human heart. There are enough indicators in America's own culture and history, for example, the group-particularism of the early religious immigrants, the egalitarianism of Jeffersonians, the humane collectivism of the Africans, and the genuinely human insights of her own novelists and self-critics, to provide both internal justification and moral force for such a move. But the move is terribly discouraged by all but universal dependence of Americans—one might say the same to a somewhat lesser degree of other advanced nations—on the fruits of their own blight, the over-mighty, cynically profit-seeking, living-for-the-glory-of-my-last-great-earth-house, entrepreneurial corporations. These exercise, far more than in Europe, a general domination over the distribution of food, the production of the requirements for a comfortable life, the means of communication, and the decisions which so-called representative statesmen take on behalf of the community. How this can be broken, attenuated or transformed is for some American genius, some truly populist movement to discover. To reach beyond capitalism and technology to a truly human way of life would be the greatest achievement of the New World, and its most lasting contribution to mankind.

First-class Fellow-travelling: The Poetry of W.H. Auden

Terry Eagleton

W.H. Auden died in Oxford a few years ago, leaving his reputation as untidy as his personal habits. There were those who believed him to be the greatest English-speaking poet of the century, after Yeats and Eliot; there were others who lambasted his work[1] as slick, brittle, cerebral, excessively *voulu*. Hailed as a poetic revolutionary, Auden was also pilloried as an intellectual flirt, a brainy exhibitionist whose scintillating technical virtuosity conceals a merely adolescent smartness. If Eliot and Yeats are the revered masters of 20th century English poetry (neither of them, significantly, Englishmen), Auden has been seen as the upstart, too clever by half, thumbing his nose at received pieties, pathologically incapable of resisting the private joke or smart crack even if it ruins a poem. Placed beside the rhetorical resonances of a Yeats or the cryptic metaphysics of an Eliot, Auden

[1]Now available in W.H. Auden: *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson, Faber and Faber, £8.50. This volume contains only the poems which Auden wished to preserve, in their final versions. A forthcoming companion volume will contain discarded pieces, and earlier versions of canonical works.

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can seem light-weight, flippant and garrulous; put beside the fertile resources of feeling of a Hardy, Edward Thomas or Lawrence, Auden seems clinical, anaesthetised, intellectually top-heavy, damagingly retarded in certain crucial areas of sensuousness and sensibility. Yet the judgement can be as easily inverted: compared with the hollow posturing and hairbrained mythologising of a Yeats, or the Olympian distaste of an Eliot, Auden emerges as our kind of man: materialist, democratic and subversively shrewd, with an uncanny eye for the telling contingent detail and a hard-nosed sardonic realism which no soft-bellied Romanticism can seduce.

Graham Martin once remarked, with typically accurate insight, that Auden's *Spain 1937* (expunged from this volume, of course, for its Commie sympathies) tries to take over the manner of Yeat's *Meditations in Time of Civil War*, but can't take over the substance.[2] What Martin meant was that Yeats, for all his hopeless Ascendency illusions, was still able to write out of a relationship with his native culture which lent the poet 'representative' status; and the basis for this, as with Eliot, is the assumption of a subliminally shared set of mythologies which link writer and audience. Auden, however, had trouble with his myths. There are essentially three sorts of interacting myths in the earlier Auden: Marxism, psychoanalysis, and something that might best be characterised as fable or fairy-tale. The Marxism, to my mind at least, was never very central. Being a Marxist in the 1930s, in certain circles at least, was a bit like being a Darwinist in the 1880s: you had to put up some pretty good reasons for not accepting anything so blindingly obvious. It's just that this is difficult to appreciate in the 1970s, where reasonable men tend to interest in medieval gynaecology – intriguing, but surely somewhat academic, and probably accountable for by personal kinks.
academic, and probably accountable for by personal kinks.
Auden's Marxism, which never fleshed itself in any significant engagement with the working-class movement, always played second-fiddle to his psychoanalytic mythology, itself a weird cobbling together of scraps of Homer Lane, Gröddeck and Blake. What all this taught Auden was the perverse, unFreudian, vaguely Reichian doctrine that the instinctual life is inherently creative and that social evils spring from the repression/perversion of these sound impulses into the false channels of materialism, power-politics, acquisitiveness. Right from the start, then, Auden regarded concrete social ills as merely phenomenal symptoms of a profounder malaise in the psychic structures of contemporary man; and indeed this is obvious enough in the 1928 and 1930 volumes, which brood on family-psychology, unrequited love and

[2] See 'The Later Poetry of W.B. Yeats', *Pelican Guide to English Literature*, vol. 7, p.181.

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individual repression rather than on the more 'public'themes which have become part of Auden's fellow-travelling image. It isn't so much that Auden abandoned an early Marxism for a later Christianity: it's rather that, with the rise of fascism, the ontological dislocations which his poetry identifies ceased to be thought resolvable by the former and instead found transcendental cure in the latter.

The archetypal figures who throng the pages of the earlier Auden – Enemy, Adversary, Devourer – personify the forces which produce, in modern man, anxiety, malaise, the death-wish, cowardice, the condition in which souls become sick and imprisoned. Against these grim deniers are posited certain creative symbols (hawk, Airman), who typify the true healers, the poets and psychologists who, as friends of life and creativity, can restore man to health. It's a reductive, primitivist opposition characteristic of its time (see Lawrence's *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, which Auden rated highly); and it lent itself to a certain type of poetic symbology. What we find, in a glance through the earlier poems, are a whole series of 'fairy-tale' situations: the meeting at the crossroads, the slaying of the dragon, the testing of the virgins and the rest. But if the Marxist 'myth' was too shorn of a symbolic dimension, too positivistically 'public', to provide poetic capital, and the psychoanalytic myth was too individualist and esoteric, this third mythological variant was really too simplistic. The 'universalising' folk ballad, and the specifying social realism, achieved at best a shot-gun wedding; and Auden was left with a problem about how to *generalise* the empiricist, idiosyncratic bent of his very English sensibility, always better at fixing a stray gesture and isolating an off-beat feature than at the kind of synoptic survey which history seemed urgently to demand. The desired unity of 'abstract' and 'concrete' is instead displaced to the structure of highly localised effects – Auden's famous coupling of the two within a single image ('A phrase goes packed with meaning like a van'; 'Hugging his gloom as peasants hug their land'; 'They lie apart like epochs from each other'; 'Anxiety receives them like a grand hotel'). By the time of the war, and the emigration to New York, Auden's poetry (*New York Letter*, for example) has come suavely to ratify some psuedo-Kantian dichotomy between the 'inner space of private ownership' and the public world where 'each one has the right to choose/His trade'. (If, that is, you're a wealthy ex-public schoolboy who can afford to live in Greenwich Village)'.

It hasn't been generally noticed how similar the preoccupations of Auden's earlier phase are to those of Sartre. Consciousness, poor, self-nauseating *être-pour-soi* that it is, is forever banished from that 'warm nude age of instinctive poise' where foun-

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tains play faultlessly in their unproblematic being. Articled to error, living in freedom by necessity, men were never 'rude and calm as a great door', forced by the cunning of Eros to hunger nostalgically for the smug self-repletion of rocks. Auden sees the dangers of such hungering well enough—the peasant who takes his colour from the earth is ripe for fascist glorification—but he can't shuck off this powerful primitivist myth, any more than could Yeats, Lawrence and Eliot. Guilt, loss, treachery and betrayal as built into the very structure of love: it isn't difficult, surely, to see the relevance of this outlook to the work of a *Thirties* poet, whose jejune public-school high-jinks are souring rapidly into precisely the kind of liberal-humanist disillusion which will end up in the arms of Kierkegaard. Auden's caricature of the liberal-humanist standpoint, in the person of King Herod in *For The Time Being,* has a funniness way beyond anything Yeats or Eliot could manage. If the Incarnation is true, then it's a ghastly mistake on God's part,

> For it could only mean this: that once having shown them
> how, God would expect every man, whatever his fortune,
> to lead a sinless life in the flesh and on earth. Then indeed
> would the human race be plunged into madness and despair.
> And for me personally at this moment it would mean that God
> had given me the power to destroy Himself. I refuse to be
> taken in. He could not play such a horrible practical joke. Why
> should He dislike me so? I've worked like a slave. Ask anyone
> you like. I read all official dispatches without skipping.
> I've taken elocution lessons. I've hardly ever taken bribes.
> How dare he allow me to decide? I've tried to be good.
> I brush my teeth every night. I haven't had sex for a month.
> I object. I'm a liberal. I want everyone to be happy. I wish
> I had never been born.

Yet, of course, there's a lot of Herod in the later Auden. If Eliot's later drama has a problem about reconciling the transcendental with social trivia (an incongruity he turns to satirical use, since talking about original sin while pouring cocktails deftly distances both activities), Auden after 1940 finds little discrepancy between pragmatics and metaphysics. 'Read the New Yorker, trust in God;/And take short views': Protestant inwardness and the end-of-ideologies sit well enough with one another. One of the more attractive features of the earlier Auden was that his poems, cynically stitched together as they sometimes were from salvagable lines of discarded efforts, were about as cosy as a concrete cushion. But that aggressive idiosyncracy then dwindles often enough into mere whimsicality as the views become shorter and shorter, the topics more eclectic, occasional and opportunist, the tone more genially arch and unbuttoned. There's an embarrassing preciousness, a showy air of synthetic, neologistic elegance, a

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verbose and anecdotal 'charm' about the 'post-ideological' Auden, a sort of chatty domesticity which bears all the hall-marks of coterie verse. The fussily self-conscious craft and gratuitous technical pirouettes of some of the later volumes suggest a sensibility which has become overbred, ingrown, quirkily private. In the end, Auden found himself with a set of beautifully refined verbal instruments and nothing of much significance to say with them.

To say that this was predictable would be arrogant, so I'll be arrogant: it was. Way back in the Thirties, socialist activists like John Cornford and Christopher Caudwell had more or less foreseen such a fate for 'Macspaunday' (MacNiece, Spender, Auden and Day Lewis), even though their remedy (join the Communist Party) didn't have much to recommend it. When capitalism slumps, one of its dominant ideological structures–liberal humanism– is regularly deflected into an idealist brand of Marxism. When capitalism recovers, liberal humanism disentangles itself from its materialist trappings and resumes its proper role as the impotent conscience of bourgeois society. Whether it does so with a new 'absolutist' underpinning–say, that of Kierkegaardian protestantism–depends largely upon how far the crisis of capitalism has revealed its values to be in need of some 'deeper' ratification and reconstruction. That, to indulge in a little of that vital intellectual activity which Brecht termed 'crude thinking', is the ballad of W.H. Auden: and it contrasts shabbily with the story-line of that granddaddy of all fellow-travellers, Jean-Paul Sartre. For though Sartre was a good deal more compromised by Stalinism than Auden ever was, he has nonetheless ploughed his lonely revolutionary furrow, hates the bourgeoisie more than ever, and has moved steadily to the left. Auden's trouble was that in the end he was just too nice to hate anyone, and nothing is more fatal to poetry than niceness. But then, unlike Sartre, he was bred in a society which lacked a revolutionary theoretical tradition, and could only offer in its stead a disreputable *mélange* of Romanticism, empiricism and humanitarianism. The psycho-social syndrome which we name W.H. Auden still repays much study: one day someone will no doubt theorise the precise structural relations between the 'Marxism', homosexuality, Oedipus complex, public-school fascination with in-groups, leadership and discipline, attraction to science and seedy industrialism, in short that whole contradictory blend of ascetic bleakness and flamboyant hedonism, Romantic idealism and tight-lipped realism, which bulks so large in the 'character-structure' of the Thirties. But it's ironical that Auden, who was never to be caught napping or cribbing or conforming or doing the same thing twice, should have turned out to be such a classic case-book in the bourgeois bad faith he hated and felt for like a father.

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