged chronologically, included more or less everything that had mattered to him at various stages of his life, from "Nursery Library, My", through his childhood interest in "Lead Mine, Visit to a", then "Love, Romantic", "Marriage", and "Aging". He interspersed the autobiographical content with topics that intrigued or amused him throughout life, such as "Dons, Humor of", "Kilns", "Names, Proper", and "Prose, Purple", along with those he took more seriously, such as "Prayer, Nature of" and "God".

Most of the entries comprise one or more quotations; some include comments of his own. A few, on topics that especially concerned him but for which he found no quotations worth reprinting, such as "Conscience" and "Liturgy, Reform of", contain only his own commentary. The closing pages retell the story of the private, imaginary lead-mining world of his childhood, a story that he had first told in "As It Seemed to Us", then repeated

in lectures and essays until it found its place at the end of his most explicitly autobiographical book.

Having alluded to his homosexuality in “As It Seemed to Us” in 1964, he provided further details in a review in the *New York Review of Books* in 1969. Writing about J. R. Ackerley’s *My Dog Tulip*, and making it obvious that he expected his review to be read between the lines, he generalized from his experiences in his twenties, in the years before his vision of Eros transformed his understanding of sex:

a homosexual who is, like Mr Ackerley, an intellectual and reasonably well-off is very apt to become romantically enchanted by the working class, whose lives, experiences, and interests are so different from his own, and to whom, because they are poorer, the money and comforts he is able to provide can be a cause for affectionate gratitude. Again, there is nothing wrong with this in itself. A great deal of nonsense has been spoken and written about the sinfulness of giving or receiving money for sexual favors. If I may be forgiven for quoting myself:

Money cannot buy
the fuel of Love,
but is excellent kindling.

Continuing to generalize, he explained that “the real difficulty” of a romance across class lines

is that of establishing a sustained relationship, for, while a sexual relationship as such demands “otherness,” any permanent relationship demands interests in common. However their tastes and temperaments may initially differ, a husband and wife acquire a common concern as parents. This experience is denied homosexuals. Consequently, it is very rare for a homosexual to remain faithful to one person for long and, rather curiously, the intellectual older one is more likely to be promiscuous than his working-class friend. The brutal truth, though he often refuses to admit it, is that he gets bored more quickly.

With increasing frequency, he declared his principled objection to literary biography in order to make an exception to it. On a biography of Wagner in 1969:

On principle, I object to biographies of artists, since I do not believe that knowledge of their private lives sheds any significant light upon their works. For example, the scene between Wotan and Fricka in *Die Walküre* is no doubt based upon Wagner’s reminiscences of marital rows with Minna, but this does not explain why it is, musically, one of the greatest scenes in all opera. However, the story of Wagner’s life is absolutely fascinating, and it would be so if he had never written a note.

On a biography of Alexander Pope, the same year: “It is not often that knowledge of an artist’s life sheds any significant light upon his work, but in the case of Pope I think it does.” On a biography of Trollope in 1972: “As a rule, I am opposed to biographies of writers, but in Trollope’s case, for a number of reasons, I approve. To begin with, Trollope wrote an autobiography, published posthumously, which, though probably accurate so far as it goes, leaves out a great deal.” When Valerie Eliot’s edition of the manuscripts of *The Waste Land* appeared in 1971, Auden announced at a dinner party that he disapproved. Kallman asked why, if that were so, he had spent the afternoon reading it.

Auden occasionally wrote that one or another kind of poem was inherently impossible to write; typically he referred to a kind of poem that he had already written or that he would write soon afterward. (In contrast, when he wrote, as he did about Eliot’s verse plays, that one kind of literary work could have been written once but was no longer possible, he was typically justifying his own practice.) In his preface to an anthology of poems on the Crucifixion, *The Tree and the Master* (1965), he wrote that “Christmas and Easter, being in themselves happy and ‘beautiful’ events, can be poeticized without much damage; Good Friday cannot”; this ignores his own “Horae Canonicae”, a sequence about Good Friday that he knew was among his greatest work. In response to Hammarskjöld’s description of *Markings* as “the only true ‘profile’” that could be drawn of himself, Auden insisted that a profile written by oneself is impossible:

No man can draw his own “profile” correctly because, as Thoreau said: “It is as hard to see oneself as to look backwards without turning round.” The truth is that our friends—and our enemies—always know us better than we know ourselves. There are, to be sure, a few corrective touches to their picture of us which only we can add, and these, as a rule, are concerned with our vulnerabilities and our weaknesses.

He then put together a poem titled “Profile” made up of haiku (and some in a related form, the five-line tanka) that he had written in 1965 and 1966 about his vulnerabilities and weaknesses. He printed it in his collection *City without Walls* in 1969, together with another kind of profile, a poem titled “River Profile” about the history of his own and anyone else’s body from conception to death. The last poem in the book was “Prologue at Sixty”, a first-person account of himself as he began his seventh decade in 1967. The poem included, among other self-revealing passages, a catalogue

of sites made sacred by something read there,
a lunch, a good lay, or sheer lightness of heart,
the *Fürbringer* and the *Friedrich Strasse*,

*Isafjörður, Epomeo,
Poprad, Basel, Bar-le-Duc . . .*

The two streets were sites of his youthful adventures in Berlin in 1928–29; Epomeo is the mountain on Ischia, the island where he summered from 1948 through 1957; Ísafjörður is the town in Iceland he had visited in 1936 with Louis MacNeice and Michael Yates, the subject of his poem “Lay your sleeping head, my love”, formerly a pupil at the Downs School where Auden had taught; Poprad, Basel, and Bar-le-Duc were stops on an automobile trip he had made in 1934 with Michael Yates and Peter Rogers, an ex-pupil of the Downs School working there as a gardener, with whom he was having an affair.

Many of his later poems were prompted by the same kind of retrospection. The starting point of “Epistle to a Godson” (1969) was his inability, as one still living in an older world, to give advice to the young. “The Art of Healing” was a memorial to his father in the form of an elegy for Auden’s doctor and friend, whom he had expected to outlive him. The recurring theme of the poems he collected in *Epistle to a Godson* (1972) was a new sense of isolation from the things that most interested him, his inability to speak with persons or things across the gap of historical time or biological difference. “Talking to Dogs”, “Talking to Mice”, and “Short Ode to the Cuckoo” spoke to incomprehending species; “A New Year Greeting” addressed the microorganisms on his skin, and “Talking to Myself” was another of his poems addressed to his unheeding body. “The Aliens”, about insects, did not even try to address its subject. “Natural Linguistics” explored the unspoken languages of color, odor, and song used by minerals, plants, and animals. Other poems looked back to the past with acknowledged incomprehension: one such poem was his “Ode to the Medieval Poets”; another was “An Encounter”, about the meeting between Attila and Pope Leo that ended with Attila withdrawing his forces for no discernible reason.

Late in 1969 he first began writing about the theme of carnival, which he illustrated from Goethe’s account in *Italian Journey* of the carnival at Rome. When Auden translated *Italian Journey* in the early 1960s, he had written that Goethe’s account of carnival was “less interesting than the rest” of the book; now, and until the end of his life, he made it one of the central themes in prose and verse. He was prompted to this theme by a book he never named, Mikhail Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, which had been translated by a friend from Auden’s theological circle, Helene Iswolsky. The theme first appeared as an acknowledged digression in his review of Loren Eiseley’s *The Unexpected Universe*, early in 1970, in which he distinguished the three worlds of Work with its sober purposes, Prayer with its attention to something outside the self, and the “belly laughter” of Carnival, the province of the anonymous and uncontrollable body, where all hierarchy and distinction is dissolved:

A satisfactory human life, individually or collectively, is possible only if proper respect is paid to all three worlds. Without Prayer and Work, the Carnival laughter turns ugly, the comic obscenities grubby and pornographic, the mock aggression into real hatred and cruelty. . . . Without Laughter and Work, Prayer turns Gnostic, cranky, Pharisaic, while those who try to live by Work alone, without Laughter or Prayer, turn into insane lovers of power, tyrants who would enslave Nature to their immediate desires—an attempt which can only end in utter catastrophe, shipwreck on the Isle of the Sirens.

In the next few years, he expanded this theme into a long essay titled “Work, Carnival and Prayer”, which he delivered as a lecture in 1971 and 1972 but never published in full. (It is printed in *Prose VI*.) As he did often in his prose, he spoke in a mostly affirmative way about matters that his poems treated more darkly. In 1969, shortly before taking up the theme of Carnival, he had written a poem, “Circe”, about the entrapment waiting for those who seek a refuge where, as in the undifferentiated world of Carnival, “sequence is conquered, division abolished”. His poem shares a common source in the *Odyssey* with his prose allusion to the Isle of the Sirens.

Around 1970 he began planning a second collection of his essays and reviews, again on the generous scale of *The Dyer’s Hand* but without the newly written material and elaborate organization that went into the earlier book. He told friends and scholarly acquaintances that he wanted to put together a collection titled *Forewords and Afterwords* (“afterwords” meant reviews of books already printed) but could not remember what he had written. When he said this to me on a visit to Yale in 1971, I replied that I had photocopies of all his essays and invited him to look at them. After spending an afternoon reading them, he told me he would need to return at some later date to choose the essays he wanted.

Meanwhile, he had put out feelers to Christ Church, Oxford, hoping to be invited to live there in more or less the same way that E. M. Forster was living in King’s College, Cambridge. Christ Church finally made the invitation early in 1972, and Auden made plans to leave New York and settle in a cottage on the college grounds in the autumn. He told me that he would not have time to revisit New Haven and asked if he could send me a list of essays that a student might be hired to photocopy for him. I agreed to this, but then wrote with the hope that he might find time to visit and read his older essays, because there were some for which I was grateful but that he might have forgotten. He replied by saying that he had decided that I should make the selection for him, and sent a list of some items that he remembered. I prepared a longer list and brought it to him for approval. He vetoed a few items that I had included (for example, his 1960 essay on Faulkner, “The

Magician from Mississippi”) and added a few that I had omitted. He asked why I had omitted his introduction to *Romeo and Juliet* (*Prose IV*); rightly or wrongly, I had never been convinced by that essay and merely shook my head. He responded by beaming, I assumed because he preferred judgment to adulation.

Auden made only minor changes to the forty-six essays in *Forewords and Afterwords*. He omitted some duplications, dropped a few passages that were suitable only in the context of a book review in a magazine or newspaper (e.g. a sentence saying he would not spoil a reader’s pleasure by quoting), and added two footnotes. He also specified and then revised the list of contents. The first four essays concerned large historical subjects: his introduction to *The Portable Greek Reader* (*Prose II*), now retitled “The Greeks and Us”, reviews of Charles Norris Cochrane’s *Christianity and Classical Culture* (*Prose II*) and of E. R. Dodds’s *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, and his introduction to *The Protestant Mystics*. These were followed by thirty-six essays and reviews about individual writers or books in chronological order from Shakespeare, Pope, Goethe, Sidney Smith, and Kierkegaard (two essays written sixteen years apart with different points of view), through Wagner, Verdi, Trollope, Lewis Carroll, and Kipling, ending with Virginia Woolf, Auden’s friends Lincoln Kirstein and Chester Kallman, Stravinsky, Hammarskjöld, and J. R. Ackerley. The next four essays concerned biology, geology, and medicine (his reviews of a book titled *The Senses of Animals and Men* and of Loren Eiseley’s *The Unexpected Universe*, with its digression on carnival, a review of a book on migraine by his new friend Oliver Sacks, and a review on mountaineering). The closing two essays were his introduction to M. F. K. Fisher’s *The Art of Eating*, about the pleasures and psychology of the table, and his autobiographical essay-review “As It Seemed to Us”. The book appeared in the spring of 1973, the last of his books published in his lifetime. Auden insisted that the title page should include the words “Selected by Edward Mendelson” although I had done little more than remind him of a few items he had forgotten.

In his last years, Auden was as professionally responsible as he had always been, turning in his reviews and essays on or before deadline, writing no more and no fewer words than he had been asked for. He was still open to unfamiliar subject matter, for example, the eccentrically reactionary Russian thinkers Konstantin Leontiev and Peter Yakovlevich Chaadayev, whom he seems to have learned about from his friend V. S. Yanovsky, an émigré novelist and physician whose work he had written about, and from Joseph Brodsky, whom he helped and encouraged when Brodsky was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972. In 1971, invited by the literary editor of the *Observer* to review books for the paper, he replied: “I should love to. I have two rules. (1) I won’t review contemporary poetry. (2) I won’t review a book un-

less I basically like it.” In recent years he had violated his second rule, but only when reviewing collections of material written by persons other than the compiler: a “documentary biography” of Mozart that collected all contemporary references to him and a collection of bawdy verses that seemed “calculated to make a reader swear off sex forever”. But he had written no negative review of any author’s work since 1953, when he disliked a book by George Santayana who, however, could not have felt wounded by this, having died a year earlier.

In October 1972, after a summer in Austria, Auden arrived in Oxford, finally settling into his cottage at Christ Church a few weeks later. He had hoped to find the same kind of talk and friendship that he had enjoyed there in the 1950s, but he and Oxford had changed. The Christ Church senior common room, like much of academia, had become less sociable, and Auden’s conversation, after nine lonely winters in New York, tended to repetitious monologue when he was not among close friends. He found a few new friends to talk with among younger academics, mostly scientists, but he was burdened by loneliness. When he delivered his “Work, Carnival and Prayer” lecture in November 1972, he justified its nonliterary subject matter by saying he had nothing more to say about literature.

Around the time he arrived in Oxford, he began writing reviews with titles that pointed toward the isolating oddness that he felt he shared with his subjects: “An Odd Couple”, about the secret marriage of the upper-middle-class Denys Munby and his kitchenmaid; “An Odd Ball”, about Chaadayev; and “An Odd Ball in an Odd Country at an Odd Time”, about St John of the Cross. After completing his book of poems *Epistle to a Godson*, he continued writing poems on that book’s insistent themes: addresses to things that cannot listen in “Thank You, Fog”, “Address to the Beasts”, “Ode to the Diencephalon”, and, again addressing his own body, “A Lullaby”; addresses to the dead in “Posthumous Letter to Gilbert White” (a perhaps premonitory title; the poem was first printed a few weeks after Auden’s death), “No, Plato, No”, and “A Thanksgiving”; and the unknowable past in “Archaeology”. He planned to publish these, probably together with another year’s work, in a book for which he had already chosen a title, *Thank You, Fog*. The typescript poems he gathered for the book included a page of autobiographical third-person haiku under the title “Addenda to ‘Profile’”, a more sexually revealing supplement to the “Profile” he had compiled around 1966.

After closing his Austrian house for the winter, Auden died in Vienna on 29 September 1973. He was on his way back to Oxford, where he no longer wanted to be, and he had already arranged to escape for a few weeks in the winter by giving a lecture tour in America. Among his papers was an unfinished book review on Heinrich Heine, titled “An Odd Fish”.

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