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REMEMBERING W. H. AUDEN

There was nothing more admirable in Auden than his complete sanity and his firm belief in sanity; in his eyes all kinds of madness were lack of discipline.

By Hannah Arendt

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W. H. Auden, St. Mark's Place, New York, March 3, 1960. Photograph by Richard Avedon / © The Richard Avedon Foundation

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I met Auden late in his life and mine—at an age when the easy, knowledgeable intimacy of friendships formed in one's youth can no longer be attained, because not enough life is left, or expected to be left, to share with another. Thus, we were very good friends but not intimate friends. Moreover, there was a reserve in him that discouraged familiarity—not that I tested it, ever. I rather gladly respected it as the necessary secretiveness of the great poet, one who must have taught himself early not to talk in prose, loosely and at random, of things that he knew how to say much more satisfactorily in the condensed concentration of poetry. Reticence may be the *déformation professionnelle* of the poet. In Auden's case, this seemed all the more likely because much of his

work, in utter simplicity, arose out of the spoken word, out of idioms of everyday language—like “Lay your sleeping head, my love, Human on my faithless arm.” This kind of perfection is very rare; we find it in some of the greatest of Goethe’s poems, and it must exist in most of Pushkin’s works, because their hallmark is that they are untranslatable. The moment poems of this kind are wrenched from their original abode, they disappear in a cloud of banality. Here all depends on the “fluent gestures” in “elevating facts from the prosaic to the poetic”—a point that the critic Clive James stressed in his essay on Auden in *Commentary* in December, 1973. Where such fluency is achieved, we are magically convinced that everyday speech is latently poetic, and, taught by the poets, our ears open up to the true mysteries of language. The very untranslatability of one of Auden’s poems is what, many years ago, convinced me of his greatness. Three German translators had tried their luck and killed mercilessly one of my favorite poems, “If I Could Tell You” (“Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957”), which arises naturally from two colloquial idioms—“Time will tell” and “I told you so”:

Time will say nothing but I told you so.
Time only knows the price we have to pay;
If I could tell you I would let you know.

If we should weep when clowns put on their show,
If we should stumble when musicians play,
Time will say nothing but I told you so. . . .

The winds must come from somewhere when they blow,
There must be reasons why the leaves decay;
Time will say nothing but I told you so. . . .

Suppose the lions all get up and go,
And all the brooks and soldiers run away;
Will Time say nothing but I told you so?
If I could tell you I would let you know.

I met Auden in the autumn of 1958, but I had seen him before, in the late forties, at a publisher’s party. Although we exchanged not a word on that occasion, I had remembered him quite well—a nice-looking, well-dressed, very English gentleman, friendly and relaxed. I did not recognize him ten years later, for now his face was marked by those famous deep wrinkles, as though life itself had delineated a kind of face-scape to make manifest “the heart’s invisible furies.” If you listened to him, nothing could seem more deceptive than this appearance. Time and again, when, to all appearances, he could not cope anymore, when his slum apartment was so cold that the plumbing no longer functioned and he had to use the toilet in the liquor store at the corner, when his suit (no one could convince him that a man needed at least two suits, so that one could go to the cleaner, or two pairs of shoes, so that one pair could be repaired: a subject of an endless ongoing debate between us throughout the years) was covered with spots or worn so thin that his trousers would suddenly split from top to bottom—in brief, whenever disaster hit before your very eyes, he would begin to more or less intone an utterly idiosyncratic version of “Count your blessings.” Since he never talked nonsense or said something obviously silly—and since I always remained aware that this was the voice of a very great poet—it took me years to realize that in his case it was not appearance that was deceptive, and that it was fatally wrong to ascribe what I saw of his way of life to the harmless eccentricity of a typical English gentleman.

I finally saw the misery, and somehow realized vaguely his compelling need to hide it behind the “Count your blessings” litany, yet I found it difficult to understand fully why he was so miserable and was unable to do anything about the absurd circumstances that made everyday life so unbearable for him. It certainly could not be lack of recognition. He was reasonably famous, and such ambition could anyhow never have counted for much with him, since he was the least vain of all the authors I have ever met—completely immune to the countless vulnerabilities of ordinary vanity. Not that he was humble; in his case it was self-confidence

that protected him against flattery, and this self-confidence existed prior to recognition and fame, prior also to achievement. (Geoffrey Grigson, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, reports the following dialogue between the very young Auden and his tutor at Oxford. "Tutor: 'And what are you going to do, Mr. Auden, when you leave the university?' Auden: 'I am going to be a poet.' Tutor: 'Well—in that case you should find it very useful to have read English.' Auden: 'You don't understand. I am going to be a great poet.' ") It never left him, because it was not acquired by comparisons with others, or by winning a race in competition; it was natural—interconnected, but not identical, with his enormous ability to do with language, and do quickly, whatever he pleased. (When friends asked him to produce a birthday poem for the next evening at six o'clock, they could be sure of getting it; clearly this is possible only in the absence of self-doubt.) But even this did not go to his head, for he did not claim, or perhaps even aspire to, final perfection. He constantly revised his own poems, agreeing with Valéry: "A poem is never finished; it is only abandoned." In other words, he was blessed with that rare self-confidence which does not need admiration and the good opinion of others, and can even withstand self-criticism and self-examination without falling into the trap of self-doubt. This has nothing to do with arrogance but is easily mistaken for it. Auden was never arrogant except when he was provoked by some vulgarity; then he protected himself with the rather abrupt rudeness characteristic of English intellectual life.

Stephen Spender, the friend who knew him so well, has stressed that "throughout the whole development of [Auden's] poetry . . . his theme had been love" (had it not occurred to Auden to change Descartes' "*Cogito ergo sum*" by defining man as the "bubble-brained creature" that said "I'm loved therefore I am"?), and at the end of the address that Spender gave in memory of his late friend at the Cathedral in Oxford he told of asking Auden about a reading he had given in America: "His face lit up with a smile that altered its lines, and he said: 'They loved me!'" They did not admire him, they *loved* him: here, I think, lies the key both to his extraordinary unhappiness and to the extraordinary greatness—intensity—of his poetry. Now, with the sad wisdom of remembrance, I see him as having been an expert in the infinite varieties of unrequited love, among which the infuriating substitution of admiration for love must surely have loomed large. And beneath these emotions there must have been from the beginning a certain animal *tristesse* that no reason and no faith could overcome:

The desires of the heart are as crooked as corkscrews,

Not to be born is the best for man;

The second-best is a formal order,

The dance's pattern; dance while you can.

So he wrote in "Death's Echo," in "Collected Shorter Poems." When I knew him, he would not have mentioned the best any longer, so firmly had he opted for the second-best, the "formal order," and the result was what Chester Kallman has so aptly named "the most dishevelled child of all disciplinarians." I think it was this *tristesse* and its "dance while you can" that made Auden feel so much attracted to and almost at home in the famous Berlin of the twenties, where *carpe diem* was practiced constantly in many variations. He once mentioned as a "disease" his early "addiction to German usages," but much more prominent than these, and less easy to get rid of, was the obvious influence of Bertolt Brecht, with whom I think he had more in common than he was ever ready to admit. (In the late fifties, with Chester Kallman, he translated Brecht's "Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny"—a translation that was never published, presumably because of copyright difficulties. To this day, I know of no other adequate rendering of Brecht into English.) In merely literary terms, Brecht's influence can easily be traced in Auden's ballads—for instance, in the late, marvellous "Ballad of Barnaby," the tale of the tumbler who, having grown old and pious, "honoured the Mother-of-God" by tumbling for her; or in the early "little story / About Miss Edith Gee; / She lived in Clevedon Terrace / At Number 83." What made this influence possible was that they both belonged to the post-First World War generation, with its curious mixture of despair and *joie de vivre*, its contempt for conventional codes of behavior, and its penchant for "playing it cool," which expressed itself in England, I suspect, in the wearing of the mask of the snob, while it expressed itself in Germany in a widespread pretense of wickedness, somewhat in the vein of Brecht's "The Threepenny Opera." (In Berlin, one joked about this fashionable inverted

hypocrisy, as one joked about everything: “*Er geht böse über den Kurfürstendamm*”—meaning, “That is probably all the wickedness he is capable of.” After 1933, I think, nobody joked about wickedness anymore.)

In the case of Auden, as in the case of Brecht, inverted hypocrisy served to hide an irresistible inclination toward being good and doing good—something that both were ashamed to admit, let alone proclaim. This seems plausible for Auden, because he finally became a Christian, but it may be a shock at first to hear it about Brecht. Yet a close reading of his poems and plays seems to me almost to prove it. Not only are there the plays “*Der Gute Mensch von Sezuan*” and “*Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe*” but, perhaps more convincingly, there are these lines right in the midst of the cynicism of “*The Threepenny Opera*” :

*Ein guter Mensch sein! Ja, wer wär's nicht gern?
Sein Gut den Armen geben, warum nicht?
Wenn alle gut sind, ist Sein Reich nicht fern.
Wer sässe nicht sehr gern in Seinem Licht?*

What drove these profoundly apolitical poets into the chaotic political scene of our century was Robespierre’s “*zèle compatissant*,” the powerful urge toward “*les malheureux*,” as distinguished from any need for action toward *public* happiness, or any desire to change the world.

Auden, so much wiser—though by no means smarter—than Brecht, knew early on that “poetry makes nothing happen.” To him, it was sheer nonsense for the poet to claim special privileges or to ask for the indulgences that we are so happy to grant out of sheer gratitude. There was nothing more admirable in Auden than his complete sanity and his firm belief in sanity; in his eyes all kinds of madness were lack of discipline—“Naughty, naughty,” as he used to say. The main thing was to have no illusions and to accept no thoughts—no theoretical systems—that would blind you to reality. He turned against his early leftist beliefs because events (the Moscow trials, the Hitler-Stalin pact, and experiences during the Spanish Civil War) had proved them to be “dishonest”—“shamefully” so, as he said in his foreword to the “*Collected Shorter Poems*,” telling how he threw out what he had once written:

History to the defeated
may say alas but cannot help nor pardon.

To say this, he noted, was “to equate goodness with success.” He protested that he had never believed in “this wicked doctrine”—a statement that I doubt, not only because the lines are too good, too precise, to have been produced for the sake of being “rhetorically effective” but because this was the doctrine everybody believed in during the twenties and thirties. Then came the time when

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark . . .

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face—

the time when it looked for quite a while as if the worst could happen and sheer evil could become a success. The Hitler-Stalin pact was the turning point for the left; now one had to give up all belief in history as the ultimate judge of human affairs.

In the forties, there were many who turned against their old beliefs, but there were very few who understood what had been wrong with those beliefs. Far from giving up their belief in history and success, they simply changed trains, as it were; the train of Socialism and Communism had been wrong, and they changed to the train of Capitalism or Freudianism or some refined Marxism, or a sophisticated mixture of all three. Auden, instead, became a Christian; that is, he left the train of History altogether.

I don't know whether Stephen Spender is right in asserting that "prayer corresponded to his deepest need"—I suspect that his deepest need was simply to write verses—but I am reasonably sure that his sanity, the great good sense that illuminated all his prose writings (his essays and book reviews), was due in no small measure to the protective shield of orthodoxy. Its time-honored coherent meaningfulness that could be neither proved nor disproved by reason provided him, as it had provided Chesterton, with an intellectually satisfying and emotionally rather comfortable refuge against the onslaught of what he called "rubbish;" that is, the countless follies of the age.

Reading Auden's poems in chronological order and remembering him in the last years of his life, when misery and unhappiness had grown more and more unbearable without, however, in the least touching either the divine gift or the blessed facility of the talent, I have become surer than ever that he was "hurt into poetry" even more than Yeats ("Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry"), and that, despite his susceptibility to compassion, public political circumstances were not necessary to hurt him into poetry. What made him a poet was his extraordinary facility with and love for words, but what made him a great poet was the unprotesting willingness with which he yielded to the "curse" of vulnerability to "human _un_success" on all levels of human existence—vulnerability to the crookedness of the desires, to the infidelities of the heart, to the injustices of the world.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

Praise is the key word of these lines, not praise of "the best of all possible worlds"—as though it were up to the poet (or the philosopher) to justify God's creation—but praise that pitches itself against all that is most unsatisfactory in man's condition on this earth and sucks its own strength from the wound: somehow convinced, as the bards of ancient Greece were, that the gods spin unhappiness and evil things toward mortals so that they may be able to tell the tales and sing the songs.

I could (which you cannot)
Find reasons fast enough
To face the sky and roar
In anger and despair
At what is going on,
Demanding that it name
Whoever is to blame:
The sky would only wait
Till all my breath was gone
And then reiterate
As if I wasn't there
That singular command
I do not understand,

*Bless what there is for being,
Which has to be obeyed, for
What else am I made for,
Agreeing or disagreeing?*

And the triumph of the private person was that the voice of the great poet never silenced the small but penetrating voice of sheer sound common sense whose loss has so often been the price paid for divine gifts. Auden never permitted himself to lose his mind—that is, to lose the “distress” in the “rapture” that rose out of it:

No metaphor, remember, can express
A real historical unhappiness;
Your tears have value if they make us gay;
O Happy Grief! is all sad verse can say.

It seems, of course, very unlikely that young Auden, when he decided that he was going to be a *great* poet, knew the price he would have to pay, and I think it entirely possible that in the end—when not the intensity of his feelings and not the gift of transforming them into praise but the sheer physical strength of the heart to bear them and live with them gradually faded away—he considered the price too high. We, in any event—his audience, readers and listeners—can only be grateful that he paid his price up to the last penny for the everlasting glory of the English language. And his friends may find some consolation in his beautiful joke beyond the grave—that for more than one reason, as Spender said, “his wise unconscious self chose a good day for dying.” The wisdom to know “when to live and when to die” is not given to mortals, but Wystan, one would like to think, may have received it as the supreme reward that the cruel gods of poetry bestowed on the most obedient of their servants. ♦

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Hannah Arendt, the author of “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” died in 1975. Her earliest reporting for The New Yorker became the 1963 book “Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil.”

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