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Love Illuminates Again . . .

In the early months of 1940, with Europe embarking on what was to prove the greatest conflict of the twentieth century, W. H. Auden, a celebrated—and controversial—English poet who had recently moved to the United States wrote a gravely beautiful poem. It took him some time, as this was no brief ode dashed off in a moment of inspiration—this was over one thousand lines, carefully and studiously constructed. Its title was “New Year Letter,” and it was addressed to Elizabeth Mayer, a refugee from the deprivations of Nazi Germany, a translator, and a close friend. Like many of his works, this poem is conversational in tone but contains within it a complex skein of ideas about humanity and history, about art, civilization, and violence. At

the end of the letter, though, there occur lines that are among the most beautiful he wrote. Addressing his friend, he draws attention to what she brings to the world through her therapeutic calling:

We fall down in the dance, we make
The old ridiculous mistake,
But always there are such as you
Forgiving, helping what we do.
O every day in sleep and labour
Our life and death are with our neighbour,
And love illuminates again
The city and the lion's den,
The world's great rage, the travel of young men.

These lines are about the person to whom the poem is addressed but when we read them today could be about Auden himself. He would never compliment himself, of course, but I believe that he is clearly one who is forgiving, who helps what we do, and if there is anything to be learned from his own work, it is precisely this message: that every day in sleep and labor, our life and death are indeed with our neighbor. And yes, in reading his poetry we see love illuminating our world.

It is this view of Auden's work that has prompted me to write an entirely personal book about the poet, about the influence he has had on my life, and about what this poet can mean for somebody who comes fresh to his work. I believe that if you read this poet, and think about what he has to say to you, then in a subtle but significant way you will be changed. This happened to me, and it can happen to you.

This small book does not purport to be a work of criticism. It does not claim to shed new light on a body of work that has already been extensively examined. It is simply an attempt to share an enthusiasm with others who may not have yet discovered, or may not have given much thought to the work of, Wystan Hugh Auden, generally known as W. H. Auden, the man whom many consider to be one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. It is not a hagiography—it recognizes that Auden has been taken to task for trying to be too clever, for using words for effect and without real regard to their meaning, and for being juvenile. There are other charges against him: in particular, he was famously criticized by

the poet Philip Larkin for turning his back on political and social engagement in favor of the self-indulgent and the frivolous—a criticism that has lingered and is still occasionally encountered.

Some of these charges—particularly the ones that accuse him of using language for effect—have some basis, but those of frivolity are certainly not justified. It is true that he deliberately turned his back on the leadership role to which English intellectuals had elected him in the years before the Second World War—the Auden age, as some called it—but he by no means sought refuge in private reflection. His later poetry, although not overtly political, was very much concerned with the question of how we are to live and by no means evades profound issues. Of course some of the poems are better than others, and we can all agree that there are some that should never have seen the light of day, but what poet or novelist has not done at least something that is best forgotten? “We fall down in the dance . . .” Some writers have written whole books over which they, and sometimes their readers, would prefer to draw a veil. None of us is perfect, and Auden was a self-critical man who was in many cases his own severest judge, describing some of his poems as meretricious

and worthless. Interestingly enough, even poems he rejected have, in the minds of his readers, survived this disowning. He wrote a poem called “Spain” that he considered dishonest, and yet it is still read—and appreciated—in spite of its exclusion from the official canon. Similarly, “September 1, 1939,” has survived its author’s judgment that it was a poem that he was ashamed to have written. This raises complex questions about aesthetics and the genuine. If a work of art gives pleasure in spite of the insincerity—at the time—of its maker, then does that detract from its value?

That question arises only in relation to a small number of Auden’s poems, but it illuminates a larger point about Auden’s work. Auden was a poet who changed. It may seem trite to say that his life was a journey—whose life isn’t?—but in his case we can see his poetry respond to the salient challenges of his times. This is enlightening, not the least for anybody who feels—as many of us perhaps do—that we are living in a time of heightened flux and crisis. How should we respond to the challenges that this provokes? Most of us want to lead a good life—however that is defined. Auden wanted that too, and the solution he found might help us today. But what was it?