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Auden's Poetic Theory & the Child-Like Voice

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AUDEN'S POETIC THEORY AND THE CHILD-LIKE VOICE

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Diana Gail Graham
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AUDEN'S POETIC THEORY AND THE CHILD-LIKE VOICE

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W. H. Auden shares with most of his contemporaries, including Yeats and Eliot, the goal of lighting modern man's way back to a sense of harmony with his universe—the certainty of identity which his ancestors enjoyed. In *New Year Letter*, Auden announces that the problem lies within man himself because each of us is possessed of a "double" nature, thus rendering us our own schismatics.

Auden finds that only with the help of divinity, specifically Christian, can the destructive element be overcome. To illustrate this solution in his poems then becomes Auden's great challenge. Employing a child-like voice or tone becomes his finest tool. It lies at the center of consciousness in most of his best works, providing the quality of "radical innocence" that the poet feels men must regain in order to become reunified within themselves and, simultaneously, reunited with grace.

If we can learn to "be honest like children," says Auden, and accept the nature of life and society, if we can accept and love ourselves for the unique beings that we
are, then the path opens to a possible peace of mind and
joy experienced in childhood. Thus, the child-like voice
in Auden's poetry serves his chief purpose as a modern poet.
His sophisticated adaptation of a child's point of view
indeed illumines the path to the Just City.
Auden's Poetic Theory and the Child-like Voice

Introduction

The title of his 1941 volume The Double Man gives away much about the poetry of W. H. Auden. The feeling of disunity of the self lies at the heart of a dilemma presented often in Auden's works, one which provides a foundation for examining the nature of the child-like voice in his poems. The phrase itself comes from Montaigne, via one of the most lasting influences on Auden's thought--Charles Williams' theological treatise entitled The Descent of the Dove--and reads thusly in its entirety:

It is not possible for a man to rise above himself and his humanity ... we are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn. 1

This disastrous division describes the center of Auden's poetic program, representing as it does the chief impediment to any sort of unity man may hope to achieve either within himself or with the world at large. Like most artists of his generation, Auden is passionately concerned with guiding man toward greater awareness, thus helping him conquer his double nature. Auden agrees with Eliot and Lawrence that the key waits within. They each hold to the belief that
modern man must first assemble a certainty within himself before he can begin to recapture the sense of harmony with the world which his ancestors enjoyed. If then, the mission thrust upon the contemporary artist is to supply a means to such a re-integration, Auden for one willingly accepts it.

"New Year Letter," the best known poem in The Double Man, repeatedly reveals this poet's commitment to such a task. Moving within the framework of a study of the possibility of salvation for the modern world, it surveys three areas in which unity may lie--the social, aesthetic, and religious realms of existence. The verse reflects optimism on Auden's part; it is lighter and more colloquial than any written up to this point. "New Year Letter" also marks the poet's first explicit effort:

To set in order--that's the task
Both Eros and Apollo ask;
For Art and Life agree in this
That each intends a synthesis.²

Auden's ability to synthesize has never been questioned. Cleanth Brooks singles out one aspect of this talent when discussing the poet's earliest works (i.e. before The Double Man, which begins the major stylistic changes of Auden's middle period). Brooks notes the striking use of contrast pervading all the early work which is "by way of becoming a hallmark."³ Marianne Moore admiringly views
it as Auden's "crowning attraction"—"paradox at its comp-
 pactest."4 Brooks realizes that, on a more subtle level,
this finesse at incorporating polarities into verse so
smoothly allows Auden to depict telling analogies drawn from
all facets of life. Though radical, they succeed, says
Brooks, by combining "in a dramatic unity the various ele-
ments which in our practical oversimplification are divided
and at war with one another."5 And Brooks correctly esti-
mates that his ability to synthesize with eloquence gives
Auden rights to status as a major poet.6

As it examines the aesthetic realm and its possibili-
ties as a route to salvation, "New Year Letter" emphasizes
the vital role of the artist in the quest for wholeness.
Auden said earlier that art's goal is "to set in order";
now he discusses exactly how the artist might bring this
about, part of the poem containing Auden's conception of
his own position. It opens by paying homage. Auden con-
gratulates the "Great Masters: of literature who have done
for their ages what modern writers hope to do for their
own time. In the supreme works of the past, poets ful-
filled the artist's ultimate obligation to "challenge, warn,
and witness" to mankind.7 Those with whom he feels a
poetic kinship Auden singles out in a list anyone study-
ing him should read, primarily because in it he presents
such an accurate genealogy of his own literary ancestry:
There is Blake, with a gift that enabled him to hear "inside each mortal thing / Its holy emanation sing"; Rimbaud, with his sense of the "terror" of life; Dante, who relates "in concrete detail" the "whole / Environment that keeps the soul"; Dryden, "master of the middle style"; Catullus, "who made all / His gutter language musical"; Tennyson, "whose talents were / For an articulate despair"; Baudelaire, "Poet of cities, harbours, whores / Acedia, gaslight and remorse"; Hardy, "whose Dorset gave much joy / To one unsocial English boy"; and Rilke, "whom die Dinge bless / The Santa Clause of loneliness."8

This list reveals much about Auden's poetic interests and inclinations, as any reader of his poems can attest. Thus, The Double Man presages his ever increasing certainty of purpose. Less confident is he of a spiritual base at this time, however. In the final section Auden deals with the sphere of religion. Compared to the poem's first two parts, it emerges as the most vague yet most beautiful. The poet, seeming somewhat unsure of himself, delivers, nevertheless, some of the richest symbolic lyric of his career. It could in fact be argued that when his customary assurance ebbs, Auden often appears at his most appealing. At any rate, since this poem dates prior to his return to the Anglican faith, its final prayer addresses what Monroe Spears calls "a deity who has been demonstrated to be a
necessary cultural and philosophical hypothesis." Critic Richard Johnson agrees with this characterization. In his opinion, "New Year Letter" catches Auden midstride in his spiritual development, and most critics support Spears and Johnson in their view that the poem hesitates on the edge of orthodoxy.

Humphrey Carpenter's biography of Auden provides a thorough account of Auden's reaffiliation with Christian thought, which took place soon after the publication of The Double Man. Carpenter finds Auden completely sincere in his religious beliefs—though critics at the time did not—and offers an insight worthy of note about the poet's intellectual outlook at this time. Reminiscent of Spears's analysis of the deity in "New Year Letter," Carpenter implies caution on Auden's part:

His attitude to faith was . . . 'I believe in order that I may understand.' Faith might itself be irrational, but it was the door to a system of thought which could explain the whole of human existence; and it was for such a system that he had been searching throughout his adult life.

Fitting back together the pieces of fragmented modern man is an intellectual as well as artistic problem for Auden. Such may be the case for all contemporary writers, but in this instance theory intersects many more areas of thought than one might assume. Auden the thinker collides with
Auden the poet with great frequency. He remains true to himself when this happens, however, for, as Richard Ohmann discovers, Auden contended early on that a metaphysic resides within all important works of art, although the artist takes too great a risk if he insists upon his audience paying any heed to its presence. To find his own metaphysic, one capable of supplying unity to the modern world, became a largely intellectual quest for Auden (especially in view of his biographer's illustration of the poet's attitude toward faith). This may be the result of Auden's being himself something of the double man—many of his essays dealing with the world of ideas as well as with poetry. Carpenter's portrait of him presents a man more rational than emotional. His account of Auden includes evaluations from friends as well as the poet's own:

He Stephen Spender observed that the Auden who had now left Oxford was someone who was beginning to devote his life to 'an intellectual effort to analyze, explain and dominate his circumstances'. As another friend put it, Auden was 'a conceptualizer in quest of intellectual order'. Auden himself agreed with this definition of his mind. 'As you know,' he once wrote to Spender, 'my dominant faculties are intellect and intuition, my weak ones feeling and sensation. This means I have to approach life via the former; I must have knowledge and a great deal of it before I can feel anything.'
As Carpenter pointed out, Auden sought throughout his life a basis from which he could construct a system of thought that explained the nature of man and his society. This passion for answers acts as the still point in an ideology swept by a constant rush of fresh notions. Auden receives much criticism for his ability to entertain seriously any doctrine. Some are merely flashes in the pan of his theory, such as communism; but if viewed in the context of a teleological quest, Auden's theoretical progression appears logical enough.

Randall Jarrell likes only Auden's very early verse and blames his increasing sophistication of thought for the elements critics often frown upon in the verse. Acknowledging the logic behind the poet's theory, Jarrell brands his intellectual development a "degeneration" into the abstract; moreover, this "degeneration" has, according to Jarrell, so much "causal unity, fits together so logically and becomingly, that the critic can hardly bear to break up the whole into fragments of analysis."14 He concludes rather archly that he "feels like saying with Schopenhauer: All this is a single thought."15

Jarrell's evaluations of Auden are always entertaining but not always accurate, either in his judgements of the poet's work or of his purpose. However, he is astute enough
to recognize the thrust of Auden's thought toward the "abstract, public, and prosaic." Ohmann proves less myopic at this point. Accordingly, he explains that Auden's final interest rests not with the ultimate truth of the ideas under scrutiny, but with ideas "as felt, and still more pronouncedly, with feelings themselves, intellectualized, ordered, and generalized." As evidence, Ohmann claims the verse rarely lobbies for any one idea in particular, but instead operates in a way that appoints Auden a "geographer of the self." 

The final section of "New Year Letter" contains the first fruits of Auden's efforts to make not only his thought but his poetry more widely accessible. This part of the poem offers a paradigm illustrating the causes of the current fragmentation of the self. It constitutes an analysis of the chain of events, both philosophical and social, which Auden deems responsible for robbing men of any feelings of harmony with the modern world. To understand this analysis, one must study the groundwork laid in the preceding section. In it, the poet accuses the devil of being "the great schismatic who / First split creation into two." To him Auden also attributes the technique of a "first-rate psychologist," capable of scheming up such clever ploys as "The False Association" in order to convince men to discard the truth, after it has been falsely linked to a lie, as
some "Treat babe and bath-water." 20 "New Year Letter" credits the evil one with instigating the fatal schism within mankind, then instilling in us the wish to remain in a desperate state. To maintain the disharmony he thus creates, Satan enlists ignorance--holding "before the mind / Amorphous shadows it can hate." 21 This section concludes by appealing to victims of this scheme to acquire "the gift of double focus" which would enable them to see through demonic chaos to the true reality of brotherly love and thus save themselves.

What comprises "double focus" remains obscure. The most reasonable inference might read something like "intelligence guided by experience." Actually, Auden's recommendation is quite complex, dealing as it does with the essence of the human self. The will plays a major role. Although a man cannot, by mere exercise of his will, send himself to Heaven, everyone must choose to be of use. This emphasis on the importance of choice resounds from a dominant existential note struck in much of Auden's poetry. He contends in this particular poem that man must select a penitential path and tread it faithfully, hoping that by so doing he may reach the state of grace that portends salvation.

Perhaps even more vital to the ability to "double focus" is intuition. Unfortunately, Auden explains that the group
mentality prevalent today stunts the growth of individual instinct. Individuality is essential; however, it can be overemphasized. What Auden calls the Renaissance's creation—the "Empiric Economic Man"—fails because its glory in man as an entity who functions best autonomously falsely inflates the ego. Plato, with his "lie of intellect," and Rousseau, with his "lie of flesh," also help fill men full of self-importance. Thus, the role of the ego erroneously blossomed. The prime example of the tyranny egotism can wield is the Wagnerian hero, whom Auden ridicules for being so steeped in the power of his own will he feels gratified in knowing "his doom is willed."23

Auden sides with thinkers like Blake, Kierkegaard, and Baudelaire, all of whom protest that "progress is not interesting."24 "New Year Letter" urges men today to break free from this mode of thought. For this, Auden offers no easy substitute. People must admit that "Aloneness is man's real condition," remediable only by learning a skill not now in evidence—the ability to love one's fellows.25 Auden pleads with men to develop an awareness that individual differences are always superficial, never qualitative. By abandoning egocentricity, men may arrive at an understanding that assumes "Each a unique particular / That is no giant, god, or dwarf / But one odd human isomorph."26
"New Year Letter" ends without offering any terribly concrete guidelines to adequately replace all its author's rejections from past western thought. It is not here that Auden achieves the synthesis he seeks. Eros and Apollo have yet to be reconciled. The poet succeeds, however, in laying a theoretical foundation from which such a system of thought builds. At the same time, Auden provides his reader with a great amount of insight into his own concerns. Francis Scarfe recognizes that the quest for a metaphysic for the modern world itself makes Auden an "important" poet, one who stands for a "synthesis of the typical thought and poetic practice of his time." As for further solution to the problem Montaigne outlines, examination of Auden's other poetry and prose yields his final answer to his own characterization of mankind's unavoidable burden: "All the striving of life is a striving to transcend duality."

Why, then, does Auden need the child-like voice as a tool for his poetry? He seems to be on solid enough theoretic ground without it, yet this voice seems to be a vital necessity since it lies at the center of consciousness in most of his poetry. The purpose of this thesis is to try to answer that question. Some suggestions stem from the Romantic tradition itself, from its insistence upon the idea that the imagination in man is an autonomous, spontaneous creative power capable of carrying the poet to a full
understanding of his universe and of his purpose in it. This child-like voice is the imaginative (often unspoken) view in Auden's poetry. The editors of The Oxford Anthology of English Literature (Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling) help the student to see the purpose and the limitation which Auden faces and which he hopes to overcome through the use of the child-like voice. These editors say,

High Romanticism was divided severely against itself. . . . It was as dualistic as the empiricists in its actual emphasis on the power of creative mind as contrasted to the phenomenal universe, which widened still further the split between subject and object.

The center of High Romanticism is found in each poet's difficult realization of the Sublime, a realization that internalizes the quest-pattern. . . . Quite narrowly, High Romanticism can be called the internalization of quest-romance, with the poet as quester, a principle of Selfhood (manifested as excessive self-consciousness) his antagonist, and a Muse figure his goal (frequently shadowy).29

Auden, of course, hopes to see with the eye of imagination, and his center of consciousness in that effort becomes the child's voice. There are other reasons for his choice as well. One is not unlike Blake's satiric juxtaposition of the worlds of innocence and experience. On the subtlest level, however, Auden enlists the child-like voice to touch our primitive consciousness, often smothered by adult concerns, evoking the sense of wonder and awe at things we had as children. By so doing, the poet aims to
reconstruct the feelings of unity in man before industrialism's intrusion, and before the modern world lapsed into emotional fragmentation. The sense of horror, the sense of wonder stemming from "radical innocence," the wisdom and authority that belong to Auden's quest, all these reside within the child-like voice--the tone that permeates most of his poetry.
Duality continues to stalk Auden in his considerations of what poetry should be and do. Like his ideology, Auden's poetic theory suffers from a profusion of ideas, some of which resist cohesion. The polarities this creates are finally resolved however by religious motives, as are most of those present within his philosophical position. A single purpose around which Auden could mesh his beliefs thus finally emerges. It does so only after a good deal of his theoretical essays appear. Though for a time minus a unifying center, Auden's theory of poetry includes a variety of concepts deserving attention, their originality being one reason. Auden on poets and poetry is always both erudite and entertaining. Besides the intrinsic interest his speculations hold, and despite the difficulties encountered in assimilating many diverse claims, specific aspects have their specific rewards. One of these, the child-like voice, lies close to the essence of his poetry--its major carrier often being the tone.

Understanding the intricacies present in Auden's theory of poetry requires review of the poet's intellectual position. As his first critical work illustrates, Auden grounded
his thought in an objective and highly analytical dissection of human nature only to be forced to reappraisals after accepting the dogmas of Christianity. He revamped his view of life and art. Oddly enough, Auden's philosophies of life and art seem inversely related in the area of complexity. Christian dogma initiates a steady trend toward the esoteric in his thought; conversely, his poetic theory moves away from the abstract aesthetic concerns of the young poet to a more concrete, utilitarian level. However, he is still as much poet as theologian, and, in consequence, his theory of poetry combines aesthetic and religious considerations.

About Auden's first speculations upon the nature of poetry and the poet, written prior to his conversion, no ambiguity exists. In a review of Herbert Read's *In Defense of Shelley*, Auden stresses with assurance the need for poetry to arise from experience, maintaining that he "cannot believe . . . any artist can be good who is not more than a bit of a reporting journalist."¹ Because he feels Shelley neither "looked at or listened to anything," Auden thinks him distastefully aseptic.² Though--like Shelley--Auden steeps his own work in the world of ideas, he believes that all poets must retain an equally keen sensitivity to the world of experience.³

Another essay of this period contains one of Auden's most strongly and consistently held views. He states
emphatically that the best definition of poetry is still "memorable speech" and that it is a misconception to think poetry must always be weighty and formal. Auden's own accessibility no doubt reflects his notion, uniquely eclectic among most moderns, that poems can be by turns "profound and shallow, sophisticated and naive, dull and witty, bawdy and chaste." During this period Auden discloses both a love for light verse and an envy for those able to write it. By "light" the poet means verse that is fresh and unaffected by not necessarily frivolous. He also declares that the modern poet is hampered by the fact that the twentieth century, unlike past ages, lacks common beliefs, which prevents the poet from writing any successful light poetry, such as folksongs; or the poetry of people like Byron, Chaucer, and Pope, centered in the communal life of their days; or nonsense verse in the universally appealing mode of someone like Edmund Lear. However, Auden's interest in what is light and informal points to the child-like voice he often manipulates.

Obviously the effect of social conditions upon the artist's freedom of expression is one of Auden's vital concerns. After defining light verse (implicitly the kind he wants to write but cannot), Auden attempts to trace the state of affairs between poet and audience from the Elizabethans onward, offering a historical analysis to explain
the seeming elitism of the modern poet. The more "homogeneous" the society, Auden observes, the greater the ease of expression its artists possess; simultaneously, they tend not to focus clearly enough upon the faults of their age if they feel too much a part of it. Auden contends that, on the other hand, the poet who finds himself quite unsympathetic to his world spots its flaws with ease, yet his dissociation robs him of a facility to communicate well any criticism. The great periods of literary production, Auden maintains, inspire feelings of both unity and disparity. If the Elizabethan Age represents such a fortunate synthesis, the seventeenth century drew its poets and dramatists back into the fold, according to Auden, only to preface the Romantics' final break with society.

The Romantic writers stand at the head of the contemporary idea of the isolated artist, Auden theorizes. They gloried in the "private world" of the self, only to discover that, however stimulating the private realm might be, it has limiting parameters. Today the problem remains, and Auden concludes, "Without a secure place in society, without an intimate relation between himself and his audience, without, in fact, those conditions which make for Light Verse, the poet finds it difficult to grow beyond a certain point." Finally, the poet can work and hope for
what Auden terms a world both "integrated and free," which would enable him to create a poetry both "light and adult." 15

These speculations help explain the need he emphasizes for a new metaphysic. Edward Callan reviews the poet's progress toward achieving such an end after his return to the church. In "The Development of W. H. Auden's Poetic Theory Since 1940," Callan picks up where Auden's essays of the 30's leave off. The scene has shifted from theories about poetry and the poetic sensibility back to the search for unity in the modern world, beginning with the assumption that "of first importance" to Auden's theory at this time is Kierkegaard's tripartate classification of existence—dividing it into the Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious realms. 16 These, Callan observes, constitute a system of categorization now integral to Auden's entire theoretic position. 17 A logical extension of Kierkegaard's categories surfaces later when Auden begins to be increasingly preoccupied with the limitations of his art. 18

For now, however, Auden concentrates on shaping his feelings about art around aesthetic, ethical, and religious considerations, forming from them his first full-blown attempt at a modern metaphysic. The result, Callan submits, is this:
To supply a unifying framework for this new synthesis he accepted, as Niebuhr and others had done, Kierkegaard's all-embracing scheme of categories . . . and this central position of the categories has been increasingly shared by a theory of analogical relationships among the worlds of art, reality, and the supernatural similar to that of Dante and the Middle Ages. 19

Auden's last and most definitive critical collection, The Dyer's Hand, provides numerous references to the analogical web that binds the world of art to what Callan calls "reality and the supernatural." The analogies Auden draws are singular and frequent, but they seem too loosely related to the structure of the book as a whole to comprise the "theory" of Callan's estimate—rather, they are a series of astute observations upon the inter-relatedness of all the arts. One comparison most pertinent to Auden's poetic theory deals with an analogical relation he, as poet, has experienced first hand: "Through listening to music I have learned much about how to organize a poem, how to obtain variety and contrast through change of tone, tempo, and rhythm, though I could not say just how." 20

Along with this passage comes his claim that "man is an analogy-drawing animal; that is his great good fortune," a statement in accord with a trend toward the didactic in Auden's theory of poetry. 21 A consciousness of the efficacy of verse as a teacher and persuader enters Auden's thought at this time, possibly because he sought to incorporate a
more religious aspect into his new work, and his preoccupation with poetry as a kind of instruction must not escape note. Auden, in a discussion on this point in The Dyer's Hand, deems poetry a much more persuasive medium than prose. Verse, he says, makes an excellent didactic tool because of its "superior power as a mnemonic." The child-like tone is related to ease of memory. The possibility that his remarks stem from an underlying religious interest becomes more likely when juxtaposed with this earlier statement:

You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables; and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences, from which each according to his immediate and peculiar needs may draw his own conclusions.

Equally responsible for this attitude is his own talent, which is naturally gregarious. As Auden has already implied, in his essay on light verse, the kind of poetry he feels most kinship with speaks in a relaxed, conversational tone—the style of Chaucer, Byron, and Pope. Auden said too that the modern poet could not reasonably expect to write in the same manner as these earlier masters because his society so little resembles theirs. Nonetheless, as Spears suggests, Auden's nature (perhaps to his regret) remained "incorrigibly didactic" as well as that of a "born entertainer." According to Spears, Auden as poet "needs a large audience to amuse
and instruct," and the problem of acquiring one hounds him "throughout his career." 25

Although naturally inclined to instruct, Auden has a strong artist's distaste for the obvious which helps channel his growing approval of didacticism into less direct pathways--such as the parable. Since Auden does not himself endorse attempts to promote a "Theory of Poetry" which applies to every poem ever written (eschewing always constraints placed upon individuality), what John Blair terms Auden's "poetics of parable" applies only to Auden's own inclinations. 26 Proof of this lies in Auden's sanction of the need of "Every poet . . . to ask himself what kinds of poetry, given his temperament and talent, it is authentic for him to write"; this is for Auden the only theoretic hypothesis worth discussing. 27

Blair takes Auden at his word and structures his evaluation of the "poetics of parable" accordingly. His discussion opens with a summary of Auden's efforts to discover the types of poetry he should by nature write, viewing them as a series of "sharpening and enriching" refinements, undertaken without ever "discarding the core of didactic poetics." 28 Within this personalized poetics the concept of art as parabolic occupies a position of prominence, Blair points out. His chronological sketch of the major developments of Auden's theory highlights this central aspect:
There are, as has been implied, points of discernible development since his initial articulation of the poetics of parable in 1935. By the time of "New Year Letter" in 1941, his mature view of man as actor is fully developed. By 1948 he is more certain that poems should help readers establish more conscious contact with their inner emotional selves. In 1956 he distinguishes two different functions of the poem, one for its maker and another for its reader. Yet his comments on "A Change of Air" in 1964 confirm the observation that he still sees the poem as a parable.

As this passage illustrates, Auden consistently backs away from obvious didacticism, settling instead for the less insistent parable. Through the subtle telling of stories, Auden hopes, as Blair relays, to instill in his reader's mind greater awareness of his world, to render him "unforgettably conscious."

Evidence of Auden's wish to employ a veiling technique when delivering the advice he so loves to give are two comments appearing simultaneously with those about blending poetry and parable. The first contains his often reiterated belief that "poetry may illuminate but it will not dictate." The second provides a follow up:

The primary function of poetry, as of all the arts, is to make us more aware of ourselves and the world around us. I do not know if such increased awareness makes us more moral or more efficient.
Upon assembling Auden's thoughts about poetry, a marked attention to utilitarianism surfaces. Although it underpins the earlier theoretical speculations to some extent, the notion that poetry should perform a prescriptive function permeates Auden's poetics for a time after his return to Christian beliefs. As was to be expected, his renewed faith deepens his fascination present in the essays and reviews of the 1930's with art as parable and ignites a conviction that poetry is too frivolous an occupation to pursue when one might actively help improve the world. Fortunately, the latter attitude soon diminished, if it never quite disappeared entirely. In the 40's, as Callan affirms, Auden still deliberates upon the limitations of his art. To poetry he assigns an increasingly modest place in the scheme of things. Auden now labels it a "game." More fully, it is a "game of knowledge," which, in Cleanth Brooks's explanation, constitutes "a bringing to consciousness, by naming them, of emotions and their hidden relationships." Callan notes one offshoot of this analogy, explaining that the poet now chooses to picture his fellows as craftsmen, not divine beings, and art as craft, not the magical force which ancient Greeks once thought it and current cinema moguls still do.

Auden, himself in "Postscript: Christianity and Art" makes it clear that culture is Caesar's domain and there is
therefore no such thing as "Christian" art. He also wishes to emphasize that "The imagination is a natural human faculty and therefore retains the same character whatever a man believes." He qualifies this immediately, but even so, Auden wishes to combat the dangers in too close association between art and Christianity: The loss of the poet's freedom and the usurpation of faith--the only element capable of properly approaching an incarnate Christ. At the same time, though, Auden makes it clear that Amos v. Wilder is not incorrect when he claims that this poet's work is "The new Christian synthesis in the making" because Auden emphasizes the necessity of individual freedom and responsibility as he offers us a "forum of the modern consciousness." Wilder also points out that Auden deals with contemporary social and ethical issues, using the language of philosophy, psychology and science and appropriating the insights of Freud. But even more important, Wilder notes the devotion to truth and sincerity in Auden's poetry--elements which infuse the poet's work with its power. These also happen to be elements which only the child-like voice can carry successfully for Auden, allowing the allusions to Christ to remain playful; the mysterious to be ebullient; the powers of imagination to be yoked with primal innocence; and the voice of conscience to authoritatively organize the whole.
Reflecting upon Auden's inclusion of utility as a poetic consideration is his mounting distaste for romanticized verse, the problem with it being this:

In so much "serious" poetry, poetry, that is to say, which is neither pure playful song nor comic, I find an element of "theatre," of exaggerated gesture and fuss, of indifference to the naked truth, which, as I get older, increasingly revolts me. This element is mercifully absent from what is conventionally called good prose. In reading the latter, one is only conscious of the truth of what is being said, and it is this consciousness which I would like what I write to arouse in a reader first. Before he is aware of any other qualities it may have, I want his reaction to be: "That's true" or, better still, "That's true: now, why didn't I think of it for myself?" To secure this effect I am prepared to sacrifice a great many poetic pleasures and excitements. 41

Critic John Bayley provides an accurate analysis of Auden's dilemma. Bayley's evaluation regards Auden as fundamentally hostile to romantic thought yet still, despite his enthusiastic efforts, subject to its influence--he is an "anti-romantic" within the romantic tradition. 42 Because he is torn between Romanticism and Classicism, says Bayley, conflict emerges in Auden's thought between being a poet with a capital "p" and a citizen with a social conscience: "The poet can indulge in all the romantic attitudes: The man must conform to the classical moral pattern." 43

Perhaps this schism prompts Auden to compare the world of art to a "mirror" world, identical to the real one in
every detail except actuality. In the same vein is his stricture against preferring art to life, a claim Bayley extracts to illustrate Auden's preoccupation (which the critic thinks strange) with making the distinction between the provinces of art and life. Classical poets like Dante, Goethe, and Tolstoy were never, Bayley feels sure, so bothered by "the awareness that what they write is not Life." Criticizing Auden for enacting this separation, however, means ignoring one of the poet's seminal aims, which is, as Spears puts it, to "disenchant and disintoxicate."

Cleanth Brooks recognizes the intrusion into Auden's theory of poetry of many such problems of definition. Inevitably he solves them, says Brooks, and their resolution yields a poetic which is not only credible but also "a positive source of strength." He concedes that it is a bit startling for a poet as concerned as this one with society's ills--Brooks dubs Auden the "poet of civilization"--to hold what "amounts to a formalist conception of poetry." Arguing persuasively, he maintains that to expect a man of Auden's intellectual sophistication to believe poetry must either provide men with an escape from life or hand them a set of guidelines on how to live better is "obviously oversimple." This being the case, Auden's claim that art is at once a powerful and insubstantial mirror of life merges logically
with his often professed interest in making men more self-aware. Finally Auden attains the theoretic balance Brooks describes:

Auden's respect for the autonomy of art has forbidden him to consider it as merely the handmaiden of a religion or of a political party. On the other hand, his sense of the limitations of art—he is willing to call it in final terms frivolous—prevents his turning it into a kind of ersatz religion. 50

The poet's synthesis, besides reconciling some difficult theoretic matters, places him basically within the Aristotelian tradition. Elder Olsen orders this system of thought in "An Outline of Poetic Theory." Auden gains credibility for his "poetics of parable" through Olsen's claim that "The ethical function of art ... is never in opposition to the purely artistic end; on the contrary, it is best achieved when the artistic end has been accomplished, for it is only a further consequence of the powers of art."51 Thus, both Brooks and Olsen grant that Auden ultimately hones his speculations about his art into a practical and respectable form. Their insights can be enlarged by showing how Auden accomplishes this through the use of the child-like voice.

Having completed the foundation of his poetic theory, Auden takes the occasion of his last critical treatise, The Dyer's Hand, to elaborate upon the impetus of artistic endeavors. His ponderings on the imagination of art contain
an enumeration of the "dogmas" of his craft which every poet must accept. Auden said earlier that in his opinion the poet should have a trace of journalist about him. Now he adds three maxims to which every poet, knowingly or not, automatically subscribes:

1) A historical world exists, a world of unique events and unique persons, related by analogy, not identity. The number of events and analogical relations is potentially infinite. The existence of such a world is a good, and every addition to the number of events, persons and relations is an additional good.

2) The historical world is a fallen world, i.e., though it is good that it exists, the way in which it exists is evil, being full of unfreedom and disorder.

3) The historical world is a redeemable world. The unfreedom and disorder of the past can be reconciled in the future.52

Auden again studies the role of the poet in one of his more famous poems, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," which commences with a discussion of the relationship between the artist and society. Yeats dies, but thankfully "By mourning tongues / The death of the poet was kept from his poems." Because they continue to be read, Yeats is, figuratively, "scattered among a hundred cities"--"The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living." So the writer can inspire, but Auden predicts no positive changes in men's lives as a result. Poetry is primarily a "way of happening, a mouth." He does not think that Yeats wrote in vain,
nonetheless, for he played as well as anyone the only role the poet can:

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. 53

The poet's main instrument in teaching his readers to praise is obviously language. In it, form and function coalesce. Olsen offers this account of the blend that takes place: "In a successful work of art, the materials are completely assimilated into the form: what was 'world' has become language. 54 Adapting this to Auden's poetic theory produces a unity it previously wanted. First, does he believe language an entity able to replace sensual phenomena without sacrificing any impact? Yes, Auden readily grants language such power in many of his critical remarks. He especially promotes this view in The Dyer's Hand. For example, the poet states that "It has been said that a poem should not mean but be. This is not quite accurate. In a poem, as distinct from many other kinds of verbal societies,
meaning and being are identical." Implicitly then, he supports Olsen's contention that the world becomes language, since form and content (being and meaning) are "identical." Second, does this synthesis preface a similar one in Auden's thought between aesthetic and religious considerations? Apparently, it signals at least the start of one. As has been demonstrated, duality plagues Auden throughout much of his criticism because he is both artist and Christian, and he balks at subordinating one to the other. Therefore, the idea that language accommodates fully each of these concerns enables Auden to weld together the dualities with which he struggles. Finally, he can say that, above all, he wants his poems to be "untranslatable speech"—ultimately, a hymn "in praise of the English language."56

Because the problem of conflicting aesthetic and religious purposes has been settled, the poet can go on to devote his attention to his expressed aim of writing poetry that can help his readers reconcile their own divisions. To do this, he incorporates the child-like voice as a major center of consciousness in his poetry. After reviewing the major points in his theory, this voice can be seen as their logical extension. Perhaps the most important theoretical tenet behind the child-like tone is Auden's urgent desire to communicate with a large audience, to make them achingly aware, and thus teach "the free man how to praise."
Obviously, everyone identifies strongly with childhood experiences and innocence, so the poet who uses this tone can hope to touch men's sensibilities deeply, and thus "persuade us to rejoice" as we move to correct and to confess.

It is also the motif of this voice in most of Auden's poems which allows Auden's synthesis to have, as Wilder points out, no "adventitious aids or extrinsic authoritarian props."
Chapter II
Definition and Extension of the Child-like Voice

Intrinsically, a child is not "more anything" than his elders—neither more imaginative nor more creative, according to Auden. The widespread misconception that children outdistance adults in this area results, he believes, from modern society's penchant for rewarding scientifically based, empiric thought, to the exclusion of equally valuable contributions by intuitive, innovative minds. Because creative thinking is so undervalued, the imaginative faculty present in us thrives in childhood only to atrophy after we reach adolescence. Lost as well is the child's ability to marvel at the world—an ability Auden deems vital to the restoration of good mental health—the reintegration of the psyche which "New Year Letter" makes clear is uppermost in Auden's poetic program. In modern society Auden finds the "sense of wonder" that is "immanent in every child" being abandoned for the hunger for power, which is also with us from birth. Society encourages this ill-considered choice to such an extent that Auden seems to be an iconoclast, insisting that the wonder should be preserved, not the power-lust. He thinks that a child-like reverence for life would make the greater contribution to the well-being of individuals and their communities:
It is only with the help of wonder, then, that we can develop a virtue which we are certainly not born with, compassion, not to be confused with its conceit-created counterpart, pity. Only from wonder, too, can we learn a style of behavior and speech which is no less precious in art than life; for want of a better word we call it good manners or breeding, though it has little to do with ancestry, school or income.

By using a child-like voice and tonality as a center of consciousness in his poetry, Auden hopes to enhance this civilizing process. He works from the perspective of a child's wonder (and the corresponding dismay) at the ways of the world, but the tone that evolves cannot be defined by this alone because Auden always balances the outlook of innocence with a wisdom and intelligence which yield a detached yet authoritative stand for the poet. The journalistic air of the more "sophisticated innocence" rings sincerely when Auden in "New Year Letter" asserts that the poet's job is to synthesize the "Eros and Apollo" sides of every man, recording human triumphs and tragedies, and establishing historical perspective while correlating the secular culture with Christian thought. Auden's synthesis, tempered through the child-like voice, also yields an imaginative appreciation of the sensory world balanced by an equally powerful objectivity. He creates, when the two fuse, a poetic motif capable of demonstrating the spirit of human reintegration, mirroring the thoughts of the truly civilized
man whom Auden attempts to coax into existence, a free man who knows "how to praise."

The tone of Auden's major poetry is more than merely conversational. It is far too intense for that term to be adequate. "New Year Letter" is certainly one of Auden's masterpieces; thus it deserves detailed attention to see whether the innocent voice is operative there, and if so, how its analysis is best approached. The poem opens as the monster of chaos broods over Europe in 1940. Art (the poem declares) must continue to assert the claims of order and the classical synthesis of sensation, feeling, and intelligence. Eros, God of instinct and passion, and Apollo, God of light and reason, both demand order. The desired order is not imposed by Germanic will but must be based upon the fullest satisfaction of varieties of desires, which will yield an inner peace built on psychic satisfaction. Art cannot, Auden thinks, usher in a new social order. It can only create symbolic models of "Life-order"—can only create its own autonomous "completed states" of fullest satisfaction.2 Though these are rooted in unique personal materials, they also serve to "typify" universal values.3 Great writers, then, show mankind "an order it has yet to find."4 If artists are weak in their private lives, all the more reason calls upon us to honor them for rising above their egotism in creating the symbolic forms of maximum
satisfied order. Great art works brood above troubled man, "large, magnificent, and calm." They challenge, warn, and witness, and the living artist must feel the great masters of the past judging him. He must, in Auden's view, in fear and trembling read his poems aloud to this dead and silent jury—to win their love. The living poet may choose one special master to appeal to—the one he admires most. For Auden, this is Dante, though all are there. The admiration for Dante helps explain why Auden utilizes the child-like voice. It has the same aspect of wonder, wisdom, and radical innocence which Dante felt at the center of his consciousness when he viewed the lovely child Beatrice and which he employed in *Vita Nuova*, his celebration of a potent innocent love.

"New Year Letter" continues. We see that the modern situation lies around us like a "baffled crime." No one knows why our social fabric is falling to pieces. All around us are "vast spiritual disorders." Poems cannot stop wars, yet Auden hopes his letters can have some benign, fresh, child-like, wonder-awakening impact on those who have political power and huddle in conferences.

As "Part Two" begins the decade ends. Troubled men look back on its growth in chaos, confusion, doubt, fear. Although it is bitter medicine, we must admit that we simply cannot go back to old fixed ideas. They do change. Satan
urges all to bold new will and action, used by God to stir up the passion Eros principle, which shows us part of the way out of the dark times. Though Satan is not real, he is a real principle that pushes us toward Grace. Satan encourages us to see the intellect as a dry divider of things—which separates causes from effects, and makes other tragic separations. But Satan does this in order to force us to the other false extreme, causing us to embrace instinct and ignore intellect. Satan is the "great schismatic." But by separating man from God, Satan plays into God's hands by making separated and fragmented man long for unity above the diversity. Satan is aided by sentimental art, vaguely idealistic art, and the emotional "woozier" religions. Auden believes that Wordsworth and others served Satan by supporting Rousseau and the simplistic logic of the French Revolution. They came to see later that they had indeed been in Satan's camp. Auden agrees with Eliot, then, that Christ is the touchstone for our redemption -- whereby Eros and Agape are reintegrated.

These essential emphases in the poem reveal that this masterpiece holds both Auden's metaphysics and his poetic theory. It also reveals the centrality of the child-like voice, the vehicle which carries the insight -- without preachment -- which Auden hopes modern man will come to see: that the human will is free when it is rightly aligned, rightly
balanced between Eros and Agape. This youthful center of consciousness, filled with instinctive wisdom and innocence, mysterious yet embullient, enfoldes the analysis of crimes and betrayals in the poem as well as the majestic beatific ending, which has the honest straightforward tone of the child-like voice, and which emphasizes the condition of youth:

Day breaks upon the world we know
Of war and wastefulness and woe;
Ashamed civilians come to grief
In brotherhoods without belief,
Whose good intentions cannot cure
The actual evils they endure,
Nor smooth their practical career,
Nor bring the far horizon near.
The New Year brings an earth afraid,
Democracy a ready-made
And noisy tradesman's slogan, and
The poor betrayed into the hand
Of lackeys with ideas, and truth
Whipped by their elders out of youth,
The peaceful fainting in their tracks
With martyrs' tombstones on their backs,
And all culture on all fours to greet
A butch and criminal elite,
While in the vale of silly sheep
Rheumatic old patricians weep. 9

The reader feels the voice as organizer of the journalistic catalogue and of the artist's imagination. Through the tonal voice the power of art is joined with the sense of primal innocence. The blunt truth declarations come in simple and naive syntax.

The ending of the poem is noteworthy:
O Unicorn among the cedars,
To whom no magic charm can lead us,
White childhood moving like a sign
Through the green woods unharmed in thy
Sophisticated innocence,
To call thy true love to the dance,
O Dove of science and of light
Upon the branches of the night,
O Ichthus playful in the deep
Sea-lodges that forever keep
Their secret of excitement hidden,
O sudden Wind that blows unbidden,
Parting the quiet reeds, O Voice
Within the labyrinth of choice
Only the passive listener hears,
O Clock and Keeper of the years,
O Source of equity and rest,
Quando non fuerit, non est,
It without image, paradigm
Of matter, motion, number, time,
The grinning gap of Hell, the hill
Of Venus and the stairs of Will,
Disturb our negligence and chill,
Convict our pride of its offence
In all things, even penitence,
Instruct us in the civil art
Of Making from the muddled heart
A desert and a city where
The thoughts that have to labour there
May find locality and peace,
And pent-up feelings their release,
Send strength sufficient for our day,
And point out knowledge on its way,
O da quod jubes, Domine. 10

The unicorn here becomes a symbol for this child-like voice,
along with the wind, which Auden labels as "Sophisticated
innocence," and we see the playful yet serious allusions to
Christ emerge. We also see the voice yoking the artist's
imagination to the primal innocence, the ease of memory,
and the sense of mystery, relieving the journalistic cata-
loguing again from any heavy element of prophecy. The
youthful center of consciousness, fresh as dawn, is posited by Auden as the bearer of a quiet non-miraculous redemption, some utterly natural and spontaneous blessing, some "White childhood moving like a sigh."

In "New Year Letter" Auden encompasses a multitude of contemporary issues--political, social, and economic as well as psychological and ethical--and the three divisions of the poem are often said to correspond to Kierkegaard's "stages of life's way," the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. But the important thing is that within Auden's comprehensive discussion of man's development in all possible stages, he makes it clear that man is unfinished. He is sinful, fallen, and yet free to choose a better, more civil, more humane approach. This history, Auden insists, man must thoroughly comprehend in order to find his way to the Just City. Auden draws into his poem a complex bundle of traditions and influences: men of letters--Homer, Catullus, Dante, Cervantes, Dryden, Blake, Tennyson, Kipling, Hardy, James, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Zola, Rilke, and Kafka; philosophers--Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Berkeley, Locke, Burke, Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx; religious figures--Luther and Kierkegaard; musicians--Schubert, Mozart; and even figures from the American tradition--Winthrop, Mather, Hamilton, and Jefferson. With this large complex the poet makes the statement he desires about the ending of an epoch of Western
Culture, the sense that "all the special Tasks of the Ren-
naissance have been done." In the midst of the bloody
struggle between the Allies and the Third Reich, the objec-
tively wise tone of radical innocence permeates the poem
as Auden attacks all positions of Western thinkers as
having led to egoism, to tyranny of some kind. He points
out that "True democracy begins with free confession of our
sins," yet he avoids the overt didacticism of the relig-
ious when he reminds us that

Art is not life and cannot be
A midwife to society,
For art is a fait accompli.

What they should do, or how or when
Life-order comes to living men
It cannot say, for it presents
Already lived experience
Through a convention that creates
Autonomous completed states.

The child-like voice obviously merges Auden's religious
concerns with his social and aesthetic ones. At the end of
the poem, as Auden struggles for his Christian synthesis, he
uses the blunt language of the market place and the child.
When the reader might expect him to call upon God, to bring
men to the recognition of their sin, to soften their hearts,
to instruct them in the art "Of making from the muddled
heart / A desert and a city," Auden instead merely offers
metaphors which resonate with the actual experience of mod-
ern man and which utilize the primal powers of fresh
imagination and primitive innocence—the mythical unicorn. The reader—through this tonality of awe and wonder—accepts with the poet the idea that as life changes before his imagination, so will what the artist makes change, and change us. Auden brings the ballad-like directness of nursery rhymes to a high philosophic level.

The tone of Auden's poetry enters Kierkegaard's aesthetic category through its lyricism. All the poems that contain a sense of delight in the works of nature speak with the voice of an innocent. This child-like voice carries great authority as well, thus fulfilling the ethical purpose the philosopher names as his second division. "New Year Letter" makes clear the Kierkegaardian thesis that the course of Western Culture to the present reveals that "Aloneness is man's real condition." Each individual must be responsible for building the Just City. The complex problems of the age are merely "Our million individual deeds / Omissions, vanities, and creeds"; and, "Upon each English conscience lie / Two decades of hypocrisy." Social fragmentation and alienation show the shrewdness behind Browning's remark that "Life's business is just the terrible choice." Thus the answer to the malaise of modern man is couched in the language of ethics and existential philosophy, and the child-like tone funnels all this into our own conscience and organizes it, as well as the social scene. The child construct
carries the ideal while the work itself deals with the actual, past and present. The poet allows the ideal, or the future, to remain within the child-like tonal appeal and within the reader's consciousness since though the poet is unique, he is not an authoritarian prophet. He too is just a fallible human being. The third Kierkegaardian realm, the religious, Auden also satisfies by using the child-like tone, conveying a beatific feeling similar to Hopkins's attitude of rapturous devotion, the selfless worship which the egos of most adults preclude them from experiencing. This is especially clear in the unicorn segment. Thus, Auden's tone enables him to do all that he thought was required of the modern Christian writer. His tone and images carry hints of an ideal order that each man must seek in his own way.

If examined in a literary context instead of religious, Auden's choice of a child-like center of consciousness also has precedents, this time technical in addition to philosophical. Behind the use of this sensibility, Bayley points out, rides the entire Romantic tradition to which Auden in his way belongs:

The child was of course an important figure in early Romantic theory, as Wordsworth's Immortality Ode shows, but his position was a symbolic one: he was not valued for himself, but by a sort of inverted Platonist process he came to seem the possessor of truths which for the adult had
faded into the light of common day. Moreover, his position and function were quite overt and official—Shelley can compare himself to a tired child without giving the game away. But in Auden's poetry, as in much modern literature, the adolescent note—however strong and shaping its influence—is never admitted to be such. The closest that Auden has come to such an admission of his fondness for a Nietzsche quotation—"Maturity—to recover the seriousness one had as a child at play"—and his references to poetry as a particular sort of game.16

Bayley should have gone much further than that. To him most of Auden's poetry contains this "adolescent note," but especially his early works. A "private world of detailed nostalgia" haunts these poems, according to Bayley.17 John Blair agrees that the outlook of Auden's early poetry is a basically youthful one which is disenchanted with the current scene because it "violates an ideal world . . . the ideal world of childhood."18 These critics characterize correctly, but both see too little. In its earliest emanations, the child-like voice takes the form of a lingering echo of the perfection of the old world, devoid of the anxiety and unrest of the modern world against which these poems protest. "The Wanderer" exemplifies such a contrast, beginning with this solemn warning: "Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle." The world this poem evokes is one in which a man may travel through the country-side as men struck with wanderlust always have, may dream of home, "Waving from window, spread of welcome / Kissing of wife
under single sheet," as have his ancestors. But, unlike them, the modern wanderer may encounter predators he may not vanquish with courage and strength, for the journey becomes a more sinister one as threats gather from within as well as without:

Save him from hostile capture,
From sudden tiger's leap at corner;
Protect his house,
His anxious house where days are counted
From thunderbolt protect,
From gradual ruin spreading like a stain;
Converting number from vague to certain,
Bring joy, bring day of his returning,
Lucky with day approaching, with leaning dawn.

The last lines, catching the child presence by the dawn image, are optimistic, but nowhere in "The Wanderer" does Auden allow a Homeric element, a taste of heroic adventure, to surface. The risks today are different, and man dwarfed by the magnitude of society's hostility yet courageously accepting his existential responsibility, can only be wished safe passage and luck—though neither may prove of much use. We will not prevail as easily as Ulysses.

Again using the child-like voice, "The Shield of Achilles" recreates the contrast between the old world and the new:

She looked over his shoulder
For Vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead.

She looked over his shoulder
For athletes at their games,
Men and women in a dance
Moving their sweet limbs
Quick, quick, to music,
But there on the shining shield
His hands had set no dancing-floor
But a weed-choked field.

Another poem written early in Auden's career, "Consider,"
deals with his regret that the modern world, equipped with
"the insufficient units / Dangerous, easy, in furs, in uni-
form / And constellated at reserved tables," embraces a
climate opposed to individual happiness. The nostalgic tone
noted by Bayley and Blair (the ally of Auden's later child-
like voice at its most effective stage) appears when the
speaker laments the situation facing all "Seekers after
happiness, all who follow / The convolutions of your simple
wish." This strikes exactly the same note as did "The
Wanderer":

It is later than you think; nearer that day
Far other than that distant afternoon
Amid rustle of frocks and stamping feet
They gave the prizes to the ruined boys.
You cannot be away, then, no
Not though you pack to leave within an hour,
Escaping humming down arterial roads:
The date was yours; the prey to fugues,
Irregular breathing and alternate ascendencies
After some haunted migratory years
To disintegrate on an instant in the explosion
Of mania
Or lapse forever into a classic fatigue.

Although the ubi sunt chord is often struck by Auden's child-like voice in his more sustained uses of it, here the syntax is too complex, and only the nostalgia hints of the later tonality. Later the nostalgia becomes less mournful by the addition of a sing-song quality native to nursery rhymes, proving more efficacious at portraying the horror of the modern world. Working on the same principle of contrast between the ideal past and monstrous present, Auden submerges the mistakes of the past into the consciousness related to the nursery-rhyme tone, forcing his reader to face afresh the decay around him, and letting small rays of light into a dark world.

The ballads written by Auden during the 1930's stand as his best employment of this earlier technique. "Victor" begins exactly as a nursery-rhyme would: "Victor was a little baby, / Into this world he came." Yet the tables turn immediately, for Victor meets with harsh admonitions from his father while still a boy. His father tells him, "Don't dishonour the family name."; "Don't you ever ever tell lies"; and "Blessed are the pure in heart." Repressed and unhappy, Victor meets the girl of his dreams, only to hear his fellow clerks talking of her promiscuity—"One said,
"God, what fun I had with her / In that Baby Austin car."
Having lost the only person, besides his father, who has ever shown him any kindness--because he cannot forgive anyone who lies--Victor's long repressed emotions burst forth; he becomes uncontrollably outraged, and brutally kills her with a carving knife. Throughout the poem Auden maintains the objective tone of radical innocence which impresses the reader with the macabre events precisely because it is so removed:

She dodged behind the sofa,
   She tore down a curtain rod,
But Victor came slowly after her:
   Said: 'Prepare to meet thy God.'

She managed to wrench the door open,
   She ran and she didn't stop.
But Victor followed her up the stairs
   And he caught her at the top.

He stood there above the body,
   He stood there holding the knife;
And the blood ran down the stairs and sang;
   'I'm the Resurrection and Life.'

Hemingway gets much the same effect with his understated descriptions of the atrocities of war, and parallels Auden with his simple prose syntax.

Victor's world reappears in the clock's warning in "As I Walked Out One Evening." It is a world of the double man:

Where the beggars raffle the banknotes
   And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,
And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer,
   And Jill goes down on her back.

O look, look in the mirror,
   O look in your distress;
Life remains a blessing
   Although you cannot bless.

Even the lover in the poem suffers from a kind of exaggerated bad taste, stemming from the dichotomy between the public and private world:

I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
   Till China and Africa meet,
   And the river jumps over the mountain
   And the salmon sing in the street

Although Auden parodies the love-songs of old here, since a world this askew does not provide the climate for beautiful lyrics, his attitude toward this man is compassionate. The lover speaks from an innocent enjoyment of life which demands the poet's sympathy because the world pictured in the poem is a place so cynical that no idealist could survive in it for very long. The compassion is couched, of course, in the nursery-rhyme tone of child-like innocence. The voice of conscience and the clock which represents time (the element in which man exists and finally the source of all equity and rest) blend impressively in the tone of primal innocence:

It was late, late in the evening,
   The lovers they were gone:
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the deep river ran on.

If society prevents most men from self-fulfillment, from building the Just City, it is only one of two deadly enemies. The other lurks within man himself. Anxiety is naturally a necessary ingredient in freedom, as Niebuhr explains, but as Auden observes in the earlier poems, anxiety and neurosis hamper modern man uniquely in his search for harmony with himself and his world. Much of his work certainly makes plain Auden's interest in the workings of the human psyche. Spears thinks Auden something of a literary psychologist, claiming that he consistently dons the "white coat and rubber gloves of a surgeon"; furthermore, "the notion of the poet as clinically detached, diagnosing the sicknesses of a society and its component individuals, and of poetry as a kind of therapy" remarkably resembles the technique of a psychoanalyst and is "fundamental" to all of Auden's poetry according to Spears. The repressed adult is of course the child betrayed. This can be seen in "As I Walked Out One Evening" as Time, working as Auden's persona, speaks:

In the burrows of the Nightmare
Where Justice naked is,
Time watches from the shadow
And coughs when you would kiss.
In headaches and in worry
  Vaguely life leaks away,
And Time will have his fancy
  To-morrow or to-day

0 plunge your hands in water,
  Plunge them in up to the wrist;
Stare, stare in the basin
  And wonder what you've missed.

0 stand, stand at the window
  As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
  With your crooked heart.

The cataloging in all of Auden's work has the same effect,
but the reader feels the repressed sensibility of the child
betrayed intensely, and the plaintive tone is one of the best
instances of Auden's needing the tool to avoid pathos. It
falls again in a group of major works which celebrate others
whose accomplishments Auden felt testify to both the power of
art and the strength of "rational voice." Freud, who opens
the wound, receives the tribute, made objective and analyti-
cal through the child-like tone taken at his death:

Only Hate was happy, hoping to augment
his practice now, and his dingy clientele
  who think they can be cured by killing
and covering the gardens with ashes.

They are still alive, but in a world he changed
simply by looking back with no false regrets;
  all he did was to remember
like the old and be honest like children.
He wasn't clever at all: he merely told
the unhappy Present to recite the Past
like a poetry lesson till sooner
or later it faltered at the line where
long ago the accusations had begun,
and suddenly knew by whom it had been judged,
how rich life had been and how silly,
and was life-forgiven and more humble,
able to approach the Future as a friend
without a wardrobe of excuses, without
a set mask of rectitude or an
embarrassing over-familiar gesture.

No wonder the ancient cultures of conceit
in his technique of unsettlement foresaw
the fall of princes, the collapse of
their lucrative patterns of frustration:

if he succeeded, why, the Generalised Life
would become impossible, the monolith
of State be broken and prevented
the co-operation of avengers.

Of course they called on God, but he went his way
down among the lost people like Dante, down
to the stinking fosse where the injured
lead the ugly life of the rejected,

and showed us what evil is, not, as we thought,
deeds that must be punished, but our lack of faith,
our dishonest mood of denial,
the concupiscence of the oppressor.

If some traces of the autocratic pose,
the paternal strictness he distrusted, still
clung to his utterance and features,
it was a protective coloration

for one who'd lived among enemies so long:
if often he was wrong and, at times, absurd,
to us he is no more a person
now but a whole climate of opinion

under whom we conduct our different lives:
Like weather he can only hinder or help,
the proud can still be proud but find it
a little harder, the tyrant tries to
make do with him but doesn't care for him much: he quietly surrounds all our habits of growth and extends, till the tired in even the remotest miserable duchy have felt the change in their bones and are cheered, till the child, unlucky in his little State, some hearth where freedom is excluded, a hive whose honey is fear and worry feels calmer now and somehow assured of escape.

The voice is needed here because, again, the adult is the child betrayed, because the mental-emotional revolution which Freud initiated and Auden hoped to see reach fruition would bring us back to the balance that is primal innocence and is the heart of Auden's poetics. Liberating the child is the program of both great thinkers. In the Yeats and James tributes, the tone of authoritative objectivity and the cataloguing continue to work as creative opposites as long as the wisdom and sense of joy that stems from radical innocence touches them:

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all: The parish of rich women, physical decay, Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry. Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still, For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives In the valley of its making where executives Would never want to tamper, flows on south From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs, Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives, A way of happening, a mouth.

(In Memory of W. B. Yeats)

With what an innocence your hand submitted To those formal rules that help a child to play,
While your heart, fastidious as
A delicate nun, remained true to the rare noblesse
Of your lucid gift and, for its love, ignored the
Resentful muttering Mass,


All will be judged. Master of nuance and scruple,
Pray for me and for all writers, living or dead:
Because there are many whose works
Are in better taste than their lives, because
there is no end
To the vanity of our calling, make intercession
For the treason of all clerks.
(At the Grave of Henry James)

Though it is not necessary to treat in detail Auden's
sophisticated, yet child-like ode "In Praise of Limestone,"
the student is compelled to touch upon it when treating the
thesis of the voice as the center of consciousness. The
homesickness, the eros, the isolation that is both individu-
ality and aloneness, the duality of the private and public
man, the evil, all this Auden sums up in the section which
proves that straight philosophy can be great poetry:

They were right, my dear, all those voices
were right
And still are; this land is not the sweet home
that it looks,
Nor its peace the historical calm of a site
Where something was settled once and for all:
A backward
And dilapidated province, connected
To the big busy world by a tunnel, with a certain
Seedy appeal, is that all it is now? Not quite:
It has a worldly duty which in spite of itself
It does not neglect, but calls into question
All the Great Powers assume; it disturbs our
rights. The poet,
Admired for his earnest habit of calling
The sun, the sun, his mind is made uneasy
By these marble statues which so obviously doubt
His antmythological myth; and these gamins,
Pursuing the scientist down the tiled colonnade
With such lively offers, rebuke his concern for
Nature's remotest aspect: I, too, am reproached, for what
And how much you know. Not to lose time, not to get caught,
Not to be left behind, not, please! to resemble
The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water
Or stone whose conduct can be predicted, these
Are our Common Prayer, whose greatest comfort is music
Which can be made anywhere, is invisible,
And does not smell. In so far as we have to look forward
To death as a fact, no doubt we are right: But if
Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead,
These modifications of matter into Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains,
Made solely for pleasure, make a further point:
The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,
Having nothing to hide. Dear, I know nothing of either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love
Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.

And even in straight philosophy such as this the voice prevails as an "underground stream," allowing the clinical enumerations to link with a sense of wonder, a state of Grace.

Perhaps his best known venture into the world of neuroticism resulting from repressed eroticism comes in "Miss Gee." Again the tone imitates nursery-rhyme. Like the start of "Victor" her story begins in classic fashion: "Let me tell you a little story / About Miss Edith Gee." Her tale recounts her efforts to fit into a community much more normal
than Victor's but no more generous, and she too fails. She too suffers from a repression of normal desires, plainly evident when Auden pictures her bicycling to church "With her clothes buttoned up to her neck." The poem's tone displays much less forced gaiety than the other ballad, rendering it more truly child-like in innocence because it is more natural. This new tolerance can be heard especially in the descriptions of Miss Gee. If Auden sympathized with Victor and the ill-fated lover, he seems to regard Miss Gee with awe, horror, and respect. The child-like sense of wonder surfaces as Auden shows Miss Gee's looking sadly up at the stars, asking "Does anyone care / That I live in Clevedon Terrace / One one hundred pounds a year?" This insinuated state of wonder allows Auden to avoid sentimentality in his description of her aloneness:

She passed by the loving couples,  
She turned her head away;  
She passed by the loving couples  
And they didn't ask her to stay.

Consequently, when she falls ill and dies, her unsympathetic treatment after death seems merely in keeping with the view in which she was held by society while alive. Society becomes the villain that preys first on her natural potential and then her primness. No one made an effort to release Miss Gee emotionally when she passed by. Thus, Auden accuses, it should not be shocking when, after her death,
"a couple of Oxford Groupers / Carefully dissected her knee." Auden's innocent center of consciousness, with its capacity to find something joyous about someone as seemingly drab as Miss Gee, points up the shameful lack of consideration we all practice toward others. This poem strikes effectively for the value of each individual and the importance of existential choice (she chose rightly as a member of a community to leave her body to science). This resembles Auden's call in "New Year Letter": for us to look upon others as no better or worse than ourselves—each of us being "one odd human mesomorph."

It has already been seen that critics appreciate the child element in Auden, but that they do not explain its full richness. Francis Scarfe lists several aspects of Auden's program, including his "imaginative interest in the way people live," his realization of the vastness and oneness of the human scene," and his ability to express a feeling at once "primitive and pure." A. Kingsley Weatherhead notes Auden's preoccupation with "the matter of guilt and innocence." Weatherhead claims that Auden's poems consistently manifest "a state of innocence" which manages to survive within a reality usually at odds with it, explaining in "The Good Place in the Latest Poems of W. H. Auden," that "the creation of an Eden out of the materials of ordinary or nearly ordinary living has become a practice dear to
Auden.  

Barbara Everett finds Auden's poetic quest describable as a protracted effort to "justify the fabulous; to find a polemic reality," and she echoes Weatherhead's interpretation of picturing Auden's work as "naturally" producing an innocent "Utopia." One of Auden's most fertile regions of imagination derives, says Everett, from his youthful experiences; additionally, "the notion of the 'Good Place' itself seems to have its roots in the intense, absorbed response to surrounding circumstances rarely found in its simplicity after childhood.

As his child-like voice grows more pronounced, Auden employs a persona to embody or to experience the feeling of radical innocence it pervays. We see this first in "A Summer Night, which recollects the idyllic experience of one particular summer evening from the perspective of an actual person in the work. This man experiences an appreciative harmony with himself, with nature, and with his fellow man:

*Equal with colleagues in a ring*  
I sit on each calm evening  
Enchanted as the flowers  
The opening light draws out of hiding  
With all its gradual dove-like pleading,  
Its logic and its powers:

That later we, though parted then,  
May still recall these evenings when  
Fear gave his watch no look;  
The lion griefs loped from the shade  
And on our knees their muzzles laid,  
And Death put down his book.*
The persona in "A Walk after Dark" shows an unquestioning faith that his is an enviable life. Though he feels resignation regarding his approaching death, the tone he uses evidences trust and quiet joy in things as they are: he characterizes himself as "Now, unready to die / but already at the / When one starts to dislike the young," but he never finds humor in his middle-aged plight: "It's cosier thinking of night / As more an Old People's Home / Than a shed for a faultless machine." He meets the future calmly because of his natural wisdom, stemming from acceptance, though he knows no more about what will happen than anyone else. It is enough for him that the stars who witnessed his "shocking" deeds in youth, still "burn on overhead / Unconscious of final ends / As I walk home to bed." Again, the poem would be self-pitying to the point of embarrassment without the child-like directness and nursery rhyme brevity of line.

The profound quality the poet achieves here embodies the wisdom inherent in children's laughter. We laugh with the persona. In "New Year Letter" the voice commands authority, as the situation demanded. A shorter work, "Musee des Beaux Arts," contains another good example.

Auden begins by promoting a view similar to that of the persona in "A Walk after Dark," the view of one aware of the natural order of things even if such an order was not fully
explained to him: "About suffering they were never wrong, / The old Masters; how well they understood / Its human position." They understood that while the few experience great sadness or great joy, most people remain uninterested. There will always be children, indifferent to "the miraculous birth," calmly "skating / On a pond at the edge of the wood." Auden stresses in this poem's last stanza the inevitable continuum which is life, his tone suggesting acceptance and even celebration:

In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure;
the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

One must simply learn to "approach the Future as a friend," says Auden, and (as he explains about Hardy's use of remote perspective) he adds:

To see the individual life related not only to the local social life of its time, but to the whole of human history, life on the earth, the stars, gives one both humility and self-confidence. For from such a perspective the difference between the individual and society is so slight, since both are so insignificant, that the latter ceases to appear as a formidable god with
absolute rights, but rather as an equal, subject to the same laws of growth and decay, and therefore one with whom reconciliation is possible.  

If we can learn to "be honest like children," says Auden, and accept the nature of life and society, accept the fact that we cannot know all there is to know about the final scheme of things, if, in fact, we can merely accept and love ourselves for the unique beings that we are, then the path opens to a possible peace of mind and joy experienced in childhood, and, ultimately, to the spiritual incarnation described in the final prayer of "New Year Letter." We will not fully appreciate the child-like voice in Auden until we understand the remarkably complex psychological, aesthetic, philosophical, and religious purposes which are served by Auden's principle. His sophisticated adaptation of a child's point of view opens the path to the Just City.

For a poet who lived and wrote prolifically as a contemporary with his critics, Auden was received more favorably than most. His star, though, should rise rapidly if—as is usually the case—the treatment following death grows kinder. Too short a time has passed for the student to be certain. Auden's poetry, though, is certainly closer to the modern idiom and the modern sensibility, and as it rests on the edge of the contemporary scene, its influence has already been widely acknowledged. This influence, mostly technical, should
widen as the exacting studies continue. Certainly his theories of re-integration (based upon the revolution in mental health stemming from Freud which will allow the private and the public man to find a common harmony) should find wide acceptance in a world full of dis-ease as it faces computers, space, and further displacement of the human element. The greatest question mark behind Auden's growing stature is perhaps related to his idea that all poems hold a metaphysic, that faith is the only tool to explain human complexity, and that the Romantic must give way to "feelings intellectualized" if not to classical objectivity per se.

On the function of the artist and the art object, Auden should also find wide acceptance, though an historical perspective is often lacking in the journalistic view of the fallen world found in most contemporary verse. Most readers would accept Auden's more succinct points on art--that it can be shallow yet profound, dull yet witty, bawdy yet chaste, sophisticated yet naive--and that it must disenchant. The contemporary mind probably will fail to a great extent in understanding the significant power of light verse to reveal the sense of community and the subtlest levels of synthesis needed on the aesthetic, the mythical, and the religious planes. And Monroe K. Spears is simply wrong when he accuses Auden of being "incorrigibly didactic," and right when he calls him a "born entertainer," the latter term explaining much of what Auden
felt about the art object as "memorable speech" and as a powerful but insubstantial mirror seated in the function of language itself. The analogical relationships in poetry, being left to the reader's own interpretation, would find some welcome in the homes of deconstructionists, while poetry as instruction would not.

The more important question, though, is how Auden's child-like tone will fare. As a tool allowing the poet to avoid authoritarian props, to balance creatively a sense of horror (actual) with a sense of wonder (ideal), to couple the imaginative strength of mystery with playful ebullience, and to avoid heavy didacticism, the child-like center of consciousness is most effective, and should be widely appreciated in a post-Romantic age still drawn to the child as symbol. And when it comes to the sense of wonder which allows nursery-rhyme elements to be an effective instrument for subtle didacticism and to incorporate Dante's vision of innocence in Vita Nuova, as well as Blake's and Hopkins', Auden strongly pleads his own case when he explains that it is only the sense of wonder which permits the double man to capture the needed virtue of compassion and the needed style, both necessary to his development of a sense of certainty. This wonder-serving poetic strategy, the youthful center of consciousness for the poet, must be seen as an original and highly effective element in his poetic theory, one which
enjoys important connections with the whole of his poetics, and with the moral and religious purposes which the poetics include.
Notes

Introduction


2 *Collected Longer Poems* (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 80-81. This work appears in further notes as CLP.


5 Brooks, p. 133.

6 Brooks, p. 133.

7 CLP, p. 83.

8 CLP, pp. 84-85.

9 Spears, p. 134.


13 Carpenter, p. 54.


15 Jarrell, p. 347.

16 Jarrell, p. 347.

17 Ohmann, p. 176.

18 Ohmann, p. 176.
19 CLP, p. 96.
20 CLP, p. 98.
21 CLP, p. 97.
22 CLP, p. 121.
23 CLP, pp. 122-23.
24 CLP, p. 118.
25 CLP, p. 126.
26 CLP, p. 129.

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1 EA, p. 357.
2 EA, p. 357.
3 EA, p. 357.
5 EA, p. 328.
6 EA, p. 364.
7 EA, p. 364.
8 EA, p. 364.
9 EA, p. 364.
10 EA, p. 364.
11 EA, pp. 364-65
12 EA, p. 366.
13 EA, p. 366.
14 EA, p. 367.
15 EA, p. 368.
16 Twentieth Century Literature, 4 (October, 1958), 84.
17 Callan, p. 84.
18 Callan, p. 86.
19 Callan, p. 89.
20 The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 51. This work appears in further notes as DH.
21 DH, pp. 51-52.
23 EA, p. 341.
25 The Poetry of W. H. Auden, p. 331
27 Reply to a Symposium, p. 206.
29 Blair, pp. 44-45.
30 Blair, p. 45.
31 EA, p. 330.
32 EA, p. 371.
33 Callan, p. 87.

35 Callan, p. 87.

36 *DH*, p. 458.

37 *DH*, p. 459.


39 Wilder, pp. 303-309

40 Wilder, pp. 303-309

41 Reply to a Symposium, p. 207


43 Bayley, p. 64.

44 Bayley, p. 64.

45 Bayley, p. 65.

46 *DH*, p. 27.

47 Brooks, p. 189.

48 Brooks, p. 188.

49 Brooks, p. 189.

50 Brooks, p. 189.


52 *DH*, pp. 69-70.

55 DH, p. 68.
56 Reply to a Symposium, p. 207.

Chapter II

2 CLP, p. 81.
3 CLP, p. 81.
4 CLP, p. 82.
5 CLP, p. 82.
6 CLP, p. 86.
7 CLP, p. 86.
8 CLP, p. 97.
10 CLP, pp. 129-30.
12 CLP, p. 128
13 CLP, p. 81.
14 CLP, p. 130.
15 CLP, p. 121.
16 Bayley, p. 63.
17 Bayley, p. 62.
18 Blair, p. 58.
19 Spears, p. 7.
20 Scarfe, p. 33.


22 Weatherhead, p. 199.


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