

ABSTRACT

Augustinian Auden: The Influence of Augustine of Hippo on W. H. Auden

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It is widely acknowledged that W. H. Auden became a Christian in about 1940, but relatively little critical attention has been paid to Auden's theology, much less to the particular theological sources of Auden's faith. Auden read widely in theology, and one of his earliest and most important theological influences on his poetry and prose is Saint Augustine of Hippo. This dissertation explains the Augustinian origin of several crucial but often misunderstood features of Auden's work. They are, briefly, the nature of evil as privation of good; the affirmation of all existence, and especially the physical world and the human body, as intrinsically good; the difficult aspiration to the fusion of *eros* and *agape* in the concept of Christian charity; and the status of poetry as subject to both aesthetic and moral criteria. Auden had already been attracted to similar ideas in Lawrence, Blake, Freud, and Marx, but those thinkers' common insistence on the importance of physical existence took on new significance with Auden's acceptance of the Incarnation as an historical reality. For both Auden and Augustine, the Incarnation was proof that the physical world is redeemable. Auden recognized that if neither the physical world nor the human body are intrinsically evil, then the physical desires of the

body, such as *eros*, the self-interested survival instinct, cannot in themselves be intrinsically evil. The conflict between *eros* and *agape*, or altruistic love, is not a Manichean struggle of darkness against light, but a struggle for appropriate placement in a hierarchy of values, and Auden derived several ideas about Christian charity from Augustine. Augustine's influence was largely conscious on Auden's part, though it was often indirect as well. Auden absorbed important Augustinian ideas through modern sources such as Charles Williams, Charles Norris Cochrane, and Denis de Rougemont, although he was himself an observant and incisive reader of Augustine's major works, especially the *Confessions*. This dissertation demonstrates that the works and ideas of Augustine are a deep and significant influence on Auden's prose and poetry, and especially on his long poems.

Augustinian Auden: The Influence of Augustine of Hippo on W. H. Auden

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

C: Augustine, *The Confessions*. Trans. Henry Chadwick

CG: Augustine, *The City of God*

CP: Auden, *Collected Poems of W. H. Auden*

DH: Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*

EA: Mendelson, *Early Auden*

EF: Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood*

FA: Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords*

MCP: Auden's untitled essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, Ed. James A. Pike

LA: Mendelson, *Later Auden*

NYL: Auden, *New Year Letter*

OCD: Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*

OED: *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed.

Prose I: Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*. vol. 1

Prose II: Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*. vol. 2

Prose III: Auden, *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose*. vol. 3

TEA: Auden, *The English Auden*

Tribute: Spender, ed. *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*

PREFACE

This dissertation argues that W. H. Auden was significantly influenced by the work and thought of Saint Augustine of Hippo, especially in the poetry and prose that Auden wrote after he began his return to Christianity in the late 1930s. Because this is a study of influence, it will be necessary to first spend some time outlining particular aspects of Augustine's theology before I can identify those ideas in Auden's works, but as the work progresses, my discussions of Augustine's thought will become more concise. Also, because Augustine's influence does not appear in equal measure in all parts of Auden's corpus, I have focused mainly on those works whose content most strongly reveals Augustinian ideas, particularly Auden's long poems of the 1940s. Throughout the process of writing this work, I have become convinced that a recognition of certain key Augustinian ideas in a few of Auden's works enables a reader to better understand Auden's other works. Among these key works are "The Prolific and the Devourer," "New Year Letter," "For the Time Being," "The Sea and the Mirror," *The Dyer's Hand*, and "Horae Canonicae." It is to these works that this dissertation repeatedly turns, first to find the influence of Augustine, but also for guidance in seeking to elucidate Auden's reliance on Augustine in his other works.

Also, I should here explain my approach to certain technical matters in use of sources. First, in referring to the works of both Auden and Augustine, I will give the title that will be most familiar to readers (e.g. *The City of God* rather than *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*). Since the MLA no longer requires square brackets around ellipses within quotations, I have omitted them; when an ellipsis appears within a

quotation, the reader may assume that material has been omitted from the quotation for purposes of clarity and brevity. Also, Auden frequently used italics in his works, so unless otherwise noted, all italics within quotations are original to the source. Finally, both Auden and Augustine are clear writers on the whole, so where possible I prefer to quote them rather than summarize them. If in quoting I have erred on the side of copiousness, it is because I wish to let the authors speak for themselves.

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The first word of gratitude belongs to Ron Raber, until recently professor of English at Grace College in Winona Lake, IN, to whom this work is dedicated, for it was he who convinced me that I could earn a graduate degree and who taught Modernist literature to me with an energy whose equal I have never found. I am perpetually grateful to Professor Raber for writing on the first essay that I submitted to him, “Make sure that every paragraph, every sentence, every clause, every phrase, and every word is *absolutely necessary* to *PROVE YOUR THESIS!*” I hope that this project will please him despite my frequent neglect of his sound advice.

This project has advanced under the guidance of an encouraging and sympathetic dissertation committee. Throughout the process I have had the benefit of the wise and capable instruction of my director, Dr. Richard Russell, who has carefully read my drafts and offered innumerable criticisms and suggestions for improvement, almost all of which I have incorporated into the finished product. Since I took his seminar on Joyce and Yeats during my first year of graduate studies, Dr. Russell has been an unimpeachable example of excellence in both teaching and scholarship, and it was his seminar more than any other single factor that inculcated in me the aspiration to thorough research. I am also grateful to Dr. David Jeffrey, first for teaching me to read Augustine (though he may not have been aware he was doing so), and for consistently giving intelligent answers even to questions that fell outside his areas of academic expertise. His breadth of knowledge in the humanities and his frank advice in matters of professionalism have been invaluable throughout my graduate studies, but I am above all grateful for Dr. Jeffrey’s personal

example as a truly charitable reader. I also thank Dr. Luke Ferretter for his frequent encouragement on the project, and for giving me the opportunity to present a derivation of one of my chapters at the Twentieth-Century Studies Seminar. Dr. Michael Foley graciously agreed to be the extra-departmental reader, even though we had not previously met. Dr. Foley was able to confirm some of my theretofore tentative interpretations of Augustine and add significant insights into Augustine's works as well. I also appreciate Dr. Kevin Gardner for offering to join the committee at a late stage in the process, and for his previous encouragement during a graduate seminar I had with him a few years ago. Dr. Gardner has the distinction, at least so far as I know, of being the only member of the committee who has published anything dealing with Auden.

This project would not have been possible without the able assistance of the staff of Baylor Libraries. Janet Sheets and the acquisitions office purchased some key books on Auden for the permanent collection at the request of a mere graduate student, and the Interlibrary Services office was always able to find odd and obscure sources with remarkable speed. I have also appreciated Dr. Stephen Prickett and the staff of the Armstrong Browning Library for their frequent hospitality, encouragement, and examples of serious scholarship. Dr. Ralph Wood made several insightful comments on portions of this draft, and I am indebted to him for two seminars, one on twentieth-century Catholic authors and the other on Christian literary theory, in which he provided me with the cultural and theoretical background that informs this work. I must also extend my thanks to Edward Mendelson, first for his impeccable example of well-informed, enlightening scholarship and incisive, sympathetic reading, as well as for his brief but kind personal encouragement of my interest in Auden's reading. As Auden himself said, "When I

recall the kindness of my tutors, the patience with which they had listened, the courtesy with which they hid their boredom, I am overwhelmed by their sheer goodness” (*DH* 39).

My thanks as well to two conference committees who allowed me to present portions of this project at their conferences: the 2008 South Central Conference on Christianity and Literature at LeTourneau University in Longview, TX; and the 2008 Baylor University English Graduate Student Association conference on “Revelations: Discoveries in Sacred and Secular Literature and Art,” and particularly the conference chair Heather Martin. I am also grateful to the Baylor University Graduate School for covering my expenses at SCCCL.

My many office mates, past and present, in Carroll Science 413 have been strong supporters of my endeavors as a graduate student, and their passion and humor as teachers and as colleagues have refreshed my spirits more times than I can count. It is no small thing that, thanks to them, I have always looked forward to going to the office. Among those for whose company I have been especially grateful are Lydia Cooper, Ginger Stelle, Ellen Condict, Yolanda Gonzalez, Bethany Wilson, Don Shipley, and Peter Epps.

Finally, I can hardly express my deep and permanent appreciation for my wife Grace. She has listened patiently while I articulated many of my ideas for the first time at some length, and her probing questions about my work have prodded me to search out matters I would have otherwise overlooked. Her penchant for “sorting out and tidying up” has been invaluable throughout my research and writing, as she ably transcribed hand-written notes, read many drafts, pointed out mistakes, and gently encouraged me to persevere. But for her generous and able assistance, this dissertation would contain far

more errors than it now does, and any errors that remain are solely my own (except for any typos that may have been surreptitiously introduced by my young daughter Keziah's typing on the keyboard while I was not looking). Without Grace's help and encouragement, I would not have finished this dissertation so quickly, and I very well might not have finished it at all. "Her price is far above rubies."

For Ron Raber

il miglior fabbro

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Mr. A's work is more important than anything I can say about it.

—W. H. Auden *The Dyer's Hand*

In a 1941 letter to Ursula Niebuhr, wife of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden wrote, “Re my theological position, it is I think the same as your husband’s, i.e. Augustinian not Thomist, (I would allow a little more place, perhaps, for the *via negativa*)” (qtd. in Kirsch xvi). Auden identifies himself with the fourth-century African bishop and theologian, Augustine of Hippo, and since Auden makes this identification so explicitly, it should not, therefore, be surprising that Auden occasionally references Augustine in his poetry and prose, and that he frequently articulates ideas that are notably Augustinian. The earliest of Auden’s many references to Augustine appear in the 1927 juvenile poem “Narcissus,” which begins with a quotation from the *Confessions* in Latin (*Juvenilia* 185). At about the same time, he quoted another line from the *Confessions*, also in Latin, in a letter to William McElwee (*Juvenilia* 187). But it was only in the late 1930s, when Auden was slowly making his way back to the Christian faith he had taken for granted in childhood, that his work begins to reflect a significant influence of Augustine. From that point on, Auden made explicit and implicit references to Augustine repeatedly. The last of these is in his poem “Aubaude,” written in 1972, only a year before he died (*CP* 881).

Auden was hard to influence. He had a strong, forthright personality and was given to dogmatic pronouncements on any subject offered for conversation. Thus, his

close associates, such as Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, and Chester Kallman seem to have exerted almost no influence on the young Auden, while his opinions and even his poetic style deeply influenced his friends. But Auden was deeply influenced by books, and although there are only a few lengthy studies whose central focus is relating Auden's writing to the books he read, it is generally acknowledged that the themes and concerns that characterize Auden's work, and especially his later work, owe much to his wide reading in psychology, philosophy, and theology. When critics identify literary and theological influences on Auden, they tend to do so incidentally to their central interests in biography or analysis of important themes in Auden's poetry and prose. But when critics identify books that influenced Auden, their lists tend to be quite similar.

Throughout his biography of Auden, Humphrey Carpenter identifies many important contemporary figures whose work left notable marks on Auden's work, specifically Freud, Homer Lane, Charles Williams, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Charles Cochrane. Arthur Kirsch adds Blaise Pascal, Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, as well as Augustine to the list (xiv). Auden himself, in his 1945 foreword to Emile Cammaerts's autobiography *The Flower of Grass*, lists Augustine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard, in that order, as his initial theological influences (*Prose II* 248). But critical attention to Auden's reading tends to be sporadic and superficial. Critical studies of Auden often identify an idea or passage that is distinctly derived from Augustine but such observations are made largely in passing. The only lengthy study of Auden that links Auden specifically to Augustine is an unpublished 1994 dissertation by William Arthur Ruleman that focuses mainly on similarities between Augustine's *City of God* and

Auden's political thought. Even that dissertation is mainly concerned with identifying parallels between Auden and Augustine, rather than tracing actual influence.

Auden's explicit identification of himself with certain theologians opens up a wide area for critical exploration of the sources of his philosophical and theological beliefs. Much work remains to be done on many important philosophical and theological influences on Auden, although some influences on Auden have been traced already. John Fuller's *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* offers insightful explanations of a vast array of literary, philosophical, and theological references in Auden's poetry, and Brian Conniff has recently published enlightening articles on the influence of Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr on Auden's work.¹ Edward Mendelson also remarks briefly but insightfully on Auden's debt to Freud, Kierkegaard, Williams, Cochrane, and Augustine throughout his two landmark studies, *Early Auden* and *Later Auden*. Auden's interest in Kierkegaard has also been quite thoroughly explored by many critics, but the influence of other theologians on Auden's thought and work has not yet been adequately traced. The closest so far is Arthur Kirsch's 2005 book, *Auden and Christianity*, which sketches the convergence of several theologians' ideas in Auden's work. Kirsch's work is important as an overview of Auden's distinctly Christian beliefs, and it provides an invaluable background for any discussion of Auden's theological influences, but Kirsch is more focused on Auden's general theological positions and development than he is on tracing any one position back to particular sources, such as Augustine. Much Auden criticism

¹See Conniff's "Auden, Niebuhr, and the Vocation of Poetry" in *Religion and Literature* (1993), and his "What Really Became of Wystan? Auden, Niebuhr and *For the Time Being*" in *Christianity and Literature* (1995), as well as his most recent article on Auden and contemporary theology, "Answering Herod: W. H. Auden, Paul Tillich, Ernst Toller, and the Demonic" in *W. H. Auden: A Legacy*, Ed. David Garrett Izzo. (2002).

consists of explication and poem-by-poem commentary, such as John Fuller's works, as well as thematic treatments, such as those by Edward Callan, Stan Smith, and Monroe Spears. Many earlier treatments, such as Randall Jarrell's, tend to presume a sharp break in Auden's content and style between Auden's 1940 collection *Another Time* and his 1941 *The Double Man* (titled *New Year Letter* in Britain), a period during which Auden returned to the church. More recently, Alan Jacobs and others have challenged this view, demonstrating the continuity underlying Auden's work and showing that what change did occur was gradual and even predictable. But so far none of these important studies has sufficiently addressed Augustine's influence on Auden's work.

There can be no doubt that Auden read Augustine and knew his major works well. Naturally, the majority of Auden's direct references are to the *Confessions*, Augustine's best-known work. For example in "New Year Letter," "For the Time Being," and "The Love Feast," he includes quotations from the *Confessions*, and he uses paraphrases from the *Confessions* in several other poems. He also took some notes on the *Confessions* in the back of the notebook in which he drafted much of "For the Time Being" in 1941-42 (see Kirsch, "Introduction" 77), and in a 1942 letter to Stephen Spender he mentioned that he was "reading St Augustine a lot lately, who is quite wonderful" (qtd. in Kirsch, *Auden* 59). Given Auden's continuing consciousness of all things political, it can hardly be imagined that he did not also read Augustine's *City of God* at some point during his life, and ideas from that mammoth work do surface in Auden's later writings from time to time. As James Bertram points out, Auden's works were influenced by "a good many patristic as well as modern theologians: as with Coleridge, it is dangerous to assume there is any relevant text Auden had not read" (Bertram 224). Auden likely read some

Augustine in school, and he said that he was reading Augustine around the same time he was reading Pascal and Kierkegaard (*Prose II* 248). He was obviously reading Pascal in the late 1930s—his abortive prose work “The Prolific and the Devourer” is modeled partly on the *Penseés*—and he began reading Kierkegaard in about 1940. It is therefore likely that Auden was reading at least the *Confessions* in 1940 and may very well have been reading other works of Augustine throughout the early 1940s.

Auden was significantly influenced by Augustine’s *Confessions* and *City of God*, but there are other, secondary works through which Auden clearly absorbed Augustinian ideas. These include Charles Williams’s *The Descent of the Dove*, Charles Cochrane’s *Christianity and Classical Culture*, and, to a lesser extent, Denis de Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World*. The first two books especially make reference to a wide variety of Augustine’s ideas, and Auden repeatedly identified these works as significant influences on his thinking. In fact, Cochrane’s distillation of many ideas from the *City of God* may have had more influence on Auden than did Augustine’s work itself. Besides such secondary sources, Auden would also have absorbed some ideas and even phrases from Augustine that were “in the air,” so to speak, in Auden’s Western intellectual milieu. Auden also counted Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr, as well as other prominent theologians, among his personal friends, and he read widely in philosophy and theology, so he could hardly help but be aware of Augustine and his works.

Biography

While Auden was not always interested in theology, religious ritual had been an important element of his childhood. In “The Prolific and the Devourer” (1939), he recalls his family’s Anglo-Catholic preferences for high liturgy, including candles, incense, and

ancient hymns (*Prose II* 414), and in an essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims* he fondly recalls, “my first religious memories are of exciting magical rites (at six I was a boat-boy) rather than listening to sermons” (*MCP* 33). Even after he had lost interest in Christianity in the late 1920s, his close friend Christopher Isherwood, with whom he collaborated on several verse plays, stated in 1937,

Auden is a musician and a ritualist. As a child, he enjoyed a high Anglican upbringing, coupled with a sound musical education. The Anglicanism has evaporated, leaving only the height: he is still much preoccupied with ritual, in all its forms. When we collaborate, I have to keep a sharp eye on him—or down flop the characters on their knees . . . : another constant danger is that of choral interruptions by angel voices. If Auden had his way, he would turn every play into a cross between grand opera and high mass. (*Tribute* 74)

But despite his lifelong attraction to religious ritual, Auden was an atheist throughout his early career. In 1939, he wrote that he did not believe in “a creator who is distinct from and independent of the creation, an omnipotent free-willing immaterial agent,” but he added later, “If anyone chooses to call our knowledge of existence knowledge of God . . . I don’t mind: Nomenclature is purely a matter of convenience” (*Prose II* 448). Soon after he wrote this statement, a long and complicated series of events brought Auden back to creedal Christianity, and after about 1940, Auden’s poetry and prose make consistent references to Christian theology. During this time, Auden was particularly drawn to the philosophical works of Kierkegaard and to the theological works of Paul Tillich and Martin Buber, as well as the theology of Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr, who became personal friends of Auden soon after he emigrated to the United States in 1939.

But Auden was also drawn to the works of Augustine, particularly the *Confessions*, and a reader of any biography of Auden might well be struck by the biographical parallels between Auden and Augustine as he presents himself in the

Confessions. Auden and Augustine were both intellectually gifted and were almost without peer in their social circles, and both quickly became expert in the use of eloquent language. Both became schoolteachers, and both had frequent, guilty indulgences in illicit sex during their youth. Augustine, of course, eventually became a celibate priest and later a bishop, and Auden was also fond of saying that, if he had not become a poet, he might have been an Anglican bishop instead, and he was never willingly celibate. While Auden's sexual preferences were always homosexual, Augustine's were largely heterosexual, though he does imply in the *Confessions* that he did at least experiment with homosexuality while at Carthage (3.1), and Auden did have a couple of female lovers. Both Auden and Augustine departed from the Christian faith of their mothers in their adolescence—Auden's mother was almost as strong an influence on him as was Augustine's mother.

Both Auden and Augustine experimented with popular philosophies of their day, Auden with Freud and Marx, and Augustine with Manichaeism and Neo-Platonism. After various forays into the details of these philosophies, certain personal crises led both to convert to Christianity in their early thirties. As I will show in my second chapter, both were fascinated by the ontology of evil, and the same Christian explanation of the nature of evil was a major factor in their respective conversions. Both Auden's mother and Augustine's mother died within a year of their sons' respective conversions. In their post-conversion works, both exhibit a taste for finely-tuned rhetoric as well as for epigrammatical pronouncements and fierce attacks on what they consider to be heretical ideas. Both men became highly interested in human psychology and the nature of time, which are themes that run through both the *Confessions* and Auden's entire poetic corpus.

Both also had a penchant for revision and retraction. Near the end of his life, Augustine wrote his *Retractions*, in which he corrected mistakes and clarified statements he had made in his earlier works, and Auden was well known for revising his early poetry in subsequent editions, going so far as to write the corrections in his friends' copies of his books. In rereading the *Confessions* in 1942, soon after he had returned to the Anglican communion, Auden could hardly have helped noticing the strong parallels between Augustine's experiences and his own.

Despite Auden's return to the Anglican communion in the early 1940s, his enthusiasm for Christian theology and ethics, and his continuing church attendance, there has always been a strain of Auden criticism that claims that Auden never, in fact, became a real Christian at all. Charles Osborne, for example, states that "Indeed, whether [Auden] ever returned to the unquestioning faith of his childhood years is highly doubtful. He was essentially a questioning, sceptical temperament" ("Auden as" 25), and Osborne further argues that "What he had lost in his teens was not faith but childhood acceptance of what his elders had passed down to him; what he regained at the age of 33 was, again, not faith: he merely thought himself back into an organization with a reassuring ritual. He liked to be . . . tidy in large, abstract matters. . ." ("Auden as" 29). Likewise, Rainer Emig argues that "What is easily mistaken as a conversion narrative in [Auden's] writings, however, is more likely a reworking of personal and existential concerns into a new framework, one that no longer aspires to universal significance or complete fulfilment," and Emig concludes that, "far from integrating his thought into established religious patterns, be they Protestant or otherwise, Auden retains an openness and polyvalence that has more in common with postmodern thinking than established

religiosity” (146). But Auden’s own accounts of his conversion are more complex than either critic acknowledges. Auden points out in 1965 essay “As It Seemed to Us” that “Every Christian has to make the transition from the child’s ‘We believe still’ to the adult’s ‘I believe again.’ This cannot have been easy to make at any time, and in our age it is rarely made, it would seem, without a hiatus of unbelief” (*FA* 518). While many critics consider Auden’s Christianity as a foreign imposition on the “real” Auden of the 1920s and 1930s, Auden came to see himself in exactly the opposite way: the unbelief of 1920s and 1930s was a “hiatus,” a period of ingenuousness between an honest but naïve childhood faith and a deeper and but more difficult faith of adulthood.

It is my hope that this study of Augustine’s influence on Auden will help to clarify just what Auden meant by claiming to have returned to Christianity, and it will demonstrate the ways in which certain of Auden’s ideas, while not explicitly “religious,” are nevertheless deeply Christian in their origins and consequences. But it should be pointed out here that Osborne and Emig’s definitions of faith in general and Christianity in particular are unnecessarily restrictive. To say that Auden became a Christian is not the same as saying that his views on politics and ethics changed completely. Osborne rightly notes that Auden’s political and ethical views did not significantly change after his conversion, but Osborne neglects to mention Auden’s assertions, in his essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims* and elsewhere, that he returned to Christianity partly because he found it could support his sense of ethics, whereas neither Freud nor Marx nor bourgeois Liberalism could. And Emig is simply wrong to presuppose an absolute opposition between Christianity and polyvalence. While it is true that Auden was, as all poets must be, open to polyvalence, the idea that polyvalence disqualifies a writer from

being a Christian is thoroughly discredited by David Lyle Jeffrey's admirable study of Christianity and polyvalence in his *People of the Book*. It might also be noted that, if univocality is a defining characteristic of Christianity, then the Bible itself could hardly be considered a Christian text.

My study of Auden presupposes that Auden was telling the truth when he claimed to have returned to Christianity, and that, despite intellectual doubts and personal inconsistencies, his Christian faith was sincere and, for the most part, orthodox. But because many critics oversimplify Auden's conversion and his subsequent approach to his faith, and because I am examining the influence of a theologian on Auden, it will be necessary to trace as carefully as possible Auden's steps back to Christianity. I will deal with these steps at various points in the following chapters, but I should say here that Auden's "conversion," as it is generally called, cannot be identified with a single event in his life. If Auden did have an "Aldersgate meeting" or a "take, read" experience at which he was "converted" in a moment of time, he never told anyone about it. (To be fair, Augustine's "take, read" experience was only the beginning of a longer conversion process, which he details in the *Confessions*.) From the available evidence in his writings and the testimony of his acquaintances, it appears that Auden's memory of several experiences in childhood and young adulthood were instrumental in bringing him back to Christianity, but he began to reconsider Christianity in earnest beginning in about 1939. In 1940 he started attending church regularly if surreptitiously. By 1941, he was calling himself a Christian. However, throughout his life he would struggle with many of the intellectual and moral demands that his faith made on him.

For Auden, the process of regaining faith did not end with his reentering the church. It would be more accurate to say that his return to the Anglican church in 1940 was but one definitive event in a long process of conversion that continued for the rest of his life. As a talented intellectual and a practicing homosexual, the Christian faith was never easy for Auden, but there can be no serious dispute that after about 1940 he accepted the existence of the Trinity and the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, and that he firmly believed that it was his Christian duty to love God and to love his neighbor as himself, though he did acknowledge his frequent failures to do so. He was outspoken about many of his opinions, but he tended to keep his faith quiet; he took very seriously Jesus' injunction, "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matt. 6:3), and he was fond of quoting an anonymous Anglican bishop's statement that "orthodoxy is reticence" (*FA* 71).

Methodology

Near the beginning of his most famous prose work, *The Dyer's Hand*, a collection of essays on art and literary artists, Auden asks, "What is the function of a critic?" (*DH* 8):

So far as I am concerned, he can do me one or more of the following services:

- 1) Introduce me to authors or works of which I was hitherto unaware.
- 2) Convince me that I have undervalued an author or a work because I had not read them carefully enough.
- 3) Show me relations between works of different ages and cultures which I could never have seen for myself because I do not know enough and never shall.
- 4) Give a "reading" of a work which increases my understanding of it.
- 5) Throw light upon the process of artistic "Making."
- 6) Throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, ethics, religion, etc. (*DH* 8-9)

According to Auden's schema, my work is concerned primarily with the third function, though it also touches on the fourth and sixth functions as well. I have some hope that it may also incidentally fulfill the first and second functions for some readers. But my work is not merely a "comparative" study. Rather, I am arguing that Augustine's works were a real and significant influence on Auden's, and that that influence was largely conscious on Auden's part, though it was often indirect as well. What I mean by "influence" should become obvious as the argument progresses, but I should be clear what I do not mean by it. I do not mean mere slavish imitation, nor do I mean only the borrowing of terms and phrases. Rather, by "influence" I mean that Auden derived several key philosophical and theological ideas from Augustine's works. Auden's occasional borrowing of Augustine's language is by no means the totality of his intellectual debt to Augustine; such borrowings are rather signals of the presence of broader, sometimes latent ideas whose definitive forms were articulated by Augustine. Auden often derived such ideas directly from his own reading of Augustine, but he also absorbed them from secondary sources, so where it is possible, I will make some attempt to trace the path of transmission of ideas from Augustine, whether directly or through a mediating source, into Auden's work.

Augustine himself, of course, wrote originally in Latin, and while Auden could and did read Latin, he claimed in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry Oxford, "You have chosen a barbarian who cannot write in that tongue and does not know how to pronounce it" (*DH* 32). Auden does quote Augustine in the original Latin a handful of times, but he read Augustine's works in the same way in which almost everyone else did in the twentieth century, in translation. E. B. Pusey's 1838 translation of the *Confessions*

was still the most widely-read translation available when Auden was reading it in the late 1930s and early 1940s. In the last section of “For the Time Being,” written in the early 1940s, Auden uses the phrase “region of unlikeness,” which, as Kirsch notes, is a translation of a phrase from Augustine’s *Confessions*, “*in regione dissimilitudinis.*” Auden’s English version, however, is taken directly from Pusey’s translation, which suggests that Auden was familiar with that particular version (Kirsch, *Auden* 57, *Confessions* 7.10). Auden also ends his commonplace book *A Certain World* with a direct quotation from Pusey’s translation (425). Auden does quote from the original Latin of the *Confessions* near the end of his long poem “New Year Letter,” but Kirsch points out that he may have found the line in Charles Williams’s brief history of Christianity, *The Descent of the Dove*, which Auden had read before he finished the poem (Kirsch, *Auden* 35). So, since Auden himself relied heavily on translations and indirect quotations rather than on the original Latin text, and because Augustine has been read almost exclusively in translation during the twentieth century, I will not attempt to deal at length with the complexities of the original language, but will rely instead on translations of Augustine. For the most part, the particular translation does not affect the nature of my argument, so unless a certain borrowing necessitates reference to Pusey’s translation of the *Confessions*, I will rely primarily on more contemporary translations of that work.

In addition to the matter of translations, I will, as all critics of Auden must, occasionally need to address the fact that Auden significantly revised many of his published poems throughout his life. In some poems, he made only minor changes to diction and style. He added ironic titles to some originally serious poems so as to cast the content in a wholly different light. In other poems he made more extensive changes,

deleting or adding entire lines and stanzas, so as to alter the original meaning significantly. Auden suppressed still other poems, refusing to allow them to be reprinted at all during his lifetime, and his early, pre-conversion poems underwent the most extensive revision. Thus, there exist at least two different versions of many of Auden's important early poems. Fortunately for this study, Auden did not extensively revise his prose, even when it was reprinted, and his revisions of his poems generally leave his poetic references to Augustine untouched, so his penchant for revision will not pose great difficulties here. Unless otherwise stated, I will use as my standard text the 1991 *Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson, which represents Auden's final versions of all his major poems. When it becomes necessary to refer to poems in their earlier forms, I will use *The English Auden*, also edited by Mendelson, as my standard text. Auden's prose is currently in the process of being collected and edited by Mendelson, but since that project is not yet complete, and since much of Auden's most important prose is already available in separate volumes such as *The Dyer's Hand* and *Forewords and Afterwords*, I will rely primarily on these published collections where possible and use the *Complete Prose* only where I quote from a prose piece that would otherwise be available only in back issues of periodicals or in books not readily accessible.

Auden did also write several plays, libretti, and travel books, many of which he wrote in collaboration with either Christopher Isherwood or Chester Kallman, but because Auden's poems and prose have already provided more material than can be adequately addressed in this study, I will not consider any of Auden's plays, libretti, or travel books in any depth. Rather, I will focus on Auden's poems and essays from the late 1930s onward to his death in 1973, during which period his work became

significantly indebted to Augustine. In the course of this study, I will touch on as many of Auden's direct references to Augustine as possible, but I do not intend this project to be exhaustive. There will doubtless remain more poems and essays that I do not mention that also suggest the influence of Augustine's thought, implicitly or explicitly. My object, rather, is to give enough textual evidence from Auden's poetry and prose that readers will be able to recognize Augustine's presence throughout Auden's post-conversion work on their own. For Auden, Augustine's works are not just a convenient source of a few epigraphs and aphorisms, but a broad theological foundation on which the philosophical development of Auden's thinking stands or falls.

Any study that employs Augustine must come to terms with two features of Augustinian theology: unoriginality and diffusion. First, what are now recognized as distinctly Augustinian ideas are often not original to Augustine, but are drawn from a wide variety of sources, from Plato and Paul to Cicero and Jerome. It is often the case that, rather than advancing a truly original idea, Augustine instead developed a compelling, memorable, and permanent articulation of ideas that were already circulating in philosophy or theology generally. It is beyond the parameters of this dissertation to trace the development of such ideas before their articulation in Augustine's works. Second, Augustine is rightly called a "church father," since his theology has been adopted in large measure by widely divergent Christian traditions throughout the centuries, from the Roman Catholic Church to Lutheran, Calvinist, and even nonconformist traditions, and so the distinction between ideas that are peculiar to Augustine and ideas that he shares with a large body of orthodox Christian theology is often difficult or impossible to make. Furthermore, Auden certainly came to share with

Augustine such central doctrines as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the necessity of faith for salvation, and the possibility of redemptive suffering, but these are ideas that characterize Christianity itself and are not original to Augustine at all. Therefore, this dissertation will focus on ideas whose articulation can be attributed specifically to Augustine rather than on ideas that are general to a much broader community of Christian thought, as Kirsch does in his *Auden and Christianity*.

Augustine, as well as Auden to a lesser extent, has been subject to a wide variety of interpretations, such that he is now almost inseparable from the diverse theological, philosophical, and literary traditions that have been an outgrowth of his work, so at times I will have to distinguish between Augustine's writings themselves and the Augustinian theological tradition more generally. Nevertheless, because Auden was himself a thoughtful reader of Augustine, I will allow Augustine to speak for himself, inasmuch as possible, and I will follow the same principle with Auden's works. Whatever the topic, Auden has almost certainly expressed an opinion on it, and while some of his pronouncements clearly contradict others made elsewhere, a surprising number are consistent with each other, if a little eccentric. Where Auden does not clearly contradict himself, and even where he seems to but may not, I will take his statements at face-value. All too frequently, critics attempting to interpret one of Auden's poems venture reasonable but wrong guesses about what Auden thought about something based on his poems alone and miss what Auden actually said on the subject elsewhere in his prose. One other difficulty is that Auden did not always use terminology consistently, so a reader of Auden must always be aware of different words used interchangeably and of the same word used in different senses.

Because Augustine's influence on Auden is not limited to only a few of Auden's works but is diffused throughout Auden's works from the late 1930s to the early 1970s, there is no entirely satisfactory way to organize a project of this kind. I have organized it first thematically by chapter, devoting two chapters each to the themes of evil, existence, and love, and devoting a short final chapter to aesthetics. Within the chapters, I proceed through Auden's works in the same sequence in which he wrote them. This organizational structure will also make it necessary to discuss some of the same works in more than one chapter, especially the long poems of the 1940s, and there will be some necessary overlap in my comments on these poems, though I will attempt to eliminate as much bare repetition as possible. But any thematic division is artificial, and will be false if followed too closely. The poems themselves often address a whole cluster of Augustinian ideas at once. Thus, certain Augustinian ideas (e.g. the *acte gratuite* and *fantastica fornicatio*) will appear in several chapters. Since much of Auden's important early poetry, which has received the bulk of the critical attention, makes no reference to Augustine, it will be only mentioned briefly, if at all. Also, I cannot offer a thorough explication of each poem on which the argument touches; often I will make reference only to a single stanza in a larger poem or to a single poem in a larger sequence because it contains a reference to Augustine. I will, however, attempt to explain the reference in the context of the poem or sequence as a whole, where this does not unduly disrupt the progression of the argument. Occasionally, I will merely extract lines for examination without comment on their original context, though I will make every attempt not to violate their original context when I do so.

The Argument

This dissertation will demonstrate that Auden's poetry and prose owes much to Augustine, and it will trace and analyze the ways in which several particular Augustinian ideas appear in and affect Auden's work poetry and prose. I hope to make the reader of Auden alert to several Augustinian features of Auden's work that are often misunderstood: they are, briefly, the nature of evil as privation; the affirmation of all existence, and especially the physical world and the human body, as intrinsically good; the troubled aspiration to the fusion of *eros* and *agape* in the concept of Christian charity; and the status of poetry as being subject to both aesthetic and moral criteria. In each of these four categories, I will demonstrate that Auden draws on Augustine's works in order to support his views on each one. In the course of the argument, little or no attempt will be made to judge whether each of Auden's uses of Augustine's ideas constitutes a valid appropriation. It should be said at the outset, however, that Auden's interpretation of Augustine is frequently insightful, though at times creative. Auden's thought was notoriously eclectic and peculiar, so his interpretation of Augustine is bound to be eccentric in some areas. But my main concerns are to demonstrate the ways in which Auden appropriated specifically Augustinian ideas, to elucidate the ways in which Auden expresses and interprets those ideas in his works, and to show how certain features of Augustinian theology affect Auden's ideas about aesthetics.

Because Auden converted to Christianity after he was already an established poet, much of his earlier work does not reveal the influence of any specifically Christian thinkers, Augustine included. As such, this dissertation will not touch on much of Auden's earlier poetry from the late 1920s and early 1930s, which is often considered his

best. In fact, much current Auden criticism continues to maintain an undercurrent of hostility toward Auden's later, post-conversion work, and a few early critics could hardly discuss the later poetry without slipping into nostalgic ruminations on how, they believed, the later poems simply did not rise to the high artistic standards that Auden had set for himself earlier on. Some of these objections proceed from critics' philosophical objections to Auden's Christianity, and I hope that this study of one of Auden's major theological influences will demonstrate the philosophical legitimacy of certain of Auden's explicitly Christian ideas, and further, that it will follow Alan Jacobs's *What Became of Wystan* in elucidating some of the philosophical consistencies across Auden's work. Auden's later works have received more positive critical attention of late, although my work is unusual within Auden criticism in that it focuses on Auden's later poetry. (Mendelson has, of course, already written the definitive account of this later poetry in *Later Auden*, a work which other Auden critics, myself included, can hope only to supplement.) While many critics assume as a matter of course that Auden's poetry varies greatly in quality, Auden's place in the canon of twentieth-century English-language poetry is now beyond dispute, and it is my hope that this dissertation will help to further confirm Auden as one of the premier poets of his century, not only for his poetic talents, but also for his depth and breadth of theological insight.

CHAPTER TWO

Evil as Privation (I)

for all your fond insistence,
You have no positive existence,
Are only a recurrent state
Of fear and faithlessness and hate.

—W. H. Auden *New Year Letter*

One of the most profound challenges to Christianity in the twentieth century has been the problem of evil, and few writers of the era have written so compellingly on the nature and presence of evil as W. H. Auden. But his early poems often seem to vaguely identify evil as a property of outmoded institutions, a neurosis perhaps, or any of a number of political ideologies, and so we begin *in medias res*. In the late 1930s, Auden began in earnest to attempt a coherent explanation of the nature of evil, and some of his most popular poems were written during this period. For example, his 1938 poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” pictures the perpetual suddenness of human suffering, “how it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along” (CP 179). Some people intentionally cause suffering, the poem implies, but most people, as well as the natural world, are uninterested: “the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree” (CP 179). The poem gives the example of Brueghel’s *Icarus*, a painting in which “everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster” (CP 179). Human suffering, Auden suggests, is frequently ignored by the mass of ordinary people. (Artists, it seems, are in a better position to notice it.) The poem deplores the failure of most human beings to pay attention to suffering and evil while quietly evoking biblical images of the Nativity and

the Crucifixion, but the poem says very little about the nature and character of the suffering itself. Can suffering be meaningful? Why do people suffer at all? And who was responsible for the fall of Icarus specifically? The poem does not say, but in Auden's subsequent poetry and prose, he would explore the nature of evil more thoroughly, and throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s he began to discuss good and evil in philosophical and ultimately theological language drawn primarily from Augustine.

As we shall see, it was partly Auden's attempt to account for the nature of evil as he experienced it that led him to accept Christianity. But it should be noted here that Auden's approach to what Christian theology refers to as the "problem of evil" was not typical of other, more conventional twentieth-century treatments of the subject. Typical modern attempts at theodicy begin with a question: If God is all-powerful and loves humans as much as the Christians say he does, why does he not alleviate human suffering? Auden's approach to evil and suffering also began with a question, but his observation of the rise of European fascism in the 1930s suggested to him a very different question: "If, as I am convinced, the Nazis are wrong and we are right, what is it that validates our values and invalidates theirs?" (*MCP* 40). In order to answer that question, Auden had to account for the existence of evil in the first place. He soon settled on a distinctly Christian account of the nature of evil, which he found in Augustine, particularly in the *Confessions*.

Augustine and the Problem of Evil

In the *Confessions*, Augustine details his own intellectual struggle with the ontological nature of evil, which prevented him from embracing Christianity for many

years. In books four and five of the *Confessions*, Augustine details his involvement with the Manichees, devotees to the teachings of Mani, who taught that all existence was ruled by two eternally opposed gods, an evil god of darkness who ruled the physical realm and a good god of light who created and ruled the spiritual realm. As Augustine explains more succinctly in the *City of God*, the Manichees “imagine that there is some evil in nature, which is derived and produced from a supposed ‘adverse first cause’ of its own” and that

they believe . . . that God was compelled to the creation of the vast structure of this vast universe by the utter necessity of repelling the evil which fought against him, that he had to mingle the nature of his creating, which was good, with the evil, which is to be suppressed and overcome, and that this good nature was thus so foully polluted, so savagely taken captive and oppressed that it was only with the greatest toil that he can cleanse it and set it free. And even then he cannot rescue all of it, and the part which cannot be purified from that defilement is to serve as the prison to enclose the Enemy after his overthrow.

This was the silly talk, or rather the delirious raving, of the Manicheans. (*City of God* 11.22)

Thus the Manichees considered the physical world, including the human body and its physical urges, to be the domain of evil, while the human soul and its intellect was the domain of good.

The Manichees developed a detailed mythological cosmology along these lines, but Augustine’s main attraction to Manichaeism seems to have been its explanation of the origin of evil. The Manicheans taught that bodily existence was inherently evil, and thus all morally evil actions arose from the body in which the soul was trapped. Therefore, the spiritual essence of a person was not responsible for evil actions; rather, an outside, malignant agency working through the body was responsible. Augustine says it flattered his pride to think that he was not really responsible for anything bad that he did (5.10).

The Manichees denounced embodiment because they believed it to be inherently evil, and so they were especially disdainful of Christian ideas such as the Incarnation, the necessity of baptism, and the resurrection of the body, and they particularly deplored the Old Testament. As Henry Chadwick explains in his notes to his translation of the *Confessions*, “Faustus of Mileu [a prominent Manichean teacher in Augustine’s day] had composed a strong attack on the Old Testament’s authority for real Christians, i.e. Manichees, because of its animal sacrifices, womanizers like Solomon, and murderers like Moses” (73n).

While the suspicion of the body was attractive to the young Augustine, he was troubled by the fact that Manichean teachings flatly contradicted the mathematics and astronomy he had learned in school as part of his liberal arts curriculum. Augustine gives the example of contrary explanations of eclipses: while the science of his day showed that eclipses were caused by the alignment of planetary bodies and could predict eclipses with precision, the Manichees thought eclipses were evidence of cosmic battles between good and evil divinities (*Confessions* 5.3). Augustine’s hope for a reasonable resolution of such contradictions was dashed, however, when he met Faustus and “discovered him to be ignorant of the liberal arts other than grammar and literature” (5.6). Disillusioned, Augustine soon abandoned the Manichees in favor of neo-Platonic philosophy, which he later came to see as a significant step toward his eventual acceptance of Catholic Christianity.

Neo-Platonism posited the absolute goodness and independence of God, which Augustine came to see as superior to the Manichean model that limited the power of divinity. Better yet, neo-Platonism also refuted the Manichees by explaining that evil

was not a substance, but an absence. Nevertheless, neo-Platonism did not offer a satisfactory explanation for the origin of evil, and after studying various Neo-Platonic works—Plotinus and Porphyry specifically—Augustine complained, “I had no clear and explicit grasp of the cause of evil” (*Confessions* 7.3). He had been told, perhaps by Ambrose, bishop of Milan, that evil was a result of the free choice of human beings, yet Augustine perceived that this answer did not wholly sever the link of causation between God and evil:

But again I said: ‘Who made me? Is not my God not only good but the supreme Good? Why then have I the power to will evil and to reject good? . . . If the devil was responsible, where did the devil himself come from? And if even he began as a good angel and became devil by a perversion of the will, how does the evil will by which he became devil originate in him, when an angel is wholly made by a Creator who is pure goodness? (C 7.3)

Augustine simply could not accept the idea that evil could exist contrary to the will of God’s all-powerful goodness. (7.5). While this question kept Augustine from embracing Christianity, his own neo-Platonism was not immune from the problem either. If the First Cause of the cosmos was totally good, evil must have had its origin outside that First Cause, and yet an origin of anything outside the First Cause called into question the primacy or independence of that Cause.

Eventually Augustine came to recognize that he had been making a categorical error all along. He had assumed that evil was a positively existing substance called “evil.” This, he found, was not necessarily true. Evil might exist in some other way. He reasoned that it is possible to corrupt good things, and that when good things become corrupted, they lose some good quality that they previously possessed. “So then,” he concludes, “if they are deprived of all good, they will be nothing at all. Therefore as long

as they exist, they are good. Accordingly, whatever things exist are good, and the evil into whose origins I was inquiring is not a substance, for if it were a substance, it would be good” (C 7.10). When he was a Manichee, Augustine had presumed that evil was an independently-existing thing, locatable in space and time, which afflicted other independently-existing things. But when he came to see evil not as a thing, but as an attribute of things, the problem of the existence of evil disappeared. In the *Confessions*, he says to God, “For you evil does not exist at all, and not only for you but for your created universe, because there is nothing outside it which could break in and destroy the order you have imposed upon it” (7.13). So, for example, falsehood is nothing but the privation of truth, and hatred is nothing but a misdirected love in the human will. He says a little later, “I inquired what wickedness is; and I did not find a substance, but a perversity of will twisted away from the highest substance, you O God, towards inferior things, rejecting its own inner life . . . and swelling with external matter” (7.16). This discovery was still perfectly consistent with neo-Platonism, so while this shift in Augustine’s thinking about the nature of evil did not immediately impel him towards Christianity, it did remove a significant philosophical barrier between him and the Church.

Part of Augustine’s reluctance to convert to Christianity appears to have been the possible aesthetic implications of Manichaeism. In book four of the *Confessions*, Augustine discusses some of his early writings on aesthetics, saying, “since in virtue I loved peace and in vice I hated discord, I noted that in virtue there is unity, in vice a kind of division” (4.15). He goes on to say that, under Manichean assumptions, he “attributed to evil not only substance but life” (4.15). Augustine resorted to the Pythagorean

vocabulary of Monad and Dyad to articulate his Manichean assumptions: “In regard to virtue, I spoke of the Monad [the good deity] as sexless mind, whereas evil was the Dyad, anger in injurious acts, lust in vicious acts. I did not know what I was talking about. I did not know nor had I learnt that evil is not a substance, nor is our mind the supreme and unchangeable good” (4.15). He explains that, during his Manichean period, he wrote a short book on aesthetics called *On the Beautiful and the Fitting*, the manuscript of which he subsequently lost. But he recalls that the book distinguished between two kinds of beauty, one “which is a kind of totality and for that reason beautiful, and another kind which is fitting because it is well adapted to some other thing” (C 4.13). The work, he says, correctly intuited the nature of beauty but incorrectly imagined spiritual beauty in physical terms and further erred in supposing that the human mind was good and the body evil (4.13, 15). As he rejected these misconceptions and embraced Christianity, he recognized that human bodies, along with all other physical things, were created by God and are fundamentally good but also susceptible to corruption, and that the human mind was also created good but is likewise corruptible. So, evil may arise from a corruption of either mind or body, while an uncorrupted mind or body would be beautiful in itself because it was divinely created.

It is therefore appropriate that Augustine concludes the *Confessions* with a thorough analysis of the biblical creation account in Genesis. In contrast to the Manichees, who dismissed the Old Testament on the grounds of its depictions of immorality, Augustine’s interpretation of the creation account asserts the goodness of all created things. His metaphorical reading of the account is varied and highly complex, reading the story both typologically as a foreshadowing of the emergence of Christianity

and analogically as a series of statements on the nature of God. His interpretation is theologically dense and often highly abstract, giving him occasion for theorizing about the nature of language and for exploring of the nature of time, but however abstract the analysis becomes, it is nevertheless predicated upon the assumption of the goodness of the physical world. Augustine has earned a reputation for abstraction and for dismissal of the physical, but in light of the *Confessions*, that reputation is not quite fair. For example, Augustine says earlier in the work, “If physical objects give you pleasure, praise God for them and return love to their Maker lest, in the things that please you, you displease him.” (4.12). So it is not the physical objects themselves to which Augustine objects, but the human failure to refer existence and pleasure to their divine source. Likewise, in book ten, Augustine notes that the pains of hunger and thirst “are driven away by pleasure. For hunger and thirst are a kind of pain, which burns and can kill like a fever, unless the medicine of sustenance brings help. Because this cure is granted to us, thanks to the consolation of your gifts, by which earth and water and sky minister to our infirmity, a calamity can be called a delight” (10.31). Thus, for Augustine, it is not wrong to take pleasure in providing for physical necessity; it is wrong, however, to indulge in drunkenness or gluttony, which he defines simply as drinking and eating to excess (10.31). Augustine is suspicious, not of physical things themselves, but of the constant human tendency to misuse physical things. He absolutely rejects the Manichean idea that the corrupted body corrupts the soul. Rather, as a Christian, he asserts that the corrupted soul corrupts the body.

“The Prolific and the Devourer”

It was to Augustine’s explanation of the nature of evil that Auden would implicitly appeal in the late 1930s and early 1940s. But even in the mid-1930s, Auden was seriously contemplating the nature of evil and discussing it in almost theological language. In his 1935 essay “The Good Life,” he asserts that “Psychology is principally an investigation into the nature of evil. Its essential problem is to discern what it is that prevents people having the good will” (*TEA* 345). Even Freudian psychoanalysis is based, Auden suggests, on the Christian assumption that “a change of heart can, and must, bring about a change in the environment. . . . ‘Except ye be born again, ye cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven’” (*TEA* 345). Auden explains that psychoanalysis is opposed both to Rousseau’s attribution of evil to social circumstance and to Augustine’s attribution of evil to conscious moral choice (*TEA* 346), a statement that indicates Auden was already quite familiar with Augustinian theology. At the time, Auden was far more interested in Freud and Marx to entertain Augustine’s theology as a legitimate account of the nature of psychological evil, but he did take Augustine seriously insofar as he attempted to demonstrate the ways in which he thought Freud had superseded Augustine.

Nevertheless, the very language that Auden used to describe evil and suffering in the 1930s is rooted in an assumption that evil is a parasitic attachment to something that would otherwise be good. Even the prefixes that the English language uses to denote negativity, such as a-, un-, ill-, non-, and dis-, suggest that we think of negativity primarily as a lack of some element. Another example of the language of privation is the word “crooked,” which appears regularly in Auden’s poetry of the late 1930s, and which Cicero Bruce notes is “synonymous with the adjective *depraved*, defined in the Christian

sense of the word as ‘corrupt,’ ‘wicked,’ or that which deviates from what is considered ‘right’ or ‘natural.’ In fact, *depravity* itself derives from the Latin infinitive *depravare*: ‘to make crooked’” (28-29). However, Bruce’s otherwise thorough explanation neglects to mention the obvious sexual connotations of the word, which Richard Bozarth explains is an important element of Auden’s post-conversion poetry. Bozarth recognizes “Auden’s ongoing proclivity for poetic figures of crookedness, with all the sexual overtones they have in his earlier work. At the same time, crookedness—or *angularity*—also signifies his sense of the relationship between the fallen human and the divine” (Bozarth 223). Bozarth notes that Auden always regarded his own homosexuality as an abnormality, probably because he believed in Freud’s thesis that homosexuality was a form of sexual immaturity (Bozarth 73). Bozarth identifies Augustine as a source for Auden’s ideas about the nature of such “crookedness,” though he suggests that Auden absorbed such an assumption through Freud, who is the “secular heir to the belief in reproduction as the divinely ordained end of sexual desire, with perversion as a turning away from that end; for St. Augustine, perversion is the definition of evil” (Bozarth 73). To call Augustine’s definition of evil “perversion” is right in a sense, but “privation” is the more exact term. The word “perversion” carries so many sexual overtones that it might wrongly imply that the essence of evil is deviant sexuality. For Augustine, and for Auden as we shall see in chapters six and seven, deviant sexuality is but one symptom of a much more serious and pervasive deformation in the human soul.

Augustine’s sense of evil as a corruption, as a privation of some good quality, became more attractive to Auden in the late 1930s when the sudden growth of fascism in Europe, particularly in Spain and Germany, began more and more to alarm him. The

more fascism grew, the more Auden became convinced that his amalgamation of psychoanalysis and socialist politics was insufficient to explain it and thus too weak to resist it. In 1939 Auden was working on a document that he titled “The Prolific and the Devourer,” a philosophical prose work written in fragments that he neither finished nor published.² In this work Auden rejects the Christian notion of a personal God, but he also asserts, like Augustine, that evil has no positive existence but is rather a corruption of something inherently good (*Prose II* 425-26, 448). This essay is the first of Auden’s works that shows a definitely positive influence of Augustine’s writings, which suggests that Auden had begun to read Augustine seriously by 1939. “The Prolific and the Devourer” does not reference Augustine explicitly, nor does it contain any quotations from him, and since the Augustinian ideas that it advances can be found in a number of Augustine’s works—the *Confessions*, the *City of God*, and the *Enchiridion*, to name only a few—it is difficult to tell exactly which of Augustine’s writings Auden might have been reading in 1939. The most probable candidate is the *Confessions*, as it was and is Augustine’s best-known work.

The *Confessions* is also most likely because of its resounding rejection of Manichean dualism, a rejection that also underlies both Auden’s poetry and prose. In “The Prolific and the Devourer,” Auden makes a characteristically sweeping statement about fallacious dualism: “The false philosophy in all its forms starts out from a dualistic division between either The Whole and its parts, or one part of the whole and another. One part is good with absolute right to exist unchanged; the other is evil with no right to exist. Progress consists in a struggle between the two in which the good is victorious,

²It is now available in a single-volume paperback, as well as in volume two of Auden’s *Collected Prose*, where it takes up some fifty pages.

and salvation is only attained with the complete destruction of the evil” (*Prose II* 425). He gives as examples the erroneous dualisms of God/Satan, body/soul, ruler/masses, State/individual, and several others. (Throughout his subsequent career, Auden would regularly refer to false dualisms of any sort as “Manichean.”) His description of dualism as a divided cosmos, one part perfectly good and worthy and the other part completely evil and worthless, comes remarkably close to Augustine’s descriptions of the Manichees, who believed that the cosmos was divided between the physical and spiritual worlds, corresponding respectively to the evil and good divinities. In the *Confessions*, Augustine says of his early, Manichean ideas, “I concluded that there are two opposed masses, both infinite, but the evil rather smaller, the good larger; and of this pestilential beginning other blasphemous notions were the corollary” (5.10). It can hardly be a coincidence that both Augustine and Auden identify false dualism of this kind as the origin of the false philosophies they rejected.

Auden, like Augustine, found he had to reject dualism in favor of the belief that all existence is inherently good and that evil has no positive existence whatsoever.

Auden follows his statement on dualism with a list of theses denouncing dualism. The first three are simple:

- (1) There are not “good” and “evil” existences. All existences are good, i.e. they are equally free and have an equal right to their existence. Everything that is is holy.
- (2) No existence is without relation to and influence upon all other existences.
- (3) Evil is not an existence but a state of disharmony between existences. (*Prose II* 426)

These theses sound quite similar to many of Augustine’s statements on the subject, such as one statement early in the *Confessions* in which Augustine laments his youthful

ignorance of God: “I did not know that evil has no existence except as a privation of good, down to that level which is altogether without being” (3.7). Such a definition of evil as disharmony or privation, rather than as an identifiable entity existing in its own right, has been recognized by philosophers and theologians as an Augustinian position for centuries and, in fact, is the generally accepted position in official Catholic dogma to this day. No one as well-read as Auden could have come to this conclusion without recognizing the idea’s source in Augustine, most particularly in the *Confessions*.

While Augustine’s rejection of the positive existence of evil led him to also reject Manichean assumptions about the physical world, Auden’s own denunciations of dualism in “The Prolific and the Devourer” implicated a wide range of philosophies and worldviews that he had come to see as false. His identification of “God and Satan” as a false and dangerous dualism suggests that he is critiquing the institutional Christianity of Europe and perhaps specifically the low-church fundamentalism of his day (*Prose II* 425). Other dualisms are easier to identify with specific philosophies, such as “the philosopher king and the ignoble masses,” which is a direct reference to the idealistic totalitarianism advanced in Plato’s *Republic*, and “the State and the individual,” a reference to fascist ideology (*Prose II* 425). He also identifies “the proletariat and the masses” as yet another false dualism, the basis of Marxist ideology (*Prose II* 425). Auden ends this section by saying, “Blake and the Marxists are probably correct in their diagnosis: Dualism is thinking about the creation in terms of man’s experience of human politics” (*Prose II* 425). While Augustine suggests that his own early dualistic thinking came from a combination of ignorance and pride, Auden argues that modern dualisms

derive from experiences in which the world appears to be clearly divided between good and evil, whatever specific entities might be linked with good and evil.

Auden's thought also resembles Augustine's in the way both men articulate the relationship between evil and the nature of matter and of the human being. In the *City of God*, Augustine argues that goodness is the natural state of humans and that evil is foreign to the natural state of existence: "Evil is contrary to nature; in fact, it can only do harm to nature; and it would not be a fault to withdraw from God were it not that it is more natural to adhere to him. It is that fact which makes the withdrawal a fault. That is why the *choice* of evil is an impressive proof that the *nature* is good" (11.17). Thus, evil can be identified as that which works against the natural inclinations of human beings, and for Augustine as for all Christians, humans were created to be naturally attracted to God. Thus, by following one's natural tendencies one will adhere to God, but it takes a conscious choice to reject God in favor of evil. Yet, according to Augustine and most other Christian thinkers, that initial choice of evil introduces a new, unnatural inclination towards evil, and Augustine was, so far as anyone knows, the first to call this initial choice against God "original sin" (*Confessions* 59n). But despite the pervasiveness of evil desires, the inclination towards evil remains foreign to the human being, and the inclination towards good and towards God remains natural, as Augustine says to God at the outset of the *Confessions*: "You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (1.1). However, the term "natural" becomes confusing because it can be used in two contradictory ways. It can denote the initial, created state of perfection, in which humans are "naturally" disposed to do good, or it can denote the later, chosen state of fallenness in which humans

are “naturally” disposed to do evil. But when both Augustine and Auden use the term, they tend to use it in the first sense rather than in the later.

Like Augustine, Auden also recognizes that the choice of evil is unnatural to either human beings or to other sentient creatures. At the end of his list of theses against dualism in “The Prolific and the Devourer”, he claims that evil is foreign to natural inclination:

To do evil is to act contrary to self-interest. It is possible for all living creatures to do this because their knowledge of their self-interest is false or inadequate. Thus the animals whose evolution is finished, i.e. whose knowledge of their relations to the rest of creation is fixed, can do evil, but they cannot sin.

But we, being divided beings composed of a number of selves each with its false conception of its self-interest, sin in most that we do, for we rarely act in such a way that even the false self-interests of all our different selves are satisfied. The majority of our actions are in the interest of one of these selves, not always the same one, at the expense of the rest. (*Prose II* 426-27)

Auden argues that one can make an evil choice only when one is mistaken about the nature of that choice, for all choices that a person (or an animal, for that matter) makes are made in the interests of securing some perceived good, whether survival or happiness or freedom from pain or something else entirely. The crucial question, then, is the nature of the good to be secured. For Augustine, the good that humans naturally desire is proximity to God. For Auden in 1939, the answer is less clear, but it seems to have something to do with psychological wholeness, with the reunification of the many contradictory selves within the human person that pursue their own interests at the expense of each other self. It is this disharmony, this privation of unity within the self, that Auden identifies as evil.

Even though Auden is implicitly drawing on Augustine's definition of evil as privation, he does not hesitate to criticize Augustine's institutional heirs in the Catholic church. He appears to have believed that Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular had abandoned Augustine's position, since he states, "Romanticism is right in asserting against [Catholicism and Protestantism] the goodness of the material world, but wrong in denying against them both the goodness of reason" (*Prose II* 446). At this point, Auden believed that both Catholics and Protestants rejected the idea that the physical world was innately good, and this supposed rejection of the world by Christians appears to have been a significant obstacle to his acceptance of Christianity.

Auden was certainly not a Christian while he was writing "The Prolific and the Devourer," since that work denies several basic tenets of Christianity. One of the tenets that he rejected was belief in God as creator³ (*Prose II* 448). Another, perhaps even more important tenet that he refused to believe was the identity of Jesus Christ as God incarnate. "The Prolific and the Devourer" contains a long series of anecdotes that illustrate Auden's own revisionist version of Jesus' teachings. In one, he says, in the voice of Jesus,

Over and over again I told my disciples that it was not I, Jesus, the son of a carpenter, living in Palestine during the Roman Empire, who was important, but the truth of which I was for the moment the mouthpiece. . . . In calling myself the Son of Man, I hoped to prevent them associating the truth with my personal existence. It was inevitable sooner or later that

³In 1978 James Bertram had expressed doubt that Auden was ever a real atheist: "I don't suppose Auden was ever less than a Voltairean deist at the height of his Freudian/Marxist phase" (222). The full text of *The Prolific and the Devourer*, which had not been published at the time, proves Bertram wrong. In part three, Auden asks himself, "Do you believe in God and the supernatural?" and then answers, "If by God you mean a creator who is distinct from and independent of the creation, an omnipotent free-willing immaterial agent, no" (*Prose II* 448).

someone should be born who should discover the True Way. If it had not been me, then it would have been another. (*Prose II* 438)

At this point in his intellectual development, Auden thought of Jesus as a significant but finally replaceable prophet who happened to discover the means of salvation. In a March 1940 review of Carl Sandburg's biography of Abraham Lincoln, Auden implied that Jesus was just one of many historically great men. In a characteristically witty tone, he states, "The average standard of politics, culture, conduct, would not be much lower if Lincoln, Shakespeare and Jesus had never lived, and it will probably not become much higher though hundreds as great or greater be born" (*Prose II* 57). Auden's assessment of Jesus squares with his earlier description of him in *The Prolific and the Devourer*: Jesus is a great man, though he is not unique in history, and many "as great or greater" may yet be born. Any real Christian, by even the most flexible standards, recognizes some unique significance in Christ, so Auden's indication that Jesus was not unique in himself places him quite outside the boundaries of creedal Christianity at this point. However, by 1941, Auden was at work on his Christmas oratorio, a work that not only presumes the existence of a creator who is distinct from the creation, but also affirms the deity and hence the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. His recognition of the nature of evil as privation was certainly a step towards Christianity, but it was not, in itself, a mark of his return to the faith.⁴

⁴Many critics speak of Auden's "conversion" to Christianity, but as Brian Conniff argues, "More emphasis should be placed on this as a 're-conversion,' as the younger Auden—pre-Oxford—was quite devout . . ." (297). Conniff's description more accurately reflects Auden's own account of his adult acceptance of Christianity. In his essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, he says that as a teenager, he did not lose faith in God so much as merely lose interest in religion (33). His adult "conversion" was not a sudden, camp-meeting repentance, but a steady progression toward a more or less

Auden's appropriation of Augustine's definition of evil did prepare him to respond to a formative experience he would have later in 1939 in a New York movie theater. Humphrey Carpenter recounts Auden's shock when, during a newsreel showing Polish prisoners taken during the Nazi Blitzkrieg, German audience members began shouting "Kill them!" Carpenter quotes Auden's later comment on this event: "I wondered then, why I reacted as I did against this denial of every humanistic value. The answer brought me back to the church" (282). As Carpenter proceeds to explain, Auden was now being forced to account theologically for blind, irrational hatred, and every system of thought he had "tried on" since his youth failed to account sufficiently for such blatantly evil behavior (282-3). Both Marxism and psychoanalysis tended to place the origin of evil outside the individual person, such that evil was imposed on a person from without. But what Auden realized in that New York theater was that evil might also have a source within the human individual. He saw that neither political oppression or psychological repression was sufficient to explain one person's irrational hatred of another person whom he or she had never met.

In fact, this was not the first time that Auden had been profoundly disturbed by the human capacity for evil. Earlier in his biography of the poet, Carpenter recounts Auden's time in Spain in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War: "Looking back on his time in Spain he said: 'The politics were particularly unpleasant.' But he was struck even more, during his time in Barcelona, by what had happened to the churches. 'I found,' he said, 'as I walked through the city that all the churches were closed and there was not a

orthodox faith through a long series of encounters with very evil things (Spain, Nazi sympathizers) and very good things (Charles Williams, the liturgy).

priest to be seen. To my astonishment, this discovery left me profoundly shocked and disturbed” (209). Carpenter recounts Auden’s response:

Auden’s sense of shock at this puzzled and worried him. “The feeling was far too intense,” he said, “to be the result of a mere liberal dislike of intolerance, the notion that it is wrong to stop people from doing what they like, even if it something silly like going to church. I could not escape acknowledging that, however I had consciously ignored and rejected the Church for sixteen years, the existence of churches and what went on in them had all the time been very important to me. If that was the case, what then?” (210).

These two events, in Spain and New York, though separated by about two years, appear to have been pivotal in Auden’s subsequent turn to Christianity. Carpenter explains,

He had been through many changes of heart since reaching adulthood, all the dogmas he had adopted or played with—post-Freudian psychology, Marxism, and the liberal-socialist-democratic outlook that had been his final political stance before leaving England—had one thing in common: they were all based on a belief in the natural goodness of man. They all claimed that if one specific evil were removed, be it sexual repression, the domination of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie, or fascism, then humanity would be happy and unrest would cease. (282)

In support of his analysis, Carpenter cites passages from Auden’s “The Prolific and the Devourer.”

While Carpenter is correct that Auden saw fatal flaws in these three earlier philosophies, Carpenter’s assessment of the nature of that fault could be more nuanced. While Auden had not yet converted to Christianity when he was writing “The Prolific and the Devourer,” the work contains certain elements that are unmistakably Augustinian, particularly Auden’s views on human nature and the nature of evil. Carpenter claims that Auden rejected Romanticism, as well as Marxism and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, because they all presupposed “the natural goodness of man.” While this assessment of Auden’s stance is perfectly true in one way, it is quite false in another. At issue is the

definition of the word “natural.” In the sense in which Rousseau, for example, might use the term, humans are “naturally” good in the sense that all their most basic impulses are toward truth, beauty, harmony, and peace, and any impulses to the contrary are societal impositions on the individual. For Rousseau, as for Freud and even Marx to some extent, the removal of societal constraints on basically good, “natural” impulses is necessary for the full flourishing of humanity. Thus, all other things being equal, humans tend toward the good, however variously defined. Auden rejected this definition of the “natural” goodness of humans in the late 1930s.

However, Auden never abandoned the idea that humans are “naturally good,” if “naturally good” means not that all human impulses are completely good and uncorrupted, but that the human person, including the human body, was originally created to be good. That is, humans were once created good, impulses and all, but they corrupted themselves by their own free will, which resulted in a conflicted nature, some impulses being evil and others being good. So while humans are not “naturally” good in the sense of their being automatically predisposed to do good, they are “naturally” good in the sense of their being created with innate desires to do good, which conflict with other, corrupted desires to do evil. Augustine makes just this distinction in his *Nature and Grace*, when he distinguishes between “nature” as the goodness and innocence of human beings as they were originally created by God and “nature” as the weakness and corruption of human beings as they exist after the Fall” (81). Auden accepted both definitions of nature. In the first sense, humans are “naturally” good, and in the second sense, they are “naturally” evil. Like Augustine, he rejected the idea that the now-

corrupted human being could be made good again by applying social engineering, political pressures, psychoanalysis, or any other external devices.

Perhaps it would be best to avoid the word “natural” entirely and say instead that Auden thought that while evil is not original to the human being as created by God, evil as a corruption of the will and other human faculties is now a fact of human existence as we know it. In this way, Auden could continue to affirm that humans, and indeed all things, are good inasmuch as they exist, and they are evil only inasmuch as some good or necessary quality is lacking from that existence. Of course, it was not necessary for Auden to be a Christian to believe in this definition of the goodness of humanity and reject the opposing, Romantic definition, but by the time Auden was writing “The Prolific and the Devourer,” he was already turning towards creedal Christianity and specifically Augustinian theology, and Auden eventually followed Augustine into a more orthodox form of Christian faith.

But Auden’s earlier work does suggest he was starting to define evil as some sort of privation, as Edward Mendelson explains in *Early Auden*. Even in the earliest mature poems from the late 1920s, Mendelson argues, “Auden’s intractable problem in these poems is finally neither erotic or social nor linguistic, but the irreducible fact of division itself,” and so “The question he asked in his first poems was not What should I do now? but Of what whole can I be part?” (*EA* 7). Whatever ailed the poet himself and his culture as a whole, Auden sensed that the real, underlying problem was a lack of some kind of wholeness, and while the early poems suggest that the missing wholeness is psychological, they are never decisive on that question. There is no need to replicate Mendelson’s thorough and convincing arguments to this effect, though suffice it to say

that his work shows that the early “poems’ central subject is their own failure to be part of any larger interpretive frame,” and so critics who attempt to read Auden’s early poems as strictly Marxist or Freudian allegories are missing the point entirely (*EA* 10). Rather, Auden was seeking a compelling account for the divided consciousness that he so acutely felt throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

In November of 1939, after he had abandoned “The Prolific and the Devourer,” Auden wrote one of his most celebrated poems of that period, “In Memory of Sigmund Freud,” which commemorates Freud’s death earlier that year. The poem pays tribute to the famed psychoanalyst who, the poet says, was “doing us some good, / who knew it was never enough but / hoped to improve a little by living” (*CP* 273). The poem indicates that Freud’s most important contribution was that he “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” (*CP* 274). In explaining Freud’s contribution to his understanding of human psychology, Auden replaces the psychoanalytic language of “neurosis” and “repression” with more general and even theological terms “denial” and “lack of faith,” terms that are similar to the Augustinian language of privation that Auden had begun to adopt in “The Prolific and the Devourer.” Auden’s description of what is wrong with humans here consists almost entirely of diction that suggests a privation of some good: “lack,” “dishonest,” “denial.” The exception, “concupiscence,” is an oddly archaic, theological term that suggests the sort of self-centered attempts at gratification that Auden’s early love poetry often describes. In fact, Auden had never extensively used much of the standard jargon of Freudian psychoanalysis, though his earlier poems often do rely on Freud’s idea that opposing

impulses constantly compete for dominance within one person. Before 1939, Auden had largely relied on allegory to suggest the divided consciousness, but from 1939 on, he would increasingly resort to more theological language that suggests he was reading Augustine seriously for the first time in the late 1930s.

“New Year Letter”

After the abortive “Prolific and the Devourer,” Auden’s next major exploration of his own theological development came in his long poem “New Year Letter,” written in the early months of 1940 and addressed to his friend Elizabeth Mayer, in whose Long Island house Auden had lived for some time. The verse epistle is written in octosyllabic couplets, which lend a certain formal rigidity to a poem that Edward Mendelson explains “is sinuous, various, and far more elusive than its formal style suggests” (*EA* 103). One of the greatest difficulties in reading the poem is that it is superficially incoherent; that is, certain ideas are tentatively accepted early on, only to be rejected later. For example, the first part of the poem affirms a minor but important role for the poet in civil society. The arts can “challenge, warn and witness,” and even under the shadow of the Nazi’s threat, “art had set in order sense / And feeling and intelligence, / And from its ideal order grew / Our local understanding too” (*CP* 203, 200). Perhaps, Auden hopes, good verse can at least help people understand each other. As Mendelson suggests, “If art cannot recommend action, it can at least promote an atmosphere in which heart and mind can choose their acts harmoniously. The rest of the poem confounds this pious hope” (*LA* 108). Other ideals, such as Platonism and Romanticism, also come in for criticism.

There is, however, one idea that does remain relatively constant throughout the poem: the entire poem is structured around Auden’s attempt to account for the nature of

evil in all its historical, psychological, and political manifestations. Thus it is not just the octosyllabic couplets that cause the poem to “[appear] to be continually pushing further and further away the decisive statement,” as John Fuller suggests (*A Reader’s Guide* 131). The poem must continually postpone the “decisive statement” because it must exhaust all possible responses to evil before settling on the uncomfortably theological response. From the start of the poem, Auden seems sure that the metaphysical nature of evil is privation, a corruption or a disharmony, but even the prayer at the end of the poem is addressed to a God whose exact identity and nature are still hidden. As Fuller points out, the poem does work its way towards a tentative acceptance of Christianity, though it might be more accurate to say that the poem’s “decisive statement” is theism, and perhaps even Christian theism, though the poem stops short of adopting creedal Christianity (*A Reader’s Guide* 133).

On the whole, Auden critics have had difficulty detecting coherence in the poem. Randall Jarrell, for example, once remarked, “This, *New Year Letter*, consists of a couple of thousand tetrameter couplets about—well, it’s always hard to say what long didactic expository poems are about, but one feels quite safe in saying the *New Year Letter* is about the Modern World and how it got to be Modern, about Auden—the poet—and his relations to Things in General” (126). Jarrell’s assessment is a rhetorical exaggeration, but he is right that “New Year Letter” is, indeed, a long discursive poem that appears to lack a coherent thematic structure. The poem has many models in the long, discursive poem genre—Pope’s *Essay on Man*, Goethe’s *Faust*, and Wordsworth’s *Prelude*—but critics have been largely unaware of the ways in which the poem is modeled on Augustine’s *Confessions*.

Not only does “New Year Letter” itself end with a confessional prayer that includes a key quotation from the *Confessions*, but it is also constructed as a personal address to a single person, such that the reader becomes an eavesdropper, overhearing Auden’s confessions to Elizabeth Mayer, who stands in for Augustine’s God. As a mother figure, Mayer may even suggest the Augustine’s mother Monica, who figures prominently in the *Confessions*. Most importantly, “New Year Letter” dedicates much space to a philosophical enquiry into the nature of evil, an enquiry that is very similar to Augustine’s queries in the *Confessions*. Like the *Confessions*, “New Year Letter” settles on the idea that evil exists ontologically only as a deprivation of good, and the poem proceeds to explore the ways in which this Augustinian view of evil can account for both the political evils and psychological evils of which Auden is constantly aware. Auden concludes that evil tends to manifest itself as any sort of false dualism, which must be exposed and denounced wherever possible. While “New Year Letter” has been criticized for its apparent lack of clear thematic structure, the underlying philosophical coherence of “New Year Letter” becomes clearer once Augustine’s significant influence on the poem is recognized.

The poem says far more about the nature of evil than it does about any likely remedy for it; Hitler is a stronger presence in the poem than is God. But this pervasive consciousness of evil reflects Auden’s stage of intellectual development at the time. As he was writing, he was coming to some settled conclusions about the nature and source of humanity’s ills, though as the Letter demonstrates, he was still at a loss when it came to finding a solution. The problem, as Auden saw it, was false dualism that was inevitably self-defeating. The Devil, Auden’s personification of evil in the poem, is “the great

schismatic who / First split creation into two,” and the Devil is thus identified with the contradictory impulses both to be God and to reject certain elements of the world, that is, to control everything that exists and yet to renounce certain existences as illegitimate (*CP* 213). As Mendelson shows, Auden uses the figure of Goethe’s Mephistopheles to embody the temptation to linger in one moment of time and thus to reject past and future, or, put another way, to affirm one existence and thus to reject other moderating existences. As Auden had insisted earlier in “The Prolific and the Devourer,” there are not good and bad existences, so all existences must be accepted and affirmed as having a legitimate right to exist. Evil consists in the disharmony between existences.

“New Year Letter” first suggests an Augustine’s definition of evil as privation in the part one, where the poem uses an extended metaphor of detective fiction to describe the modern world’s search for the nature and cause of disorder in society. For the modern intellectual, everyone is a suspect until some clever detective, perhaps a Marxist or Freudian or Liberal ideologue, makes an arbitrary arrest that automatically exonerates everyone else (*CP* 205). Auden does not specifically identify the detective, but in a much later essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, Auden explained that during the 1920s and 1930s he and his contemporaries were all attempting to identify the fatal flaw in Western culture:

What was one looking for at the time? Nothing is more difficult to recall than past assumptions, but I think the state of mind among most of my contemporaries was somewhat as follows. We assumed that there was only one outlook on life conceivable among civilized people, the liberal humanism in which all of us had been brought up, whether we came from Christian or agnostic homes. . . .

To this the theological question seemed irrelevant since such values as freedom of the person, equal justice for all, respect for the rights of others, etc., were self-evident truths. However, the liberal humanism of the past had failed to produce the universal peace and prosperity it

promised, failed even to prevent a World War. *What had it overlooked?*
The subconscious, said Freud; the means of production, said Marx. (*MCP*
39-40, emphasis added)

The search for the lost key to a just society also necessitates the identification of a scapegoat, such as the bourgeoisie or the subconscious or fascism, to which all evil and disorder can be attributed. “New Year Letter” leaves the arbitrarily arrested criminal unnamed, allowing any ideology to be identified with the detective; the detective story in the poem is a social allegory intentionally left open for interpretation.

Later sections of the poem suggest that, whatever ideology might be identified with the detective figure, the popular ideologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are based on fallacious negations. For instance, Marxism, by its own admission, is a “negation of a negation,” a phrase from *Das Kapital*, which Auden quotes in “New Year Letter” (*CP* 216). Or, as Michael Murphy argues, Auden observes that ideologies must always identify a scapegoat, such that Freudian ideology privileges the subjective/artistic/inner knowledge over the objective/scientific/outer knowledge privileged by Marxist ideology (118).⁵ Auden insists, against modern philosophies, that “guilt is everywhere” and that the evil regimes of the twentieth century are irrefutable evidence of “vast spiritual disorders” (*CP* 205). Evil, whatever its origin, is not to be identified with any particular class or element of society, or even any ideology, because it

⁵Murphy goes on to argue that “New Year Letter” anticipates the neo-Marxism of Habermas, who concluded that “If the Just City is to be achieved it will be through communication rather than domination, a conclusion which we might regard as implicit in the very form of a letter” (118). But Auden was always doubtful about the ability of language, and especially poetry, to make any significant contribution to social improvement, as “New Year Letter” itself asserts: “Art is not life and cannot be / A midwife to society” (*CP* 201).

is a *disorder*, a failure to maintain a healthy ordering of parts. Auden suggests that all utopian dreams are based on a rejection of some good or necessary thing.

Part Two of “New Year Letter” proceeds to affirm the Hereclitean notion that “no two existences / can ever be alike,” an idea that Auden probably also recognized in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins (*CP* 208). So, because all existences are different, none is redundant and therefore unnecessary; it is necessary to affirm all existences. The contrary impulse Auden calls the Devil, the “Prince of Lies,” and the “Spirit-that-denies” (*CP* 209). Theo Hobson suggests that Auden’s use of the Devil “could be seen as a ‘mere’ personification, a convenient symbol for that which impedes human freedom and moral responsibility, yet even to employ Christian imagery so extensively is suggestive of an essentially religious position” (25). But as we have seen, Auden was not even a theist when he began the poem, and while the poem does work its way tentatively toward Christian theology, Auden’s earlier use of theological terms in *The Prolific and the Devourer* were not indicative of a religious position, since only a year earlier he had stated explicitly that in the realm of religious language, “Nomenclature is merely a matter of convenience” (*Prose II* 448). Mendelson is closer in suggesting that “The Devil is a convenient name for the cause and agent of this inner division” (*LA* 108). In fact, the Devil is not the *cause* of the division, but is a name for the division itself, the privation that Auden identified in “The Prolific and the Devourer” and that he calls in “New Year Letter” “the great Denier” (*CP* 211).

This Denier, Auden says, has “no positive existence,” a statement that has confused not a few critics (*CP* 209). Randall Jarrell, for example, argues that in “New Year Letter,” “the status of the Devil (who has ‘no positive existence,’ but who

nonetheless perpetually pushes us over into Good) is still exactly that of A. A. Milne's bears which eat you if you step on the cracks in the pavement—lovable hypostatized fictions of the pragmatic moralist" (101). Jarrell is referring to A. A. Milne's children's poem "Lines and Squares," in which "the masses of bears, / . . . wait at the corners all ready to eat / The sillies who tread on the lines of the street" (Milne 364). Jarrell completely misunderstands Auden's Augustinian view of evil as privation, which would distinguish between the idea of evil as a fictional non-entity as portrayed in Milne's poem and the idea of evil as a real absence as articulated by Augustine. Auden's statement in "New Year Letter" that the Devil has "no positive existence" does not mean that evil is only an illusion, nor even that evil is not real, but that evil is not a real existence. It is a real absence. In fact, the phrase is quite close to Augustine's statement in *The City of God* in which he says, "evil is *not a positive substance*: the loss of good has been given the name of 'evil'" (11.9, emphasis added).

Evil maintains an explicitly Augustinian identity as Auden begins to describe it as a false dualism, not unlike the Manichaeism that Augustine denounced. For the Devil, "all life is a state of war" between irreconcilable dualities (*CP* 214). Auden gives the Devil a monologue that articulates but one of a host of possible false dualisms. The demonic voice rejects "*l'esprit de géométrie*" which affirms the logical, "cruel intellect" that "kills the roots of all togetherness" in favor of a romantic irrationalism, exclaiming "O when will men show common sense / And throw away intelligence, / That killjoy which discriminates . . .?" (*CP* 211-212). The obvious absurdity of common-sense rejection of intelligence draws attention to the self-defeating nature of this particular brand of Romantic dualism. Auden says a few lines later that the Devil offers the human

being a “self-made paradox, / To be both god and dualist. / For, if dualities exist, / What happens to the god?” (*CP* 213). The contradiction is particularly clear in Manichaeism, which posits the existence of two gods equal in strength, one good and one evil, and constantly at war. But to say that one is good and one is evil presupposes some standard of goodness that supersedes both deities, such that even the good god is subject to some higher existence, thus denying him his claim to ultimacy. However, if one denies the higher existence and instead affirms the opposing deities as the ultimate beings in the cosmos, one is left with no criterion by which to judge which is evil and which is good. Choosing to follow the “good” deity becomes not a moral obligation but an arbitrary decision. Similarly, if the world is to be divided between good and evil political ideologies, by what standard is anyone to declare one party good and the rest evil? One cannot answer the question by appealing to the ideology of the party itself, which merely begs the question. It is false dualism of this sort that Auden finds he must reject in “New Year Letter.”

But the revelation of a dualism as false does not in itself constitute a defeat of dualism. When revolutionaries are disappointed by the failure of their dualist ideals, “Here’s where the devil goes to town” (*CP* 219). Auden shows that, when the Devil finds a person has rejected one dualistic philosophy, he merely offers another, opposite dualism to take its place. He pictures the Devil as a patronizing parent addressing a hung-over undergraduate:

“Well, how’s our Socialist this morning?
I could say ‘Let this be a warning,’
But no, why should I? Students must
Sow their wild oats at times or bust.
Such things have happened in the lives
Of all the best Conservatives.

I'll fix you something for your liver."
And thus he sells us down the river. (*CP* 219)

The disillusioned Socialist reacts against socialism by becoming that which he reacted against, conservatism. But socialism only happens to be the example Auden chooses in this instance, perhaps because of his own fascination with it earlier in his life. The idealist might just as easily have been disillusioned by liberalism, and the Devil would offer him socialism or fascism as a remedy. The particular form of dualism does not matter, just so long as it is dualist.⁶ Auden had a penchant for seeing opposing ideas as variations on a theme, and his note⁷ on these lines says, "Fascism is Socialism that has lost its faith in the future. Its slogan is Now or Never" (*NYL* 118). Auden chides not only his contemporaries, but also himself, as he warns of the dangers of being merely reactionary: "Repenting of our last infraction," he says, "We seek atonement in reaction" (*CP* 219). Auden's poem cites the early Christians as another example of a group of idealists that made a similar mistake. They believed "all flesh unconscious on the eve / Of the Word's temporal interference / With the Old Adam of Appearance" (*CP* 215)

⁶There are other problematic philosophies available, and while Auden sees most of them as dualist, there are some that are wrong but do not necessarily arise from a false dualism. Auden concludes his 1940 essay, "A Note on Order," saying, "For what at the time appears to be a heresy never arises without a cause. Either it is a real advance on the old orthodoxy (for example, the Copernican cosmogony was an advance on the Ptolemaic) or it is an unsatisfactory reaction to a real abuse (for example, Manicheism was an intellectual heresy caused by the moral corruption of the relatively orthodox church)" (*Prose II* 103). But it seems that the Devil of "New Year Letter" prefers to peddle the later kind of heresy, which is dualistic.

⁷The poem was originally published in one volume (titled *The Double Man* in America and *New Year Letter* in Britain) with the sonnet sequence "The Quest," but the volume also included over eighty pages of footnotes to "New Year Letter." Many of the notes are quotations from a wide variety of philosophers, theologians, and artists, but others are short lyrics and brief prose comments by Auden himself. The notes were never reprinted.

That is, following the Platonists, they rejected bodily existence in favor of spiritual consciousness, since the apocalypse was about to occur. Auden may have in mind particularly Tertullian and the Montanists—a second-century sect that insisted on withdraw from worldly affairs and proclaimed the immanent return of Christ—but whatever the case, Auden asserts that early Christianity eventually traded an unhealthy rejection of the world for an equally-unhealthy embrace of political power, and that they would see “Their early agape decline / To a late lunch with Constantine” (*CP* 215).

The answer to false dualism, Auden suggests, is not to trade it for yet another false dualism, whose totalizing ideology continues to reject certain existences, but instead to develop what he calls “double-focus” (*CP* 220). The Devil offers “The either-ors, the mongrel halves,” and “he may never tell us lies, / Just half-truths we can synthesize. / So, hidden in his hocus-pocus, / There lies the gift of double-focus” (*CP* 220). The Devil’s half-truths become clues to the whole truth, so long as one can hold opposing desires and ideas in suspension and see them both at once. In his note to these lines, Auden said,

The Devil, indeed, is the father of Poetry, for poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings. The Poetic mood is never indicative.

Whether determined by God or their neural structure, still
All men have one common creed, account for it as you will:
The Truth is one and incapable of self-contradiction;
All knowledge that conflicts with itself is Poetic Fiction. (*NYL*
119)

Of all Auden’s statements questioning the value of his own art, this is perhaps one of the most extreme. But it must be remembered that when Auden speaks of the Devil, he does not have in mind a person or even a disembodied, malignant intelligence as more traditional Christian theology might define him. Rather, the Devil is Auden’s personification of disorder or conflict, and because a good poem must deal with

conflicted desires, or as Auden puts it, “mixed feelings,” a poem necessarily expresses something false, or at least something unnecessarily flawed. (Auden would elaborate on this idea at length many years later in ““The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning”” and “Dichtung und Wahrheit.”) But if the “gift of double-focus” is available in the Devil’s lies, then perhaps double-focus is achievable in poetry as well.

Mendelson calls “double-focus” “more than a dialectical ability to see both sides of a question,” but “a realm of free action in an eternally changing condition to which the poem gives two names: Purgatory, a name Auden had not used before, and the simpler word ‘time’” (*LA* 114). Certainly the idea of “double-focus” has much to do with acknowledging one’s limited existence in time, but the two ideas are perhaps not entirely identical. In a review written at the same time as “New Year Letter,” Auden himself describes “double focus” as the knowledge “that all absolutes are heretical but that one can only act in a given circumstance by assuming one” (*Prose II* 56). Perhaps the word “absolute” should not be taken too absolutely, as Auden seems to mean by it the assertion that one has perfect and total knowledge, the idea that a human can achieve a transcendent, God-like perspective on history, which would give that person unquestionable moral authority.⁸ Yet another appropriate term for the idea of double focus, which Auden was about to discover in Charles Williams’s book *The Descent of the Dove*, is the theological term “co-inherence.” The word “co-inherence” is a little-used

⁸Auden’s use of “absolute” in a negative sense is similar to Conniff’s description of Paul Tillich’s sense of the “daemonic,” which he argues influenced Auden at this stage in his career. Auden had certainly read Tillich by the time he was at work on “New Year Letter,” since he cites Tillich in his notes to the poem. Conniff explains that Tillich “consistently characterizes the demonic as the inflation of a finite quality, perhaps an individual personality trait that is presumed to be more than merely human, or an aspect of social organization that is treated as more than a historical product” (312).

term that Williams adopted to describe any union of distinct or diverse things in which both unity and diversity are harmoniously maintained. In theology, the word may refer to the orthodox conception of the Trinity, in which God is regarded as a single substance existing in the three persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, such that the single divine substance is never divided while the three distinct persons are never conflated. The term may also refer to the hypostasis of the human and divine natures of Jesus Christ, who is regarded in creedal Christianity as both fully God and fully man.

Williams dedicates *The Descent of the Dove* to “the Companions of the Co-inherence,” and he uses the theological sense of co-inherence as an analogy for the way in which he believes Christianity should resolve theological disagreements, so the idea of co-inherence forms the entire basis of his brief analysis of church history (v). According to Williams’s account, Christianity has always struggled to maintain a balance between pairs of ideas in tension which have threatened to pull the church apart, and have been successful in doing so on a number of occasions. For Williams as for Auden, the particular nature of those ideas is not as important as the resultant dualism in which one side is discarded and the other upheld as absolute. In his first chapter, Williams gives as a primary example the early controversies over the nature(s) of Christ. Some claimed he was God and only appeared to be man, and others claimed he was a man or angel and only appeared to be God. At various councils, particularly the Nicene council, it was decided that the human and divine natures co-inherited in Christ, that Christ was not divided but that he was both man and God in one person, hence the term “co-inherence”

(Williams v). While the term “co-inherence” does not appear in Auden’s poem,⁹ Mendelson notes that Auden did read Williams’s book shortly after its publication in February of 1940 and that other phrases from the book begin to appear in the last hundred or so lines of “New Year Letter” (125). In fact, the American title of the book in which “New Year Letter” was originally published, *The Double Man*, came from Williams’s book, in which he cites an unnamed Egyptian monk who said, “It is right for a man to take up the burden for them who are near to him, whatever it may be, and, so to speak, to put his own soul in the place of that of his neighbor, and to become, if it were possible, a double man. . . . For thus it is written *We are all one body . . .*” (Williams 55). Auden had probably already drafted the lines concerned with “double-focus” when he read *The Descent of the Dove*, although, as Mendelson puts it, there are many ideas that “had been in the poem before Auden found them in Williams, but they looked different in the light that Williams reflected on them” (127). The idea of double-focus is certainly one of these.

However, the phrase “Double Man” itself has a double meaning. It does certainly have the positive connotations that Auden draws from Williams, but it also has opposing, negative connotations that are reminiscent of Auden’s earlier obsession with inner psychological conflict. Mendelson suggests that Auden had this negative meaning in mind when he chose the title for *The Double Man* (LA 124). After all, on the book’s

⁹Auden did use the word at least once, in a 1956 letter to a priest, Brother Rigney, which Kirsch quotes: “it does seem to me that the Doctrine of the Incarnation implies the coinherence of spirit and flesh in all creatures, and that materialism and manicheism are mirror images of each other” (qtd. in Kirsch *Auden* 28). Kirsch points out the important connection between the idea of co-inherence and Augustine’s thought, saying, “The stigmatization of matter and the body as evil by the Manicheans preoccupied Auden throughout his life and was a major reason for his attraction to Saint Augustine . . .” (28).

dedication page, which is not replicated in the *Collected Poems*, Auden includes a quotation from Montaigne: “We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn.” This phrase echoes a passage in the book of Romans, in which Paul the Apostle exclaims, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me” (7.15-17). So the phrase “the Double Man” initially suggests the fallen, self-conscious individual who is torn between competing, contradictory desires and who wishes for a return to pre-Fall wholeness. Naturally, a title as ambiguous as “Double Man” suggests a double meaning, and indeed, later on in “New Year Letter” the phrase “Double Man” does take on the new, positive meaning as articulated by Charles Williams. Or, put another way, the fallen Double Man must be restored by becoming a whole Double Man.

Another important tension that Williams identifies in the early history of Christianity is the conflict between what he calls “the Negative Way” and “the Affirmative Way” (Williams 57). What Williams calls “the Negative Way” characterized the desert fathers, early Christian ascetics who retreated to hermitages or small communes in the wilderness, renouncing physical pleasures and comforts in their efforts to maintain holiness, and it is generally identified with contemplative mysticism. “The Affirmative Way,” on the other hand, characterized those Christians who, often maintaining an urban presence, saw opportunities for gratitude in physical pleasure and developed iconography as a means of perceiving the divine in the material world. As Williams presents them, these two contrary tendencies appeared to be polar opposites,

and so they had to either co-inhere or split Christendom into two separate religions adhering, respectively, to the Affirmative and Negative ways. Either tendency, if isolated from the other, would reject some crucial aspect of existence and generate a false dualism.

Auden would use the Latin form of the phrase “Negative Way” (*via negativa*) in his 1941 letter to Ursula Niebuhr, in which he called himself an Augustinian in the vein of Reinhold Niebuhr, adding that “I would allow a little more place, perhaps, for the *via negativa*” (qtd. in *Tribute* 106). Auden’s statement was likely made in response to Ursula and her husband Reinhold’s general skepticism about the value of Christian mysticism (see *Tribute* 109). Anne Fremantle, with whom Auden compiled *The Protestant Mystics* in the 1960s, quotes a letter from Ursula Niebuhr: “To be absolutely honest, I am rather allergic to what is usually called ‘mystical’” (qtd. in *Tribute* 90). Neither did Auden consider himself mystical, and he flatly told Fremantle, “I am not mystical” (qtd. in *Tribute* 90). At the same time, Auden did not denigrate mysticism, and his comment to Ursula Niebuhr gently defending the *via negativa* suggests that soon after he wrote “New Year Letter” he considered mysticism to be a beneficial and even necessary component of the Christian tradition, if not of each Christian’s individual experience. Auden’s acceptance of mysticism as a legitimate element of Christianity probably owes something to Williams’s association of Augustine with the mystical tradition in *The Descent of the Dove*. Williams argues that Augustine, “for all his culture, followed the Way of Rejection of Images, and he inspired later centuries to return to that Way” (64). Auden was seriously engaging Augustine’s definition of evil as privation when he read

Williams, “Move some of [Augustine’s] sayings but a little from the centre of his passion and they point to damnation” (64).

In referring to the *via negativa*, Auden did mean pretty nearly the same thing as Williams’s phrase “the Negative Way,” though in his use of the phrase Auden often has in mind a more strictly theological mysticism and not merely an ascetic rejection of physical pleasure or of iconography. The theological tradition of mysticism is long and complex, but the term “mysticism” might be briefly defined as an unsuccessful attempt to articulate a glorious, personal vision of the Divine. In his essay “The Protestant Mystics,” written as an introduction to the book of the same name on which he collaborated with Freemantle, Auden writes that many who have achieved the Vision of God are “those who have chosen the *via negativa*” (74). But Auden, confessing that he has never himself had a Vision of God, can find very little to say about it specifically. Nevertheless, he does indicate that, as regards the Vision of God, there need be no contradiction between the personal experience of the mystic and the systematic explanation of the theologian. The theological language of mysticism developed by Catholic monasticism and the high value placed on personal experience by Protestants should not be foreign to each other—yet another, though later, example of Auden’s insistence on co-inherence, or double-focus. Significantly, he does mention Augustine in his essay, although he does not identify him as either a mystic or a proponent of the *via negativa*, but rather as a model of the co-inherence of Medieval academic versions of the Affirmative and Negative Ways:

There seems no *rational* reason why a return to St. Paul and St. Augustine could not have rescued theology from its sterile debate between Realism and Nominalism without leading to Calvinism and, as a defense reaction, to the adoption by Rome, understandably but still, to my mind,

mistakenly, of Thomism as the official Catholic philosophy. But history, of course, is not rational or repeatable. (*FA* 76)

Both Auden and Williams use the term *via negativa* to describe the sort of ascetic mysticism that characterized the desert fathers, but by the 1960s, Auden did not count Augustine among the proponents of the Negative Way, as Williams did. Auden did, however, derive from Williams a defense of mysticism based on his explanation of co-inherence.

Another, more personal reason why Auden's theology made space for the Negative Way is that he had himself had a mystical experience in 1933, which he recorded in the poem "Summer Night." There will be more to say about this in chapter six, but it should be noted here that Auden's referred to his mystical experience as a "Vision of Agape," in which, he later recalled in his essay "The Protestant Mystics," "I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine" (*FA* 69). The experience was not a revelation of God, but a revelation of the value of his associates: "For the first time in my life I knew exactly—because, thanks, to the power, I was doing it—what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself. . . . I felt their existence as themselves to be of infinite value and rejoiced in it" (*FA* 69). While it was not a mystical vision of God, Auden nevertheless considered it an authentic mystical experience. In the same essay, Auden explains that the practitioners of the Negative Way might be more likely to achieve the Vision of God, but as Auden says in his essay, asceticism cannot force the Vision to come (*FA* 72). But neither can any other sort of Vision be achieved at will, whether the visions of Nature, Eros, or Agape, which are other types of mystical vision he describes. He characterizes his own mystical vision of Agape as a revelation of "plurality, equality and mutuality of human persons"

(*FA* 70), and he goes on to say that “among the various factors which several years later brought me back to the Christian faith in which I had been brought up, the memory of this experience and asking myself what it could mean was one of the most crucial, though, at the time it occurred, I thought I had done with Christianity for good” (70). “New Year Letter” was one step on his journey back to Christianity, and so it is not surprising that the third part of the poem opens by describing an event that bears some significant resemblance to the Vision of Agape.

Part Three begins with two contrasting descriptions of New Year’s Eve in New York City, the first a festive celebration, perhaps in Time Square, where “The Old Year dies a noisy death” (*CP* 220). But in contrast to this public event, a private party occurs in the home of Elizabeth Mayer, where the poet says,

I felt the unexpected power
That drove our ragged egos in
From the dead-ends of greed and sin
To sit down at the wedding feast,
Put shining garments on the least,
Arranged us so that each and all,
The erotic and the logical,
Each felt the *placement* to be much
That he was honored overmuch. (*CP* 221)

This account resembles Auden’s description of the Vision of Agape in a number of ways. First the experience is brought on by an “unexpected power,” which the poem never names (*CP* 221). The experience has not been concocted or planned by any of the participants, as it is unforeseen. Further, it leads to the “plurality, equality and mutuality of human persons” that Auden would describe later in his essay “The Protestant Mystics” (*FA* 70). Auden never mentioned having another vision of Agape after his 1933 experience, so it is unclear whether the dinner party described in “New Year Letter”

represents a comparable mystical vision, but the language in which he describes the event does suggest that, if it is not an authentic mystical vision, it is an event that typifies the Christian charity of which a vision of Agape is a full revelation. In the poem, all types and temperaments, “The erotic and the logical,” are graced with generous placements around the table. The result is not just equality, but privilege beyond what any of the participants deserves.

The passage’s reference to Christ’s parables of the wedding feasts in the gospels of Matthew and Luke should not be missed. In Matthew 22 Christ describes the Kingdom of Heaven as a wedding feast to which the poor and maimed are invited after the original, wealthy invitees failed to appear (2-10). However, one man is expelled from the wedding feast because he is not wearing appropriate wedding garments (11-13). The bad guest is recognized as lacking something crucial that marks the approved guests, and it is interesting that Auden’s phrase “shining garments” references this biblical example in which evil consists of privation (*CP* 221). However, no one is expelled from the wedding feast that Auden describes in “New Year Letter,” since “the unexpected power” has “Put shining garments on the least,” and no one is found inappropriately clothed (*CP* 221). The garments are, of course, not literal, but rather signify the perfect mutuality and unmerited privilege of the guests at the Mayer house. The poem also alludes to another of Christ’s parables concerning a wedding feast, at which Christ advises his listeners to intentionally choose the lowest places at feasts in hopes that the host might promote them to higher places, rather than choosing the highest places and risk being demoted to the lowest places (Luke 14.8-10). The moral of the story is that “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14.11).

Auden's reference to this parable is obvious, and at the "wedding feast" he describes, each of the guests "felt the *placement* to be such / That he was honored overmuch" (221 Auden's emphasis). No guest has seized a place of honor; but rather, each guest has been promoted to a more honored place than he or she could have achieved. In Auden's words, "GLUCK and food and friendship made / Our privileged community / That real republic . . ." (221). If for only a few hours, Elizabeth Mayer's New Year's Eve party has become an example of the perfect community, or in biblical vocabulary, the Kingdom of Heaven.

However, the Vision of Agape soon dissolves in the remainder of the poem's wide-ranging third part, which is in large measure a search for an appropriate metaphor for the poet's psychological condition. The poet tries out comparisons with historical epochs, with landscapes, with religious movements, and with foreign countries, and he finds that the true condition of humans is isolation, which makes it impossible for him to imagine a perfect metaphor for that condition. At the end of the poem, he finds that he must turn from the vocabulary of psychology and sociology to that of theology in order to clearly articulate his sense of isolation. This is not an easy turn, and as Conniff points out, "the difficulties Auden faced in his efforts to restore his religious faith, and reconcile it with his poetry, were compounded by his recognition—one he shared with many of these same intellectuals—that the source of greatest human evil, the heart of darkness, could be found at the center of civilization as he knew it" (306). Underneath the circuitous but steady progress toward theology is Auden's sense that evil consists of privation, of a lack or rejection of some essential element of human existence.

Auden returns again and again to one particular philosophical rejection that he sees as fallacious: the denial of time. Following Goethe's *Faust*, in which the protagonist is only in danger of damnation if he rejects the future in favor of prolonging some present moment, Auden recognizes that evil in the modern world often consists of the rejection of some element of time, whether past, present, or future. Sin occurs not in some act, even in eating from "the tree / And fruit of human destiny," but rather in lingering at the tree instead of "depart[ing] / At once with gay and grateful heart, / Obedient, reborn, re-aware" (CP 221, 222). To "stop an instant there" is to find that "Horror . . . / . . . has sprung the trap of Hell" (CP 222). Potential human destiny will not be realized by merely mulling it over. Once the vision is granted, it must be acted upon, not rested in. But the problem remains as to what exactly a human being must do, a problem that had plagued Auden for his entire poetic career. Whatever the action is, to attempt to stop moving through time is to condemn oneself. But it is equally dangerous to exist in time with no sense of direction or purpose. Hence, Auden identifies Hell with the philosophy that "claim[s] / Becoming and Being are the same," that is, with existentialism (CP 222). The error of existentialism is that it "[denies] the laws of consciousness" by claiming that a person can both exist in time and be "self-complete" which results in being "locked / Each in a stale uniqueness" while remaining "Time-conscious for eternity" (CP 222). Perhaps in response to Jean Paul Sartre's aphorism, "Hell is other people," Auden retorts, "Hell is existentialism."

The alternative Auden describes is the hard, unorthodox climb up Mount Purgatory, a term which Mendelson indicates Auden had not used in his poetry before, and which Mendelson claims is another word for time (LA 114). While Auden draws on

Dante's *Purgatorio* for his image of Purgatory as a rocky mountain which must be deliberately climbed, Auden's Purgatory does not occur at the end of one's life, but *is* one's life, such that "if we do not move we fall, / Yet movement is heretical, / Since over its ironic rocks / No route is truly orthodox" (*CP* 223). Auden likely has his own past in mind here, though he might just as easily be referring to the biography of any philosophical pilgrim, from Augustine to Buddha, many of whom tried out a variety of false philosophies before happening on the truth. No one is born orthodox and then remains so throughout his or her entire life. All progression toward truth must take the pilgrim through a series of falsehoods.

But in the middle of his mythic climb up Mount Purgatory, the poet must pause to listen to the "calls of conscience" that surround him in the contemporary world, in case one of these just causes demands his personal devotion (*CP* 224). There is far more injustice in the present than any one person can address, and the present evil threatens to destroy civilization. While the current enemies of civilization are often imagined as the barbarians at the gates of civilized Rome, Auden insists that such a historical analogy is false. We are not entering a new Dark Ages:

The future which confronts us has
No likeness to that age when, as
Rome's hugger-mugger unity
Was slowly knocked to pieces by
The uncoordinated blows
Of artless and barbaric foes... (225)

Rather, "The cities we abandon fall / To nothing primitive at all" (225). The modern destroyer of civilization, the disembodied "Voice" that comes out of Europe, is not a backward barbarian but an industrial populist who creates "mechanised societies / Where natural intuition dies" (*CP* 225). It is also "A theologian who denies / . . . / The basis of

civility” (CP 225). Like other forms of evil in the poem, Hitler is characterized not by any affirmation, but by a denial of goodness. Auden explains in his essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims* that Nazism was an “utter denial of everything liberalism had ever stood for” (MCP 40). But in 1940, it was clear to Auden that evil was starkly present in the moment and demanded a prompt response, in part because it fit in so well with modern industrial society. So it is not the Dark Ages to which Auden turns in “New Year Letter” for a historical analogy with his own time, but to the Renaissance. He traces the origin of the modern “Economic Man” back to “All the special tasks begun / By the Renaissance” which have now been completed (CP 230). Auden suggests that the Renaissance introduced the idea of settling theological disputes on the battlefield with “the / Opinions of artillery” (230). The combination “Of LUTHER’s faith and MONTAIGNE’s doubt, / The epidemic of translations” with “The scholars’ scurrilous disputes / Over the freedom of the Will” produced the modern capitalist whose sole aim is economic profit and who is “urban, prudent, and inventive” (CP 230).

It should be remembered that Augustine’s thought was, on at least two accounts, crucial to these debates of the Renaissance and Reformation. First, most major theological sects that developed during the Reformation appealed explicitly to Augustine for support. Martin Luther was a monk of the Augustinian order who was well-versed in Augustine’s discourses on free will. John Calvin’s *Institutes* rely heavily on references to Augustine’s works, and Calvin was especially influenced by Augustine’s insistence on predestination. Rome, of course, also maintained an interest in Augustine, although in Auden’s view at least, Rome had become more influenced by the systematic theology of Thomas Aquinas and had begun to neglect some of Augustine’s more psychological and

existential concerns. Secondly, Augustine's *Confessions* has been seen as the first foray into what would become modern psychology, and so Augustine is considered the first modern, self-conscious man whose project of self-examination would be continued by the Renaissance and the Reformation. While Augustine's theology was highly influential during the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Romantic authors saw Augustine's *Confessions* as the first autobiography which opened up possibilities for a totally new literary genre that focused on artful self-exploration; Rousseau's own *Confessions* and even Freudian psychoanalysis are rooted in the ground of self-consciousness and literary introspection that Augustine originally cultivated.

Auden can hardly have been unaware of Augustine's distant relation to his own exploration of the emergence of self-consciousness in youth. Part III of "New Year Letter" reveals the division between the public, outer self, which can choose its place in society and its loyalties, and the private, inner self, which can choose neither its own past experiences nor its past childhood attachments (*CP* 225-26). It is the political conflation of the public and private self, the poem suggests, that produces "the Fall of Man / From natural liberty" (*CP* 226). Auden's note on these lines states that at one time, in "the Golden Age. . . there was little or no need of ethical resistance to temptation, when human law was not felt as coercive but regarded as a perfect codification of Natural law. . ." (*NYL* 125). Despite his attempt at explanation, Auden's point is obscure. But he seems to mean that, once a division arises between the "public" self, who exists in relation to others, and the "private" self, in which the will (presumably) exercises autocratic control over the self, the temptation arises to treat the public realm in the same way as one's own private sphere, which is tyranny. But the poem soon offers a clearer

articulation of the Fall when it identifies the limestone landscape of northern England with human consciousness generally and the development of his own self-consciousness particularly. Here “I was first aware / Of Self and Not-self, Death and Dread,” and he describes his gazing into abandoned mine shafts at which he “felt / The deep *Urmutterfurcht* that drives / Us into knowledge all our lives” (CP 228). Auden’s shift from first person singular “I was” to the third person plural “drives *us*” suggest that he is using the landscape to typify not only his own psychological maturation but all human development as well. Each self-conscious human being is fallen by definition.

He does not exempt himself from his critique of dualism; indeed, to be able to write poetry at all requires self-consciousness, which is to be fallen from psychological wholeness. Thus, every aspect of the adult human psyche is affected by the fall into conflicted consciousness, and the modern Economic Man that developed in the Renaissance “founded a new discipline / To fight an intellectual sin, / Reason’s depravity” (CP 231). Auden is not so much arguing against Enlightenment rationalism’s belief that human reason is capable of perfect knowledge as he is making a historical observation: a new discipline, psychology, became necessary because all human faculties, including Reason,¹⁰ are faulty, or depraved. (Here it should be remembered that “depraved” in its theological sense does not mean “as bad as it could possibly be” but merely “flawed.”) After the failure of the Enlightenment project to establish a perfectly

¹⁰I maintain the capitalization of “Reason” because Auden uses the pronoun “she” to refer to “Reason,” which suggests that he does not capitalize the word only because it appears at the beginning of a line. Rather, he has personified “Reason” in the same way that earlier writers referred to the Soul in the feminine. Picturing a single human faculty as a person in itself is consistent with Auden’s sense of self-consciousness as several contradictory wills competing within one person. Later, in “For the Time Being” and “The Age of Anxiety,” Auden would use a similar personification of individual faculties, though in more Jungian terms.

rational basis for philosophy and ethics, it becomes necessary to explain why human Reason failed. In Auden's view, it was Reason's conflation of "useful concepts" with "universals" (*CP* 231). That is, the inductive reasoning of the scientific method introduced in the Renaissance is based on amassing a series of observations from which the scientist may draw general conclusions that give the scientist the means to control the natural world. As such, the inductive leap from individual observations to a general law appears to arrive at a conclusion that is universally true, and so the pragmatic concerns of empiricism are mistaken for universals.

In his note on these lines, Auden quotes the contemporary theologian Paul Tillich's account of the problem of Renaissance empiricism. In Auden's excerpt, Tillich argues that while the Medieval mind dealt with contradictions in nature by appealing to the supernatural, both Protestantism and Renaissance thinking more generally acknowledged such contradictions;¹¹ but while Renaissance thought maintained its naïve acceptance of them, the contradictions in nature became central to the Protestant emphasis on working out the difficulties of day-to-day life (*NYL* 134). In its Protestant position within contradictory nature, Tillich continues, "the subject has no possibility of an absolute position. It cannot go out of the sphere of decision. Every part of its nature is affected by these contradictions" (qtd. in *NYL* 134). That is, the reasoning self can never achieve a view of things that transcends its own historical, geographical, and psychological limitations and thus can never be privy to universal principles. It can only

¹¹Tillich's characterization of the medieval mind as seeking to escape contradictions in the natural world by "flee[ing] from it into super-nature" is largely a caricature. One would be hard pressed to identify many medieval texts that appeal to the miraculous to account for apparent contradictions in nature.

act in the present moment on the basis of incomplete knowledge. Whether or not Tillich is correct in his assessment of the development of Protestant thought (and the Protestant emphasis on *sola gratia* and *sola fide* might suggest a corrective of his historical account), Auden found Tillich's critique of empiricism compelling. The fallen human intellect cannot arrive at a knowledge of universal principles, but can only make limited, pragmatic observations that tempt the individual to take them for universals.¹² This is not to say that empiricism was a total failure, but rather, as Auden puts it, was a "half-success" (*CP* 231). And yet, "All failures have one good result: / They prove the Good is difficult" (*CP* 231).

But even if Protestantism, as Tillich argues, is superior to empiricism, the Protestant is also prone to certain mistakes, which Auden finds explained in Kierkegaard's *Journals*, portions of which are quoted in the notes to "New Year Letter." Kierkegaard suggests that Luther's highest spiritual principle was "pure inwardness," which relegated all significant spiritual activity to the inner person, making the events and choices of the individual in the physical world irrelevant to inward spirituality. As such, Protestants would eventually come to see worldliness as the height of piety (qtd. in *NYL* 129). That is, if salvation is not by works, but by faith alone, the absence of works in one's life could be taken for evidence of salvation. Every system of thought, including Protestantism, involves temptations toward a dualism of some kind, whether it is empiricism's rejection of the spiritual in favor of the physical, or the Protestant rejection

¹²This failure characterizes a lack of double-focus, as Auden points out in his 1940 essay, "The Double Focus: Sandburg's Lincoln," in which he reviews Carl Sandburg's biography of Abraham Lincoln (*Prose II* 57).

of works in favor of faith. And thus, every person, including the poet himself, is a victim of his or her own dualism.

Auden points out that the modern world was warned about the dangers of an uncritical acceptance of empiricism, but those few dissenters against empiricism—Blake, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, and Baudelaire—were ignored, and “Whichever way we turn, we see / Man captured by his liberty” (*CP* 232). But the modern world was not built by a preexisting totalitarian state, even though individuals deny their own responsibility for the state of their world:

But still each private citizen
Thanks God he's not as other men:
O all too easily we blame
The politicians for our shame
And the hired officers of state
For all those customs that frustrate
Our own intention to fulfil [sic]
Eros's legislative will. (*CP* 233)

All self-destructive tendencies in a society can thus be traced directly back to the self-destructive tendencies within each member of that society. Laws and customs may unjustly restrain the individual's freedom, but individuals cannot get around their own internalization of such restrictions in the form of the superego. In addition, a democracy cannot blame its government for its own failures, for “The politicians we condemn / Are nothing but our L. C. M. [lowest common mean, or denominator]” (*CP* 234). Auden offers the 1920s and 1930s in Europe as evidence: “Upon the English conscience lie / Two decades of hypocrisy, / And not a German can be proud / Of what his apathy allowed” (234). The lines are prophetic. In 1940 there were certainly many Germans who were proud of fascism, but it would not be long after the war's end that Auden's statement would become much closer to fact. While it might be argued that in moving to

America, Auden was trying to distance himself from the two decades of English hypocrisy on his conscience, he never exempts himself from his critique.

In fact, a few lines earlier, Auden asks rhetorically, “O what can love’s intention do / If all his agents are untrue?” (*CP* 234). The line is reminiscent of many of his earlier love poems, like “Lay your sleeping head, my love” and “As I Walked Out One Evening,” both of which implicate the speaker in the unfaithfulness that always threatens the romantic relationship. But the line may also be a subtle repudiation of Auden’s (in)famous statement in “September 1, 1939”: “We must love one another or die” (*TEA* 246). Of course, Auden later renounced the poem, mainly because he came to object to that particular line, though he did once allow the poem to be reprinted only with the line changed to read, “We must love one another and die.” In September 1, 1939, “love” is primarily the self-centered survival instinct, or *eros*. I will deal with Auden’s concepts of love at length in chapters six and seven, but suffice it to say Auden’s use of the word “love” is often ambiguous. If the “love” mentioned here in “New Year Letter” is similar to the love of “September 1, 1939” (*eros*), then the poem is suggesting that the mere will to survive is not a sufficient basis for society. Love, whether as a survival instinct (*eros*) or a self-sacrificial altruism (*agape*), may be pure in its intentions, but it must be acted upon by individuals who are fallen and corrupt. As Monroe Spears explains, “New Year Letter,” along with Auden’s other poetry of 1939-1940, seeks to “reverse the ‘pure in heart’ concept in the direction of orthodoxy: nobody is pure in heart, because the law of our own nature is corrupt; Eros, being selfish, tends toward evil” (*Poetry* 135). “New Year Letter” suggests that this selfish impulse is at the root of political conflicts.

In fact, according to Augustine, the impulse to control others but not be ruled by anyone—that is, the impulse towards totalitarianism—is self-destructive. He says, “Such self-love is better called hate” (*OCD* 1.13). This is why, Augustine explains, St. Paul says in Ephesians 5.29, “‘No man ever hated his own flesh,’” for hatred always consists of the self-centered desire for control of others, which produces enmity between individuals (*OCD* 1.14). Augustine argues that even Platonists and ascetics, who claim to want to be free of their bodies entirely, are deluded: “they hate not their bodies but the corruption and solidity of their bodies” (*OCD* 1.24). Auden attacks Platonism for much the same reasons. In a late poem, “No, Plato, No,” written in 1973, he says, “I can’t imagine anything / that I would less like to be / than a disincarnate Spirit” (*CP* 888). He had maintained this attitude towards Platonism consistently since writing “New Year Letter” in 1940, when he identified Platonism as one of two dangerous sources of modern dualism, which leads to totalitarianism. It was “PLATO’s lie of intellect” that produced the philosopher-kings who are really tyrants: “knowing Good, they will no Wrong / United in the abstract Word / Above the low anarchic herd” (*CP* 234). The poem refers particularly to the *Republic*, which rejects the physical world in favor of the abstract, ideal world of the Good. Thus Platonic Idealism proposes that only those who know the Good, the philosophers, are fit to rule. The Platonic dualism that rejects the material world leads to totalitarianism.

The problem, as Auden sees it, is the equation of knowledge with virtue. Plato does not recognize that the moral corruption that leads to injustice and oppression comes not from ignorance but from the conflicting impulses within the fallen, self-conscious individual. Plato denies the Fall, which Auden insists is the real condition of humans.

His critique of Catholicism in “The Prolific and the Devourer” is quite similar, and he may have had Catholic neo-Platonism in mind when he wrote, “Romanticism is right in asserting against [Catholicism] the goodness of the material world” (*Prose II* 446). If the material world is good, then a philosopher’s knowledge of the abstract world of ideas does not necessarily make him superior to those who lack such knowledge. At the least, it does not automatically fit him to rule. Auden reasons that the dualism that cuts off the abstract world from the physical world leads to tyranny and therefore cannot be valid.

In the same section of the poem, Auden identifies another source of dualism that causes trouble for the modern world. Rousseau’s Romanticism is, as Auden labels it, “falsehood of the flesh” which rejects reason in favor of “the Irrational” that supposedly unites all people in their common equality (*CP* 234). Rousseau’s valuing of the primal and irrational opposes Plato’s rationalism, and his insistence on equality opposes Plato’s elitism, but like Plato, Rousseau ignores the Fall, and so, Auden concludes in a passage that approaches a metaphysical conceit, the rain of dualism that fills the streams “That water the opposing dreams / . . . / is scattered from one common cloud” (*CP* 235). He pictures the divided self, the Ego, as the cloudy source of both dualism and of the revelation that dualism is false: “Up in the Ego’s atmosphere / And higher altitudes of fear / The particles of error form / The shepherd-killing thunderstorm” (*CP* 235). The shepherd here might stand for the Arcadian Romantic, the follower of Rousseau who rejects reason in favor of impulses that turn out to be deadly lightning strikes. But the thunderstorm reaches past the individual and into society, such that “our political distress / Descends from her [the Ego’s] self-consciousness, / Her cold *concupiscence d’esprit*”

(CP 235). It is this spiritual concupiscence, or lust, within every human being that Auden believes produces social ills.

At this point Auden drops the thunderstorm metaphor, and the Ego becomes, not an atmosphere, but a mad woman in the attic, but unlike the conventional woman in the attic, the Ego is imprisoned by her own choice. She might “use / Her function of free-will to choose / The actions that this world requires / To educate its blind desires,” but instead she asserts “the right to lead alone / An attic life all on her own, / Unhindered, unrebuked, unwatched, / Self-known, self-praising, self-attached” (CP 235). Left to itself, the Ego naturally turns inward to narcissistic introspection, which is pleasurable enough at first, but once the introspection becomes self-conscious, it leads to panic and despair, and at that point self-loathing is inescapable (CP 235). And yet, the Ego’s self-conscious self-hatred is still a product of a twisted form of love. Auden’s note on these lines is a passage from canto seventeen of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, in which Virgil explains,

Nor Creator nor creature, my son, was ever without love,
either natural or rational; and this thou knowest.
The natural is always without error; but the other may err
through an evil object, or through too little or too much vigour . . .
. . . Hence thou may’st understand that love must be the seed
of every virtue in you, and of every deed that deserves punishment. (qtd.
in *NYL* 143)

That is, all humans are naturally, or originally, inclined towards peaceable and rightly ordered love of God and of other people. One may rationally will to disregard that original love in favor of a disordered love in which one loves a wrong thing or loves a right thing too little or too much. Auden would later conclude that it is impossible to love too much, and that all disordered loves come from a lack of love rather than an overabundance as Dante thought, but here the Ego’s self-love is faulty because it loves

itself at the expense of loving others, thus imprisoning itself in its own contracted, self-referential existence.

At this point in the poem, the Ego undergoes yet another transformation, from a committed lunatic to a witch: “A witch self-tortured . . . / . . . / She worships in obscene delight / The Not, the Never, and the Night” (*CP* 235). The Ego, once obsessed with its own self-consciousness, now gazes below into its own unconscious, the Id in Freudian terms, and its desire reaches for privations. Auden identifies this witch figure with the Wagnerian hero who “exists to suffer” and is fascinated with his own faults (*CP* 236). The Ego has regressed from the atmospheric self-consciousness to the madness of self-absorption, and finally to the witchcraft of self-worship. But what the Ego finds to worship in the self is expressed in almost totally negative terms: “Not,” “Never,” “Night,” as well as “The formless Mass without a Me,” a reference to the pre-human world of Genesis in which “the earth was without form” (1.2). The Ego is now stripped down to the *Eros* and *Thanatos* drives—the survival instinct and the death wish, respectively¹³—which Auden reminds us are really “Synonymous with one another” (*CP* 236). The Ego wishes to be not-itself by relinquishing self-consciousness and returning to the pre-conscious fetal state in the mother’s womb, either in sex or in death, but the recognition of this fact by the Ego does not solve the problem of self-consciousness. In fact, Auden is implying that psychoanalysis makes the problem of self-consciousness

¹³Auden’s definition of *eros* is somewhat different from Freud’s. Whereas Freud would use the term to describe the drive to seek pleasure, Auden used it to describe a wider range of biological and psychological impulses, including the drives to nourish oneself and to reproduce. As we shall see in later chapters, Auden thought of *eros* primarily as a set of physical desires that he associated with the survival instinct.

worse, and the Ego is pictured as a witch because she has taken to worshipping privations, which are the essence of evil.

Auden likens the privation-worshipping witch to the heroes and heroines that were put on stage by Wagner, whom Auden calls in his notes “the greatest of the Romantic artists, because he carries the Romantic heresy—the exaltation of causal necessity over logical necessity—further than any other” (NYL 143). That is, Wagner’s plots revolve around characters who know beforehand that their choices will have tragic results but make them anyway, so “their actions deny their knowledge and, even as psychology, that is absurd,” for the characters consciously act contrary to self-interest, which Auden believed was impossible (NYL 144). The characters embody what Auden calls “the Romantic heresy” because they act totally on the basis of irrationality; they serve Auden’s purposes because they reveal the absurdity of Rousseau’s glorification of the irrational, though they serve Wagner’s purposes because they “*allow Wagner to go on writing music*,” which Auden indicates is reason enough to put such characters in an opera (NYL 144). However, they are realistic in one sense. As Auden says, “The real motto of all his characters is, *the show must go on*” (NYL 144). Most people, when faced with the absurdity and despair of self-consciousness, must ignore it in order to go on living. Auden’s poem, too, must go on, and it quickly shifts back to the modern world, this time to closing-time at American bars, when “The revelers go home to change / Back into something far more strange, / The tightened self in which they may / Walk safely through their bothered day” (CP 236). Auden plays on two senses of the word “tight,” as the revelers are “tight” (drunk, in British slang) after being at the bars, but they will go

home and become “tight” in the sense of constricted or repressed in order to go on living as though nothing were wrong.

In America it may seem that “WINTHROP’s Little Speech” about America becoming the City on a Hill actually founded a brand new society, but the old human problem of false dualism followed the immigrants across the Atlantic (*CP* 237). It has been “Long since inventive JEFFERSON / Fought Realistic HAMILTON, / Pelagian versus Jansenist; / But the same heresies exist” (*CP* 237). In his note on this line, Auden translates the political battle between Jefferson and Hamilton into economic terms, saying that “the Haves are usually Pelagians, the Have-nots Jansenists,” because the rich think the poor are poor by their own free will, and the poor think they are poor because the rich predestined them to be so (*NYL* 149). The Pelagian heresy, propounded by Pelagius in the fourth century and denounced by Augustine, taught that humans could achieve salvation by strength of will alone and could live sinlessly without divine assistance, while the Jansenist heresy, developed by a seventeenth-century Catholic sect, taught that man had no free will whatsoever and relied entirely on grace for salvation. They are both extreme examples of the ongoing philosophical and theological debates between free will and divine necessity, or as Auden puts it, “round the freedom of the Will, / Our disagreements centre still” (*CP* 237). To deny either free will or causal necessity is to acquiesce to one heretical dualism or another.

Human nature does not change with geography, but America does provide the poet with a clearer view of human nature. He pictures the almost nomadic nature of American society as a collection of commuters, migratory vacationers, hitch-hikers, all reminiscent of the mythic pioneers, all searching for paradise (*CP* 237-38). The

technological advancement of America, especially in means of transport, does not open up new possibilities for social organization, but it does make the constraints on social development obvious:

More even than in Europe, here
The choice of patterns is made clear
Which the machine imposes, what
Is possible and what is not,
To what conditions we must bow
In building our Just City now. (*CP* 238).

Throughout the poem, Auden has been concerned with the development of a just society, but he has also recognized that a coherent society cannot be made up of psychologically incoherent individuals, and that impossibility is only exacerbated by the technology that the poet sees at work in the American populace. Auden was himself no Luddite or Agrarian, having been fascinated by industry and machines ever since his childhood in Northern England's mining country, but he observes "That the machine has now destroyed / The local customs we enjoyed, / Replaced the bonds of blood and nation / By personal confederation" (*CP* 238). Americans are not unified by the accidental fact that they happen to live in the same place, for they always have the choice to move elsewhere, and so a society is now more than ever based on the personal choices of its members, even though there is no clear basis upon which the members can choose. This is not, Auden reminds us, a new development in the evolution of society; rather, "The secret that was always true / But known once only to the few, / Compelling all to the admission, / Aloneness is man's real condition" (*CP* 238). There is, it turns out, only one condition that limits the building of the Just City: humans' inevitable isolation from each other. This was less obvious when only the rich and privileged could become adventurers, but in America, every salesman, middle manager, and subway rider is a knight errant seeking

his fortune, which, while potentially exciting, also points up their fundamental isolation from each other.

Auden observes that Asia, too, is becoming mechanized with similar results, even while most people dream of the perfect society in which it is “easy to be good, / And cheap,” and in “Whose form is truth, whose content love” (CP 240). He pictures a society in which State and individual, the One and the many, co-inhere perfectly, “Where Freedom dwells because it must, / Necessity because it can, / And men confederate in Man” (CP 240). But Auden quickly punctures his own utopian bubble:

But wishes are not horses, this
Annus is not *mirabilis*;
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. (CP 240).

A society cannot be built on well-intentioned voluntary associations, and the sloganeering and demagoguery of Western politics does not look particularly promising either. The way forward, Auden concludes, is not ideology or campaigning. Instead, “All that we can always say / Is: true democracy begins / With free confession of our sins” (CP 241). Real democracy can be based on confession because confession is one activity that shows all people as completely equal, and confession must be free, not compelled.¹⁴ “New Year Letter” becomes Auden’s own way of confessing that he does not have an answer to the

¹⁴Auden is not claiming that awareness of a problem is the same as solving it. In his mind, there is a clear difference between mere acknowledgement of the problem in general and a real confession of sins. As Caliban insists in *The Sea and the Mirror*, it is only a delusion that the solution consists of acknowledging the problem (CP 442). Real confession, on the other hand, involves being truly sorry for one’s sin, admitting one’s personal guilt, and making restitution or satisfaction for the damage one has caused. See, for example, Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale*, which explains the matter in thorough detail.

world's ills. It is the emergent confessional nature of the poem that most clearly places it in the tradition of confessional literature, not the least of which is Augustine's *Confessions*.

While the poet does not claim to offer a solution for the world's problems, he does make two confident assertions. First, human needs and abilities make society necessary, for "all have wants to satisfy / And each a power to supply" (*CP* 241). This is almost a paraphrase of the Marxist slogan, "From each according to his ability; to each according to his need," except that Auden does not offer it as an imperative but as a statement of fact. Each member of any society does both contribute to society and draw resources from it, and the society would not exist at all if this were not the case. He is not suggesting that, after all, communism will produce Utopia, for the communist society would have to be made up of fallen, selfish human beings, and so Marx is subject to the same critique to which Auden subjects Plato and Rousseau: none of them take into account the fall of humans into selfish and divided self-consciousness.

But the fall into self-consciousness is not a complete disaster after all, and this is the second thing of which the poet is sure. As he said at the beginning of Part III, the garden of innocence "must be lost to be regained," and for Auden this loss occurred in the limestone uplands of northern England where "In ROOKHOPE I was first aware / Of Self and Not-self, Death and Dread" (*CP* 221). While his own fall into self-consciousness entailed an awareness of death, it also made love possible and necessary, for "We need to love all since we are / Each a unique particular / . . . / We can love each because we know / All, all of us, that this is so" (*CP* 241). Love of the other begins with a recognition that there is a difference between Self and Not-self, between I and Thou,

and even though the recognition of difference can only occur after the fall into self-consciousness, that difference is paradoxically the basis of equality.¹⁵ Once the Other is recognized as equal, it is possible to become the Double Man in Charles Williams's sense, one who can "bear one another's burdens" in love and make up for the other's deficiencies (Galatians 6.2). Mutual recognition of quality in difference makes love possible, but not inevitable, since difference can just as easily make selfishness and violence possible.

Near the end of the poem, Auden points out the distinct limitations of human perspective, and thus of humans' ability to achieve anything like a just society: "Ashamed civilians come to grief / In brotherhoods without belief, / Whose good intentions cannot cure / The actual evils they endure" (*CP* 240). At the same time, it is exactly those limitations and common faults that reveal the basic equality of the human race, and a few lines later, Auden suggests that this equality of guilt might be a tentative starting point for social justice:

. . . all that we can always say
Is: true democracy begins
With free confession of our sins.
In this alone are all the same,
All are so weak that none dare claim
"I have the right to govern," or
"Behold in me the Moral Law" . . . (*CP* 241).

But if "confession of our sins" is a necessary prerequisite to a free and just social order, there must be someone to whom all humans can confess. "New Year Letter" was initially addressed to Elizabeth Mayer, but at the poem's end, Auden directly addresses someone

¹⁵John Fuller explains that Auden borrowed this idea from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (*W. H. Auden* 352). Buber first explained the significance of the I/Thou dichotomy in a 1923 essay *Ich und Du*, which was first translated into English in 1937. It is not clear which version Auden would have read.

else—God—in a prayer that appropriately ends with a line from Augustine’s *Confessions* (CP 242).

It is not clear from the poem’s language whether his understanding of God falls within orthodox Christian Trinitarianism (which he would soon accept explicitly), or whether he is addressing a protean deity of his own imagining. The prayer runs, in part,

O Unicorn among the cedars,
To whom no magic charm can lead us,
White childhood moving like a sigh
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. . . . (CP 241-42)

The prayer addresses a hidden deity with many names, most of which are drawn from Christian tradition: Unicorn, Dove, Ichthus, Wind, Voice, and finally in the words of Augustine, *Domine*, or Lord (CP 241-2). But Auden also uses names like Clock and Keeper of the years, which is not necessarily a Christian reference (CP 242). Nor is the epithet, “It without image . . .,” a name that suggests Auden does not yet have the Incarnation in view. As Mendelson points out, Auden would have found most of these names in Williams’ *Descent of the Dove*, and regardless of the deity’s exact identity, the

poem has clearly moved much closer to Christianity than any of Auden's previous poems had. The prayer asks for conviction, for instruction, and for strength, and it ends with a quotation from Book 10.29 of Augustine's *Confessions*, "*O da quod jubes, Domine,*" a phrase he likely took from Williams' book.¹⁶ Translated, it means "O give what you command, Lord." The line is taken, slightly-altered, from book ten of the *Confessions*, where it refers specifically to chastity but also suggests Augustine's broader recognition that he is incapable of obeying any of God's commands unless God also gives him the grace to believe and obey. Auden quoted the line again a few months later in a book review, in which he claimed, "Augustine . . . was not denying free will, but only saying that in order to will you must first believe that you can" (*Prose II* 88). So at this point in his life, Auden was interpreting the passage as an affirmation of free will, which accords with the "free confession of our sins" (*CP* 241) with which Auden prefaces the prayer.

It is not clear from the prayer itself whether the end of "New Year Letter" represents an acceptance of creedal Christianity or not, but extratextual evidence suggests that Auden did not yet consider himself a Christian when he wrote the lines. Mendelson reports that in March 1940 Williams wrote to his wife and mentioned that Auden had written him a letter saying "he just wanted to tell me how moved he was by the Dove (and he no Christian)" (qtd. in *LA* 125); presumably Auden told Williams explicitly that

¹⁶While both Mendelson and Kirsch suggest that Auden found the phrase in Williams, *The Descent of the Dove* does not give the phrase exactly as it appears in the poem. First Williams offers an English translation that includes some of the original context: "Command chastity; give what thou commandest, and command what thou wilt!" (65). Then he gives part of it in Latin, "*da quod iubes.*" Auden expands the line to read, "*O da quod jubes, Domine,*" adding the word "*Domine,*" Latin for "Lord, which is not a part of the line either in Williams or in Augustine" (Williams 66, *CP* 242). Auden's alteration was likely driven as much by the need to incorporate the quotation into a tetrameter line as it was by the desire to name the prayer's addressee.

he was not a Christian. Auden would not begin attending church until the autumn of 1940, and then only “in a tentative and experimental way,” as he put it, when he had already finished the “New Year Letter” (qtd. in *LA* 148). Monroe Spears suggests that the Christian language in “New Year Letter” is mythic and is entertained as a theoretical possibility and even a cultural necessity, but that the poem nevertheless “hesitates on the edge of belief” (*Poetry* 172). The poem is tentatively theistic, though as Mendelson states, “Auden hoped to receive instruction and strength from the divinity he had prayed to earlier. But it was Elizabeth Mayer to whom he looked for forgiveness” (*LA* 126). The poem’s second, final prayer is a direct address to Mayer, to whom the entire poem is dedicated. Perhaps it seemed inappropriate at the end of the epistle to neglect the first addressee, even for God, but it is certainly an appropriate ending given the poem’s concern with building a just society. In any event, he expresses his gratitude for Mayer’s forbearance and forgiveness, which leads Auden to remind himself that “Our life and death are with our neighbor” (*CP* 243). He has embraced the second most important command, to love one’s neighbor as oneself, and he is on his way to acknowledging the first, to love God (Matthew 22.37-39). The poem does not reflect a conversion as such, but it does represent one important step towards Auden’s eventual embrace of Christianity.

Auden had intuited long ago that the solution to the world’s problems had something to do with love, but he had first to define those problems in a coherent, meaningful way. Mendelson’s *Early Auden* details Auden’s early attempts to define the world’s (and his own) problems in biological, political, psychological, or even theological terms, but in “The Prolific and the Devourer” first and then shortly afterward

in “New Year Letter” Auden had settled on the Augustinian definition of evil as privation, which he came to believe could account for psychological and social evil in all its guises. Evil consists in a deprivation of some kind, so psychologically speaking evil is the fragmentation of the consciousness in which many selves compete with each other for dominance. Political and social evil arises from the inner conflicts within each person, and social evils consist mainly of exploitative relationships, which are by definition bad relationships because they lack love. The opposite of love, which accepts differences in the Other, is dualism, which rejects one difference in favor of its opposite. From the 1940s on, Auden tended to refer to most any false dualism as “Manichaeism,” though he did recognize the historical form of Manichaeism, as when he stated in a 1940 essay, “Mimesis and Allegory,” that “by rejecting as heresies both Arianism and Manicheism, the Christian Church was able to relate the universal to the particular, the spiritual to the material, and made the technical advance of civilization possible” (*Prose II* 79). So for Auden the term “Manichee” has specific historical connotations even though he often applies it to those dualisms which denigrate the body, an emphasis that he doubtless takes from Augustine’s description of Manichean heresies.

Auden also casts his account of the origin of evil in explicitly Christian terms, though he sees them as mythic, or at least pre-historical. As a modern poet, Auden operates from a Freudian evolutionary standpoint which reads the story of the Fall in Genesis as a myth describing the emergence of self-consciousness. The first man and woman eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and they then recognize their own nakedness and are ashamed, which suggests that they gained secret knowledge that produced self-consciousness. The point of the story for Auden is not that Adam and Eve

violated a divine command, but that they achieved a different sort of consciousness than they had before and therefore separated themselves from the natural world, from each other, and even from themselves. As Auden says in “The Prolific and the Devourer,” “The Fall is repeated in the life history of each individual, so that we have a double memory of Eden, one from personal experience, and one social-historical” (*Prose II* 472). That is, the first humans were distinguished by the first Fall into self-consciousness sometime in the depths of pre-history, but each individual person reenacts the mythic event with the dawning of self-consciousness in childhood.

Many years after writing “New Year Letter” and entering Anglican communion, in his essay on introduction to *The Protestant Mystics* (1964), Auden described the Fall in less Freudian and more Augustinian terms:

As St. Augustine, following St. James, says: “Man was created in order that beginning might be made.” The dogma of the descent of all mankind from a single ancestor, Adam, is not, and should never have been imagined to be, a statement about man’s biological evolution. It asserts that, insofar as he or she is a unique person, every man and woman, irrespective of race, nation, culture and sex, *is* Adam, an incarnation of all mankind; that, as persons, we are called into being, not by any biological process but by other persons, God, our parents, our friends and enemies. And it is as persons, not as members of a species, that we become guilty of sin. When we speak of being “born in sin,” of inheriting the original sin of Adam, this cannot mean, it seems to me—I speak as a fool—that sin is physically present in our flesh and our genes. Our flesh, surely, is not in itself sinful, but our every bodily movement, touch, gesture, tone of voice is that of a sinner. From the moment consciousness first wakes in a baby, (and this may be before birth) it finds itself in the company of sinners, and its consciousness is affected by a contagion against which there is no prophylaxis. (*FA* 53-54)

Like Auden, Augustine believed that the creation account in Genesis was more significant as allegory than as historical narrative,¹⁷ and in book thirteen of the *Confessions* he interprets the first chapter of Genesis as allegorically prefiguring the Christian Church. Unlike Auden, Augustine never identified self-consciousness with sin. For Augustine, sin was largely a conscious choice, so it would seem that for him self-consciousness was a necessary prerequisite to the Fall. But Augustine also noted in book one of the *Confessions* that not even babies are innocent of sin (*C* 1.7), and Auden’s account of original sin comes close to Augustine’s sentiments. From the late 1930s onward, Auden would continue to speak of evil consistently in terms of privation, which he drew from Augustine, and like Augustine he would eventually conclude that God was the goodness that was missing from the fallen human race. Even in “New Year Letter,” which Auden completed before he began attending church and well before he began calling himself a Christian, Auden’s prayer to the absconded deity shows that he was seriously considering Christian theism as a possible remedy for the social and psychological privations that lay at the root of all human ills. The next chapter will address the ways in which Auden continued to describe evil as privation in his later poetry, and the ways in which his understanding of evil became more explicitly theological as he embraced Christianity. Further chapters will address the ways in which

¹⁷Throughout book thirteen, Augustine interprets each event in the creation story as pertaining symbolically to the church. His discussions of the creation of aquatic life and of humans become occasions for meditating on the rich polyvalence of Scripture (*C* 13.20-22, 24). Of the first verse of Genesis—“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”—Augustine says, “Cannot this bear many interpretations, not including misleading errors, but true interpretations of different kinds? In the same way the offspring of human beings ‘increase and multiply’” (*C* 13.24). Augustine’s reading of the creation story does not deny the historicity of the Biblical creation story, but it does hold the spiritual significance of the story to be more important.

Auden drew on Augustine to articulate the logical corollary to the idea of evil as privation that all existence, and particularly the physical world, remains fundamentally good despite the Fall.

CHAPTER THREE

Evil as Privation (II)

Religion and culture seem to be represented by a catholic belief that something is lacking which must be found. . . .

—W. H. Auden “The Sea and the Mirror”

Between the autumn of 1939 and the summer of 1941, during which time he wrote “New Year Letter,” Auden underwent a series of personal events and crises that brought him fully back to Christianity. In his essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, Auden identifies his reading of Kierkegaard, among what he calls “some theological works,” as important factors in his return to the Christian faith (*MCP* 41). It is not entirely clear what works other than Kierkegaard he read at that time, though the notes to “New Year Letter” contain quotations from Pascal and Paul Tillich, and a page later he favorably compares Kierkegaard’s existentialism with Augustine’s exploration of the interaction of free will with faith and grace in the human consciousness (*MCP* 42). In a 1945 essay Auden claimed that Augustine, along with Pascal and Kierkegaard, were some of his initial theological influences (*Prose II* 248), so it is very likely that Augustine was one of the theologians whom Auden was reading between 1939 and 1941. But in addition to Augustine, Auden was reading contemporary works that would have made him acutely aware of Augustine’s thought. One of these books was Williams’ *Descent of the Dove*, but another was Charles Norris Cochrane’s 1940 *Christianity and Classical Culture*, whose importance to Auden’s intellectual development will be treated more extensively in the next chapter. It is not clear exactly when Auden first read Cochrane, but in a 1944 review of the revised edition, he claimed to have read it “many times” since

its original publication (*FA* 33). Soon after the book's publication, Auden began drawing heavily from Cochrane account of Augustine's confrontation of Classical philosophy.

Christianity and Classical Culture is part history, part political philosophy, and part theology; in some ways it is an early and admirable example of what would come to be called "cultural studies" later in the twentieth century. Auden's own summary of Cochrane's book is highly accurate:

It is divided into three sections. The first, "Reconstruction," describes the attempt of the Principate to justify itself as the political form which could best realize the good life on earth as envisaged by classical philosophy. It traces the fortunes of the New Order, from its foundation by Augustus, attended by the hopes of all civilized mankind, to its collapse after the death of Diocletian. The second, "Renovation," beginning with the edict of Milan in 313 A.D. and ending with an edict of 403 which authorized private individuals 'to exercise with impunity the right of public vengeance against criminals,' describes the futile attempt, interrupted by the platonist Julian, of the last Caesars to give the dying empire a new lease of life by substituting Christianity for philosophy as a state religion. The last section, "Regeneration," is an exposition of the writings of St. Augustine, in particular of his views of the doctrine of the Trinity, the State and Divine Providence in history. (*FA* 33)

In essence, the last section of *Christianity and Classical Culture* describes the ways in which Augustine's theology solved many of the theoretical problems that had plagued the irreconcilable classical philosophies of idealism and materialism.

Cochrane explains that one of the many significant philosophical problems that classical philosophy was unable to solve was the nature of evil, so Augustine's theory of evil as privation is a direct response to classical philosophy:

Accordingly, [Augustine] places himself squarely in opposition to those who, from whatever standpoint, admit a 'cause of will' independent of the willing subject. Conspicuous among such persons were the Manicheans who, by recognizing a 'principle of evil', frankly acknowledged the existence of such a 'natural' or 'essential' cause of evil will. But Augustine was no less concerned to expose the error of the Platonists

which, as he insisted, rested upon a false antithesis between body and soul.
(447)

That is, Augustine denounced both Manichaeism and Platonism as forms of false dualism. As Cochrane explains that Augustine's definition of evil, far from dismissing the seriousness of evil, actually reinforces the fact that evil has great power because of its pervasiveness:

From this Augustine concludes that sin is due originally to a corruption, not of body but of soul. As such, it begins with a wrong determination of the will and develops as the result of physical satisfactions derived therefrom, until it is finally confirmed by the bond of habit. Its consequences are thus insidious, far-reaching, and cumulative; the ultimate nemesis being frustration or self-defeat through the loss of genuine freedom and power. (449)

Evil cannot therefore be defeated by legal action or political pressure because it infects every human being, including those who make and enforce the law. The corruption of each human will produces ignorance of the principles of love and justice, and it cripples the mind's ability to resist additional seductions, plunging it ever deeper into hatred, selfishness, and despair. Every corrupted person, Cochrane states, "may thus be described as a slave to sin, that is, to his own aberrations of mind and heart" (449).

Auden likely read these words either while he was working on "New Year Letter" or shortly after he completed it, so Cochrane's summary of Augustine's definition of evil resonated strongly with him. "New Year Letter" had advanced a very similar argument: that all evil could be traced to an insidious corruption of the human mind. But "New Year Letter" is less emphatic about how evil might be addressed and corrected in the day-to-day world, but the poem does suggest that the mode of thought it calls "double-focus" is the way to resist the corruption of one's own mind. The poem claims that the Devil

may never tell us lies,

Just half-truths we can synthesize.
So, hidden in his hocus-pocus,
There lies the gift of double-focus. (*CP* 220)

If evil is the absence of goodness, then a lie is the absence of truth. Yet Auden reasons that every lie, in order to be convincing, must still contain some measure of truth, so each diabolical lie may paradoxically reveal an element of truth that must be recognized and synthesized with other truths found in other lies. Auden's statement is very similar to Cochrane's distillation of passages of Augustine's *City of God*, among other works:

In other words the nature even of the devil, in so far as it is a nature, is good; *even his lies, in order to serve their purpose as lies, must have verisimilitude, i.e. they must be interspersed with elements of truth.* The goodness and truth which are thus original in nature are, moreover, final to it. In the secular conflict with sin and error they are substance confronting shadow, unity division, the whole a distorted and partial image, a mere parody of itself. In such a conflict who can doubt to which side final victory must belong? Accordingly, the apparently irreconcilable antitheses which present themselves everywhere in nature are not to be accepted as ultimate. (513, emphasis added)

The two passages are strikingly similar in their characterization of the Devil's lies as half-truths in which truth can never be wholly effaced, and since *Christianity and Classical Culture* was published in 1940, it is possible that Auden was already reading it as he was drafting "New Year Letter." On the other hand, Auden would have been writing that passage during the early spring of 1940, so he would have had to procure and digest Cochrane's book very quickly after it was released in order to work Cochrane's ideas into his poem. Furthermore, he had already argued in "The Prolific and the Devourer" in 1939 that evil consists of privation, and from that idea it is a short logical step to the conclusion that lies must contain an element of truth. So even if the passage from "New Year Letter" is not drawing directly on Cochrane, the similarities of Cochrane's words to those in "New Year Letter" could hardly have escaped Auden's notice. But Auden had

certainly read Cochrane by the time he started on his next long poem “For the Time Being,” which he wrote between October 1941 and July 1942. But the significant influence of *Christianity and Classical Culture* on that poem will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

“For the Time Being”

After 1940, both Charles Williams and Cochrane provided Auden with more theological vocabulary in which he could continue to make reference to evil in terms of privation and dualism, although after “New Year Letter” Auden would never again explore the nature of evil at such length. However, “For the Time Being,” Auden’s Christmas oratorio, regularly refers to evil in terms of privation, which the Incarnation subsequently repairs. While the oratorio does follow the form of the traditional oratorio in the sense that the speakers are only voices and not really actors, it also suggests the medieval mystery play in which the biblical story is represented by actors in contemporary modes of dress and speech. Thus, Simeon becomes a modern philosopher, the shepherds represent the working classes, and Herod is a liberal humanist dictator. In this way, Auden is able to draw some convincing parallels between the story’s original setting in the early first century and his own time in the mid-twentieth century by recasting the political conflicts of the time as psychological conflicts. In “New Year Letter” he had argued that all social and political ills are rooted in psychological fragmentation in each individual, himself included, and this same assessment underpins “For the Time Being.”

The second part of the poem, entitled “The Annunciation,” begins, not with Gabriel and Mary, but with the Four Faculties as distinguished by Jung: Intuition,

Feeling, Sensation, and Thought. Together they identify themselves as dissociated parts of the human psyche, saying “We who are four were / Once but one, / Before his act of / Rebellion” (CP 355). Deprived of their co-inherence with the self in the unfallen mind, “His error became our / Chance to be” (CP 355). The divided nature of the human person goes all the way down to the cellular level, as a later Boys’ Semi-Chorus says in a prayer to Sts. Joseph and Mary:

Joseph, Mary, pray for us,
Independent embryos who,
Unconscious in another, do
Evil as each creature does
In every definite decision
To improve; for even in
The germ-cell’s primary division
Innocence is lost and sin,
Already given as a fact,
Once more issues as an act. (CP 366)

The semi-chorus speaks in the voice of pre-conscious, pre-sexual embryos who, nevertheless, are subject to the division that constitutes evil since even individual cells reproduce asexually by fission, which Auden represents as a foreshadowing of the divided consciousness that will inevitably emerge later in the speakers’ lives. The pre-conscious embryos imply that their development is inherently selfish and takes place at the expense of another and is therefore evil, though not yet sinful because not conscious. In “The Prolific and the Devourer” Auden had distinguished between the evil committed unconsciously by animals and the sin committed consciously by adult humans (*Prose II* 426-7), but this passage in “For the Time Being” reveals a disturbing continuity between animal evil and human sin.

The passage recalls one of the most controversial passages in Augustine’s *Confessions* in which Augustine traces his own rebellious selfishness as far back as his

own infancy. Augustine says that, even though he does not remember his own infancy, “I have personally watched and studied a jealous baby. He could not yet speak and, pale with jealousy and bitterness, glared at his brother sharing his mother’s milk. Who is unaware of this fact of experience?” (1.7). Augustine continues, saying that “people smilingly tolerate this behavior, not because it is nothing or only a trivial matter, but because with coming of age it will pass away” (1.7). If children do carry such greed and jealousy into adulthood, they are sternly rebuked (1.7). Like Augustine, Auden suggests that the trajectory towards the future, conscious choice to sin has already been established at conception. Some years later Auden would say in *The Dyer’s Hand* that “No human being is innocent, but small children are not yet personally guilty” (415), so he would not hold a baby judicially guilty of willful sin. However, he also notes in a later essay, “From the moment consciousness first wakes in a baby (and this may possibly be before birth) it finds itself in the company of sinners, and its consciousness is affected by a contagion against which there is no prophylaxis” (*FA* 54). Auden indicates that no human being, however young, is able to escape the sinful destiny established by its circumstances, so while Auden’s sense of “original sin” may be slightly less severe than that of Augustine, Auden’s version is a recognizable version of Augustine, who apparently coined the term “original sin” in the *Confessions* (5.9).

According to Gabriel, who speaks directly after the Four Faculties in “For the Time Being,” that trajectory of all humans towards sin was set by Eve, who, “in love with her own will, / Denied the will of Love and fell” (*CP* 359). Mary, then, becomes an antitype of Eve, whose fall was a privation of wholeness. As Gabriel tells Mary, “What her negation wounded, may / Your affirmation heal to-day; / Love’s will requires your

own...” (*CP* 359). Even if Eve did not fall through willful selfishness and rejection of God, but rather through an emergent self-consciousness, Mary can begin to repair the fall through her own willful acceptance of Christ’s presence in her body. For Auden evil is a negation, even of the will, and so restoration must take the form of a willful affirmation. I will have more to say about this affirmation in the next chapter, but the important point here is that throughout “For the Time Being” Auden continues to think of evil largely in terms of privation, and especially as a psychological privation of single-mindedness—witness the narrator’s words to Joseph and Mary: “Sin fractures the Vision, not the Fact” (*CP* 365).

The nature of evil as privation is more subtle in the most obvious manifestation of evil in the poem, “The Massacre of the Innocents,” which is spoken by a modernized Herod the Great. He does not speak in terms of privation as explicitly as do Gabriel and the Four Faculties, but his speech is immediately recognizable as the product of dualistic thinking, which Auden always associates with Manichaeism as described by Augustine. At the outset, Herod admits that he has to make a decision about what to do with the newborn Christ, but he virtually renounces his own free will, saying “my decision must be in conformity with Nature and Necessity” (390). He then expresses his gratitude to his parents and teachers who have formed his nature and have, as far as he is concerned, turned every choice he makes into a foregone conclusion. Herod is a Platonic dualist who believes that knowledge is equivalent to virtue, and so he fears the loss of “objective truths perceptible to any who will undergo the necessary intellectual discipline, and the same for all” (*CP* 393).

When he begins his monologue, Herod has already executed a twenty-year campaign to banish all forms of irrationality from his realm. He has outlawed crystals, ouija-boards, and alchemy, and now crime rates are down, food supplies are steady, and the economy is growing (*CP* 392-92). But still, Herod laments the fact that magic and many other forms of the irrational are still prevalent, complaining that “to my certain knowledge, the captain of my own guard wears an amulet against the Evil Eye, and the richest merchant in the city consults a medium over every important transaction” (*CP* 392). Not the least among Herod’s accomplishments is that he is the one fictional dictator in twentieth-century literature who manages to make his dystopia attractive.¹ A society that values allotment gardening and fair prices for soft drinks and sandwiches looks vastly superior to a barbaric society in which “Mongolian idiots are regarded as sacred and mothers who give birth to twins are instantly put to death” (*CP* 391). But Herod’s state is a dystopia. His subjects have not willingly chosen to live in his perfectly rational society, and so he must impose rationality by force. The problem is that the covert barbarians within Herod’s realm are just as much dualists as Herod is. The opposing dualisms of Herod’s dystopic Judea are largely drawn from Cochrane’s account of the philosophical antitheses that plagued classical civic theory: “To Classicism morality is a matter *either* of emotion *or* of reason. The former it regards as subjective, particularist, barbarian; the other as objective, universal, the morality of civilized man”

¹When Auden was writing “For the Time Being,” Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* had already been written, though Orwell’s *1984* had not. It is a testament to Auden’s rhetorical power that while both novels give voice to their respective dictatorships, neither one manages to make their respective dystopias quite as attractive as Auden’s Herod does. Fuller observes that Herod is effective “not as Hitler, but as a representative of those attitudes which have no ultimate sanction against a Hitler” (*W. H. Auden* 353).

(Cochrane 507). Auden sets of Herod as an exemplar of the Platonic dualism that Cochrane identifies attempting always to resist the subjectivist materialism of what it sees as irrational barbarism.

The clearest expression of Herod's Platonic dualism is his complaint that if the Christ child is allowed to live, "Idealism will be replaced by Materialism" (*CP* 393). Herod's language here is drawn directly from Cochrane, who explains that classical philosophy "falls into two general divisions, (1) that of classical materialism, and (2) that of classical idealism; the former of which envisages the cosmos as one big machine, the later as one big soul" (508). Cochrane's subsequent analysis of Augustine's response to these divisions helps explain why Auden chose to characterize Herod as a platonic idealist:

To Augustine the machine-cosmology is so grotesque that it hardly merits the attention of a serious thinker. . . . The other, the one-big-soul cosmology, was . . . much more seductive and dangerous, inasmuch as it appealed to the spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice which is one of the fundamental and most deep-seated instincts of the race. Yet it evoked this spirit only to degrade, pervert, and destroy it. . . . What it demanded was, in effect, that the individual should abnegate his God-given status, in order to prostrate himself before, not a reality but a figment of his own imagination, the so-called 'group spirit' as exemplified in family, class, or state. (508-9)

For Auden no less than Augustine as presented by Cochrane, the "liberal" idealism represented by Herod is highly attractive, first because of its strong emphasis on reason and knowledge, but also because of its ability to inspire loyalty to social and political associations. While Platonism as Cochrane presents it is a form of false dualism, it can nevertheless be the source of significant political power as Herod's republic demonstrates. Because it primarily seeks to suppress all forms of irrationality, it is very difficult to refute on the grounds of pure rationality.

The flaw in Herod's idealism is not a strictly logical flaw, but a moral one. The logic of his political idealism necessitates the murder of innocent children. Herod assumes that his resistance to the Christ child is just another step in his campaign against the romantic materialists who argue, "I like committing crimes, God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged" (*CP* 395). Were it not for the epigraph to the poem from Romans 6.1 ("What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid."), Herod's assessment of his battle against Romanticism would seem quite compelling (*CP* 347). It is in the best interests of civilization to maintain law and order, and if this child is about to disrupt the entire social order that Herod has spend his life building, then the child must be killed. But of course, Herod is wrong. Even though he cannot imagine a world in which rationality co-inheres with magical rites and law co-inheres with mercy, that is exactly the world that Christ has come to build in place of both Herod's Republic and the barbarians' wilderness. To his credit, Herod attempts to imagine what would happen, hypothetically, if "this child is in some inexplicable manner both God and Man," but he concludes that if it were so, "God would expect every man, whatever his fortune, to lead a sinless life in the flesh and on earth" (*CP* 394). "Then indeed," he continues, "would the human race be plunged into madness and despair," as if he does not think that his Romantic barbarian opponents are not already subject to madness and despair (*CP* 394). He momentarily tries and fails to imagine something that transcends his own Platonic dualism, and he therefore plunges himself into despair. He ends his speech saying, "I wish I had never been born" (*CP* 394).

The coming of Christianity does not, as Herod imagines, entail a plunge into irrationalism, but it will reveal the futility of his attempt to establish a perfectly rational society. It will open up an answer to the existential crisis faced by people whose options have heretofore consisted of competing dualisms. To those who accept the Incarnation in which opposites co-inhere, the final chorus of “For the Time Being” offers not security and serenity, but increased tension. “He is the Way,” the chorus says, “Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness” (*CP* 400). The phrase “Land of Unlikeness” is taken from Pusey’s translation of Augustine’s *Confessions*, in a passage in which Augustine looks back at his youth and remarks, “I perceived myself to be far off from Thee, in the region of unlikeness [*in regione dissimilitudinis*]” (7.10).² Auden’s appropriation of this phrase suggests that, paradoxically, the Incarnation has both brought God near to humanity and revealed the great remaining distance between humans and God. It is a testament to Auden’s interest in Augustine that he ended both “New Year Letter” and “For the Time Being” with quotations from the *Confessions*.³

After “For the Time Being,” the nature of evil as privation is not so much explained as assumed in Auden’s poetic works. Spears has noted that “For the Time Being” “is the fullest and most balanced expression of Auden’s religious attitudes; the ideas and dominant images that have been seen partially and transitionally in other poems here may be seen in their final place as part of an ordered whole” (*Poetry* 206). It is

²Fuller states that Auden borrowed the quotation from Chester Kallman (*W. H. Auden* 355).

³Mendelson notes that there were more references to Augustine in early drafts of “For the Time Being” (*LA* 214). One of these references, to Augustine’s statement that he would rather have been deprived of his friend than of his grief (*C* 4.6), was eventually used as part of Prospero’s speech in “The Sea and the Mirror.”

reasonable, then, that some of Auden's theological assumptions would recede into the background of his subsequent poetry instead of being foregrounded as they are in "New Year Letter" and "For the Time Being." "For the Time Being" does indeed remain the most explicitly religious and theological work that Auden would ever attempt, and while his later poetry often has religious overtones and deep theological implications, it does not explore the nature of evil in such explicit depth again.

"The Sea and the Mirror"

"For the Time Being" was first published alongside another long poem of Auden's, "The Sea and the Mirror," and while "The Sea and the Mirror" came first in the volume, it was written after "For the Time Being."⁴ The publication sequence reflects a logical progression in theme, since "The Sea and the Mirror" ends by positing the world's need for God, and "For the Time Being" examines God's entry into the world. The poems are quite different from each other, but they do share some similar concerns about human nature and social order, as well as a definite philosophical underpinning that maintains the Augustinian view of evil as privation that Auden had articulated explicitly in "New Year Letter." While "The Sea and the Mirror" is not as explicitly theological as "For the Time Being," dealing as it does with the difficult relationship between Art and Life,⁵ it does contain several passages that express doubt about the false dualisms that

⁴According to the dates given for the poems in the *Collected Poems*, "For the Time Being" was begun in October 1941 and completed in July 1942. Auden then quickly started on "The Sea and the Mirror" in August 1942 and completed it in February 1944. Their order in the *Collected Poems* reflects the order of composition.

⁵As Spears states, the poem is "a definition and exploration of the relations between the Mirror of Art and the Sea of Life, or Reality" (218).

Auden rejected in “New Year Letter,” and it also includes some relatively overt statements that reveal a consistently Augustinian position on the nature of evil.

In the first section, “Prospero to Ariel,” Prospero remarks that when he looks into Ariel’s eyes, the “mirror” of art that reflects life, “All we are not stares back at what we are” (CP 405). That is, Ariel, who represents the idealistic, artistic impulse, shows up all human shortcomings, making clear the areas in which the viewers are deprived of good. But once art has revealed his deficiencies, Prospero finds that Ariel has no power to supply his want, and so Prospero must leave his contrived artistic world and once again inhabit the real one where he will not be able to manipulate characters and events at will. His initial renunciation of his art will have to continue in the real world as he follows his own *via negativa*, or his Way of Rejection of images, in Charles Williams’s words (Williams 57-58). Prospero anticipates this Negative Way with some hesitancy, asking himself,

. . . Can I learn to suffer
Without saying something ironic or funny
On suffering? I never suspected the way of truth
Was a *way of silence* where affectionate chat
Is but a robbers’ ambush and even good music
In shocking taste (CP 409, emphasis added)

In this way of silence, Prospero will have to reject the magic of artistic impulses, even the innocent arts of conversation and music, lest he be tempted to try to remake a new magical world in Italy. His excessive interest in art must be corrected by a kind of asceticism through which he will practice relinquishing control of his circumstances.

Other characters from *The Tempest* hint at the psychological fragmentation, the lack of wholeness, that Auden had come to see as the source of personal and social problems. Stephano, the drunken butler, finds himself pulled in conflicting directions by

his many contradictory desires, and he wonders which of his opposing selves is supposed to be dominant:

Exhausted glasses wonder who
Is self and sovereign, I or You?
We cannot both be what we claim,
The real Stephano—Which is true?
A lost thing looks for a lost name. (*CP* 413)

Prospero's magic arts may have brought a temporary halt to political hostilities, but Prospero could not repair the characters' inner psychological damage that lies at the root of political conflicts. His magic arts have no power to reunify Stephano's divided and conflicted self. Neither can his magic produce genuine love between the other characters, and while Gonzalo suggests that "All our loves were altered" on the enchanted island, Gonzalo himself finally "stood convicted of / Doubt and insufficient love" (*CP* 414). Like Stephano, Gonzalo's faults lie strictly in what he lacks, faith and love, which Prospero has no power to supply.

Alonso's speech is addressed to his son Ferdinand, and it is, according to Mendelson, "the poem's structural center" as it recasts in concrete political terms the dilemmas that Caliban will raise in abstractly artistic terms at the end of the poem (*LA* 237). The speech returns to the questions of politics and justice that Prospero had initially raised in his monologue. Alonso explains that the just ruler must strike a perfect balance between the desert and the sea, idealism and pragmatism. He tells his son, "For as your fears are, so must you hope. / The Way of Justice is a tightrope" stretched between the two, for "How narrow the space, how slight the chance / For civil pattern and importance / Between the watery vagueness and / The triviality of sand" (*CP* 416, 417). Though he does not use the term, Alonso indicates that the good ruler must maintain a

sense of double focus, the gift that can be found within the errors surrounding him and that will help the sea and the desert to co-inhere. He hopes Ferdinand will “find / The spring in the desert, the fruitful / Island in the sea, where flesh and mind / Are delivered from mistrust” (*CP* 418). Both the sea and the desert are false dualisms, but it is not clear in the poem exactly what the sea and the desert symbolize. As Spears’s perceptive analysis suggests, “the sea is associated with the flesh, the senses, potentiality, and subjectivity; the desert with mind, abstraction, the temptation to ignore the limitations of the human creature” (*Poetry* 223). Or, in the terms set up by “New Year Letter,” the desert seems roughly equivalent to Platonic idealism, which denies the good of bodily existence, while the sea is similar to Rousseau’s romanticism,⁶ which in Alonso’s speech suggests a subjectivism that refuses to acknowledge any ideal at all. Both dualisms will lead Ferdinand to become a tyrant if he does not achieve the double focus necessary to perceive the co-inherence of body and mind.

Fuller further argues that “the sea represents the life of the senses, the realised; the desert represents the life of the spirit, the potential. One is reached by the *via activa*, the other by the *via contempliva*” (*W. H. Auden* 362). If Fuller is right that Alonso’s speech alludes to the Active and Contemplative ways, then it must further invoke an entire tradition of spiritual mysticism going back to the desert fathers. In the West, the mystical tradition comes largely through Augustine, who distinguished between the Active, Contemplative, and Mixed lives in a famous passage in *The City of God*: “As for the three kinds of life, the life of leisure, the life of action, and the combination of the two no one ought to be so leisured as to take no thought in that leisure for the interest of his

⁶Auden would later explicitly identify the image of the sea with Romanticism in his 1950 book *The Enchafed Flood: or The Romantic Iconography of the Sea*.

neighbor, nor so active as to feel no need for the contemplation of God” (19.19). Augustine’s brief instructions would become the basis for a long evolution of the distinction the Contemplative Life of the hermit or monk and the Active Life of the layman or pastor. However the two were variously defined, it was generally maintained that while both were good and necessary to the general life of the Church, it was also possible to lead a “Mixed Life” in which a person was engaged in both contemplation and business activities. Alonso’s speech in “The Sea and the Mirror,” then, seems to draw on the Mystical tradition’s insistence that the Mixed Life is desirable for the just ruler.⁷

But even if the fledgling ruler were to achieve the mental coherence necessary to maintain that double focus, it is no guarantee that he will build the just city. His subjects may not share his breadth of vision. Antonio’s ironic reply to Alonso’s speech reveals his total rejection of the just state, or indeed, any state at all:

One crown is lacking, Prospero,
My empire is my own;
Dying Alonso does not know
The diadem Antonio
Wears in his world alone. (*CP* 418).

Even under a just ruler, participation in the just state cannot be coerced, and Antonio remains the demonic voice that insists on total self-rule and subverts all noble aspirations.

⁷Spears hints that Alonso’s address to Ferdinand suggests the Medieval and Renaissance “mirror for princes” genre, which involves letters of advice and caution given to young rulers by elder subordinates (222). While Alonso is not a subordinate, his warnings about the difficulty of achieving and maintaining a just state strongly suggest the features of the genre. If, in the poem, the “mirror” represents art, then Alonso’s speech is a “mirror” in two senses: as a genre and as an artistic contrivance. However, the speech breaks with the genre because it remains in the indicative mood without advancing into the imperative. It gives no real advice, which is to be expected given Auden’s doubtfulness about art’s ability to command action.

But the demonic voice does point to the truth at which Auden arrived in “New Year Letter”: “Aloneness is Man’s real condition” (CP 238). But Antonio has gone far beyond the mere isolation inherent in fallen human nature. He has isolated himself from all human society and begins to resemble the privation-worshipping witch who represents the self-conscious self’s fixation on its own fragmentation in “New Year Letter” (CP 235-36). Earlier in the poem, Antonio had spoken a defiant monologue in *tirza rima*, perhaps suggestive of Dante’s *Inferno*, but Mendelson argues that Antonio is really “unconvincing as the speaker of a monologue, because he embodies the motiveless malignity that, after it is revealed, withdraws into total silence” (LA 228). Indeed, a perfect representation of evil as privation would be total silence. But as a cast member, Antonio must speak, and in each of Antonio’s subversive lyrics, he distances himself from the other characters, and his final lines are particularly emphatic: “I am I, Antonio, / By choice myself alone” (CP 412). Antonio has achieved what Caliban later calls “the ultimately liberal position” in which “your existence is indeed free at last to choose its own meaning, that is, to plunge headlong into despair and fall through silence fathomless and dry, all fact your single drop, all value your pure alas” (CP 438). Caliban reveals that Antonio’s complete self-absorption has cut him off from all other existences, and he is approaching a state of total evil, an almost complete privation of existence. As Spears points out, the passage is cast in “terms that parody those of atheistic existentialism” (Poetry 227); the passage also recalls Auden’s critique of existentialism in “New Year Letter,” in which he suggested that if being and becoming were the same, then we would actually be trapped in the hell of unchanging singularity for the rest of our lives (CP 222). As Auden had asserted a few years earlier, “Evil is not an existence. . . . Pure evil would

be pure passivity, a denial by an existence of any relation with any other existence; this is impossible because it would also mean a denial of its own existence” (NYL 109).

Antonio comes very close to such a state of “pure evil,” in that he asserts his absolute independence from all others. He does not, of course, actually achieve absolute solitude; his ironic answers are parasitic, all depending on the existence of the other characters’ lyric monologues. It is actually impossible for Antonio to achieve a state of “pure evil,” though he clearly wishes to do so.

The attempts of religion and culture to avoid Antonio’s fate of wallowing in absolute denial are widely varied, but according to Caliban, they all operate on similar principles:

Religion and culture seem to be represented by a catholic belief that something is lacking which must be found, but as to what the something is, the keys of heaven, the missing heir, genius, the smells of childhood, or a sense of humor, why it is lacking, whether it has been deliberately stolen, or accidentally lost or just hidden for a lark, and who is responsible, our ancestors, ourselves, the social structure, or mysterious wicked powers, there are as many faiths as there are searchers, and clues can be found behind every clock, under every stone, and in every hollow tree to support all of them. (CP 440-41)

Caliban’s statement accords with accounts that Auden gave elsewhere of his frustrations with modern philosophies. In his essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, he points out that “The various ‘kerygmas,’ of Blake, of Lawrence, of Freud, of Marx” were all searching for some missing or overlooked element of existence, whose discovery would make the establishment of the just society possible (MCP 38-39). Auden remarks that “each of them brought to some particular aspect of life that intensity of attention which is characteristic of one-sided geniuses (needles to say, they all contradicted each other), and such comprehension of Christian wisdom as I have, little thought it be, would be very

much less without them” (*MCP* 39). For Lawrence, the thing that is “lacking which must be found,” as Caliban puts it, is sexual freedom, for Freud the recognition of repression, for Marx the liberation of the working class. Or, put another way, every modern philosophy believes in something like Augustine’s theory of evil as privation in that they all begin with the supposition that the source of disorder in the world is the lack of some crucial element that will bring order and wholeness to existence once it is found. For Auden, as we have seen, that deprivation is the psychological wholeness that was lost in the Fall.

However, the poem is not primarily about metaphysics or ontology, but about the relationship between art and life. The two really are distinct spheres, and Caliban indicates that attempts to conflate them, to let life intrude too much into art or art too much into life, are highly dangerous projects. In an ironically self-referential turn, Caliban reminds his audience that while he represents life in the body, he must nevertheless speak as the work of art he is, for he speaks from the stage in a poem, though his words are prose. As the voice of art—and he has never really spoken apart from that role, since it was an artist who taught him to speak⁸—Caliban announces his inability to offer solutions to the audience’s problems as he has described them:

I begin to feel something of the serio-comic embarrassment of the dedicated dramatist, who, in representing to you your condition of estrangement from the truth, is doomed to fail the more he succeeds, for the more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly can he indicate

⁸Auden’s poem makes no mention of the fact that in Shakespeare’s play *Miranda* also helps teach Caliban to speak. It is a convenient omission for Auden’s allegorical reading of the play because it sets up the opposition between the poet (Prospero) and the body (Caliban) without having to deal with the role of another, female influence on Caliban, which could complicate the allegory significantly. The poem would probably have developed somewhat differently if Auden had chosen to acknowledge or even prioritize *Miranda*’s involvement in teaching Caliban to speak.

the truth from which it is estranged, the brighter his revelation of the truth from which it is estranged, the brighter his revelation of the truth in its order, its justice, its joy, the fainter shows his picture of your actual condition in all its drabness and sham (CP 442)

That is, the artist may depict the reality of the human condition, but in that case he cannot depict the ideal world from which the real world has fallen; or the artist may choose to depict the ideal, but then he will not be able to depict the real. The artist can never make realism and idealism co-inhere. In his speech, Caliban has chosen to reveal the problem, which bars him from clearly articulating the solution, but also promotes “your delusion that an awareness of the gap is in itself a bridge, your interest in your imprisonment a release” (CP 442). There is a difference between recognizing that a gap between the ideal and the real exists and making the ideal co-inhere with reality.

Caliban must think his attempt to portray humanity’s estrangement from truth very successful, since he is only barely able to hint at the truth from which it is estranged. But just as the poet in “New Year Letter” had found the gift of double-focus hidden in a tangle of lies, Caliban uses the utterly disastrous human attempt to order life to point to the human need for divine grace. As it turns out, the world really *is* a stage on which every human being, no doubt ad-libbing his or her part, has attempted to bring artistic order to life in the form of a grand opera⁹ that turns out to have been “indescribably

⁹In *The Dyer’s Hand*, Auden imagines a similar situation: “In any village twenty people could get together and give a performance of *Hamlet* which, however imperfect, would convey enough of the play’s greatness to be worth attending, but if they were to attempt a similar performance of *Don Giovanni*, they would soon discover that there was no question of a good or a bad performance because they could not sing the notes at all” (468). The provincial players in Caliban’s speech, on the other hand, have either deluded themselves into thinking they can sing the opera, or they have just enough talent to be able to go on with a very bad performance. Given Caliban’s description, the latter is the more likely, and the more fitting. Humans have just enough talent for artistic order to make a perfect political mess of the world they inhabit.

inexcusably awful” (CP 443). In the dead silence following the final dissonant note, the players can finally hear “the real Word which is our only *raison d’être*,” so it is not in spite of human failures “but with them that we are blessed by that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf” of which the gap between art and life “are feebly figurative signs” (CP 444). It is important to note that the Word, the Life, for which Caliban gives several other names like Mercy and perfected Work, is not found in the *gap* between the ideal and the real, but in the disasters of the real, physical world itself. Once again, Auden has rejected the modern Manichaeism that would deny embodied existence in order to escape into the ideal world of art. As he explains in his essay “Christianity and Art” in *The Dyer’s Hand*, “it is difficult for a modern artist, unless he can flee to the depths of the country and never open a newspaper, to prevent his imagination from acquiring a Manichaean cast, from *feeling*, whatever his religious convictions to the contrary, that the physical world is utterly profane or the abode of demons” (460). And yet, as Caliban indicates, it is only through that untidy physical world through “the whippings, the lies, the twaddle, and all their carbon copies, . . . our shame, our fear, our incorrigible staginess, all wish and no resolve” (CP 444), that redemption can come, for as “For the Time Being” would assert, humans are redeemed through the appearance of the Word in the physical world.

Even though “The Sea and the Mirror” was completed well after Auden had officially reentered the Anglican church in 1940, the poem has more in common with “New Year Letter,” which exhibits at best an ambivalent faith, than it does with “For the Time Being,” which he began during his journey back to Christianity. Like “New Year Letter,” “The Sea and the Mirror” focuses on exploring the perennial questions of

existence while only hinting at possible theological answers. Both poems also explain human evil strictly in terms of privation, and while “For the Time Being” also views evil in similar terms, Auden’s subsequent poetry would take the Augustinian position as a tacit assumption. For example, Auden’s next last long poem, “The Age of Anxiety,” allegorizes the psychological fragmentation of the modern human consciousness, and so it assumes that evil consists of a deprivation of inner wholeness and coherence. The poem does not overtly describe evil as privation, as Auden’s earlier work does, and yet it presumes the idea as a basis of its structure. However, in Auden’s subsequent poetry, there are occasional references to evil that indicate that he would continue to think of it in consistently Augustinian terms for the rest of his life.

Later Poems

One example occurs in the third poem in the sequence “Thanksgiving for a Habitat.” This poem, “The Cave of Making,” is dedicated to Auden’s friend Louis MacNeice and describes Auden’s personal study where he writes his poetry. In the body of the poem he meditates on the solitary nature of his art and welcomes the ghostly presence of his recently-deceased friend, but the poem ends with a postscript partly made up of a series of epigraphs on the nature of poetry and language, one of which states, “Speechless Evil / Borrowed the language of Good / And reduced it to noise” (*CP* 695). As he characterizes it here, evil has no language of its own; all it can do is corrupt good speech that does not properly belong to it, making evil essentially parasitical. As in “New Year Letter,” evil here has no positive existence of its own, but consists in a corruption of what was originally good. These lines set up the poem’s final address to MacNeice in which Auden acknowledges “how much inspiration / your vices brought

you” (*CP* 695). Indeed, Auden admits, acquiescence to temptation makes for “many a fine / expressive line,” for an immoral life is often an interesting one (*CP* 695). But still, the poet concludes, if evil is only a corrupt derivative of good, he tells his friend,

God may reduce you
on Judgment Day
to tears of shame,
reciting by heart
the poems you would
have written had
your life been good. (*CP* 696)

The poet does not deny the high quality of poetry produced by vice, but he adds that there is no reason that poetry produced by a life of virtue should not be even better. Of course, Auden is speaking hypothetically, and there is no way to either prove or disprove his suggestion.

A few other late poems also make reference to evil in terms of privation. Two of Auden’s “Eleven Occasional Poems” are particularly worthy of note. In the fifth, “Josef Weinheber” (1965), he comments that evil is ever present in the world: “never as yet / has Earth been without / her bad patch, some unplace with / jobs for torturers” (*CP* 758). Locating evil in an “unplace” does not suggest that evil is not really present, but only that evil necessarily deprives any location of its positive particularity. As Auden had argued at the end of “New Year Letter,” love acknowledges and accepts the differences and particularities in the other people, while evil attempts to both deny the existence of particularities and abolish them, a self-contradictory aspiration. The next poem in the series, “Epithalamium” (1965), also alludes to Augustine’s definition of evil as privation. The poem reminds the newlyweds that “genders, married or not / . . . share with all flesh / a left-handed twist” (*CP* 761). “Left-handed” is the etymological sense of the word

“sinister,” while “twist” suggests opposition to what is straight. Both terms indicate that there is something abnormal about every person. If all humans, regardless of gender or social relationships, share this abnormal characteristic, Auden must be alluding to the doctrine of original sin in terms of privation. Another late poem that suggests the idea of evil as privation is “Song of the Devil” (1963), in which the Devil speaks in much the same voice he had in “New Year Letter,” and with many of the same connotations. Here, the Devil’s temptations are called “fiction” and are clothed “in up-to-date diction” that articulates the Freudian, liberal, and capitalist heresies that deny honor, honesty, and moral values (*CP* 782). The Devil’s strategy is to maintain the delusion, to suppress real self-knowledge, as long as possible. But should one realize that one has been “only a cipher of Hell’s,” the Devil offers yet another delusion: “Believe while you can that I’m proud of you, / Enjoy your dream: / I’m so bored with the whole fucking crowd of you / I could *scream!*” (*CP* 783). The recognition of guilt is itself no cure, and it can instead produce even more delusions.

Auden makes more direct reference to Augustine’s ontology of good and evil in his 1956 autobiographical essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*. He explains that what he admires in both Augustine and Kierkegaard is their appreciation of the fact that “every man has, through faith and grace, a unique ‘existential’ relation to God,” but that Kierkegaard’s major limitation is his disregard of the body (42). Auden continues in a more Augustinian strain:

But every man has a second relation to God which is neither unique nor existential: as a creature composed of matter, as a biological organism, every man, in common with everything else in the universe, is related by necessity to the God who created that universe and saw that it was good, for the laws of nature to which, whether he likes it or not, he must conform are of divine origin.

And it is with this body, with faith or without it, that all good works are done. (42)

Both Auden and Augustine had to come to settled conclusions about the nature of evil and therefore about the nature of physical reality before they could fully accept the Christian faith, and for both men, the recognition that evil consisted of privation was the first step in the direction of recognizing the fundamental goodness of all physical reality and thereby rejecting the false dualisms of their day. While Auden's debt to Kierkegaard and other modern theologians is significant, he owes to Augustine his basic ideas about the nature of evil.

This is not to say that Auden did not sometimes speak as though he believed that evil is a positive existence in the world. As he says in an essay on Kafka in *The Dyer's Hand*, "No one who thinks seriously about evil and suffering can avoid entertaining as a possibility the gnostic-manichean notion of the physical world as intrinsically evil. . ." (167). In another essay in the same volume, "Postscript: Christianity and Art," Auden asserts that the filth and grime of the modern, industrial world always tempt the artist to adopt a Manichean stance by condemning the physical world as unredeemably evil (*DH* 460). Auden's insistence that evil is basically a privation of good does not deny the shocking ugliness of the modern world, nor does his Augustinian position on evil downplay the destructive power of evil. On the contrary, the insistence that evil is a deprivation of goodness, especially in the human soul, implies that all humans have the capacity to commit great evils, and that the eradication of evil is not as simple as redistributing the means of production or undergoing psychotherapy. Auden came to believe that, as Augustine would argue throughout his works, humans are, by themselves, incapable of healing the flaws in their own souls and therefore must accept divine grace

which alone can repair fallen humanity. Auden came to believe that such grace comes through the physical world, specifically through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, who was, as Auden put it elsewhere in *The Dyer's Hand*, “a real man who openly claims to be God” (*DH* 207). The next two chapters will discuss the ways in which the Incarnation reaffirms the inherent goodness of the physical world.

CHAPTER FOUR

Existence as Good (I)

There are not “good” and “evil” existences. All existences are good, i.e. they are equally free and have an equal right to their existence. Everything that is is holy.

—W. H. Auden “The Prolific and the Devourer”

In the midst of his gradual return to Christianity in the mid-1940s, Auden repudiated what he saw as false dualisms. He saw as deficient the Romantic dualism he associated with Rousseau, which exulted the primal, irrational urges and disdained abstract reasoning. But Auden especially attacked the dualism he identified in “New Year Letter” with Platonic Idealism, which he argued had over-valued abstractions and the human mind and unfairly neglected the human body and the physical world. He associated what he saw as false Platonic dualism with Manichaeism, the dualistic religion against which Augustine directed much of his polemic in the fourth century. While the fourth-century Manichees were by no means Platonists—Augustine himself abandoned Manichaeism in favor of Neo-Platonist philosophy before he became a Christian—Auden saw similarities between them, since both systems of thought rejected the physical world as inherently evil and corrupt, and both systems offered to release their adherents’ souls from their imprisonment in physical bodies. Plato, of course, did not go nearly so far as Manichean philosophy, which insisted that evil and physicality were roughly synonymous. The Manicheans also strongly criticized the Christian and Jewish doctrine that God made all things good. They pointed out that if God had created everything that exists, they must also believe that God created evil, since no one could deny that evil exists. Thus they accused Christianity and Judaism of casting doubt on God’s ultimate

goodness. Auden followed Augustine in his response to the question: God did not create evil because evil is not an actual existence, physical or otherwise, but a real absence, a corruption or perversion of what was originally created good. Evil did not and could not have any positive existence in its own right; evil was, instead, a deprivation, an absence of some good quality in those things that did have positive existence. Evil is thus parasitic; it depends entirely on good existences for its own existence. Working backwards from the idea that evil is a privation, Augustine concluded that existence as such must be fundamentally and intrinsically good, since it was created and sustained by a God who was himself fundamentally and intrinsically good. It is better to exist than not to exist, and so embodied human existence, however painful or corrupted, must therefore be a basically good thing.

During his return to Christianity, Auden followed Augustine's logic from his intuition that evil was a privation into a sustained and repeated insistence that human existence in the body was good. This belief in the innate goodness of physical existence became a central principle, and some have argued *the* central principle (Replogle 49), of Auden's approach to poetics. Despite the fact that he lived to see the devastation and atrocities of two world wars and the national psychological trauma that inevitably resulted from them, he maintained throughout his post-conversion poetry and prose that human existence as souls in bodies, and indeed, the existence of the entire physical cosmos, was a substantially positive thing. All evils, no matter how terrifying or pervasive, could be attributed to a corrupting disunity in the human soul and not to the fact of physical existence. The physical world, including the human body, suffered evil but is itself originally good. In fact, in *The Dyer's Hand*, first published in 1948, Auden

maintained that this Augustinian view of existence was the only justification for the creation of art:

Every poet, consciously or unconsciously, holds the following absolute presuppositions, as the dogmas of his art:

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. (*DH* 69-70, emphasis added)

Auden's first presupposition asserts that history is linear and that as such, truly novel events can occur. This view is implicitly opposed to cyclical views of history, whether ancient, like the Platonists',¹ or modern, like Yeats's. Auden maintains that physical reality and historical novelty are good in themselves. However, as he states in the second presupposition, the historical (physical and temporal) world is afflicted by evil. Auden characterizes this evil strictly in terms of privation—"unfreedom," or the lack of freedom, and "disorder," or the lack of order. However, because the fallen world is fundamentally good, as Auden reasons in the third presupposition, it is possible to resolve conflicts, supply what is lacking, and thus redeem the historical world. As Auden would imply in works such as "For the Time Being," God redeems the historical world through human beings.

¹Augustine attacks the Platonic view of cyclical history in *The City of God* 12.14-21.

Augustine and Charles Norris Cochrane

In the early 1940s, when Auden was drawing on Augustine's articulation of the nature of evil, he also began to borrow his ideas about the nature of the good from Augustine, but he would not begin to refer specifically to Augustine's articulation of the ideas until the late 1940s. But even in 1939, Auden was beginning to derive his views on the goodness of physical existence from Augustine, who sets out his position in the *Confessions* with characteristically straightforward logic:

It was obvious to me that things which are liable to corruption are good. If they were the supreme goods, or if they were not good at all, they could not be corrupted. For if they were supreme goods, they would be incorruptible. If there were no good in them, there would be nothing capable of being corrupted. Corruption does harm and unless it diminishes the good, no harm would be done. Therefore . . . all things that are corrupted suffer privation of some good. If they were to be deprived of all good, they would not exist at all. If they were to exist and to be immune from corruption, they would be superior because they would be permanently incorruptible. . . . Therefore as long as they exist, they are good. Accordingly, whatever things exist are good Hence I saw and it was made clear to me that you made all things good, and there are absolutely no substances which you did not make. . . . [A]ll things are good in the sense that taken individually they are good, and all things taken together are very good. (7.12)

For Augustine, starting as he must with the premise that God is both all-powerful and absolutely good, whatever God created must be good insofar as it maintains its original created existence. Augustine then turns the logic of the Manichees back on itself. If Manichean philosophy holds that the physical world is corrupt, then, Augustine reasons, it must be good and not evil, for something that is totally evil cannot be further corrupted; only that which is initially good can become corrupt. As it turns out, the theory of evil as privation is embedded so deeply in his language that Augustine finds he cannot really conceive of evil as having a positive existence. Instead, as he announces later in the

Confessions, “By the Spirit we see that everything which in some degree has existence is good; for it derives from him who does not exist merely in some degree since he is Existence” (13.31).² That is, God is the ultimate Existence from which every other existing thing derives its being, and since God’s Existence is good, whatever else exists is also good inasmuch as it does exist.

Despite Augustine’s repeated insistence that all bodily existence is intrinsically good, he has earned a reputation for suspicion of the body and its pleasures, especially sex. When he deplores public obscenity in the theaters, Augustine’s rhetoric is strikingly harsh, and his many denunciations of the Pelagian heresy tend to emphasize the depravity of fallen human nature. But Augustine never denounced bodily existence or pleasure in themselves, and he was suspicious of extreme forms of Christian asceticism (see *Confessions* 10.31). Unlike many of his contemporary theologians, Augustine did not uphold asceticism as a normative model for the Christian life, chiding those who “perversely war on their bodies as though they were natural enemies. In this way they have been deceived by the words, ‘The flesh lusteth against the spirit: and the spirit against the flesh; for these are contrary to one another’” (*OCD* 1.24). As he explains further in *The City of God*, the “flesh” spoken of in the Pauline epistles does not denote “body” as such, but rather denotes the corruption of the body, which corruption proceeds from a corruption of the soul (14.2-3). Similarly, Augustine understands “spirit” to mean not the human soul as opposed the body, but rather the innate goodness of the intelligent soul that naturally desires proximity to God. But when Augustine was a Manichean, and even as he later turned to Neo-Platonism, he did indeed attribute all human evil—lust,

²Augustine regularly reiterates these arguments in other works. See *The City of God* 11.17-23 and 12.2 for similar statements.

greed, malice, cowardice, ignorance—to the body. As a Christian, however, Augustine maintained that all human evils arose from the soul when it rejected its original adherence to God.

Auden was certainly familiar with these Augustinian ideas, since he had read the *Confessions* by the late 1930s and had quite probably read *The City of God* by the mid-1940s, but he also would have absorbed many of Augustine's ideas through Charles Norris Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture*. In 1944, Auden published a review of the second, corrected edition of Cochrane's book in *The New Republic*, and he began his review by claiming that "Since the appearance of the first edition in 1940, I have read this book many times, and my conviction of its importance to the understanding not only of the epoch with which it is concerned, but also of our own, has increased with each reading" (FA 33).³ Auden was occasionally given to exaggeration, but he did not often claim to have read a book "many times," and his statement suggests that Cochrane had by that time become an important influence on Auden's intellectual development. The review is also exceptional because of its departure from Auden's usual style of writing book reviews. He would usually begin his reviews with a short assessment of the book under consideration and then use the bulk of the remaining space as an occasion for expressing his own views, which were sometimes only tangentially related to the subject at hand. His review of Cochrane's book, however, consists almost entirely of lucid summary, and he only states his own, rather modest views in the last

³In an unpublished dissertation, Sarah Hannah claims that "It is not clear whether or not Auden actually read Charles Norris Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture* in 1940 when it was released, but in 1942 he wrote to Stephen Spender that Cochrane's was 'one of the most exciting books I have ever read'" (175). However, Auden's phrasing in the review does imply that he first read it very soon after its first publication in 1940.

three paragraphs, all in a tone that indicates his deep respect for Cochrane's work.

Several of Auden's ideas, including his belief in the innate goodness of creation, can be traced directly to Cochrane's distillation of Augustine. Cochrane's work also offered a breadth and depth of knowledge of the classical and patristic epochs that surpassed even Auden's wide reading, and Cochrane's description of Augustine's philosophical triumph over both idealist and materialist dualisms could hardly have been more timely for Auden, who was engaged in his own struggles against modern dualisms when he read Cochrane for the first time in 1940.

One of the most important themes in Cochrane's book is Augustine's ability to offer a cogent articulation of the Christian doctrine of creation over against the twin pagan dualisms of the fourth century, idealism and materialism. Augustine's rejection of pagan dualisms, Cochrane explains, was grounded in his early life experiences; he had spent his youth promiscuously indulging in a principle of physical gratification, but later in life

Augustine's subsequent repudiation of this principle was complete and unequivocal. But it must not be supposed that, in rejecting it, he rejected in its entirety the life of sense. For, as against the Manicheans, he held tenaciously to the doctrine that there was no intrinsic evil in what is called "matter". And, with equal vigour, he denied the idealist contention that material existence is involved in necessary ambiguities and contradictions, from which escape becomes possible only in the life of pure "form." (390)

That is, Augustine did not escape from hedonistic materialism by embracing a stoic idealism. Rather, he ultimately rejected them both. And while Augustine frequently stated that the Platonists were by far the best of the pagan philosophers because closest to Christianity, he still saw them as fatally flawed in their suspicion of human embodiment (*City of God* 14.5).

And yet, Augustine himself has repeatedly been accused of harboring a hatred of the body, especially its sexual functions, an accusation that may sometimes arise from cursory readings of selections of the *Confessions* in isolation from his other works. But regardless of the merits of such accusations, suffice it to say that Cochrane's reading of Augustine's corpus—he cites over twenty-five separate works—resoundingly emphasizes Augustine's affirmation of the goodness of embodied human life. There is, in Cochrane's reading of Augustine, no original, inherent contradiction between the human body and the human soul: “That is to say, the roots of our nature as human beings strike deep into the physical world but they are not on that account any the less spiritual” (445). This is not to say that Augustine imagined the soul and body as equal partners in human life. Rather, Cochrane explains, “Augustine sees the life-process of human beings in terms of a body-soul complex in which body fulfils the requirements of an organ or instrument to soul, and this he applies no less to the elementary vital functions than to the highest manifestations of conscious and deliberate activity” (444). The body is an instrument of the soul, but Augustine does not identify the soul with consciousness and intellect. Instead, in an insightful anticipation of modern neuroscience, Augustine suggested that consciousness, rational thought, and willed choices do not operate independently of the body.

While Augustine had less to say about the innate goodness of the natural world than about the innate goodness of the human body, he did object to the textbook science of his day that operated on the assumption that natural necessity operated in constant opposition to human freedom, so “it should be noted that Augustine's revolt was not from nature; it was from the picture of nature proposed by classical science; i.e. from a

cosmology and an anthropology constructed in terms of form and matter as the basis for a ‘formal’ ethic and a ‘formal’ logic” (Cochrane 410-11). Against pagan science, Augustine asserted that the natural world is not a closed system governed solely by eternal and unchangeable laws, but is instead an order created by God who governs it from the outside and who makes it at least partially intelligible. Therefore, what is evil in the natural world only appears to be so because of human ignorance. To illustrate this point, Augustine gives an example of an artisan’s workshop:

If an ignorant man . . . enters the workshop of a craftsman, he will there encounter many instruments the reason for which he does not comprehend, and, if he is a fool, he will pronounce them superfluous. In the same way, having stepped into a forge, or wounded himself by the maladroit handling of a sharp tool, he will imagine that he is surrounded by many deadly and injurious things. Human beings are such fools that, even though, in the presence of an artisan, they dare not abuse what they do not understand, yet they have the impudence to vilify many things in this universe whose founder and governor is God, only because they fail to perceive the reasons for them. To confess the truth, I myself do not see why mice and frogs, flies and worms, have been created. Nevertheless I recognize that each, in its own way, is beautiful. For when I consider the body and members of any living creature, where shall I not find measure, number and order exhibiting the unity of concord? Wherever you see measure, number and order, look for the craftsman. (qtd. in Cochrane 480-81)

Thus, Augustine’s argument for the basic goodness of creation does not suppose that the natural world does not frequently produce pain and calamity, but rather that such “natural” evils are often an element of a divine plan which humans cannot fully comprehend. While such explanations are often distasteful to the modern mind, they were an improvement over a pagan science that had portrayed humans as helpless particles in an indifferent cosmos who had tried and failed to construct a philosophy that could relate the ethics governing human affairs to the natural laws governing the rest of the cosmos. But from Augustine’s point of view, Cochrane points out, “the problem of

the Christian is not so much to read into nature the values of truth, beauty, and goodness as to detect those values in it” (481).

But both the natural world and the human being, body and soul, have fallen from their initial perfection and are now corrupted, though not beyond repair. According to Cochrane, Augustine sees the physical world and the human body as originally good but now corrupt, so this potential renewal, or salvation, involves the restoration of the original goodness of matter. Cochrane explains that, for Augustine, “just as there is no ‘nature’ which is essentially and inherently evil, so there is no essential or inherent evil in the life of sense. The problem of salvation is thus not to destroy or to suppress the affections; it is rather that they should be reoriented with a view to the supreme good. That good lies in God . . .” (342). Salvation, then, is a matter of reorienting one’s love towards God. This love, “which, when directed to the pursuit of mundane ends, gives rise to moral confusion and ruin, is conceived by Augustine to yield the motive power necessary to a realization of creative peace, the Kingdom of God” (Cochrane 342). The possibility of salvation is predicated on the original goodness of that which is to be saved, namely the soul, the body, and the whole of physical creation.⁴ The process of salvation, for Augustine, consists of accepting the knowledge of God in faith. Cochrane outlines Augustine’s conception of the results of this salvation in distinctly modern terminology:

⁴Today the term “salvation” is frequently used as a synonym for “conversion,” but it is important to recognize that Augustine conceived of salvation in broader terms. As Cochrane presents Augustine’s thought in part three of his book, “salvation” includes a past conversion event, but it also encompasses both a virtuous Christian life in the present world and eternal life in a resurrected body with God after death. For Auden, who was sympathetic both to Freud and to Reinhold Niebuhr’s pioneering of what would become known as the “social gospel,” salvation was largely a matter of achieving a personally virtuous and coherent individual life, as well as a just and peaceful social order, although he did also accept the doctrine of the resurrection of the saints to eternal life, as we shall see in the next chapter.

we may perceive the meaning of 'justification by faith', i.e. the acceptance of Trinitarian Christianity as a condition for the eradication of intellectual and moral shortcomings as well as for the realization of those positive values to which mankind aspires. . . . *That goal is the integration of personality.* . . . That is to say, it makes possible, but in a significantly new sense, the classical ideals of freedom and detachment. In the second place it provides the technique necessary for *the casting out of devils, the expunging of congenital and habitual complexes which serve merely to inhibit constructive activity.* In doing so it points to a realization of the *classical ideal of peace*, not through the mortification but through the regeneration of the flesh. (454-55 emphasis added)

That is, Augustine viewed salvation as the means both to rid oneself of self-destructive impulses and habits and to restore the unity and concord that originally existed before the Fall. Cochrane's reading of Augustine in explicitly post-Freudian terms could hardly have escaped Auden's attention.

Reading these words in 1940, just after he had written a long poem ("New Year Letter") that expressed his longing for an integration of consciousness and that vented his exasperation with modern "devils," Auden recognized that Augustine's theology offered plausible answers to the difficult psychological and philosophical questions he had been asking. The trajectory of Auden's intellectual development had anticipated these answers, as the 1939 abortive prose work "The Prolific and the Devourer" demonstrates. For example, he had remarked that "Romanticism is right in asserting against [Catholicism and Protestantism] the goodness of the material world" (*Prose II* 446), but later in Cochrane's book he would find an ancient Catholic who insisted again and again that the material world was fundamentally good and able to be redeemed, and who condemned the very same Platonic and Romantic/Materialist dualisms about which Auden expressed doubt in "The Prolific and the Devourer" and that he later firmly

denounced in “New Year Letter”⁵ (see *CP* 234-35). He had also written in “The Prolific and the Devourer” that “All existences are good, i.e. they are equally free and have an equal right to their existence. Everything that is is holy” (*Prose II* 426). Given Auden’s breadth of reading it is improbable that he would not know about Augustine’s articulation of such ideas, but as other passages in “The Prolific and the Devourer” makes clear, Auden was not ready in 1939 to accept Augustine’s Trinitarian theology as the basis of his rejection of dualism and his affirmation of the goodness of physical existence.

This is not to say that either Auden or Augustine denied the reality of evil actions and corrupt motives in the world, or the corruption and decay evident in the natural world of plants and animals. Auden did explore the differences between human and animal life frequently in his poetry—“Their Lonely Betters” (1950), “Ode to Gaea” (1954), “Dame Kind” (1959), and “Natural Linguistics” (1969) are only a few of the better-known examples—but in “The Prolific and the Devourer” he drew a distinction between doing evil and committing sin. According to Auden, “To do evil is to act contrary to self-interest,” which is possible because no sentient being knows fully what is in its own interests (*Prose II* 426). However, Auden’s definition of sin is “consciously to act contrary to self-interest,” and this is possible only for humans since “we, being divided beings composed of a number of selves each with its false conception of its self-interest, sin in most that we do, for we rarely act in such a way that even the false self-interests of all our different selves are satisfied” (*Prose II* 426-27). Animals, on the other hand, have

⁵Since Cochrane’s book was published in 1940, it is also possible that Auden was already reading it as he was finishing the “New Year Letter” early in 1940. The poem was finished by April of that year. In any case, Auden’s suspicion of dualism was already appearing in his works from the late 1930s, so Cochrane’s work merely confirmed and elaborated on ideas that Auden had been entertaining for some time.

only one unified self in whose interests they must act, so an animal “can do evil but he cannot sin” (*Prose II* 427). This distinction places humans and animals in morally incomparable categories, since animals are not answerable to the moral laws that govern human affairs. Animals, Auden believed, can “do evil” in the sense that they can be violent and destructive, but they cannot “sin” because they always act in their own single-minded self-interest. This was yet one more reason for Auden to reject Rousseau’s Romanticism, for if the animal world can and does do evil, then salvation cannot be achieved by a return to nature since the natural world is also violent and destructive, though in a way that is very different from the human world.

“In Memory of W. B. Yeats” and “Herman Melville”

For the first ten years of Auden’s career as a poet, he said very little about the nature of existence as such. Even in “The Composer,” written in 1938, Auden comments that of all the arts music alone is “unable to say an existence is wrong,” which implies that all other art forms can and do assert that certain existences are intrinsically evil, but the poem does not say whether such an assertion would be right or wrong (*CP* 181). His poems appeared to be political or psychological allegories that alternately struggled with a divided self and prophesied an immanent political revolution. These were, at least, the conventional interpretations offered by early critics. Although Auden did flirt with a variety of dualistic ideologies, he had always assumed that the fact of his existence was basically a good thing. While he wrote many poems expressing mental anguish, he never wrote a suicidal poem. He never wished not to exist. But he it was not until the late 1930s that Auden began to consider the broader philosophical questions behind his intuitions that existence was good. His most explicit conclusions appear in “The Prolific

and the Devourer,” but because it was not published, it was very difficult for any of his contemporaries to perceive the direction of his philosophical inquiries. There were, however, hints in some of Auden’s best-known lyric poems from 1939: “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” and “Herman Melville.”

Just before he started work on “The Prolific and the Devourer” in mid-1939, Auden wrote an elegy, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” in commemoration of Yeats’s recent death, and in that poem Auden remarks on the difficult relationship between the human person and the body. Initially in the poem, embodiment is seen as integral to the human person. The poet says of Yeats’s last day alive, “for him it was his last afternoon as himself” (*CP* 247). If the self is not exactly identified with the body, the line does suggest that the continuity between body and soul is necessary for the existence of the self.⁶ At the same time, the poem also pictures the dead poet as “scattered among a hundred cities / And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections, / To find his happiness in another kind of wood” (*CP* 247). So, in some sense, the human person does maintain a sort of existence after death, though perhaps only in the memories and imaginations of the living. But the poem declines to make pronouncements on the question of life after death, and instead focuses on the legacy of the dead, now to be “modified in the guts of the living” (*CP* 247). As the poem’s second section observes, the poet’s legacy “survived it all: / The parish of rich women, physical decay, / Yourself” (*CP* 248). In the poem’s imagery, the self is a kind of imprisonment, for while the poet dies, each of the living “in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom” (*CP* 247). The poem returns to

⁶Later in *The Dyer’s Hand* Auden would distinguish between the subjective, conscious “ego” and the objective, sensory “self” and use the terms quite consistently in his prose thereafter (e.g. *DH* 104, 111-112). In this poem, however, the categories are only vaguely distinct.

the image of self-imprisonment in its final lines: “In the deserts of the heart / Let the healing fountain start, / In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise” (*CP* 249). It is clear that it is the imprisoned poet who teaches the free man to praise. The last three stanzas of the poem are an address to the poet, which begins, “Follow, poet, follow right / To the bottom of the night,” and parallels the last line of the poem, “teach the free man how to praise,” which is also in the imperative (248-49). But it is never entirely clear from the poem exactly what the free man is to praise or why, and it is an ambiguity that Auden would revisit in subsequent poems, such as “In Sickness and in Health” (*CP* 319) and “For the Time Being” (*CP* 365). In the elegy, praise is a gratuitous act that should be performed, even if it is performed for no other reason than that one wishes to. For Auden it is an affirmation of the goodness of an existence whose purpose and nature the poet—Yeats in this case—could never fully understand.

While “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” addresses the nature of existence obliquely, another poem from the same year, “Herman Melville,” explores the nature of evil and goodness more directly. The poem contrasts Melville’s *Moby Dick* and *Billy Budd, Sailor* in order to trace Melville’s progression from a false, melodramatic view of good and evil to a truer, more moderate view. The poem is laced with allusions to Melville’s life and works, and it appropriately opens by picturing Melville’s intellectual development as a sea voyage: “Towards the end he sailed into an extraordinary mildness” (*CP* 251). The second stanza relates Auden’s own sense of the conclusions to which Melville eventually came: “Goodness existed: that was the new knowledge. / His terror had to blow itself quite out / To let him see it” (*CP* 251). The following stanza makes it clear that this “terror” is a reference to *Moby Dick*, with its “maniac hero hunting . . . /

The rare ambiguous monster that had maimed his sex / Hatred for hatred ending in a scream” (CP 251). Auden suggests that Captain Ahab and Moby Dick are in some ways mirror images of each other, and that to set up a novel on the basis of mutual hatred leaves little room for the necessary affirmation of goodness. Auden’s sees this opposition as too melodramatic and concludes that Melville eventually realized that “All that was intricate and false; the truth was simple” (CP 251). Whether Auden’s reading of *Moby Dick* is warranted is questionable, but Auden’s purpose is not a critical assessment of the novel. He is rather using the novel as an analogue for a falsely melodramatic view of good and evil. Auden implies that Melville learned, in contrast to Ahab and the White Whale, that “Evil is unspectacular and always human, / And shares our bed and eats at our own table, / And we are introduced to Goodness everyday” (CP 251). Good and evil are not always distinguishable, as Ishmael found in his initial bedroom encounter with Queequeg, an incident to which Auden’s poem clearly refers in the line, “shares our bed.” The line further suggests sexual infidelity, and the line “eats at our own table” is also an oblique reference to the Last Supper and Judas’s betrayal of Jesus. Evil appears not as a dramatic, overwhelming malevolence but as the always-possible infidelity of a friend or lover, not as a palpably malicious being but as the potential for deceit and unfaithfulness.

For Auden in 1939, evil was thus always intermixed with good such that they are seldom encountered in their pure forms. In fact, evil never exists purely by itself. Auden said the same year in “The Prolific and the Devourer” that “Pure evil would be pure passivity . . . [which] is not possible even to electrons” (*Prose II* 426). Neither can we ever encounter pure goodness, though something close to it might at least be imaginable for Melville once he had exhausted the dramatic possibilities of evil in *Moby Dick*.

Auden suggests that the Goodness to which we are introduced each day “has a name like Billy and is almost perfect, / But wears a stammer like a decoration” (CP 251). Of course, the reference is to Melville’s story *Billy Budd, Sailor*, which Melville never finished revising and which was only published in 1924 during the “Melville Revival.” Auden indicates that the vision of good and evil in *Billy Budd* is more realistic than in *Moby Dick*. Billy Budd is a Christ-figure, in the sense that he is condemned while remaining a perfectly innocent man. Billy embodies goodness as much as any fictional character can, but there is no character in the story that embodies evil. Later in *The Enchafèd Flood*, Auden would identify Claggart, Billy’s accuser, as the story’s devil figure (143). But as this poem describes the situation, evil occurs through petty jealousy, false accusations, and an inflexible code of justice on the high seas that leads to Billy’s execution. The story is a kind of parable about the parasitic nature of evil that destroys itself when it kills its good host. Billy inadvertently kills his accuser and is then himself executed, and in Auden’s assessment, “It is the Evil that is helpless like a lover / And has to pick a quarrel and succeeds, / And both are openly destroyed before our eyes” (CP 252). The poem works toward an implicitly Augustinian position that holds that evil cannot exist independently of good, and any victory for evil is merely Pyrrhic and only reveals evil’s parasitic nature and reaffirms the basic goodness of that which really exists.

The poem’s conclusion considers the implications of Melville’s Christ-figure. If Billy can embody goodness, then even though he dies he suggests the possibility of hope for the rest of humanity. Auden suggests that Melville’s final work opens up possibilities for redemption: “Reborn, he cried in exultation and surrender / ‘The Godhead is broken like bread. We are the pieces.’ / And sat down at his desk and wrote a story” (CP 252).

The introduction of such explicitly Eucharistic imagery was a significant poetic development for Auden, though here in 1939 Auden was resorting to Christian symbolism without necessarily invoking all the related Christian dogmas. In the same year, Auden wrote that he did not believe in “a creator who is distinct from and independent of the creation, an omnipotent free-willing immaterial agent” (*Prose II* 448). Instead, he had begun to use the name “God” to denote the totality of existence, such that “If anyone chooses to call our knowledge of existence knowledge of God, to call Essence the Father, Form the Son, and Motion the Holy Ghost, I don’t mind: Nomenclature is purely a matter of convenience” (*Prose II* 448). If this mythic nomenclature is applied to the last lines of “Herman Melville,” God (existence) has been broken up and is now divided into pieces (individual humans) who are always attempting to restore the divine unity of existence, and Melville makes his own attempt to restore it by writing a story, *Billy Budd, Sailor*. The story will not achieve the final reunification of existence, but in Auden’s view it has at least revealed the fact that existence is good in itself and that even if reunification of the divided world is not possible, our knowledge of the nature of that division is an added good.

“Herman Melville” does not actually say whether reunification is possible through art or not, but “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” indicates that the poet’s role is to praise what exists without attempting to use poetry as a vehicle for social or political change. Auden famously suggests that art is impotent to achieve anything, good or bad—“For poetry makes nothing happen” (*CP* 248). This line has occasionally been attacked without reference to its context in the rest of the poem, and the context suggests that the line should be read in the most strictly narrow sense possible: poetry *makes* nothing happen,

in the sense that the mere writing of a poem will not force humans to act against their own free will. Read in that narrow way, the line is a self-evident truism. Language can *influence* the human will, as the rest of the poem suggests, but it does not replace the human will and make historical choices in its place. In contrast to the varied historical determinisms of Marx and Yeats, the line asserts that even if the course of history were predetermined—and in this poem Auden withholds judgment on that question—poetry has no power to force human society towards its predetermined end. Instead, the poem gives poetry a social role that is at once more modest and more liberating to the poet, who is under no obligation to produce political propaganda but is instead free to rejoice in whatever he finds praiseworthy: “Still persuade us to rejoice,” and “Teach the free man how to praise” (CP 248-49). Such laudatory poems can help humans to understand themselves and to respond constructively to their negative circumstances in history. The poet’s role, the poem implies, is to consistently reassert the goodness of existence, encouraging its audience not to give up hope.

About a year later Auden would suggest a similarly limited role for art in “New Year Letter,” in which he repeats his assertion that art cannot force a just society to exist, though it can exhort individuals to work for a more just social order. “Art is not life and cannot be / a midwife to society” Auden claims, and later adds, “No words men write can stop the war / Or measure up to the relief / Of its immeasurable grief” (CP 201, 206). Nevertheless, poets can “challenge, warn and witness,” and “the Good Offices of verse” can sometimes help individuals to understand themselves and each other (CP 202, 206). But the poem itself quickly moves from its bleak outlook on the relative impotence of poetry to a general denunciation of false dualisms that “split creation into two” in order to

reject one part of existence as irredeemably evil and embrace the other part as unequivocally good (*CP* 213), and the rest of the poem is concerned with revealing the sinister incoherence of various dualisms. The poem itself enacts its assertion that poetry does have the power to challenge, warn, and witness. Evil, Auden supposes, is not to be identified with any part of existence, but with disharmony between existences. But if one is to reject dualism, as the poem does, it is less emphatic about what exactly one ought to embrace instead. Auden emphasizes the need for “double focus,” but even in the double prayer that ends the poem, it is unclear what sort of unity that double focus will reveal. The obvious logical corollary to accepting the idea of evil as privation is to affirm the goodness of all existences. But while Auden did make just such a logical step in “The Prolific and the Devourer” in 1939, he did not make any similar decisive statement in “New Year Letter” in 1940, and he would not do so until “For the Time Being,” which he began in the autumn of 1941.

Meanwhile, Auden did make some reference to the goodness of existence in “Kairos and Logos,” which was probably written in 1941, though before “For the Time Being” was begun. As Fuller and Mendelson both point out, the title derives from Paul Tillich’s *The Interpretation of History*, which Auden had already cited in his notes for “New Year Letter” (Fuller, *W. H. Auden* 389-90, *LA* 168). The “Logos” in the poem’s title refers to Christ, the Word that appears in history as God incarnate, while “Kairos” refers to a decisive or propitious moment for a significant historical event, such as the Incarnation, to occur. The poem is composed of four sestinas, the first of which investigates the significance of the birth of Christ at the height of the Roman empire. The poem’s ideas would be refined and expanded in “For the Time Being,” but here the poem

implicitly draws on Cochrane's analysis of Roman dualistic philosophy that "Besieged the body and cuckolded love," which is a reference to the various Gnostic cults as well as the Manichees, all of whom denigrated bodily existence to some degree. The sestina ends on a laudatory note, praising "The just, the faithful and the uncondemned" saints of the early church, as well as their divine love that "never, like its own, condemned the world / Or hated time" (CP 306). There is here at least the implication that Christianity, defined by its belief in the Incarnation, affirms the goodness of the physical world, but as in "New Year Letter," "Kairos and Logos" emphasizes Auden's rejection of Manichean dualism while only implicitly offering an affirmation of physical existence.

"For the Time Being"

The Christian doctrine of the Incarnation holds that God, in the person of the Son, the second member of the Trinity, became human at a particular point in history, first gestating inside a mother's womb, then being born and growing to maturity as a man, Jesus Christ, who is recognized by the ancient creeds as both God and man. In the centuries following the death of Christ, it was gradually accepted by theologians and clergy that the Incarnation upset the old Mosaic prohibition against images. Because God made himself visible in the incarnate Christ, Christians were now free to artistically represent Christ, along with all the rest of creation, in the physical medium of iconography. Naturally, there were many dissensions about the extent to which iconography could be used in worship—the split between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Roman churches was in part precipitated by differing views on iconography, and the Protestant Reformation often included an iconoclastic element—but those who defended iconography always pointed to the Incarnation as the justification for religious art (see

Williams 93-94). If, as Augustine maintained, the physical world was innately good because God created it, and if redemption came about through the Incarnation in the physical world, then physical portrayals of biblical stories, saints, and even God himself are both permissible and desirable elements of worship.

By the twentieth century, the various Protestant traditions had staked out their positions on iconography, and while a few Medieval and Renaissance icons were still considered high art by serious critics, contemporary iconography was, often justifiably, considered banal and thus ignored as a serious art form. In England, religious questions about iconography had temporarily resurfaced in the Anglican Church during the nineteenth-century Oxford movement headed by John Henry Newman and Henry Edward Manning, but by the time Auden rejoined the Anglican communion in the autumn of 1940, the church had largely moved on to other questions, such as liturgical reform. Against this background of disregard for icons as a serious form of expression, religious or artistic, Auden deliberately shaped his poem “For the Time Being” as a kind of iconography. Or, as he explained to his father in a letter, the poem drew on the medieval mystery plays, whose forms and purposes were directly related to medieval iconography. Auden explained to his father in a letter why he chose to set the Christmas story in the modern era rather than attempt a “realistic” portrayal of a first-century nativity scene:

Perhaps you were expecting a purely historical account as one might give of the battle of Waterloo, whereas I was trying to treat it as a religious event which eternally recurs every time it is accepted. . . .

I am not the first to treat the Christian data in this way; until the 18th Cent. it was always done, in the Mystery Plays for instance or any Italian paintings. It is only in the last two centuries that religion has been “humanized,” and therefore treated historically as something that

happened a long time ago; hence the nursery picture of Jesus in a nightgown and a Parsifal beard. (qtd. in *LA* 186)⁷

Thus, Auden's poem on the Incarnation relies on a largely implicit acceptance of the iconographic terms of the genre he has chosen. For a poem on the Incarnation, "For the Time Being" says relatively little on the redemption of the physical world, although Fuller observes that "the oratorio is dedicated to [Auden's] mother and suffused with an eagerness to make the sort of difficult peace with the Flesh (and, interestingly enough, peace with the mother) that is found in Augustine's *Confessions*" (*W. H. Auden* 346).⁸ The poem does indeed address concerns about human embodiment, but it addresses them largely through its consideration of the Incarnation as it relates to historical time, and to the present time specifically, a theme with which the *Confessions* is also very much concerned.

The poem is about a singular event breaking in on an otherwise cyclical history. The event, the Incarnation, is almost impossible for its observers to accept, and yet its reality is undeniable, for it creates a reference point that makes both past and future meaningful. The chorus that open the poem's first section, "Advent," suggests a monotonously cyclical history in which "The clock on the mantelpiece / Has nothing to

⁷Auden is right that Medieval and Renaissance iconography always pictured religious events in contemporary settings, no matter what the historical context of the original event might have been. This habit of dressing biblical and religious characters in contemporary clothes has been a boon to historians and archeologists, who can, for example, derive clues about Medieval arms and armor from Medieval paintings of the crucifixion and find information about Renaissance carpentry from Renaissance pictures of Noah building the ark. Perhaps we can now glean information about the social conditions of the 1940s from Auden's poem.

⁸Auden took notes on Augustine's *Confessions* in the back of the same notebook in which he drafted "For the Time Being," so it is likely that he was reading the *Confessions* and writing the poem at about the same time.

recommend” (CP 349). All three stanzas spoken by the Chorus in “Advent” begin and end with the same line: “Darkness and snow descend,” “Winder completes an age,” and “The evil and armed draw near” (349-50). The repetitious form reinforces the sense of endless cycles of history in which no event is truly unique. What the Chorus implies, the Narrator states outright:

As events which belong to the natural world where
The occupation of space is the real and final fact
And time turns round itself in an obedient circle,
[Disasters] occur again and again but only to pass
Again and again into their formal opposites,
From sword to ploughshare, coffin to cradle, war to work,
So that, taking the bad with the good, the pattern composed
By the ten thousand odd things that can possibly happen
Is permanent in a general average way. (CP 351)

Mendelson explains that the poem’s sense of cyclical history in the pre-Christian world is largely derivative of Cochrane’s *Christianity and Classical Culture*, and Mendelson further identifies several places in the poem in which Auden directly borrows vocabulary from Cochrane (184-86). But as Mendelson suggests, the poem’s setting in the modern age is in part an attempt, sometimes unsuccessful, to make the historical past, the historical present, and Auden’s personal life coincide (186).

It is sometimes a stretch to relate the historiography of first-century Rome to that of twentieth-century Western civilization, but Auden does manage to suggest some significant parallels between ancient and modern cyclical views of history. The Narrator’s references to “sword to ploughshare” and “war to work” vaguely suggest the post-Christian Marxist utopianism with which Auden had flirted in the 1930s and that bears some surprising resemblance to the liberal utopianism espoused by Herod later in the poem in “The Massacre of the Innocents,” but as Auden would point out later, neither

Marxism nor Liberalism are based on cyclical views of history. On the contrary, he asserts that the modern philosophies advanced by Marx, Freud, and others “were all Christian heresies” (MCP 38). “That is to say,” Auden continues,

One cannot imagine their coming into existence except in a civilization which claimed to be based, religiously, on belief that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and that, in consequence, matter, the natural order, is real and redeemable, not a shadowy appearance or the cause of evil, and historical time is real and significant, not meaningless or an endless series of cycles. (MCP 38)

So while the opening of “For the Time Being” draws some superficial parallels between first-century Rome and twentieth-century Europe and America, Auden would also suggest that the Incarnation irrevocably shifted the concept of history in the Western mind from a cyclical view to a linear view. The monotonous cycles of history in the poem are rudely interrupted by the Incarnation, which the Narrator calls “an outrageous novelty,” “this Horror,” “the Abomination,” and “the wrath of God” (351-52).

That a long poem on the Incarnation should be primarily focused on the nature of time bears some consideration. The poem relates time to the physicality of the Incarnation in a characteristically Augustinian way, since Augustine explores the relationship between time and the physical world in both *The Confessions* and *The City of God*. In what are perhaps the most theoretical and abstruse passages in the *Confessions*, Augustine inquires into the nature of time, suggesting that time is a created thing that exists along with the rest of the created cosmos, and that time consists of a distention or extension (10.17, 26). He hypothesizes that time is an expansion, a spreading out of the mind, since time is experienced primarily in the memory.⁹ The present time, which is the

⁹Auden would have found this idea explained and reinforced in Cochrane (437-39).

only time that actually exists, is an infinitesimally thin line between the future, which has yet to exist, and the past, which has ceased to exist (10.15, 27). But because Augustine links the mind with bodily existence (see Cochrane 444), time is also an extension of physicality, since time was created by God along with the physical world (C 10.3, 12). As Augustine asserts in the *City of God*, “the world was not created *in* time but *with* time. An event in time happens after one time and before another, after the past and before the future. But at the time of creation there could have been no past, because there was nothing created to provide the change and movement which is the condition of time” (11.6). Time is not to be exactly identified with the motion of matter, but it does depend on motion and change in the physical world. That is, for Augustine as for Auden, time is meaningful only in the presence of the unique historical event.

Because the Incarnation is a unique event in history, and for the poem’s Narrator it is also a horrifyingly undeniable event, it makes the idea of strictly cyclical time impossible, offering instead a radically different sense of reality as a linear movement out of a unique past into a unique future. The new sense of linear time established by the Incarnation subsumes the cyclical time in the natural world on the basis of which the pagan world had attempted to establish its philosophies of ethics and human government (e.g. Cochrane 411, 494), so for Auden’s neo-pagans, the Incarnation represents the introduction of a completely new way of thinking about existence. “The Real,” as the Recitative opines, “is what will strike you as really absurd,” and it is absurd to both the leftist Narrator and the liberal Herod (CP 354, 394). It is also absurd to the Four Faculties, whose voices dramatize the inaccessibility of the Incarnation to the divided human consciousness. That there are four different faculties in the place of one coherent

consciousness is a result of the Fall: “We were himself when / His will was free, / His error became our / Chance to be” (*CP* 355). Because they are divided, they are unable to see into “the garden of Being” in which the Incarnation has occurred (*CP* 354). As it turns out, the Fall is a property of human consciousness, for as Gabriel tells Joseph, “There is one World of Nature, and one Life; / Sin fractures the Vision, not the Fact” (*CP* 365). The Fall does not consist of embodiment, as the Manichees would have it, nor of a lapse into subjectivity, as Herod thinks, but of an incapacity to apprehend reality as it really is. Thus the First Wise Man, representing the Baconian scientist, is unable to wring unequivocal information out of the natural world:

With rack and screw I put Nature through
A thorough inquisition:
But She was so afraid that if I were disappointed
I should hurt Her more that Her answers were disjointed—
I did. I didn't. I will. I won't.
She is just as big a liar, in fact, as we are. (369)

Such a dim view of empirical science would have sounded ridiculous just a few decades before Auden wrote the lines, but after Einstein's theories of relativity upset Newtonian physics, the natural world would never again yield perfectly coherent data. For the Wise Men, their visions of the natural world, of time, and of human society look hopelessly inadequate.

And yet, the fact of corruption is itself a sign of hope. In the middle of the poem, Auden has a Chorale sing to God, “for Thy Goodness even sin / Is valid as a sign” (*CP* 374). The Fall becomes an opportunity for redemption, as the Chorale continues:

Inflict Thy promises with each
Occasion of distress,
That from our incoherence we
May learn to put our trust in Thee,

And brutal fact persuade us to
Adventure, Art, and Peace. (*CP* 374)

Auden had said something similar in “New Year Letter,” though in less explicitly theological language. Here his statements recall Augustine’s reasoning in the *Confessions*, where he explains that to claim that a thing is corrupt is to presuppose a perfect, uncorrupted state of existence that has become corrupted (7.12). The admission of sin as a fact assumes the existence of a standard of perfection by which sin is identified as a real failure and not just as a neutral fact of existence. As Augustine followed the logical trail from the definition of evil as privation into belief in the goodness of both nature and God, so “For the Time Being” identifies the moral failings of the twentieth century as evidence of the existence of an ultimate Goodness.

A central feature of “For the Time Being” is “The Meditation of Simeon” in which Simeon is portrayed as a theologian/philosopher who is considering the philosophical and aesthetic implications of the Incarnation. The Fall, Simeon asserts, was not an illusion, nor a necessary progression from innocence to experience, nor is it reversible by mere effort (*CP* 385-86). Simeon then echoes the Chorale’s statement that the Fall does, nevertheless, provide an opportunity to recognize the existence of Goodness. In Simeon’s view, fallen humanity had to exhaust every possibility to regain coherence before it could be presented with the opportunity to either accept or reject the Incarnation. Every dualism had to be weighed and found wanting: “Before the Positive could manifest Itself specifically, it was necessary that nothing should be left that negation could remove; the emancipation of Time from Space had first to be complete. . .” (*CP* 386). The word “emancipation” generally carries positive connotations, but in this case it bespeaks an inability to develop a coherent account of all elements of the

cosmos—matter, time, space, energy, human will, and so forth. Likewise, every philosophical dualism that rejected some necessary aspect of existence had to be pushed to its unreasonable conclusion¹⁰ before humanity was ready to abandon dualism altogether in favor of an entirely different view of reality.

The basic philosophical problem for pre-Christian Rome, and for the modern world in Auden's opinion, is the seemingly irreconcilable contradiction between the One and the Many. That is, the cosmos appears at times to consist of total unity such that all variation and difference is illusory, but at other times the cosmos appears to be the opposite, a disunified collection of disparate parts in which unity and wholeness are illusory.¹¹ To choose either view is to necessarily reject the other, and thus embrace an obviously false dualism, as Simeon explains:

Before the Infinite could manifest Itself in the finite, it was necessary that man should first have reached that point along his road to Knowledge where, just as it rises from the swamps of Confusion onto the sunny slopes of Objectivity, it forks in opposite directions towards the One and the Many; where, therefore, in order to proceed at all, he must decide which is Real and which is only Appearance, yet at the same time cannot escape the knowledge that his choice is arbitrary and subjective. (CP 386)

¹⁰Simeon does not identify specific pre-Christian philosophies but instead follows Cochrane's broad categorization of all pagan philosophies as either "materialist" or "idealist" (see Cochrane 390), both of which are false dualisms. One obvious example of a dualistic philosophy that produces an unreasonable result is Plato's *Republic*. Plato's scheme for a just society is based on idealism, which in Auden's and Augustine's view denigrates the body, and produces a tyrannical state that few sane people would want to live in.

¹¹The problem of the One and the Many is well illustrated by Raphael's painting, *The School of Athens*, which depicts Plato and Aristotle deep in an argument. Plato raises an index finger toward the sky, indicating his privileging of the One, whereas Aristotle gestures toward the earth with outspread fingers, suggesting his preference for the Many. Cochrane explains the problem as Plato articulated it (428). The Chorus of "For the Time Being" offers a tidy summary of the inevitable conclusion of the argument between the two philosophers: "*Promising to meet, we parted forever*" (CP 386).

For Simeon, the problem of the One and the Many cannot be solved by reference either to unity or to diversity, and so the decision to accept one and reject the other is based on mere whim. Simeon's assessment is in some ways a caricature of philosophy, as few enough philosophers would admit that their *a priori* assumptions are purely arbitrary. But Simeon is right to point out that Christianity offers a resolution to the problem of the One and the Many in its doctrine of the Trinity in which both unity and plurality co-inhere. Neither the One nor the Many is illusory, and both can be accepted as fully existing. As Edward Callan points out, Auden replaces the Platonic aesthetic that relies on the metaphysical abstraction of "the Good" with "the Christian doctrine of the union of the material and the divine in the Word made Flesh" (31). As such, the Incarnation reveals that physical existence is not opposed to the abstract or the spiritual, but complementary to it.

But not all critics recognize the aesthetic consequences that Auden recognized in the Incarnation. Rainer Emig, citing Mary's statement that "In human dreams earth ascends to Heaven / Where no one need pray nor ever feel alone" (*CP* 380), asks rhetorically,

If Heaven is a place where communication through prayer is no longer necessary because of the achieved proximity of souls and Creator, then what does Christ's presence on earth mean in terms of communication? Is not every word spoken about the Divine presence then superfluous? Does it not, indeed, show a misrecognition of the event? And where does that leave a 'Christmas Oratorio'? Even in its seemingly orthodox sections, Auden's text manages to undermine its very right to exist and argue its point. (139-40)

Emig's identification of the Heaven in dreams with the historical Incarnation is questionable at best, but more importantly, he fails to recognize that Auden had anticipated such questions and answered them in "The Meditation of Simeon," in which

Simeon explains the aesthetic consequence of the Incarnation: “Because in Him the Flesh is united to the Word without magical transformation, Imagination is redeemed from promiscuous fornication with her own images” (CP 388). Far from silencing art, the Incarnation unites the physical world with the world of abstract forms and legitimizes artistic depiction, even of God, such that the poem’s focus on the Incarnation is a defense of the poem’s own existence as an iconographic representation.

Simeon’s phrase “fornication with her own images” (CP 388) is a paraphrase of Augustine’s famous phrase *fantastica fornicatio*, which Simeon uses to describe the tendency of art toward mere self-referentiality. Within a dualistic philosophy, Simeon suggests, poetry has no real place; idealism is suspicious of the physicality of language and the tendency of poetry to celebrate physical pleasures, whereas materialism is suspicious of the tendency of language toward generalization and equivocation. Only when the flesh is united with the Word¹² is space made for the paradoxical tendencies of art to both generalize and particularize. Simeon concludes this section saying, “Because in Him all passions find a logical In-Order-That, by Him is the perpetual recurrence of Art assured” (CP 389). For Simeon, as for Auden himself, Christianity establishes the only philosophically coherent justification for the production of art, “for the One and the Many are simultaneously revealed as real” (CP 389). Simeon’s speech is an apology not only for art in general, but also for this poem in particular. The poem as an icon is a kind of recurrence of the original event, a recurrence that is not bare imitation but a creative reenactment that is both a unique event in history and a repetition of a past, definitive

¹²“Word” is the usual English translation of the Greek word “logos” in John 1.1, where it describes Christ. The same word had been used earlier by Plato to describe his concept of the Ideal.

event. With the reconciliation of Flesh and Word, of concrete thing and abstract sign, poetry need not be a closed system of self-referentiality, nor must it be banished from the just city as hopelessly carnal. Both the abstract and physical qualities of language have an equal right to existence, and their fundamental goodness is most obvious when the two are accepted as equally legitimate.

It is one thing to affirm both the One and the Many as real and non-contradictory, but quite another to live consistently with the fact. After Simeon's triumphant speeches heralding the one solution to all philosophical problems, the next speaker is Herod, who dimly recognizes the reality of the Incarnation but rejects it categorically and orders a massacre to prevent its disrupting his utopian project. It is hard to affirm the goodness of all existence when Rachel is weeping for her children. Even before Simeon's meditation and Herod's massacre, the Shepherds have related their own, more visceral struggle to affirm existence as they know it. They are tempted by an existential angst that regularly asks, "You are free / Not to be, / Why exist?" to which they find themselves responding, "No, I don't know why, / But I'm glad I'm here" (*CP* 377). Emig argues that there is a radical disjunction in the shepherds' identities in the poem: "at times it is difficult to decide whether they are awaiting the birth of Christ as the redeemer, or a proletarian revolution. Their main function is to remind the reader that the search for salvation and redemption must never lose sight of the mundane issues of daily practice" (139). On one level, Emig is right that the shepherds are concerned with their own economic welfare, but because Emig does not recognize the poem's iconographic mode of representation, he perceives a discrepancy between the shepherds' symbolic significance as members of the working class and their status as voices expressing a longing for redemption. But as

Biblical characters who are dressed, as it were, in modern clothing, there is no necessary conflict between their desire for spiritual salvation and their desire for political or economic salvation: for Auden as a socialist, the establishment of social and economic justice is an important component of the salvation of the whole human being.

Emig's misreading is rooted in his misapprehension of Christianity as a spirituality that aspires to pure abstraction: "Once more, if there is a Christian message in this text, it is by no means an orthodox one. Its vision of salvation encompasses physical needs, such as 'Light, water, and air', as well as the end of established 'Authoritarian/Constraint', rather than projecting the fulfilment of those demands into a metaphysical elsewhere" (Emig 139). Emig erroneously identifies the Neo-Platonic gnosticism of which Auden was so critical with orthodox Christianity. While Emig is correct that the shepherds' concept of redemption involves the physical world, his description of Christian orthodoxy is irreconcilable with the Christianity of the Apostolic and Nicene creeds, as well as with Auden's and Augustine's repeated affirmations of embodiment as fundamental to human existence. The Shepherds' own affirmation of existence is, admittedly, more tentative than that advanced by Simeon, since it not based on a rational extrapolation from the Incarnation as a philosophical given, but on an intuition whose source they can never quite manage to trace. But their lack of philosophical certainty is not the same thing as a lack of faith.

Mary and Joseph are more doubtful during "The Flight into Egypt," in which they attempt to evade the temptations of the bohemian desert by escaping into the impotent civilization of Egypt: "Safe in Egypt we shall sigh / For lost insecurity; / Only when her terrors come / Does our flesh feel quite at home" (*CP* 398). Temptations and dangers are

everywhere along the route. Mary and Joseph have escaped Herod's dystopia only to descend into the anarchy of the desert on the way to the false security of a dead civilization in Egypt. There is no safe place where the Incarnation can flourish unhindered, only a constant pilgrimage through a wide variety of distractions and dangers. As the Narrator puts it, "To those who have seen / the Child, however dimly, however incredulously, / The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all" (*CP* 399). The Narrator uses the church calendar to place the reader in the short interval of "ordinary time" between the seasons of Advent and Lent. Between the sudden, shocking vision of the Incarnation and the prolonged purgation of Lent and Good Friday lies a mundane existence in which it is easy to slip back into one tacit dualism or another, any of which will implicitly deny the Incarnation. The struggle to reenact the Incarnation every day, to keep natural, cyclical time contained within the all-encompassing linear time established by the Incarnation, requires more concentration and determination than anyone can muster.

As a kind of iconography, the poem naturally includes a didactic element, at which not a few critics understandably balk.¹³ Yet the didacticism is not imposed on the subject matter or on the form of the poem, but is intrinsic to them. The poem identifies Christ in the biblical language of "the Way," "the Truth," and "the Life," phrases that evoke the original context of those phrases in the Gospel of John, where Christ also announces that "No one comes to the Father except through me" (*CP* 400, John 14.6). Thus, it is appropriate that the Chorus ends the poem in the imperative mood: "Follow

¹³John Fuller's generally fair assessment of the poem is one example (*W. H. Auden* 345). He admits that he is looking at the subject matter from the outside, so the implications of the Incarnation "must remain a theological mystery to the non-Christian (346).

Him through the Land of Unlikeness;¹⁴ / You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures” (CP 400). But given Auden’s earlier self-assessment in “New Year Letter” and other poems of the early 1940s, “For the Time Being” is addressing its exhortations to its own maker as much as to anyone else. The challenge for Auden was to particularize experience, to recognize the uniqueness of each historical moment. “In the meantime” between Christmas and Lent, the Narrator states, “There [is] . . . / . . . the Time Being to redeem / From insignificance” (CP 400). That is, the Incarnation must be reenacted by the individual in the historical moment, and the act of writing poetry with explicitly religious themes does not necessarily qualify.¹⁵ Like the Fall, the original event happened for the first time at some definite point in history, but it must also be recurring in individuals at subsequent points in history.

“*The Sea and the Mirror*”

“For the Time Being” was originally published in one volume with “The Sea and the Mirror,” which began with “The Sea and the Mirror” and ended with “For the Time Being,” even though Auden had written them in the reverse order. Auden’s reasons for this arrangement are obvious enough; “The Sea and the Mirror” is a poem about the nature and limitations of art, and it ends by insisting that humans cannot give coherent, artistic order to their existence and therefore must accept God’s intrusion into human affairs. “For the Time Being” then explores the implications of that divine intrusion.

¹⁴The phrase “Land of Unlikeness” is from Augustine’s *Confessions*, as Fuller points out (*W. H. Auden* 355). It is from Pusey’s translation, which Auden would have found quoted in Cochrane.

¹⁵Auden argued in *The Dyer’s Hand* that a Christian theme or image does not necessarily make a work of art any more or less Christian (458).

While “For the Time Being” advances an Augustinian articulation of the inherent goodness of human embodiment, “The Sea and the Mirror” implicitly relies on a similar Augustinian insistence that human embodiment must not be denigrated in the interests of the spirit. The poem is subtitled, “A Commentary on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*,” a play that Auden later referred to as a “Manichean” work, as he said, “not because it shows the relation of Nature to Spirit as one of conflict and hostility, which in fallen man it is, but because it puts the blame for this upon Nature and makes the Spirit innocent” (*DH* 130). In response to what he perceived as *The Tempest*’s Manichean tendencies, Auden sets up his commentary such that it demonstrates the interdependence of body and spirit. The poem also explores the mutual culpability of body and spirit, and finally offers the possibility of resolving the spirit/body opposition, not through poetry but through the divine Word.

Nineteenth-century interpretations of *The Tempest* had tended to identify Prospero with Shakespeare, or the artist, and to see Ariel as the artist’s muse of spiritual inspiration—Auden later suggested that in an ideal staging of *The Tempest* Ariel should not appear onstage but rather speak from offstage so as to emphasize his (or its) identity as a voice without a body (*DH* 132-33). In contrast to Ariel, Caliban was identified by nineteenth century critics with the body, largely unteachable and totally unartistic. Shakespeare’s Caliban, it will be remembered, speaks mostly in prose rather than in blank verse. Prospero was set between them as a figure of the artist who attempts to control the body with the help of his spirit of inspiration and with his magic art. One problem with making such an allegory out of *The Tempest* is that it ignores the necessarily physical nature of art, including poetry. In the *Confessions*, Augustine points

out that language exists in the physical world, since it involves the mouth, ears, and eyes, and that spoken language is no less physical for its being transitory (see *C* 11.22-23, 27). Rather, the transitory nature of language emphasizes its belonging to the physical world of constant flux and change. The written word exists primarily in the physical world, and as would be discovered later, spoken language depends on physical vibrations in the air. As it turns out, language cannot exist in a disembodied state. The idea that poetry is mainly “spiritual” rather than primarily physical is an illusion that Auden’s poem shatters.

Auden points up what he sees as Shakespeare’s mistaken disembodiment of art by making Caliban, not Ariel, speak on behalf of the artistic process and on behalf of Ariel himself. Further, Caliban speaks in a Jamesian prose, which is paradoxically appropriate for several reasons (see Spears, *Poetry* 224; *LA* 230-32), not the least of which is its obvious artifice and tendency toward abstraction. Auden wrote in a letter to Theodore Spencer that in writing for Caliban he had tried to find “a style as ‘spiritual’, as far removed from Nature, as possible (Ariel’s contribution) and James seemed to fit the bill exactly . . .” (qtd. in Kirsch, Introduction 31). Caliban’s ‘spiritual’ prose is in part an attempt to foster a measure of cognitive dissonance in the reader, for on one hand the style looks and sounds abstract and “spiritual,” but the fact that the speaker is Caliban forces the reader to remember that Caliban represents the body, even to the extent that, as Auden told Spencer, Caliban is “the Prick” (*LA* 230-31). Auden had associated the literary with the phallic as early as 1930, when he wrote to a friend, “Never write from your head, write from your cock” (qtd. in Schmidt 737). At the time, he may have meant that a writer should privilege the visceral while rejecting the abstract and intellectual—

Auden made many such categorical pronouncements throughout his life, quite a few of which he subsequently contradicted—but in light of his later work the statement does suggest an early connection of poetry with the facts of human embodiment. For Auden, art could never be separated from the body.

At the same time, art is not the exclusive domain of the body. Auden is not denying the quasi-Platonic idealism of *The Tempest* in order to slip into its mirror-image, the dualism of philosophical materialism. From the beginning of his speech, Caliban has been speaking in a “spiritual” prose style and is therefore already conflated with the spirit Ariel. The connection becomes clearer when Caliban speaks specifically to aspiring poets and novelists about the troublesome relationship between the artist and the inspiring muse who, when “released” by the artist as Prospero releases Ariel, refuses to leave. At this point, Caliban says, the artist first begins to inquire into the nature of art itself and eventually sees in the mirror of Ariel’s eyes “a gibbering fist-clenched creature with which you are all too unfamiliar, for this is the first time indeed that you have met the only subject that you have, who is not a dream amenable to magic but the all too solid flesh you must acknowledge as your own; at last you have come face to face with me” (CP 433). In his first moment of real honesty, the artist finds that his inspiration and his flesh cannot be separated, and further, that his own flesh is the only subject he really has. “Subject” is a pun, for the self is a subject in two senses, in that the flesh is a subject for artistic depiction, as well as a subject that must be ruled. Caliban chides the artist for not engaging in the fierce struggle with his own body but instead maintaining an aesthetic distance from himself in order to produce his art: “Had you tried to destroy me, had we wrestled through long dark hours, we might by daybreak have learnt something from

each other; in some panting pause to recover breath for further more savage blows or in the moment before your death or mine, we might both have heard together that music which explains and pardons all” (*CP* 434). In this post-Freudian re-reading of the biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the Angel (Genesis 32), Auden pictures Ariel as the conscious Jacob wrestling with his double, Caliban, a mysterious stranger who Ariel/Jacob must subdue in order to achieve reconciliation.

Caliban’s language echoes Auden’s description of the contemplative mystic in his essay “The Protestant Mystics.” “In the case of the Vision of God,” Auden says, “it does not seem to be granted to anyone who has not undergone a long process of self-discipline and prayer, but self-discipline and prayer cannot of themselves compel it” (*FA* 55). The moment of clear vision in which the artist sees reality as it is can come only after a difficult process of purgation. The “music” to which Caliban refers suggests the divine music of the spheres as depicted throughout Dante’s *Paradiso*, which can be heard only by the blessed who have undergone a purgative process of fighting bodily desires, not in order to abolish them but in order to moderate and control them. But Auden’s essay warns against developing too strict an analogy between an artistic inspiration and a mystical vision: “The vision of God cannot be a ‘work’ like a poem,” but is instead a gift given to some who through self-discipline have become able to receive it (*FA* 72). Barring the kind of wrestling with the flesh that Caliban describes, the only other option that the artist has for developing a tolerable relationship with his flesh is “to forgive and forget the past, and to keep our respective hopes for the future within moderate, very moderate, limits” (*CP* 435). It is not, perhaps, an ideal solution, but for an artist like

Auden who found himself constantly dissociated from and at odds with his bodily drives, expectations for co-existence had to be kept low enough to be easily met.

The struggle with Caliban that the artist has largely avoided is replayed in grander terms at the end of the poem, as Caliban describes the colossal failure of all human attempts to order life aesthetically. The moment of honest self-knowledge also reveals the absolute need of God, to whom Caliban refers as “the real Word,” “that Wholly Other Life,” and “the perfected Work” (*CP* 444). Yet the recognition of the “essential emphatic gulf” between the human and the divine does not result in a rejection of the human in favor of the divine, but in “the restored relation” between the divine and the human, and consequentially a restored relation between Ariel and Caliban (*CP* 444). Ariel’s “Postscript,” with an echo by the Prompter, briefly touches on the possibilities and problems inherent in accepting the restored relation. Ariel confesses to Caliban that he is “Helplessly in love with you” as well as with “Elegance, art, fascination” but that he cannot reconcile with Caliban by collapsing the differences between them: “only / As I am can I / Love you as you are” (*CP* 445). But neither can their differences ever completely sever Ariel from Caliban, so Ariel reminds his counterpart, “Never hope to say farewell” (*CP* 445). The prompter’s echoing “. . . I,” which implicitly opposes Antonio’s earlier, ironic echoes insisting on total division and isolation, reinforces the possibility of the restored relation between Caliban and Ariel, a relation in which their differences are not erased, nor their unity divided. That is, regardless of the existential struggles between them, Caliban and Ariel must co-inhere. In the more theological language that Auden borrowed from the debates leading up to the Nicene council, one must neither “confound the persons” nor “divide the substance” in defining the

relationship between the human body and spirit. Though they are frequently at odds, the existence of each one is always necessary to the existence of the other, and so each is intrinsically good in its own limited way.

In the poetry that Auden would write after “The Sea and the Mirror,” he would continue to employ such theological and religious language to describe the difficult relationships between elements of human existence that tend towards destructive binary opposition—body and mind, individual and society, past and present, sacred and secular—and he would continue to insist that such categories must necessarily relate to each other in dialectical harmony. From the beginning of his career, Auden had been seeking a unified vision of psychological and historical reality, but he would not accept a vision that achieved unity at the expense of particulars, nor individuation at the expense of unity. But he saw in the political history of the twentieth century a dangerous tendency towards political ideologies, fascism especially but also communism, that sought to dissolve human individuality in the tyrannical state, and so many of his later poems express a deep concern to reaffirm the goodness of the particularities of human existences. The 1952 poem “The Shield of Achilles” (1952), for instance, moves from a vision of an army composed of unindividuated “eyes” and “boots” (*CP* 597) to “A crowd of ordinary decent folk” watching a political execution (*CP* 597), and finally to a “ragged urchin, aimless and alone” (*CP* 598), a progression from the collective to the individual that focuses the reader’s attention more and more on the particular atrocities of modern tyranny. The evils of such a world become clearer the closer the poem gets to the particulars of the situation, but the nature of evil as a corruption also becomes clearer. The “unintelligible multitude” is certainly dangerous because it has been deprived of

individuality (*CP* 597), but the “ragged urchin” is more obviously a victim of his corrupt circumstances:

That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,
Were axioms to him, who’d never heard
Of any world where promises were kept,
Or one could weep because another wept. (*CP* 598).

Violence and injustice are the realities of his world, but these things also remind the reader that such a world is ultimately a corruption of a human world that ought to be based on fairness, trustworthiness, and empathy. To admit the ugly reality of the Fall is to admit that the world has fallen from a state of goodness that is still intrinsic to it. In some of Auden’s later poems, especially the sequences “*Horae Canonicae*” and “Thanksgiving for a Habitat,” Auden would continue to reiterate the fundamental goodness of physical existence, and in the next chapter I will examine the ways in which Auden’s late poetry develop his vision of existence as good.

CHAPTER FIVE

Existence as Good (II)

Goodness is timeless.

—W. H. Auden “Archaeology”

Between the late 1940s and his death in 1973, Auden continued to write poems that place a high value on physical existence, and some of his best poems of this period, including “*Horae Canonicae*” and “*In Praise of Limestone*,” are premised on the idea that physical existence in general and the human body specifically are intrinsically good. During this period, Auden occasionally cited Augustine as a source of such a position, and the poems of the 1950s and 1960s reveal a consistent recognition that ethics and a just civil order must be based on an acceptance of the body as a fundamental and legitimate aspect of human existence. The poems of this period also show an increasing awareness that, since the body exists in time, the goodness of the body has implications in the realm of history. This chapter will touch incidentally on the development of Auden’s conception of history during these years, but it will focus on the ways in which Auden’s later poems and prose maintain their reliance on Augustine for their account of the goodness of the physical world. It will also explore the tension between Auden’s chosen role as a “civic” poet and his continuing doubts about the ability of poetry to directly affect history or politics. As we shall see in this and later chapters, Auden believed that the role of the poet is primarily to identify and praise whatever is good, even more than it is to denounce what is evil, although Auden did his share of

denunciation. Throughout his poetic corpus, and especially in his later poems, Auden consistently identifies embodied human existence as thoroughly good and praiseworthy.

“Horae Canonicae”

Auden’s first explicitly religious poem, “For the Time Being,” indicated that the Incarnation, as a real historical event, must be reenacted by individuals within their own historical context, but the poem’s ending had not explored the possibilities for such reenactment in day-to-day life so much as commented on the difficulty of doing so. In some ways, Auden’s poem sequence “Horae Canonicae,” which he completed in 1955, is a continuation of the project begun in “For the Time Being.” But instead of the Incarnation, “Horae Canonicae” investigates the ways in which the suffering and death of Christ might be reenacted at other points in history. Auden had been considering writing such a poem sequence for some time, and Mendelson reports that in a 1947 letter to Ursula Niebuhr “he explained he had ‘a possible scheme in mind for a series of secular poems based on the Offices’; the word ‘secular’ was evidently a warning not to expect anything liturgical or devotional, although Auden’s schemata, from the beginning, emphasized the liturgical and theological dimensions of the work” (LA 312). Auden eventually developed several detailed charts relating each of the canonical hours to particular historical events, biblical stories, types of people, and body parts, but the poems he actually produced bear little relation to the charts. Mendelson explains that one “chart portrays a linear sequence of events from Lauds to Compline, Creation to Apocalypse, dawn to dusk. But a strictly linear time ignores the repetitive physiology of the body. The finished sequence, with Lauds at the close, integrates linear history with cyclical nature . . .” (LA 313). So few of the terms and ideas in the original charts

actually appeared in the finished poems. The sequence would, however, prove a logical successor to other, earlier long works in which Auden had continually struggled to articulate the necessity of the integration of opposites: nature and history, cyclical time and linear time, individual and society, conscious ego and unconscious self.

In the poem sequence, Auden did retain one level of analogy with the canonical hours. Traditionally, each of the seven canonical hours was an occasion for meditation on a different event in the Passion,¹ and so most of the poems in the sequence relate to the corresponding Good Friday event, if sometimes only obliquely. As Mendelson explains, “the event at their center is the specific historical act that was performed in first-century Jerusalem and, simultaneously, any apparently trivial act you may do that harms another person when you did not consciously intend to do harm” (*LA* 332). Mendelson’s reading also identifies the body and its troubled relation to the self as a central theme of the poem. While “*Horae Canonicae*” revisits territory that had become familiar to Auden in “*For the Time Being*” and “*The Sea and the Mirror*,” this poem sequence extends and expands Auden’s conception of the struggle between the body and the consciousness. The Incarnation as described in “*For the Time Being*” had emphasized the fundamental goodness of linear time and the goodness of the body by implication, and “*The Sea and the Mirror*” had pointed out the body’s and the spirit’s mutual responsibility for the conflict between them, but “*Horae Canonicae*” now emphasized the difficulties of embodiment and points up the necessity of redemption.

¹Auden’s charts follows the traditional order fairly closely, though he conflates the first two. Lauds and Matins (midnight and 3:00 a.m.) correspond to the prayer in the garden and the arrest, Prime (6:00 a.m.) corresponds to the mocking, Tierce (9:00 a.m.) to the trial and sentence, Sext (noon) to the crucifixion, Nones (3:00 p.m.) to the piercing, Vespers (6:00 p.m.) to the removal from the cross, and Compline (9:00 p.m.) to the burial (see *LA* 311-13, 333-34; and Fuller, *W. H. Auden* 456-57).

The first poem in the sequence, “Prime,” was also the first to be written—the rest are not arranged in order of composition—and it was begun in 1949, five years after “The Sea and the Mirror” was finished. The poem is about the first moment of undivided consciousness as “Without a name or history I wake / Between my body and the day” (*CP* 627). The speaker has, for a moment, returned to a pre-Fall Eden in which there is no division between what Auden generally referred to as the Ego, or the *I*, and the Self, or *me*.² At this moment the speaker calls “holy,” there is no distinction between what one is and what one desires, and the speaker is “wholly in the right” (*CP* 627). The speaker and his body are one, as

the will has still to claim
 This adjacent arm as my own,
 The memory to name me . . .

 . . . and I
 The Adam sinless in our beginning,
 Adam still previous to any act. (*CP* 627)

R. A. York maintains that “the person at the first moment of consciousness is conceived as unfallen and the activities of the day as a fall” (234). But this is not quite right. For Auden, the Fall does not occur in what follows the advent of self-consciousness; rather, the Fall *is* the emergence of self-consciousness. As Auden articulated the idea in “The Prolific and the Devourer” and “New Year Letter,” the human race fell from innocence at

²Mendelson remarks that this distinction is especially tricky for those who, naturally, use the terms interchangeably (*LA* 339n). Auden defined the *I* as that self-consciousness that is aware that there is another part of itself, the *me*, that projects into the outside world and includes the body. Hence, it is possible to say “my tooth hurts,” as if the tooth that feels pain were distinct from the *I* who says it. This is not a strict mind/body distinction, since the self-consciousness is aware of mental processes as well as of bodily sensations. It is a distinction between the *knowing* ego and the *known* self. Auden relies on this distinction in “Precious Five,” in which the conscious, knowing *I* addresses the sensory, corporeal *self*. Auden explains the distinction in various prose pieces. See especially *EF* 117 and *DH* 104.

the moment of self-consciousness in which the previously coherent self is split into competing and contradictory desires. In “Prime” the poet momentarily recovers a sense of innocent wholeness, even to the extent that he senses no distinction between the body (the adjacent arm, for instance) and his self, but in becoming fully awake he reenacts the Fall as well. In a refined version of the ideas expressed in those earlier works, the poem locates the Fall in the moment at which the self wished to be other than what it was, when duty and desire fail to coincide:

I draw breath; that is of course to wish
No matter what, to be wise,
To be different, to die and the cost,
No matter how, is Paradise
Lost of course and myself owing a death. (*CP* 628)

In an almost comic paradox, the poem uses the most innocent act of conscious breathing as an example of an emerging desire to be other than what one already is. The act is of no consequence in itself, but it signals the emergence of self-consciousness and the division of the *I* from the *self*, which has serious consequences for the body.

After the Fall, the body rebels against the *I* and introduces its own conflicting drives into the consciousness, so it becomes partially responsible for the ensuing divisions in the human person. Now fully awake and aware of the Fall, the speaker refers to his body as “this ready flesh / No honest equal, but my accomplice now, / My assassin to be” (628). Both body and mind had been equally good in their pre-Fall union, but now the body is accessory to any sin that the ego commits, and in the poem sequence murder is a synecdoche for all sin. In the context of a poem sequence that reenacts Good Friday, the murder that the “assassin” body will commit is the execution of the innocent Christ.

The next poem, “Terce,” advances the argument by contrasting the fallen, average man in “Prime” with “our victim who is without a wish” (*CP* 629). The victim, Christ, is sinless since he does not wish to be anything other than what he already is, the perfectly coherent person who “knows that by sundown / We shall have had a good Friday” (*CP* 629). Because Christ is innocent, there can be no rational reason for his execution, and the only “unforgivable” aspects of Christ that “Terce” identifies are his perfect understanding of fallen human nature and his ability to foresee the violent consequences of fallen humans’ collision with the innocent man. The crucifixion is, indeed, an archetypal *acte gratuite*, a term that Auden associates with Augustine and defines in his review of Cochrane’s *Christianity and Classical Culture*:

When a Christian, like Augustine, talks about ethics, therefore, he begins not with the rational act or the pleasant act, but with the *acte gratuite*, which is neither reasonable nor physically pleasant, but a pure assertion of absolute self-autonomy. . . . Man, that is to say, always acts either self-loving, just for the hell of it, or God-loving, just for the heaven of it; his reasons, his appetites are secondary motivations. (*FA* 37)

The murder of the innocent victim may be overtly predicated on jealousy or pride, but such motivations are only pretenses. The murder is all the more atrocious because it is committed, literally, “just for the hell of it.”

“Nones,” a later poem in the sequence, begins just after the murder has been committed:

What we know to be not possible,
Though time after time foretold
By wild hermits, by shaman and sybil
Gibbering in their trances,
Or revealed to a child in some chance rhyme
Like *will* and *kill*, comes to pass
Before we realize it. . . . (*CP* 634)

Despite the speaker's disbelief in the possibility of the act, the "chance rhyme" of "will" and "kill" had long suggested that the impetus towards the murder of an innocent victim had always been implicit in fallen humanity, and now it has actually happened. The mob that committed the murder has now dissipated into the individuals of which it was comprised, individuals who cannot now give any rational explanation for their actions.

Neither can they forget that their actions were real, for "the blood / Of our sacrifice is already / Dry on the grass" (CP 634). Compared to many of his contemporaries, Auden is not a particularly visual poet, as Richard Hoggart observed soon after this poem was published (17), so this image stands out in the poem as a reminder that the Fall and the consequent crucifixion were not abstract, mythical symbols of psychological complexes. The Fall and the crucifixion physically happened in real history, so each individual reenactment of Fall and sacrifice also happens in time and in the body. The fourth stanza suggests that each *acte gratuite*, even those that are innocent in themselves, like games, now evokes the crucifixion: "This mutilated flesh, our victim, / Explains too nakedly, too well, / . . . / The aim of our chalk-pit game . . ." (CP 635).

Because of the unavoidable association of every *acte gratuite* with the crucifixion,

We shall always now be aware
Of the deed into which they lead, under
The mock chase and mock capture,
.....
Be listening for the cry and stillness
To follow after: wherever
The sun shines, brooks run, books are written,
There will always be this death. (CP 635)

The poem suggests that all games are, in a way, reenactments of the crucifixion inasmuch as they are pursued for their own sake. A game is an *acte gratuite*—and Auden considered art a kind of game too—so it can never appear to be wholly innocent to those

who are already fallen. The poem points up the culpability of literary art at the end of the stanza, which insists that “wherever / . . . books are written, / There will also be this death” (*CP* 635). Literature, being a game primarily for grown-ups, is perhaps especially implicated because, as the next stanza indicates,

. . . we have time
To misrepresent, excuse, deny,
Mythify, use this event
While . . .
. . . its meaning
Waits for our lives. (*CP* 635)

The poem identifies language as the primary means by which we attempt to regard the murder as something other than what it was; the actions of misrepresenting, excusing, denying, and mythifying are executed by means of language. The poem specifically identifies mythologization as an illegitimate attempt to deny responsibility for the murder by claiming that the sacrifice of an innocent victim is “only a symbol.”

To think that the crucifixion or any of its reenactments are “just a myth” and not a physical reality is to forget that language is itself a physical reality that cannot be separated from bodily existence. The end of the poem describes a dream in which “our dreaming wills may seem to escape / This dead calm, wander instead” over a wide variety of freely-associated landscapes until it reaches “a room, / Lit by one weak bulb, where our Double sits / Writing and does not look up” (*CP* 636). Mendelson identifies the Double with the body, the external self from which the dreaming ego is dissociated, even though “the dream cannot say that the Double is the body, because the will has no way of knowing the meaning of dreams” (*LA* 345). That the Double, the body, is pictured writing does draw attention to the fact that the ego cannot express itself except through the body. As Mendelson notes, “in the poetic world made up of words, the body does not

look up from its work of making because, in dreams, the will cannot summon the body to act on the will's behalf" (*LA* 345). But the final stanza reveals that the Double's "writing" is a metaphor for the unconscious biological processes of the body that continue even during sleep:

. . . while we are thus away, our own wronged flesh
May work undisturbed, restoring
The order we try to destroy, the rhythm
We spoil out of spite: valves close
And open exactly, glands secrete,
Vessels contract and expand
At the right moment, essential fluids
Flow to renew exhausted cells,
Not knowing quite what has happened, but awed
By death (*CP* 636)

While the body is an "accomplice" to murder, as "Prime" indicated, it also resists the ego's arbitrary, self-assertive attempt to destroy innocent order "out of spite." The body acts as a willing instrument of the ego, and so it is always implicated in the Fall—after Nuremburg it is impossible to excuse oneself by claiming, "I was only following orders"—yet it also retains a commendable impetus towards order and coherence. In fact, its orderly regularity and unity suggests that the body has not fallen so far as the ego. And if sleep cannot restore the unity of the ego and the self, it can at least postpone the ego's self-destructive acts and allow the body time to restore some of its original goodness.

As in "Nones," the body also shows up in "Vespers" to remind a Utopian and an Arcadian that their respective dreams are fictions that cannot accept the existence of the physical world. The poem details a meeting between two antitypes, the speaker of the poem who is an Arcadian, and another man, a Utopian. In *The Dyer's Hand*, Auden explained that between the two "there is a characterological gulf as unbridgeable as that

between Blake's Prolifics and Devourers" (409). There are many differences between them, but at base the Arcadian wishes to return to the lost world of the pre-Fall Eden while the Utopian looks forward to the perfect society of the New Jerusalem. As Auden put it, "Eden is a place where its inhabitants may do whatever they like to do; the motto over its gate is, 'Do what thou wilt is here the Law.' New Jerusalem is a place where its inhabitants like to do whatever they ought to do, and its motto is, 'In His will is our peace'" (*DH* 409). That Auden himself had Arcadian leanings is obvious from his use of the first-person voice of the Arcadian in "Vespers," as well as his more comic treatment of the subject in an earlier poem, "Under Which Lyre." In "Vespers," the speaker, who is an Arcadian, and the Utopian appear to have nothing in common, so they have nothing to say to each other as they walk through the city. Neither one can accept the totality of physical reality as it comes to him: "Passing a slum child with rickets, I look the other way: He looks the other way if he passes a chubby one" (*CP* 637). Both are dualists; their dreams deny that certain realities have any right to existence.

While the beginning of the poem draws attention to the sharp differences between the two positions, the Arcadian speaker wonders near the end whether the meeting was "simply a fortuitous intersection of life-paths, loyal to different fibs? / Or also a rendezvous between two accomplices who, in spite of themselves, cannot resist meeting . . .?" (*CP* 639). Parenthetically he also asks, "do both, at bottom, desire truth?" (*CP* 639). The obvious answer is "no," since both are committed to comfortable fictions and must therefore reject reality as it is. Mendelson remarks that the phrase "at bottom" is a pun and "a comic reminder of the body," different aspects of which the Arcadian and Utopian reject (*CP* 355). The meeting between the two also

forc[es] us both, for a fraction of a second, to remember our victim (but for him I could forget the blood, but for me he could forget the innocence), on whose immolation (call him Abel, Remus, whom you will, it is one Sin Offering) arcadias, utopias, our dear old bag of a democracy are alike founded:

For without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand. (*CP* 639)

The body, both their own living bodies and the dead body of the victim, is an embarrassment to each dreamer and reveals the sinister side of both fantasies. The Utopian reminds the Arcadian that the ritual sacrifice involves real blood; it cannot be reduced to a merely aesthetic spectacle in which no one really gets hurt. In *The Dyer's Hand*, Auden notes that in every imagined Eden, "Whatever people do, whether alone or in company, is some kind of play" (411). So without the Utopian's presence, the Arcadian could go on pretending that the sacrificial murder—the *acte gratuite*—is only a symbolic game. Likewise, the Arcadian's existence reminds the Utopian that the sacrificial victim is innocent. The Utopian would like to pretend that anyone who is excluded from the New Jerusalem deserves his expulsion, and that those who die are manifestly guilty of capital crimes against his Utopia. But, like Herod in "For the Time Being," he finds that certain victims are innocent and that he must grudgingly go ahead with the execution anyway, violating the very principle of rational justice on which he wants to build his state. As Jan Curtis argues, "What unnerves the Arcadian and the Utopian and momentarily shatters their dreams of escaping history is the remembrance of the Paschal meal of evening prayer presided over by a powerless Messiah who experiences the ambiguities of history and falls into the abyss of death" (205). Both dreams are untenable fantasies that cannot acknowledge the reality of the crucifixion

because they are unable to look at the fallen, physical world without either denying the most self-evident aspects of reality or contradicting the principles of their own existence.

Since the conflicts between the *I* and the *self* cannot be resolved by regression to Eden or progression to the New Jerusalem, the next poem, “Compline,” represents an existentially honest attempt to address guilt through self-assessment and confession. The poem mirrors the first poem in the sequence, “Prime,” in both form and content. Both poems are written in a similar syllabic meter and stanzas of alternating longer and shorter lines,³ and both examine the semi-conscious state between sleeping and waking, but while “Prime” is about waking up, “Compline” is about falling asleep. As the speaker falls asleep, “seizing its chance, the body escapes” the control of the conscious will and enters the self-regulated state that Auden had previously described in the dream scene in “Nones” (*CP* 640). But “Compline” focuses on the ruminations of the ego as it struggles to remember a definitive past event that is now lost to memory. As the speaker falls asleep, he expects “The instant of recollection / When the whole thing makes sense,” but the memories come only in fragments, “And I fail to see either plot / Or meaning; I cannot remember / A thing between noon and three” (*CP* 640). In the context of the canonical hours, the event that the speaker cannot remember is the crucifixion and death of Christ, and by implication, the speaker’s own guilty participation in a reenactment of that murder. In his essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, Auden comments on the relationship between memory and liturgy:

It is easy to forget, particularly if I do not wish to remember, what I thought or felt yesterday, but it is difficult to forget what I did. Even mere

³Mendelson compares the forms of the two poems thus: “The stanza form of both poems is the same, but in “Compline” the rhythms are slower, the diction more relaxed, and the internal rhymes less frequent and agitated” (*LA* 355).

routine has its value, as a reminder. A man may go to confession in a frivolous state of mind, rattle off some sins without feeling any real contrition, and go away to commit them again, but as long as he keeps up the habit he cannot forget that there are certain actions which the Church calls sinful, and that he has committed them. . . . (43)

A liturgy, Auden argues, requires active participation from everyone, so it serves as an aid to memory (42-43). The whole of “Horae Canonicae,” despite Auden’s initial plan to write “secular” poems, is an exercise in a liturgical recovery of memory, hence the efforts of the speaker in “Compline” to remember what he did “between noon and three.”

In the second stanza the speaker is drifting further into sleep, and the ego has become almost completely unaware of his body, though what awareness he has left maintains the body’s otherness. He is aware only of “A heart’s rhythm, a sense of stars”; the phrase “*a* heart” rather than the expected “*my* heart” emphasizes the body’s detachment from the conscious ego (*CP* 640). But in the next lines the speaker reclaims the heart as his own, suggesting that

. . . maybe
My heart is confessing her part
In what happened to us from noon till three,
That constellations indeed
Sing of some hilarity beyond
All liking and happening. (*CP* 640)

In phrasing reminiscent of Poe’s short story “The Tell-Tale Heart,”⁴ the speaker supposes that the sound of the heartbeat is itself an admission of guilt, and further, that his heart is leading him to a Dantean Paradise among the stars. But he immediately punctures what he calls “vain fornications of fancy” (*CP* 640). The phrase is a translation of Augustine’s *fantastica fornicatio*, a version of which Auden had used previously in Simeon’s speech

⁴Auden knew Poe’s work well, though he does not mention this particular tale in his introduction to his book of Poe’s selected writings, reprinted in *FA* (209-20), nor did Auden include “The Tell-Tale Heart” among his selections for the anthology.

in “For the Time Being.” Here, the speaker uses the phrase to suggest that his imaginations, however pleasant, are perversions. He has imagined that his heart is automatically confessing without the ego’s willing it to do so, implicitly absolving the ego of any responsibility to admit its own culpability. The speaker’s fancy has taken a distinctly Manichean turn, since it makes the body solely responsible for evil and releases the mind from guilt. It has further implied that one’s own body may become the scapegoat whose rejection merits the mind’s entrance into Paradise among the stars. Such a thought, the poet says, is nothing but the imagination fornicating with itself.

The proper response to the body and to the cosmos to which the body attests, consists of “blessing them both / For the sweetness of their cassations” (*CP* 640). Auden’s technique of doubling is particularly thick here: “both” refers to the heart and the stars, and the word “cassation” has two meanings, both of which are relevant to the heart and the stars. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “cassation” denotes the action of making null and void, and the word is also the name of a type of a type of eighteenth-century instrumental music similar to a serenade. The heart’s rhythm in the beginning of the stanza suggests music, and the heart has also, through its pretended confession, nullified the ego’s pride and reawoken its sense of guilt. The stars, on the other hand, are the source of the music of the spheres in the Ptolemaic cosmos in which Dante operates, though the stars’ distance from the ego has suggested the possibility of a blessedness available only through a contrition and confession that would nullify its guilt. The speaker rightly blesses his own physicality, represented by his heart, and the physical world outside himself, represented by the stars, because their manifest

existence does not let him forget that there are things and people apart from himself whose existences are all holy.

The third stanza edges closer to the total unconsciousness of sleep, which the speaker describes as “one step to nothing” (*CP* 641). “For the end,” he says,

for me as for cities,
Is total absence: what comes to be
Must go back into non-being
For the sake of the equity, the rhythm
Past measure or comprehending. (*CP* 641)

Auden’s language here recalls Augustine’s description of the passage of time, as he details in the *Confessions*:

What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. . . . Take the two tenses, past and future. How can they ‘be’ when the past is not now present and the future is not yet present? Yet if the present were always present, it would not pass into the past: it would not be time but eternity. If then, in order to be time at all, the present is so made that it passes into the past, how can we say that this present also ‘is’? The cause of its being is that it will cease to be. So indeed we cannot truly say that time exists except in the sense that it tends towards non-existence. (*C* 11.14)

In this passage, Augustine attempts to make sense of his own existence in time, and while he eventually comes to some provisional conclusions about the nature of time, his hypotheses also involve a hesitancy that admits, in Auden’s words, that the matter is “past measure or comprehending.” Augustine recognizes, and Auden follows him here, that the existing present continually passes into the non-being of the past, which then “exists” only in memory.

But the speaker in Auden’s poem cannot remember the violent act of which he is guilty until he learns to pray, even in the most pedestrian language, for himself, for his lover (“dear C,” a reference to Auden’s intimate friend and sometime lover Chester Kallman), “And all poor s-o-b’s who never / Do anything properly . . .” (*CP* 641). It is a

prayer for mercy, as the speaker asks, “spare / Us in the youngest day when all are / Shaken awake, facts are facts” (CP 641). The speaker has shifted from the first-person singular *I* of the previous stanzas into the first-person plural *Us*, which indicates that he is learning to regard other people as equally important as himself, and in his identification with others he finds that “I shall know exactly what happened / Today between noon and three” (CP 641). His confession now involves his full consciousness and volition, and it therefore results in the promise of redemption, which Auden pictures as “com[ing] to the picnic / With nothing to hide” (CP 641). He ends the poem with a particularly Dantean image of redemption as a dance, which “moves in perichoresis, / Turns about the abiding tree” (CP 641). “Perichoresis” is a theological term of Greek origin, literally meaning a turning or revolving but used figuratively to describe “the interrelationship or interpenetration of the Persons of the Trinity; the manner in which the three Persons are regarded as conjoined or interlinked without each one's distinct identity being lost” (“Perichoresis” *OED*).⁵ It is analogous to Charles Williams’s term “co-inherence,” and the idea (though not by that name) was vigorously defended by Augustine, as well as by a host of other patristic writers. Auden’s use here is appropriate given his association of the term’s literal meaning with Dante’s image of restoration in Paradise as a circular dance, and it evokes the idea, always attractive to Auden, of a unification without erasure of difference, not only at the divine level, but also at the social level, and, most especially, at the psychological level.

⁵Fuller’s commentary also gives this definition (*W. H. Auden* 461), but Mendelson erroneously states that the term refers to “the mutual ‘co-inherence’ of the human and divine in Christ” (*LA* 357). The co-inherence of the Trinity and the co-inherence of the two natures of Christ are analogous in some important ways, but they are not exactly the same thing.

Several important themes from “Compline” are reiterated in the last poem of the sequence, “Lauds,” which Mendelson characterizes as a “naïve-sounding prayer for blessing, made possible by a free admission of guilt, [which] is phrased with Auden’s subtlest skill” (LA 358). Mendelson observes that the people on whom the poet asks blessing are neither isolated individuals nor an anonymous public, but “a Realm—a *royaume*—ruled by a person, and . . . a People, a plurality made up of persons” (LA 358). The poem reveals a peaceful consonance between the natural world, represented by the crowing cock and the singing birds, and the historical human world, represented by the mass-bell and the mill-wheel. The most prominent aspect of the poem is the resolution of social conflicts that were explored earlier in the sequence, especially in “Nones” and “Vespers.” But in “Lauds” the poet envisions the possibility that “Men of their neighbors become sensible,” and that the public and private worlds might co-exist peacefully, an idea repeated in every stanza by the refrain, “*in solitude, for company*” (CP 642). While the poem uses the pastoral images of an Eden arranged to Auden’s tastes—he had identified waterwheels as form of technology acceptable to the Arcadian in “Vespers”—it does not slip back into the blithe Arcadian temperament that Auden had ironically portrayed in “Vespers.” On its own the poem might sound merely sentimental, but following as it does a long, disquieting meditation on the Passion, it comes as the relieved dénouement after the confessional climax at the end of “Compline.” It reminds the reader that the whole sequence is based on a liturgical pattern, and “Lauds” is the doxology that both ends the sequence and offers a new beginning for the cycle.

“Precious Five” and “Memorial for the City”

It took Auden five years to finish all the poems for “Horae Canonicae.” The first poems he wrote were “Prime” in 1949 and “Nones” in 1950, both of which he published in the volume *Nones* with no indication that he was planning to place them in a larger sequence. The rest of the poems for the sequence were written in the early 1950s, but while Auden was still developing his ideas for “Horae Canonicae” in the late 1940s, he wrote many other short poems, including two that are especially notable for their focus on the goodness of human embodiment: “Precious Five” and “Memorial for the City.” The poems, written within a year of each other, touch on the corrupted goodness of the human body that Auden would soon examine at greater length in “Horae Canonicae”; they address the nature of human embodiment more directly and thus offer a starker picture of Auden’s sense of the benefits of embodiment.

“Precious Five” is arranged as an address to the poet’s own sensory organs—nose, ears, hands, eyes, and tongue—which are undergoing a process of recognizing the goodness that is always present in the surrounding world, knowledge of which is inaccessible to the conscious ego except through the mediation of the body’s senses. At the same time, Auden is also addressing each of the sense organs as synecdoches of the body as a whole, which must assist the conscious ego’s process of training and discipline in order to accept the intimations of goodness communicated by the body. The nose, for example, becomes a metaphor for the body’s mediation between the physical world and the ego:

now
In anxious times you serve
As bridge from mouth to brow,
An asymmetric curve

Thrust outward from a face
Time-conscious into space. (*CP* 587-88)

The nose is a reminder that the body as a whole is an extension in both space and time, an observation reminiscent of passages in book eleven of Augustine's *Confessions*, but it is also here a punning symbol of the connection, or "bridge," between the physical and the cognitive aspects of the person, between the appetites, represented by the mouth, and the consciousness, represented by the brow. At the end of the first stanza, the nose also becomes a sign of purgatorial hope: "Point, then, for honor's sake / Up the storm-beaten slope / From memory to hope / The way you cannot take" (*CP* 588). The fact that the body cannot follow the purgatorial way is an implicit rejection of Manichean dualism that Auden had attacked in "The Sea and the Mirror" for placing the blame for evil on the body. It is the conscious ego, not the unconscious body, that must undergo the process of purification through which it will become capable of apprehending the truth that the body constantly senses in the surrounding world.⁶

The second stanza, addressed to the ears, reemphasizes the fact that human corruption is located primarily in the ego. The ears are called upon by "The paranoiac mind" to affirm its self-delusions, since "lacking in conviction / It cannot take pure fiction, / And what it wants from you / Are rumors partly true" (*CP* 588). The ego, retaining as it does a measure of its original goodness, does not wish to be completely deceived about the nature of reality, but it would like the body to misrepresent reality in accordance with its preconceived notions of what reality ought to be. In order to resist

⁶Auden persistently attributed human problems to the mind while insisting that the body itself is not responsible for sin; such ideas are consistent both with his Augustinian theology and with his theory of illness as psychosomatic, which he got from John Layard and Homer Lane. In Auden's view, human and bodily ills were a product of a corrupted mind.

the temptation to misperception, the ears must “Go back again to school, / Drudge patiently” in order to perceive that all sounds are “natural, not one / Fantastic or banal” (CP 588). The ears, being easy to deceive, must undergo a process of training. But this statement on the ears’ need for training seems to contradict the indication in the previous stanza that the body cannot ascend Mount Purgatory. Either the body can participate in the redemption of the individual person or it cannot. The poem does not suggest any easy resolution to the question, but the different images with which Auden describes the redemptive process offer a clue. Auden imagines the purgation of the ego as a journey up Mount Purgatory, whereas he imagines the training of the body as a school. The two processes are analogous but not identical, since the image of Mount Purgatory suggests that the ego requires a theological and ultimately spiritual reformation in order to completely re-orient its passions, desires, and loves, while the body only needs technical training in order to better do that which it already does naturally. Their training complete, the ears will “Dance with angelic grace, / In ecstasy and fun,” an image that does suggest Dante’s *Paradiso* in which the saints dance to the music of the spheres. It seems that the purgation of the ego and the training of the body are different but analogous means to the same paradisaic end.⁷ In the state of perfection, the ears, and by implication the entire body, may “do what you will” (CP 588), an echo of Augustine’s famous statement, “Love, and do as you will,” (*Homilies on the First Epistle of John* 7.8).

⁷At some level Auden seems to recognize the fact, almost universally ignored by Dante critics, that Dante’s *Comedia*, including the *Purgatorio*, is composed almost entirely of educational situations in which a teacher (Virgil) guides a student (Dante) towards ever-greater knowledge by means of exposition, direct observation, and guest-lecturers. I am grateful to Grace E. Schuler for pointing this out to me.

That is, once the will is completely purified, what is willed is by definition identical with what is good.

While all the senses, not just the ears, must undergo a similar training in order to convey the goodness of existence to the generally uncooperative ego, the senses have always been naturally predisposed to recognize goodness in the physical world, as becomes apparent in Auden's address to the eyes. While the mind is always tempted by solipsism to regard only itself as real, the eyes continually remind the mind that other objects also have real existence:

True seeing is believing
(What sight can never prove)
There is a world to see:
Look outward, eyes, and love
Those eyes you cannot be. (*CP* 590)

Once the ego through the eyes recognizes the existence of other people as legitimate and good, the whole person is enabled to extend unselfish love to those other people. As Augustine once remarked, "a man cannot love that which he does not believe to exist" (*On Christian Doctrine* 1.41). While the eyes naturally recognize other objects, the tongue, like the ears, must undergo a process of training. The tongue—and here Auden addresses the sensory organ according to its productive function rather than its receptive function—has to train itself to "Praise, tongue, the Earthly Muse / . . . / Praise Her revolving wheel / Of appetite and season" (*CP* 590). While several years before in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" Auden had asserted that the poet should "teach the free man how to praise" while hesitating to say what exactly should be praised (*CP* 249), here the poet clearly identifies the object of praise as physical existence. The attempt to praise is more important than an achieved perfection, for "Although your style be fumbling, / Half

stutter and half song, / Give thanks however bumbling” (CP 590). The injunction recalls what Auden had said at the end of “For the Time Being,” that in the ordinary time between the vision and the final redemption, “the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing” (CP 400). But here in “Precious Five” the poet is more specific about the content of that rejoicing, since the tongue must praise even human appetites, including the sexual appetite represented by “his twin, your brother / Unlettered, savage, dumb, / Down there below the waist” (CP 590). No natural aspect of the body, no matter how corrupted or difficult to live with, is excluded from the tongue’s halting hymn.

It is not necessary that the ego, or the self, for that matter, know *why* it should give thanks for existence. The final stanza urges, “Be happy, precious five, / So long as I’m alive / Nor try to ask me what / You should be happy for” (CP 590). The ego could suggest excuses and occasions for the body to be happy, such as sex, alcohol, and material comforts, but it is incapable of offering a compelling reason to do that which it intuitively is right and good to do. The ego could also find compelling reasons for anger and despair, but the poem’s speaker admits that the physical world outside himself merely reasserts “That singular command / I do not understand, / *Bless what there is for being,* / Which has to be obeyed . . .” (CP 591). One early Auden critic has identified this command as one articulation of Auden’s poetic center of gravity, saying that “*the central Auden belief . . ., beyond any doubt, would be ‘Life remains a blessing’, or ‘Bless what there is for being’*” (Replogle 49). The line “Life remains a blessing” comes from “As I Walked Out One Evening” (CP 135), written in 1937, and indeed, Auden reiterates the injunction on several other occasions. In the 1940 poem “In Sickness and in Health,” the speaker insists that there “comes a voice / Which utters an absurd command—Rejoice”

(*CP* 319), and in “The Temptation of St. Joseph” from “For the Time Being,” the Narrator states, “To choose what is difficult all one’s days / As if it were easy, that is faith. Joseph, Praise” (*CP* 365).

The command to praise lies at the core of Auden’s convictions, even though the attempt to obey it is never unproblematic, firstly because the conflicting desires of the fragmented consciousness make consistency in action and motive impossible, but also because the reason for the command is incomprehensible to the rational mind. But in “Precious Five,” the ego must finally admit, “What else am I made for, / Agreeing or disagreeing?” (*CP* 591). The poet may accept or reject the command, but he cannot finally dismiss the recognition that he has been created with a natural inclination to praise what is good. The passive voice subtly obscures the theological implications of the poem; Auden’s phrasing does suggest that “I am made” *by* somebody who is not named in the poem, but whose presence is implied by the very existence of the physical world and by the goodness that is perceptible in it. Fuller suggests that in the poem’s ending “the theological position is one of Leibnizian optimism” (*W. H. Auden* 430). Leibniz was a seventeenth-century mathematician who believed that all events could be traced to sets of specific reasons and that the present world is the best of all possible worlds that God could have created. But surely this is almost the opposite of what Auden is saying, for the poem indicates that the existence of any compelling reason for praise is inscrutable and inaccessible to the human mind. It is an act of pure faith to assert that there is a reason, just as it is an act of faith to believe “What sight can never prove,” that the objective world of matter and sense really exists and is not just an illusion (*CP* 590). Further, the fact of the Fall, which the poem takes for granted, means if nothing else that

the present world could have been better than it now is. Given the poem's reliance on distinctly Augustinian conceptions of the goodness of the physical world and its reference to a central principle in Augustine's thought, "Love, and do as you will," the poem's final tentative optimism is more directly attributable to Augustine than to Leibniz.

In "Memorial for the City," written in 1949, Auden had further explored the problems and advantages involved in existing as an embodied person. The poem is in part a lament for the destruction of cities during the two world wars, but it considers the subject more broadly and attempts to place the twentieth century in the larger context of Western civilization's repeated, futile attempts to build the Just City. The poem's view of history is drawn from many sources, including Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's 1939 book *Out of Revolution: Autobiography of Western Man*, Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture*, and Williams's *The Descent of the Dove*. The poem begins with an epigraph from Dame Julian of Norwich, stating, "In the self-same point that our soul is made sensual, in the self-same point is the City of God ordained to him from without beginning" (CP 591). Fuller points out that Auden would have found the quotation in Williams, to whom the poem is dedicated,⁸ and he explains that Auden's use of Julian is an expression of Auden's continued suspicion of Manichaeism (*W. H. Auden* 417), though Fuller makes no further attempt to examine the poem in light of Augustine's thought. Augustine's ideas, as mediated through Williams and Cochrane, are the most obvious in the poem's final stanza, in which the body speaks in an enigmatic monologue reminiscent of Celtic and Anglo-Saxon "Who am I?" riddles.

⁸Williams used the phrase not only in *The Descent of the Dove*, but also as the opening statement in a 1939 essay "Sensuality and Substance" on D. H. Lawrence in the journal *Theology*. The article was reprinted in *The Image of the City* (68-75).

The body, referred to earlier in the poem as “our Image” and “our Weakness” (*CP* 595) does not associate itself with the historical events with which the rest of the poem has been engaged. Rather, the body’s voice turns to mythic and literary events to describe its own limited and redemptive role in human life. The difference between myth and history is analogous to the distinction Auden made between the mythic and the historical character in *The Dyer’s Hand* (407-08, c.f. 69-70); a mythic character is a character for whom a reader can imagine any number of further adventures for the character that the author, as it were, neglected to record—examples are Sherlock Holmes and Don Quixote. The mythic character is, in a way, perpetually repeatable, as a mythic event like the Fall and the Incarnation is perpetually repeatable. But a historical character is a character who is inseparable from his or her linear narrative as recorded by the author—examples are Anna Karenina and Prince Hal. An historical event is a unique event, such as the Protestant Reformation or the Battle of Waterloo; it happens only once. While “Memorial for the City” is largely concerned with historical events, events such as wars and revolutions that are unique in time, the body’s monologue is concerned almost solely with mythic events, such as the theft of fire by Prometheus and Galahad’s quest for the Grail; Mendelson remarks that in the list of events to which the body alludes, the only historical event is the crucifixion of Christ (327n), though as “*Horae Canonicae*” demonstrates, that event is also mythic because it is repeated in every human life.

Given the poem’s initial focus on historical events, the shift to the mythic is surprising and jarring. The poem follows up on a similar speech in “The Sea and the

Mirror” in which one of Shakespeare’s few mythic characters, Caliban,⁹ speaks for the body in a borrowed voice about his relationship to another mythic character, Ariel. In both speeches, the body speaks in a borrowed voice since it has no voice of its own. Caliban borrows the language of Henry James, and the body in “Memorial for the City” borrows mythic language. And neither speaker deals with the historical world as such, but with mythic metaphors that provide analogues to any number of historical events to which the audience cared to relate them. As presented in both poems, the body is itself a mythic entity, and as “Memorial for the City” characterizes it,

. . . our Image [the body] is the same
Awake or dreaming: it has no image to admire,
No age, no sex, no memory, no creed, no name,
It can be counted, multiplied, employed
In any place, at any time destroyed. (*CP* 595)

Auden had described the body’s physical operations in “Nones” as valves opening and closing, glands secreting, and vessels contracting and expanding (*CP* 636); the body’s processes are perpetually repeatable throughout time and thus not responsible for the unique ethical choices that the ego makes in linear history.

Mendelson explicitly links this section of the poem to a passage from *Christianity and Classical Culture* in which Cochrane states, “To Augustine . . . body is neither absolute reality nor absolute appearance; it is the organ by which mankind establishes contact with the objective world” (Cochrane 437, qtd. in *LA* 322). The body is an instrument of the soul and is therefore not to be blamed for the poor choices of the ego: “I was not taken in by the sheep’s eyes of Narcissus,” the body says (*CP* 595), since Narcissus’s pride and self-absorption was a purely intellectual sin, as Auden further

⁹Auden identifies Caliban, along with Ariel and Prospero, as one of only five mythic characters in Shakespeare’s plays (*DH* 408).

explains in *The Dyer's Hand* (DH 94-95). The body's voice continues, "I was innocent of the sin of the Ancient Mariner" who shot the albatross out of pure spite and not out of any corporeal need (CP 596). At the end of its speech, the body announces, "As for Metropolis, that too-great city; her delusions are not mine, / Her speeches impress me little, her statistics less . . ." (CP 596). The body has no interest in building what Augustine called the City of Man or the Earthly City, which he contrasts with the City of God. The Earthly City, which Augustine sees most fully realized in imperial Rome, operates on the basis of pride and the achievement of personal glory (see CG 5.15, 14.28), desires for which Auden attributes to the conscious ego, not to the body. By contrast, Augustine indicates that the City of God is characterized by love and harmony and is always already existing among God and his followers, including the angels, the martyrs, the church, and the past and present saints (CG 14:28, 19.13). It is therefore puzzling that Fuller should suggest that in this poem, "The human clay is seen finally, despite Dame Julian, as still awaiting the City of God" (*W. H. Auden* 420). Augustine maintains throughout *The City of God* that the divine City does not exist in the same way as the Earthly City does. For Augustine, it is true (and perhaps this is what Fuller means) that what Auden might elsewhere call "the Just City" is not finally achievable through the present modes of civic and political life, since the Earthly City is based on self-aggrandizement.

In *The Enchafèd Flood*, a work based on lectures given in 1949, the same year he wrote "Memorial for the City," Auden reiterates Augustine's clear distinction between these two cities. The ships in Melville's fiction, he says, can represent

the *civitas terrena*, created by self-love, inherited and repeated, into which all men since Adam are born, yet where they have never totally lost their

knowledge of and longing for the Civitas Dei and the Law of Love. From this arise absurd contradictions, like the chaplain on a man-of-war who is paid a share of the reward for sinking a ship and cannot condemn war or flogging, or the devout Baptist who earns his bread as captain of a gun. To be like Christ, to obey the law of love absolutely, is possible only for the saint, for Billy Budd, and even for him the consequence is the same as for Christ, crucifixion. The rest of us cannot avoid disingenuous compliances. (66-67)

Auden's assertion that no human is able to establish or maintain the City of God on earth suggests that a reader of "Memorial for the City" should not be surprised that utopian liberal humanism does not triumph at the end of the poem. For Auden as for Augustine, the concept of the political Just City is merely an idealized form of the Earthly City; it is not to be confused with the City of God. Auden makes a similar point in his review of Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture*, where he remarks on the dubious project of conflating the two cities:

Our period is not so unlike the age of Augustine: the planned society, caesarism of thugs or bureaucracies, paideia, scientia, religious persecution, are all with us. Nor is there even lacking the possibility of a new Constantinism; letters have already begun to appear in the press, recommending religious instruction in schools as a cure for juvenile delinquency; Mr. Cochrane's terrifying description of the 'Christian' empire under Theodosius should discourage such hopes of using Christianity as a spiritual benzedrine for the earthly city (FA 39)

While Auden was not about to give up trying to encourage the present Earthly City to become more just and humane whenever he could, by the time he wrote "Memorial for the City" he was under no illusions that any human society could bring the New Jerusalem to earth.

"Thanksgiving for a Habitat" and Later Poems

Mendelson explains that "Horae Canonicae" and other poems of the late 1940s and early 1950s had "emphasized the body but said nothing 'coolly realistic' about the

facts of bodily needs” (LA 443), so in the late 1950s Auden set out to write a series of poems about his new home in Kirchstetten, Austria, in which he had recently settled. The house was a natural subject for a poem sequence in which he wished to explore the facts of corporeal existence; as Mendelson observes, “A house is a frame and an extension of the body . . .” (443). Auden said something very similar in a 1971 essay, in which he remarked on the difference between the conscious “I” and the “Self, both physical and mental, which I am inhabiting like a house or driving like a motor car” (“Pride and Prayer” 7). Auden’s meditations on his house in “Thanksgiving for a Habitat” represent a reinvigorated interest in human embodiment, and so it is not surprising that references to Augustine’s ontology of good and evil are sprinkled throughout the sequence, reinforcing Auden’s belief in the innate goodness of physical, created things despite their corruption. Callan suggests, “An alternative title for this cycle might be ‘Against the Manichees’; for it provides a poetic counterpart for the thesis against the Manichean-Gnostic imagination that pervades his criticism including *The Enchafèd Flood* and his collection of critical essays *The Dyer’s Hand*” (241). The sequence contains several direct references to Augustine’s ideas about the nature of good and evil—we have seen in the previous chapter that the postscript to “The Cave of Making” refers to privation as the essence of evil. Another poem in the sequence, “For Friends Only,” written about the guest room, contains a pun on Augustine’s definition of evil. In the poem, Auden comments on the necessity of maintaining friendships through frequent visits and regrets the frequent good-byes:

Distance and duties divide us,
But absence will not seem an evil
If it make our re-meeting

A real occasion. Come when you can:
Your room will be ready. (*CP* 707)

The statement that “absence will not seem an evil” is a witty reversal of the Augustinian theory that evil consists of an absence of good.

The correlative Augustinian position on the goodness of the physical body most clearly underpins the sixth poem of the sequence, “The Geography of the House.”¹⁰ The poem is about the toilet, and it draws comparisons between artistic production and the production of the bowels. After citing Martin Luther’s inspirations in the privy and the posture of Rodin’s *The Thinker*, Auden states,

All the Arts derive from
This ur-act of making,
Private to the artist:
Makers’ lives are spent
Striving in their chosen
Medium to produce a
De-narcissus-ised en-
-during excrement. (*CP* 699)

For Auden, the physical nature of artistic production and the fact of embodied existence prevents the poet’s work from slipping into the complete abstractions of Manichean dualism that would denigrate the body, and by implication, the act of artistic production.

The poet then offers a prayer to nature:

Keep us in our station:
When we get pound-noteish,
When we seem about to
Take up Higher Thought,
Send us some deflating
Image like the pained ex-
-pression on a Major
Prophet taken short. (*CP* 699-700)

¹⁰Mendelson explains that the title is a British euphemism for the bathroom, in the sense in which a host might ask his guests, “May I show you the geography of the house?” (*LA* 453).

The poet must never forget that he lives in a physical body and in a physical world inhabited by other people with physical bodies. Even in the early 1960s when this poem was written, modern electronic communication such as radio, films, and television was making it increasingly easy to act as if the body were a superfluous accessory to the mind. But in earlier ages, Auden notes, it was harder to forget the less attractive aspects of embodiment, as he suggests in a parenthetical stanza near the end of the poem:

(Orthodoxy ought to
Bless our modern plumbing:
Swift and St Augustine
Lived in centuries
When a stench of sewage
Ever in the nostrils
Made a strong debating
Point for Manichees.)” (*CP* 700)

Before modern innovations in sanitation, the claim that human embodiment was good was hard to support with concrete evidence, but Auden points out that Augustine’s insistence that the body is fundamentally good, though now corrupted by the Fall, should be easier to accept now that modern technology has made embodied life more pleasant and comfortable in the Western world. At least, physical comfort appears to have made it easier for Auden personally to accept Augustine’s doctrine of the body’s goodness.

Auden’s exposition of the goodness of the body extends into later poem in the sequence, “The Cave of Nakedness,” a poem on the bedroom. The poem is not about sex, as the title might imply, but about the difference between the public and private selves. The bedroom represents the absolutely private realm where a person can “switch from personage, / with a state number, a first and family name, / to the naked Adam or Eve. . .” (*CP* 711). In a scene that resembles “Lauds” from “*Horae Canonicae*,” the poem ends in the morning twilight when a sleeper awakes as

members of an avian orchestra
are already softly noodling, limbering up for
an overture at sunrise, their effort to express
in the old convention they inherit that joy in beginning
for which our species was created, and declare it
good. (*CP* 712),

The declaration that creation is “good” is, of course, a reference to the creation story of Genesis in which God repeatedly calls his creations “good.” As the sleeper in the poem offers his own compliment to the body:

We may not be obliged—though it is mannerly—to bless
the Trinity that we are corporal contraptions,
but only a villain will omit to thank Our Lady or
her hen-wife, Dame Kind, as he, she, or both ensemble,
emerge from a private cavity to be re-born,
re-neighbored in the Country of Consideration. (*CP* 712)

While “Prime” in “*Horae Canonicae*” had pictured the process of awakening as a reenactment of the Fall, “The Cave of Nakedness” pictures the same process as a positive re-creation that enables neighborly love. The “Postscript” to the poem does hint that Fall continues to occur: “Only look in the glass to detect a removable blemish: / As for the permanent ones, already you know quite enough” (*CP* 713). The “permanent blemishes” include spiritual flaws that do not appear in a mirror. The body’s flaws, by contrast, are not permanent, nor are they detrimental to the soul’s aspirations to virtue. As another aphorism in the “Postscript” says, “Our bodies cannot love: But, without one, / What works of love could we do?” (*CP* 713). The body is the necessary instrument by which the person makes contact with the world.

Some time later, Auden revisited the themes of “Thanksgiving for a Habitat,” and particularly “The Geography of the House,” in another poem, “Ode to the Medieval

Poets” (1971), in which he expresses his amazement that the medieval poets achieved so much given their limited resources:

Chaucer, Langland, Douglas, Dunbar, with all your
brother Anons, how on earth did you ever manage,
without anaesthetics or plumbing,
.....
. . . to write so cheerfully,
with no grimaces or self-pathos? (*CP* 863).

One would expect that an age of physical discomfort would produce literature whose main topics would include wars, plagues, pain, corruption, and despair, while an age of physical comfort would produce literature praising the beauties and comforts of the physical world, but Auden finds that the reverse is true. “Our makers,” he says, “beset by every creature comfort, / immune, they believe, to all superstitions, / even at their best are so often morose or / kinky, petrified by their gorgon egos” (*CP* 863). In “Thanksgiving for a Habitat,” Auden had identified the fourth and eighteenth centuries, the ages of Augustine and Swift respectively, as eras when physical discomforts made Manichaeism attractive, but in this later poem he depicts the Middle Ages as a time when the poetic celebrations of the physical world coincided with notably harsh living conditions. A younger Auden might have tried to account for the fact by referencing some theory of the world’s historical development, but here he accepts the fact as an impenetrable historical mystery. He does suggest that the artistic neuroses of the present age may be linked to the mechanization of the modern world, but as in “Thanksgiving for a Habitat,” Auden observes that modern technology has had some benefits as well. He admits that he could not own printed books were it not for the mechanized age in which he lives, for “Without its heartless / engines, though, you could not tenant my book-shelves, / on hand to delect my ear and chuckle / my sad flesh . . .” (*CP* 863). Although Auden had been fascinated

by mining technology as a child, his later attitudes toward technology were mixed. He did object strongly to certain forms of technology—atom bombs and jukeboxes were favorite targets—but he also recognized some of the potentially dehumanizing effects of the modern machine age. Like the body, technologies for Auden are generally neutral instruments that can be used for both good or evil purposes.

When Auden referred to contemporary authors as “morose,” “kinky,” and “petrified,” he may or may not have been including himself in such categories; throughout his prolific career he had written poems which might very well be described in just those terms. But during the last few years of his life, he continued his conscious efforts to defend the innate goodness of physical existence against what he saw as an ever-present tendency in the modern world toward Manichean dualism. Just a few months before his death in 1973, Auden wrote in “No, Plato, No,”

I can't imagine anything
that I would less like to be
than a disincarnate Spirit,
unable to chew or sip
or make contact with surfaces
or breathe the scents of summer
or comprehend speech and music
or gaze at what lies beyond. (*CP* 888)

Auden had sharply criticized Platonism many times, perhaps most clearly in “New Year Letter,” for its suspicion of bodily existence and its trajectory toward disembodiment as an intellectual ideal. Earlier, he had gone further in *The Dyer's Hand*, asserting that “If we were suddenly to become disembodied spirits, a few might behave better than before, but most of us would behave very much worse” (*DH* 99). The language of the poem is very similar to a statement that Augustine made in *On Christian Doctrine* debunking desire for disembodiment: “And that which some say, that they would rather be without a

body, arises from a complete delusion: they hate not their bodies but the corruption and solidity of their bodies. They do not wish to have no bodies at all but rather incorruptible and most agile bodies, and they think that no body could be so constituted because then it would be a spirit” (1.24). Auden’s poem also follows Augustine’s critique of Platonism in the *City of God*, in which Augustine declares, “anyone [e.g. Platonists] who exalts the soul as the Supreme Good, and censures the nature of flesh as something evil, is in fact carnal alike in his cult of the soul and in his revulsion from the flesh, since this attitude is prompted by human folly, not by divine truth” (14.5). Auden tended to conflate Platonism and Manichaeism in his writings, and while Augustine also saw some similarities between the two, he did make a clear distinction between Platonism and Manichaeism in a subsequent passage: “The Platonists, to be sure, do not show quite the folly of the Manicheans. They do not go so far as to execrate earthly bodies as the natural substance of evil . . .” (CG 14.5). But Auden recognized that both Platonism and Manichaeism arose from a similar supposition that the immaterial was inherently superior to the physical, and since the term “Platonist” did not have quite the derogatory connotations of “Manichean” in the modern world, Auden seems to have preferred the latter term as a general epithet for any dualism, including Platonism, that involved a suspicion of human embodiment.

The last explicit reference to Augustine in Auden’s poetry touches on the nature of human embodiment. The reference appears in “Aubade,” written in 1972 and dedicated to Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, the historiographer whose work Auden had consulted in his composition of “Memorial for the City” and whose ideas also appear in some of the charts Auden constructed in preparation for “Horae Canonicae” (see *LA* 311-

13). “Aubade” returns to the subject matter which “Prime” had treated, the process of waking up. Despite the similarity in subject, the tone of “Aubade” is less intense, and instead of repeating a sense of the Fall being reenacted each morning, this poem views the event positively. The poem records the moment at which the speaker is “expelled from the padded cell / of Sleep and re-admitted / to involved Humanity” (CP 881). Waking up is now pictured as a release from an insane asylum of sleep, in which the ego has been imprisoned and powerless to command the body, and the waking human is now capable of entering into meaningful relationships with other people. Such relationships are predicated on consciousness, which Auden describes with a near-quotation from the *Confessions*: “as wrote Augustine, / I know that I am and will, / I am willing and knowing, / I will to be and to know” (CP 881, c.f. C 13.11). As Augustine put it elsewhere in the *Confessions*, “it is as certain that no one would wish himself not to exist as it is that no one would wish himself not to be happy. For existence is a necessary condition for happiness” (11.26). Both Augustine and Auden believed that there is within the human person a natural impulse towards continued existence and towards knowledge and happiness, and “Aubade” views those impulses as positive starting points for healthy relationships with the world outside the self, a subject that will be further examined in the next chapter.

Resurrection

While Auden absorbed Augustine’s insistence on the goodness of physicality and made the idea central to his poetry, Auden did not easily accept every theological implication thereof. After his return to Christianity, he held tenaciously to the doctrine of the Incarnation and its affirmation of human embodiment, but that doctrine is only half of

the ancient *regula fide*, or “rule of faith,” to which Augustine and many other patristic theologians regularly appealed as a source of apostolic authority. As Cochrane explains, the “rule” had two very important propositions. The first, according to Cochrane, “affirmed that the historical Christ was the ‘only Son’ of the Father and so, quite literally, the God to end gods” (225). Auden accepted the first proposition, but he had more difficulty with the second, which maintained that “the prospect of ‘eternal life’ extended to the faithful. That prospect was based, not on the common pagan aspiration of transcendence, but on a new sense of the relationship between ‘body’ and ‘spirit’ as revealed in the life of the Master, and therewith of the potentialities of human nature to be realized through a ‘redemption’ of the flesh” (Cochrane 225). That is, a direct corollary to the principle of the goodness of creation is the doctrine of the Resurrection, which Augustine took for granted as true. But some of Auden’s comments on the subject suggest that he was more ambivalent about the Resurrection than was Augustine.

Although Auden clearly accepted Augustine’s account of the fundamental goodness of the human body and of the physical world, it is widely acknowledged that he expressed doubts about the Resurrection of Christ.¹¹ Auden’s best-known expression of doubt is in “Friday’s Child,” a 1948 poem dedicated to the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, before he was martyred by the Nazis in 1945, had advocated a “worldly” Christianity that focused on the Crucifixion of Christ (*LA* 425). Near the poem’s end, the speaker asks, “Now, did He really break the seal / And rise again? We dare not say; / But conscious unbelievers feel / Quite sure of Judgment Day” (*CP* 676). The poem speaks as much for the whole of modern society as it does for Auden

¹¹See Kirsch 20-21 for the best summary of this view of Auden’s position.

personally. A belief in an imminent, apocalyptic Judgment Day is characteristic of the Utopian in “Vespers,” who, “when he closes his eyes, . . . arrives, not in New Jerusalem, but on some august day of outrage . . .” (*CP* 639). Given Auden’s own early interest in an approaching apocalypse, his poem speaks for both his modern scientific society and himself when he suggests that it is easier to believe in Judgment Day than in the Resurrection. In his essay on Protestant mysticism, he explained the modern aversion to the Resurrection: “I think most Christians will find themselves in understanding sympathy with Simone Weil’s difficulty: ‘If the Gospels omitted all mention of Christ’s resurrection, faith would be easier for me. The Cross by itself suffices me’” (*FA* 52). While Auden clearly implies that he shared Weil’s sentiments, he had further, aesthetic reasons for doubting the Resurrection. Kirsch notes that “In his draft notes on religion and theology,¹² Auden wrote, ‘To-day, we find Good Friday easy to accept: what scandalizes us is Easter: Modern man finds a happy ending, a final victory of Love over the Prince of this World, very hard to swallow’” (*Auden* 21). While the ancient world doubted that the divine man could die in a tragic martyrdom, the modern world now doubts that the divine man could be finally and totally victorious.

However, the usual critical assessment of Auden’s position on the Resurrection does not take into account several other statements Auden made on the topic. For example, Ursula Niebuhr reports that in the early 1940s, Auden was attracted to a more orthodox position on the Resurrection than even she could accept. Auden had asked to borrow some books on the Gospels from her, and she replied that “as a student of the

¹²The unpublished notes are in the Berg collection of the New York Public Library.

New Testament and of early Christian documents, I was sceptical about part of the so-called historical record. An event is always fact and interpretation, and sometimes the interpretation is more important than the fact. But this did not satisfy Wystan, who said of the Resurrection: ‘It does make a difference if it really happened, doesn’t it?’ (*Tribute* 108).¹³ While Auden’s comment to Niebuhr suggests that he did at one time seriously consider the possibility that the Resurrection of Christ actually occurred, a few of his poetry of the late 1940s allude to the Resurrection without directly dismissing the doctrine. “Friday’s Child” famously questions whether Christ really did “break the seal / And rise again? We dare not say. . .” (*CP* 676), but the line is a question, not an assertion. As Alan Jacobs argues, “The key phrase here is ‘We dare not say.’ It is not the same as “We dare not believe” . . . More likely, he means that we dare not affirm this as a statement of what is the case, we dare not present it for rational scrutiny and evaluation according to accepted canons of evidence and probability” (*What Became* 95). Other poems of the period are clearly more amenable to the possibility of the Resurrection. Like “Friday’s Child,” “Memorial for the City” addresses both Judgment Day and the Resurrection in one short passage, but “Memorial for the City” envisions Judgment Day as the occasion of the Resurrection of all human bodies. The poem’s final lines, spoken by the body, look forward to the end of “Metropolis, that too-great city” and announce that “At the place of my passion her photographers are gathered together; but I shall rise again to hear her judged” (*CP* 596). In contrast to the suspicious ambivalence of

¹³Kirsch says of Ursula Niebuhr’s account that “Auden also was to have continued doubts about whether the Resurrection ‘really happened.’” (20). While Kirsch is right that Auden did have doubts, it is misleading to cite that passage as an example of such doubt. Niebuhr’s account is one of a few instances in which Auden expresses an inclination toward belief in the Resurrection.

“Friday’s Child,” “Memorial for the City,” which was written in 1949, only a year after “Friday’s Child,” looks forward to a Resurrection in a surprisingly confident tone.

Another, better known reference to the Resurrection of the body appears at the end of “In Praise of Limestone,” written in 1948:

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. . . . (CP 542, emphasis added).

The poem is less confident than the voice in “Memorial for the City,” attaching to the Resurrection the conditional “if,” but it does seriously entertain the possibility that bodies may one day rise from the dead, and the poem’s tone suggests less skepticism than is often detected in “Friday’s Child.” The placement of the line in a parallel structure that also contains the clause, “if / Sins can be forgiven” suggests that the two ideas share a similar level of plausibility in the speaker’s mind. Auden did certainly hope that sins could be forgiven, and it seems that he also even dared to hope that bodies might rise from the dead.

While Auden was more optimistic about the future Resurrection of all humans, he did express some doubt about the Resurrection of Christ in the historical past. Several of Auden’s statements on the Resurrection of Christ do express significant hesitance to accept it, but his wording in each statement is telling. He said only that he found the event difficult to accept as a historical reality; he never renounced the doctrine as false or dismissed it as impossible. In the first lecture in *Secondary Worlds*, Auden comments on Jesus as heroic martyr:

to those who witness his death, he must seem to have died to no purpose. Nothing happens to vindicate beyond all doubt the cause for which he has died. Christ did not convert the whole world in an instant by appearing in glory on the First Easter Sunday. He appeared in private to his disciples and entrusted them with the task of converting the world; they were to preach to the world that He had risen from the dead, an event for which they could offer no proofs. (18)

Auden's matter-of-fact tone in the passage suggests that he takes the account of the resurrection as seriously as he does that of the crucifixion. Still, it would be wrong to say that, after his return to Christianity, Auden always and unreservedly accepted the Resurrection of Christ, but to say that he "doubted" implies a greater measure of disbelief than the whole of the evidence suggests. It was certainly a doctrine that Auden found hard to accept, but he seems to have found it just as hard to reject. He never affirmed it unequivocally, as he did the Incarnation, but he never denied it categorically, as he did Manichaeism. Jacobs observes that Auden believed "we are saved as embodied creatures, and saved for a future of embodiment. Auden came to believe the doctrine of the resurrection of the body a vital one and a necessary corrective to the implicit Gnosticism and Manicheanism of his existentialist influences" ("Auden" 29). Auden may have had the Resurrection in mind when he said in a 1943 article,

If a man who professes himself a Christian is asked why he believes Jesus to be the Christ . . . he can give a no more objective answer than the lover: "I believe because He fulfills none of my dreams, because He is in every respect the opposite of what He would be if I could have made Him in my own image." Thus, if a Christian is asked: "Why Jesus and not Socrates or Buddha or Confucius or Mahomet?" perhaps all he can say is: "None of the others arouse *all* sides of my being to cry "Crucify Him'." (*Prose II* 196-97)

The Resurrection was one aspect of Christ, perhaps more than any other, which attracted Auden's suspicion. At the same time, if the very difficulty of belief in Christ became, for

Auden, a compelling reason to believe, his questioning of the Resurrection may paradoxically be seen as a hesitant affirmation.

Conclusion

Between the beginning of Auden's return to Christian faith in the late 1930s and the composition of his long poems in the early and mid-1940s, his use of Augustine's ideas and language appears frequently when he discusses the nature of evil. But when he turns to an examination of the goodness of the created world, an idea he clearly affirmed at that time, his affirmations of existence as good are only obliquely indebted to Augustine's thought. During this period Auden did write some poetry that affirms physical existence as good, but he seldom stated the idea in Augustine's language, as he did with the definition of evil as privation. But by the late 1940s, the situation reverses itself. Auden's references to evil become less explicitly Augustinian, even though his views on the subject did not change substantially between 1939 and his death in 1973, but his references to the intrinsic goodness of physicality become far more frequent and also tend to include clear and direct references to Augustine. The reasons for this shift in emphasis are many and complex, but some of the change may be attributed to the simple fact that once Auden felt that he had satisfactorily resolved a philosophical question, he tended not to write about the issue extensively afterward. But Auden's historical situation suggests a further reason. The years during which Auden's poetry focuses most on the nature of evil coincide almost exactly with Hitler's reign in Germany—he came to power in 1933 and died in 1945. Soon after the end of World War Two, Auden's theological poems contain many more clear affirmations of the goodness of created existence. It seems that once the threat of Nazi Germany disappeared, Auden was able to

relax the psychological tensions that fascism's presence had forced him to maintain, so his poetry shifted its emphasis from examinations of the nature of evil to praising the goodness of physical existence.

During the war, Auden had been interested in the immediate political ramifications of his newfound Christianity, and after the war he continued his inquiry into Christianity's relationship with the world of civic responsibility and physical necessities. In an essay in *The Dyer's Hand*, published well after World War Two ended, Auden remarked that "The wicked man is not worldly, but anti-worldly. . ." (DH 205). In 1966, Auden reviewed E. R. Dodds's book, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, and in that review he observed that orthodox Christianity always includes an implicit affirmation of the goodness of the material:

Despite appearances to the contrary, the Christian faith, by virtue of its doctrines about creation, the nature of man and the revelation of Divine purpose in historical time, was really a more this-worldly religion than any of its [pagan] competitors, so that, when its opportunity came in the following centuries with the collapse of civil government in the West, it was the Church which took on the task of creating such social order and of preserving such cultural heritage as there was. On the evidence of its history, it would seem that Christianity has always been more tempted by worldliness, by love of money and power than, say, Islam or Buddhism. (FA 47).

Auden recognized from the beginning of his return to the church that Christianity affirmed the existence of the physical, temporal world, and as he told Clement Greenberg in a 1944 letter, the Christian faith is the opposite of "a withdrawal from the world. (Jesus said My kingdom is not of *this* world. He did not say of *the* world.)" (qtd. in Kirsch, *Auden* 21). Auden's theological interests were never mere speculations about irrelevant abstractions; he was always attracted to theology that had strong implications for honest and charitable engagement with the world.

Augustine's works helped to confirm Auden's belief that it was primarily the body's extension of the human person in space and time that allowed for such a rich variety of contacts with the world of nature and of other persons. As Auden asked rhetorically in "Thanksgiving for a Habitat," "Our bodies cannot love: / But, without one, / What works of Love could we do?" (*CP* 713). It was impossible, Auden found, to take moral responsibility for one's actions without asserting that the body was a good and necessary instrument for those actions. The command to love one's neighbor, which Auden always took very seriously in both his writings and his personal life, was rooted in the recognition that human embodiment was created by God to be good in every way. At the same time, human life as we know it is fallen and requires redemption, which humans cannot effect for themselves. In his last poem, "Archaeology," Auden comments on the fact that archaeological discoveries unearth an ancient record of human destruction and cruelty:

From Archaeology
one moral, at least, may be drawn,
to wit, that all

our school text-books lie.
What they call History
is nothing to vaunt of,

being made, as it is,
by the criminal in us: (*CP* 896-97)

The historical record is primarily a broken and fragmentary account of human evil, but history is not the last word, either in human existence or in Auden's poem. Instead, the last line of his last poem states simply, "goodness is timeless" (*CP* 897).

CHAPTER SIX

Eros Rescued by Agape

to love her
Against her will, and to turn
Her desperate longing to love.

—W. H. Auden “For the Time Being”

Some of Auden's best-known poems are love poems. From his first major poetic efforts in his 1928 verse play *Paid on Both Sides*, which involves a struggle between loyalty to family and marital love, to his lyrics of the late 1930s such as “Lullaby” and “As I Walked Out One Evening,” to post-conversion poems like “In Praise of Limestone” and ““The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning,”” Auden's poetry repeatedly returns to the conflicts between different kinds of love. His poetry is often concerned with the troubled relationship between friendship and sex, and after his return to Christianity, the question of how God relates to them both regularly vexes and energizes his poetry. From the beginning, Auden did recognize a difference between the selfish love epitomized by sexual desire and the altruistic love epitomized in friendship between equals, and his poetry from the 1930s exhibits regret and guilt that the two forms of love never manage to coexist permanently. In this chapter I will examine the conflicted attitudes towards different loves in Auden's early love poetry, and I will show how Auden eventually aspired to a concept of rightly ordered love drawn from Augustine. Augustine's own views of love are complex and variegated, and it is beyond the parameters of this study to give a comprehensive account of Augustine on love. Rather, this chapter and the

following one will identify several key passages from Augustine's works, which Auden drew upon as quintessential articulations of a Christian conception of love.

Auden's early poetry uses the word "love" ambiguously, though the context of the word always suggests a distinction between "love" in the sense of selfish, acquisitive desire and "love" in the sense of a self-giving, reciprocal relationship, which might or might not include sex or even close friendship. As he began his return to Christianity at the end of the 1930s, Auden began to use the Greek terms *eros* and *agape* to distinguish between these two different types of love. In his 1944 review of Cochrane's *Christianity and Classical Culture*, a book that heavily emphasizes Augustinian theology, Auden defines these terms: "The doctrine of the Trinity is the theological formulation of the Christian belief that God is Love, and that by Love is meant not Eros but Agape, *i.e.*, not a desire to get possession of something one lacks, but a reciprocal relation, not an everlastingly 'given' state, but a dynamic free expression; an unchanging love is a continually novel decision to love" (FA 35-36). As Auden used the term after about 1940, *eros* designates a basically acquisitive desire that seeks its own gratification and, consequentially, its own cessation, for once desire is satisfied, it ceases to exist. *Eros* is a form of love that very often expresses itself as sexual desire, even though it can just as easily be a desire for fame, possessions, or power. As Auden would describe it, *eros* is rooted in the biological survival instinct, which drives an organism to acquire sustenance, and also to reproduce. It is quite different from *agape*, which is more difficult to define exactly, but which Auden generally describes as a conscious and deliberate attempt to do good to another person, and for Auden it is always based on the recognition that the other

person is equal in value to all other human beings. For Augustine no less than Auden, the willfulness of *agape* is of vital importance, as Cochrane explains:

Translated into terms of psychology, the doctrine of grace resolves itself into the doctrine that “my love is my weight” and that the greater love is ultimately irresistible. As such, the working of the Spirit emerges, not as magic but, in the deepest and truest sense of the word, as “natural law”. Accordingly, it may be described as *ardor caritatis*, or *ignis voluntatis*, the “heat of love”, or the “flame of will”. Its efficacy as a means of salvation thus depends upon the assumption that the image of God, i.e. of the creative and moving principle, has not been wholly effaced from the hearts even of unbelievers. (453)

While Auden never claimed that the “natural” human love for God was irresistible, as Augustine suggested, he experienced at least once a love for his neighbors that he described as an “irresistible” *agape* (see *FA* 69-70). He wrote a poem, which he later titled “Summer Night,” about the experience, and I will examine that poem presently. Later he would describe this experience as a “vision of *agape*” in which he found himself loving his neighbors as himself (*FA* 69).

Cochrane’s description of Augustine’s view of love alludes to one of Augustine’s most famous statements on love, which comes near the end of the *Confessions* and emphasizes the necessity of proper motivation for love by likening love to physical weight—Augustine always thinks of love in terms of the physical world, never as a pure abstraction. Augustine states, “In your gift we find our rest. . . . In a good will is our peace. A body by its weight tends to move towards its proper place. The weight’s movement is not necessarily downwards, but to its appropriate position” (13.9). Here Augustine refers to the conventional physics of his day, in which it was supposed that each of the four elements—earth, water, air, and fire—naturally gravitated toward its proper place in relation to the other three. Augustine explains, “Things which are not in

their intended position are restless. Once they are in their ordered position, they are at rest” (13.9). In Augustine’s view, it is as true of the human soul as it is of physics that an object out of place will naturally seek its proper place until it comes to rest—a continuation of his statement addressing God at the opening of the *Confessions*, “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (1.1). Thus, Augustine explains at the end of the same work, “My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me. By your gift we are set on fire and carried upwards: we grow red hot and ascend, as we move upwards ‘to the peace of Jerusalem.’ . . . There we will be brought to our place by a good will, so that we want nothing but to stay there forever” (C 13.9).¹ Here Augustine does not divide self-interested love from altruistic love, but rather implies that love (*amore*) is both a natural desire for self-fulfillment (*eros*) and a willful giving of self to the object of affection (*agape*). For Augustine, desire (*cupiditas*, corresponding to common use of the Greek *eros*) is neither right or wrong in itself, but when desire operates alone and unchecked it becomes an acquisitive form of self-love that results in the vices of pride, greed, and lust; but desire that is directed and controlled by *agape* naturally attracts the human person to love God, which results in the love of neighbor.

According to Anne Fremantle, Auden was well aware of Augustine’s ideas on love when he had a conversation with her that she relates in *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*, which was compiled by Auden’s friend Stephen Spender in 1974, a year after Auden’s death. Fremantle, with whom Auden edited *The Protestant Mystics*, recalls that Auden at first told her,

¹Auden included a quotation from this passage of the *Confessions* in the *Viking Book of Aphorisms* (cited in Spears 244).

“I avoid the word mystical.” “Yet,” I countered, “you wrote that ‘There is no other want . . . all actions and diversions of people, their greyhound races, their football pools, their clumsy acts of love . . . what are they but the pitiful, maimed expression of that entire passion, the positive tropism of the soul for God’.” “Yes, yes,” he said, “but Augustine said it first, and better.” So I quoted *irrequietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te* [“our heart is restless until it rests in you”] and went on to ask if he agreed with my favorite of all Augustine’s remarks, that *Virtus est ordo amoris* [“virtue is rightly ordered love”]—wasn’t that absolutely true for a writer above all? “I think,” Wylan said, “that the ideal for the writer is to find that he has a view of reality he shares with everyone else, but knows he sees it uniquely and can express both the unique vision and the shared view and feel he knew this all the time. And the writer must remember—as Augustine also said—‘that the truth is neither mine nor his nor another’s but belongs to us all, and that we must never account it private to ourselves, lest we be deprived of it’.” (*Tribute* 91)

This conversation must have taken place in the early 1960s, and at that point Auden believed that the human soul did naturally and ultimately desire God. It was to this concept of love—*eros* transformed by *agape*—that Auden aspired after his return to Christianity. From the beginning of his career as a poet in the late 1920s, he had suspected that his homosexuality was a deceptive and isolating form of self-love. Many of his poems from the late 1920s and 1930s allude to his sexual relations with a variety of short-term partners at Oxford, Berlin, and elsewhere, but those poems also reveal a frustrated desire to reconcile his promiscuous sexuality with his need for friendship. During his return to Christianity in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Auden met and fell in love with a younger man named Chester Kallman, and partly because of that relationship, Auden intellectually settled on a Christian view of love drawn from Augustine. But after his relationship with Kallman fell apart, he maintained an Augustinian view of love intellectually, even though his approach to love worked out rather differently on a personal level, as we shall see in the next chapter. Friendship, a mutual care and respect between equals, had always been of primary importance in Auden’s life, but his view of

the way in which friendship should relate to sex underwent a dramatic transformation over the course of his career. The development of Auden's thinking about love was long and complex, but the most dramatic shifts in his personal attitude towards love are reflected in the poems he wrote in the eight-year interval between 1933 and 1941.

Ambiguities of Love in the 1930s

During Auden's early career in the late 1920s and 1930s, the word "love" appears regularly in his poetry, but its meaning is never fixed. It can refer alternately to the sexual act, to close friendship, to political camaraderie, or even to a vague altruism. Before 1940, Auden's poems never address the love of God, since he was a tacit atheist for much of this period, but one of his chief concerns in his poetry is the distressing fact that sex and friendship never quite align. At times, Auden draws on Freud and associates sexual love with death (see Mendelson's analysis in *EA* 6, 78, and 139). My overview here elides the subtle and varied changes in opinion about love that Auden underwent during the first ten or twelve years of his career, but Mendelson's *Early Auden* thoroughly tracks these changes, and there is no need to replicate his detailed and insightful analysis here. The important point here is that in the first major stage of his career, Auden remained uncertain about the nature of love, and his search for a coherent account of love that would reconcile sex and friendship led into the first major shift in his thinking about love in 1939.

Any number of poems might be selected from Auden's early work to demonstrate his ambiguous and inconsistent statements on the nature of love, but a few poems from 1933 offer a particularly clear view of Auden's varied definitions of love in his early career. In one sequence of twelve sonnets, most of which were written in 1933 and are

reproduced in *The English Auden*, Auden describes love as a natural impulse toward survival and self-actualization, but also, following Freud, as an impetus towards death. The octave of the third sonnet in the sequence, “At the far end of the enormous room,”² the poet waits in a busy restaurant or club for his beloved, but in the sestet, he remarks, “It is an enemy that sighs for you: / Love has one wish and that is, not to be” (*TEA* 147). As Mendelson explains, “Love desires its own satisfaction, but when satisfied it ceases to desire” (*EA* 234). The lover is an “enemy” in the sense that he loves in order to use the beloved to satisfy his self-interested desires. Seen this way, Love is a compulsion imposed on the lover by the beauty and fidelity of the beloved. “Had you [the beloved] never been beautiful nor true,” the poem concludes, “He [Love] would not have been born and I were free / From one whose whispers shall go on and on / Till you are false and all your beauties gone” (*TEA* 147). The poem’s speaker abdicates all responsibility for loving, claiming instead that the beauty of the beloved is the cause of his love, and that his love will continue only until beauty disappears along with fidelity. Erotic love always seeks its own end.

Auden eventually discarded that poem, along with several others in the sequence, but the last poem he retained with minimal revision in his later collections, in which it is titled “Meiosis,” a scientific term that describes the division of cells into gametes, the egg and sperm. The poem actually describes the process of fertilization that occurs after meiosis, which the poet takes as a metaphor for *eros*, the impetus toward satisfaction of desire through possession of another. The poem begins, “Love had him fast, but though

²Auden did not usually provide titles for his poems in the 1930s, which makes consistent citation difficult. If Auden later provided a title for a poem, I will use the added title as it is given in the *Collected Poems*, unless the title subverts or alters the poem’s meaning in some significant way.

he fought for breath / He struggled only to possess Another, / The snare forgotten in the little death” (*TEA* 150). The sperm’s natural impulse or desire is directed towards fertilizing an egg, at which point the sperm ceases to exist in its own right. In “Meiosis,” “love” is not altruistic or disinterested, but is rather the survival instinct underlying erotic love, which the poem suggests is both a will to self-actualization, taking place through the possession of something else, and an impetus towards self-annihilation.

Another 1933 poem examines the tension between *eros* and friendship in a more nuanced way. “The earth turns over,” which Auden later revised and titled “Through the Looking Glass,”³ is set during the Christmas holiday, during which the speaker feels estranged from his family and wishes instead to be near his absent friend, whose “portrait hangs before me on the wall” (*TEA* 145). The portrait becomes “The mirror world where logic is reversed,” in which the speaker sees “My father as an Airedale and a gardener, / My mother chasing letters with a knife,” and other strange images (*TEA* 145). The next stanza states that the mirror world is “False; but no falser than the world it matches, / Love’s daytime kingdom which I say you rule” (*TEA* 145), that is, his imaginary world in which he and his friend are united, where “All lust [is] at once informed on and suppressed” (*TEA* 145). The speaker imagines his relationship with his friend as a kind of ideal Republic in which neither one is subject to the merely self-interested desire that the sonnet sequence had expressed, but in which the friendship nevertheless includes an

³Auden’s revisions in this poem are largely matters of word choice. For example, in the original, lines 3-5 read, “The ticking heart comes to a standstill, killed, / The icing on the pond waits for the boys. Among the holly and the gifts I move,” (*TEA* 144), but the lines were later revised to read, “A faint heart here and there stops ticking, killed, / Icing on ponds entrances village boys: / Among wreathed holly and wrapped gifts I move,” (*CP* 12). Throughout the poem, Auden made similar substantive changes which, while not significantly altering the content, tend to make the diction more precise and the meaning clearer.

erotic element. The speaker identifies himself as “your would-be lover who has never come / In the great bed at midnight to your arms,” lines that suggest the speaker’s wish for a sexual fulfillment of what has seemed at first a Platonic relationship.

But the next lines undercut the speaker’s idealism, admitting,

Such dreams are amorous; they are indeed:
But no one but myself is loved in these,
And time flies on above the dreamer’s head,
Flies on, flies on, and with your beauty flies.
All things he takes and loses but conceit,
The Alec who can buy the life within,
License no liberty except his own,
Order the fireworks after the defeat. (*TEA* 145)

The speaker recognizes that his fantasies, whether erotic or idealized, are ultimately the product of a self-centered *eros*—“no one but myself is loved”—that will disappear with the fading of the beloved’s beauty, leaving only the speaker’s conceit intact. Auden later revised the lines about conceit and the (smart) Alec to read, “And pride succeeds to each succeeding state, / Still able to buy up the life within” (*CP* 124), which more clearly suggest that the speaker’s fantasies can ultimately be traced to narcissism. The change of “conceit” to “pride” intensifies the poem’s regret, since “conceit” suggests mere vanity or arrogance, while the word “pride” carries with it serious theological connotations of mortal sin and, according to tradition, is the cause of the Devil’s expulsion from heaven.

The mirror world of lovers’ fantasies is troubling, but in the opposing, real world of bodily existence, the speaker finds that his “sea is empty and the waves are rough” (*TEA* 145). The speaker is trapped between the narcissistic mirror of his own fantasies—an image that suggests Augustine’s *fantastica fornicatio*—and the sea of physical desires. Auden would develop the same pair images some years later in “The Sea and the Mirror,” but here they suggest that the speaker is struggling to reconcile the opposing desires of

mind and body, and that he is nevertheless unable to be something other than a mind/body dualist. The opposing dualities of body and mind correspond respectively to childhood innocence and adult guilt, since in this stanza the sea imagery clearly suggests childhood innocence:

Lost in my wake the archipelago,
Islands of self through which I sailed all day,
Planting a pirate's flag, a generous boy;
And lost the way to action and to you.
Lost if I steer. . . . (TEA 145-46)

The possibility of an innocent, sex-less friendship has been lost, and the phrase "Lost if I steer" suggests that such a relationship cannot be achieved through the exercise of the will. It might, however, be reached through blind *eros*:

Gale of desire may blow
Sailor and ship past the illusive reef,
And I yet land to celebrate with you
Birth of a natural order and of love;
With you enjoy the untransfigured scene,
My father down the garden in his gaiters,
My mother at her bureau writing letters,
Free to our favours, all our titles gone. (TEA 146)

This last stanza recalls Plato's *Symposium* in which Socrates argues that the love of beauty in a particular object can raise the soul to a superior love of the ideal of beauty itself, and so erotic love has the potential to build a bridge to friendship and to wisdom. Much later, Auden would dismiss Plato's "ladder of love" in favor of a more Augustinian and Dantean understanding of physical love being redeemed by divine love (see FA 65-69). But this poem suggests that the "gale of desire," later changed to the more ambiguous "tempests and tide," may develop an honest love, here distinguished from the "natural order," in which illusions are replaced by a vision of reality as it actually is, and in which each partner is free to give love to the other gratuitously, not under the

compulsion of physical drives. Among Auden's poems of the 1930s, "Through the Looking-Glass" is a rare aspiration to an unselfish love resembling *agape*, which might transcend the self-centered loves that pervade the other poems of the period, yet the poem remains doubtful about the probability of developing such a relationship.

Another poem from 1933, however, recounts the sudden arrival of a set of relationships that closely resemble the mature relationship that "Through the Looking-Glass" almost despairs of achieving. This poem, which Auden later titled "Summer Night,"⁴ is an autobiographical poem set in a summer evening during Auden's tenure as a teacher at Downs School, and it begins by establishing a sexually charged atmosphere:

Lucky, this point in time and space
Is chosen as my working place,
Where the sexy airs of summer,
The bathing hours and the bare arms,
The leisured drives through a land of farms
Are good to a newcomer. (*CP* 117)

As in Auden's other poems of the period, *eros* is not a product of the will, but of arbitrary circumstance that the poet here calls merely "lucky." In a typical Auden poem of the 1930s, the next stanzas would, like "Through the Looking-Glass," express erotic desire for another person and end with disappointment and regret that the lover cannot also be a friend. But here the poem takes an unexpected turn:

Equal with colleagues in a ring
I sit on each calm evening
Enchanted as the flowers
The opening light draws out of hiding

⁴Because I wish to focus on Auden's ideas about love as they were developing in the 1930s, I use the original version of the poem as printed in *The English Auden* (136-138), where it is untitled. By the time it was reprinted in the *Collected Poems* in 1945, Auden had given it a title, changed the wording of a few lines, and dropped four of the original stanzas. For convenience I will refer to the poem by its later title, "Summer Night."

With all its gradual dove-like pleading,
Its logic and its powers. . . . (CP 117)

The poet finds himself in a position that is unprecedented in his previous poetry. Against a background of *eros* he has found companionship with not one person but several people, all equal in status and by implication in concern for each other. The metaphoric language of the stanza suggests that the poet considers his recognition of equality to be a kind of spiritual experience, which involves “opening light” that is “dove-like” and possesses both logic and power. Gone is the familiar anxiety and disappointment that pervade other relationships based on *eros*: “That later we, though parted then, / May still recall these evenings when / Fear gave his watch no look” (CP 117). The erotic opening of the poem is redirected towards an unexpected equality that neither encourages nor condemns sexual acts, but rather leaves them behind for a more fulfilling experience of neighborly equality.

About thirty years after writing the poem, Auden gave a prose account⁵ of this same experience:

One fine summer night in June 1933 I was sitting on a lawn after dinner with three colleagues, two women and one man. We liked each other well enough but we were certainly not intimate friends, nor had any one of us a sexual interest in another. Incidentally, we had not drunk any alcohol. We were talking casually about everyday matters when, quite suddenly and unexpectedly, something happened. I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly—because, thanks, to the power, I was doing it—what it means to love one’s neighbor as oneself. . . . My personal feelings towards them were unchanged—they were still

⁵The account is given in Auden’s 1964 essay “The Protestant Mystics,” where he represents it as “an unpublished account for the authenticity of which I can vouch” (FA 69). But no one has ever questioned the fact that that the story is Auden’s own. His language at the beginning of the account, “One fine summer night in June 1933 . . .” makes it clear that the 1933 poem, which Auden later titled “Summer Night,” records the same experience.

colleagues, not intimate friends—but I felt their existence as themselves to be of infinite value and rejoiced in it. (*FA* 69)

In the same essay, Auden classifies this experience as a mystical vision of *agape*, and represents it as a recognition of the equality and value of other people that transcend one's personal feelings about them (*FA* 69). Auden notes that this love of neighbor was not a product of either intellectual intimacy or sexual attraction—it is in no sense a Platonic climb up the ladder of loves from *eros* to friendship to wisdom. Rather, he describes it as a sudden invasion of a benevolent power, language that more commonly describes the *eros* associated with “love at first sight,” but Auden clearly states that the “power” was not *eros* at all.

Mendelson suggests that the stanza's metaphors of doves and light, “with their distant echoes of the Annunciation, suggest religious resonances Auden was not yet prepared to acknowledge more directly” (*EA* 167). Indeed, the religious imagery is an oblique gesture towards Christian spirituality, but Auden himself suggested later that he associated the experience, not with the Annunciation, but with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Just before he describes his experience in the essay, Auden notes that “the classic Christian example of [the vision of *agape*] is, of course, the vision of Pentecost,” (*FA* 69), an association that explains why the description of the light in “Summer Night” is “dove-like” (*CP* 117). Mendelson also notes that “for the first time in Auden's career he associates love with conscious choice rather than simple instinct. The worlds of Eros and responsibility coincide as never before . . .” (*EA* 164). Paradoxically, Auden says that the experience occurred with his full consent even though he says the “power” was “irresistible” (*FA* 69). The experience was neither a product of his own idealization of his companions, nor was it traceable to his own physical desires.

After the stanza containing the line “Fear gave his watch no look,” the original version of the poem continues:

Moreover, eyes in which I learn
That I am glad to look, return
My glances every day;
And when the birds and rising sun
Waken me, I shall speak with one
Who has not gone away. (TEA 137)

Here the poet implies that the recent vision of *agape* will make possible a deeper friendship that may culminate in a satisfying sexual experience. The returned glances suggest a romantic attraction, and in the morning he will speak with the friend who has been with him all night, likely in bed. At this point in his life, Auden seems to have hoped that his experience of disinterested, neighborly love would help him to reconcile the profound gap between sex and friendship that his other poems describe in painful detail. But the reconciliation that this stanza describes did not actually occur in Auden’s life at that time. The stanza is the expression of an unfulfilled wish, and Auden later dropped this stanza from the poem, allowing the final, shorter version of the poem to maintain its focus on *agape* as transcending *eros* rather than diverting the poem from *agape* back to *eros*.

The rest of the poem tries to work out the implications of the poet’s vision of *agape*. The poet watches the moon rise over the English landscape of “churches and power-stations”:

To gravity attentive, she [the moon]
Can notice nothing here, though we
Whom hunger does not move,
From gardens where we feel secure
Look up and with a sigh endure
The tyrannies of love. . . . (CP 118)

The juxtaposition of the moon's gravity and humans' love evokes a parallel with Augustine's statement in the *Confessions* that "My weight is my love" (13.9). Auden was already familiar with the *Confessions* even at this early date (see the first paragraph of the Introduction), and given the Christian imagery of doves and wedding rings he used to describe his vision of *agape* early in the poem, it is possible that he had Augustine's work in mind as he drafted this stanza. The rhyming of "move" and "love" suggests a similarity between the two words that evokes a long Augustinian tradition that includes Dante's *Paradiso*, in which the love of God is identified with the *primum mobile* that sets the cosmos in motion—"The love that moves the sun and the other stars" (33.145). But in this poem the moon, along with the whole of the natural world, operates according to strict causal necessity, in this case gravity, while humans are not entirely subject to natural necessity, since the poem shows them unmoved by the natural force of hunger. And yet, from the security of their English garden, they "Look up and with a sigh endure / The tyrannies of love" (CP 118). The characterization of love as tyrannical would have fit well in Auden's other poems of the period, where love is often equated with the sex drive, but the use of the word "tyrannies" is strange in this poem where, for once, *agape* has temporarily superseded *eros*. Auden's language in his prose account implies that *agape* itself may be a kind of benevolent tyranny: "I felt myself *invaded* by a *power* which, though I consented to it, was *irresistible* and certainly not mine" (FA 69, emphasis added). Even in this early vision of *agape*, Auden cannot quite abandon the idea that love in any form is beyond the lover's willful control.

But Mendelson is surely correct in suggesting that the word "tyrannies" also "acknowledges the existence of more painful tyrannies elsewhere" (EA 169). The

comfortable colleagues sitting in their ring of *agape* “do not care to know, / Where Poland draws her Eastern bow, / What violence is done” (*TEA* 137). The poet acknowledges that this vision of *agape* has been made possible in part by injustice and oppression elsewhere in Europe. Two stanzas that Auden later dropped turn to a sense of guilt for complacently enjoying the vision of *agape* instead of allowing it to catapult him into political action:

And now no path on which we move
But shows already traces of
Intentions not our own,
Thoroughly able to achieve
What our excitement could conceive,
But our hands left alone. (*TEA* 138)

The poem’s initial vision of *agape* is downgraded to a mere “excitement,” and the potential but abortive achievement, as the next stanza shows, is based on yet another kind of love, the love of one’s own country:

For what by nature and by training
We loved, has little strength remaining:
Though we would gladly give
The Oxford colleges, Big Ben,
And all the birds of Wicket Fen,
It has no wish to live. (*TEA* 138)

The poem’s vision of *agape* has degenerated into a feeble patriotism that, while both innate and learned, cannot save an English civilization that has succumbed to a Freudian death-wish. Just as Auden’s deletion of a previous stanza focused the poem more clearly on *agape*, his dropping of these two stanzas eliminated yet another distraction, this time a political distraction, from *agape*. But the Auden of the early 1930s could not keep political ramifications and their attendant guilt out of the poem. The later, shorter version of the poem maintains the uneasy tone in the final stanzas, and it also retains the

implication that the setting for the vision of *agape* depends on injustice elsewhere in the world, but the elimination of these two stanzas removes much of the overtly personal guilt from the poem.

The last four stanzas, which Auden left relatively intact, picture a coming deluge that will break “through the dykes of our content” and reveal the “vigours of the sea” (*TEA* 138), an almost apocalyptic image that suggests the emergence of politics, perhaps fascism, based purely on the unconscious physical drives of which the sea is a constant image in Auden’s early poetry. However, the poem looks towards a renewed, post-diluvian world that will support *agape*: “May this for which we dread to lose / Our privacy, need no excuse / But to that strength belong” (*TEA* 138). Auden later changed the lines to refer more clearly to the vision of *agape*: “May *these delights* we dread to lose, / This privacy, need no excuse / But to that strength belong” (*CP* 118, emphasis added), a change that prioritizes the “delights” of *agape* rather than the unnamed thing for which privacy was the necessary condition in the earlier version. This *agape*, the poem concludes, may “calm / The pulse of nervous nations; / Forgive the murderer in his glass” (*TEA* 138). In these last stanzas, Auden again contrasts the sea of physical desires with the mirror of conscious reflection, where the murderer, perhaps heretofore guided by unconscious drives, recognizes his own guilt and accepts forgiveness. Even for the Auden of the mid-1940s, who kept these lines in the poem, *agape* has particular political consequences, though in the context of the shorter, revised poem, the political implications are more moderate than the Auden of the early 1930s might suggest.

The vision of *agape*, as “Summer Night” describes it, was important to Auden’s future for another reason. He says at the end of his prose account, “among the various

factors which several years later brought me back to the Christian faith in which I had been brought up, the memory of this experience and asking myself what it could mean was one of the most crucial, though, at the time it occurred, I thought I had done with Christianity for good” (FA 70). Auden does not mention his 1933 vision of *agape* in his essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, where he lists many other factors in his eventual return to Christianity, including his experiences with Nazi fascism, the Spanish Civil War, his acquaintance with Charles Williams, and his reading of Kierkegaard, to name a few. Auden’s 1933 vision of *agape* was not in itself a decisive turning point, as he was not able to immediately integrate the experience into his constantly shifting accounts of human existence. The fact that the original version of the poem attempted to merge *agape* into sexual intimacy on the one hand and into patriotism on the other suggests that Auden was not able to allow his vision of *agape* to exist on its own terms until he began to explore Christianity seriously. Even in its final, revised form the poem remains an isolated example of pure *agape* among the other poems of the period that are concerned almost exclusively with *eros*.

Many other poems from the 1930s touch on the difficulty of reconciling the necessities of physical drives with the power of the human consciousness to exercise willful control over its actions, and after 1933, Auden’s poems begin to explore the willful side of love. “A Bride in the 30’s,” written in 1934, sets an erotic relationship against a backdrop of politics, where Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill, and Roosevelt woo their constituencies as the poet woos his lover. Like the nations to whom the politicians wish to make love, the individual beloved can consciously choose whether or not to return the affections:

But Love except at our proposal
 Will do no trick at his disposal,
 Without opinions of his own performs
 The programme that we think of merit,
 And through our private stuff must work
 His public spirit. (CP 129)

Whether this “Love” is the sexual *eros* of previous poems or whether it includes an element of neighborly *agape* is unclear, though the capitalization of the term recalls the Greek god Eros (Cupid to the Romans). But this Love is not a power or passion imposed on the lovers from without, but is rather controlled by the lovers’ own volitions, even though this Love is indifferent to the moral condition of its object; the voice of Love says “lightly, brightly, / ‘Be Lubbe,⁶ be Hitler, but be my good, / Daily, nightly” (CP 130)⁷. Here Love is a force that, while able to be directed by the human will, is also capable of ignoring the monstrousness of its object. At the end of the poem, the voice of the heart speaks,

though we would not hearken:
 “Yours the choice to whom the gods awarded
 The language of learning, the language of love,
 Crooked to move as a money-bug, as a cancer,
 Or straight as a dove.’ (CP 130)

Over against the tendency of Love to attach itself arbitrarily to another regardless of the consequences, the heart, or perhaps more properly the conscience, provides a clear choice of wrong or right, the “crooked” way of greed or repression (Auden associated cancer with repressed artistic impulses, as in his narrative poem “Miss Gee”), or the “straight”

⁶Marius van der Lubbe was a young German communist who was tried and executed by the Nazis for setting the Reichstag on fire. The political turmoil following the Reichstag fire enabled Hitler’s to seize absolute power in Germany.

⁷Auden’s lines are probably also an allusion to Satan’s statement in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, “all Good to me is lost; Evil be thou my good. . .” (4.109-10). Similarly, in his 1941 poem “Though determined Nature can,” Auden would characterize *eros* as a demon.

way of the dove, which Auden had associated a year earlier in “Summer Night” with the vision of *agape*. “Crooked” and “straight” also have obvious sexual connotations, and the poem’s association of “crooked” homosexuality with acquisitiveness and repression indicates Auden’s continuing discomfort with his own sexuality and his inability to reconcile *eros* and *agape*.

A slightly later poem, which Auden wrote in 1936 and eventually labeled “V” after placing it in a sequence of “Twelve Songs,” distinguishes the natural, morally innocent love of animals from volitional human love. While “Lion, fish and swan / Act, and are gone / Upon Time’s toppling wave,” the human lovers find that “We must lose our loves” (*CP* 138). As in Auden’s earlier poems, *eros* ceases to exist once it possesses the object of its desire. The transience of sexual relationships does not bother animals, who live only in the moment and so have no anxiety over the natural cessation of desire or the future loss of their mates—it is unclear from the poem whether Auden was aware that swans mate for life—but humans can always look forward to the relationship ending in regret: “Sighs for folly done and said / Twist our narrow days” (*CP* 138). The “twist” recalls the language of homosexual “crookedness” from “A Bride in the 30’s,” and this poem is equally doubtful about the future of the relationship it celebrates. And yet, the poet does celebrate what pleasure the relationship has given him:

But I must bless, I must praise
That you, my swan, who have
All gifts that to the swan
Impulsive Nature gave,
The majesty and pride,
Last night should add
Your voluntary love. (*CP* 139)

In surprisingly religious language of blessing and praise, the poet merges animal images into a voluntary human relationship. Unlike the animals, this human love for which the poet is grateful is clearly an act of the will, but the happiness of the moment exists in the perpetual shadow of “The Devil in the clock” (*CP* 138), the awareness that the relationship is ultimately unsustainable.

Auden is even more frank about the transience of sexual relationships in his famous poem “Lullaby,” also known by its first line, “Lay your sleeping head, my love.” Written early in 1937, it underwent relatively few revisions—Auden later changed four words—and it describes a scene that Auden must have repeated many times throughout his life. He lies in bed talking to a sleeping lover with whom he will soon part. Mendelson accurately characterizes the poem’s tone: “He is grateful for the pleasures of the body, but his post-coital sadness is felt as ethical self-reproach” (*EA* 230). I need not replicate Mendelson’s insightful reading of the poem (*EA* 230-33), but it is important to point out that the poem represents love as imposing high ethical demands on the lovers:

Grave the vision Venus sends,
Of supernatural sympathy,
Universal love and hope;
While an abstract insight wakes
Among the glaciers and the rocks
The hermit’s carnal ecstasy. (*CP* 157)

Venus has replaced the god Love (Eros), and her vision “of supernatural sympathy, / Universal love and hope,” a vision of *agape* in Auden’s pre-Christian vocabulary, is “grave,” a term that suggests that the vision is not only highly serious, but also potentially lethal. Love as desire seeks its own satisfaction and therefore its own demise, so not even the universal love that Venus introduces can escape the transience that pervades the poem. Venus’s vision is also an “abstract insight” that awakes the hermit’s ecstasy,

though the line originally read “sensual ecstasy” (*TEA* 207) rather than the later “carnal ecstasy” (*CP* 157). If the hermit’s ecstasy is merely “sensual,” the line is ambiguous. The hermit’s spiritual experience may or may not be authentic; many mystics have used highly erotic language to describe a vision of the divine, though in the context of the poem’s open admission of infidelity, the language of *eros* is already suspect. Auden’s later change to “carnal ecstasy” more strongly indicates that the hermit’s ecstasy is “a quite straightforward and unredeemed eroticism,” as Auden once called his own pseudo-devout phase in adolescence (*MCP* 34). The “certainty, fidelity” that “On the stroke of midnight pass” (*CP* 157) belongs to the self-deceived hermit as much as to the faithless lovers.

The last stanza confirms the transience of the vision offered by Venus. In the original version, it reads,

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:
Let the winds of dawn that blow
Softly round your dreaming head
Such a day of sweetness show
Eye and knocking heart may bless,
Find the mortal world enough;
Noons of dryness see you fed
By the involuntary powers,
Nights of insult let you pass
Watched by every human love. (*TEA* 207)

With the dying of the vision of universal love, the poet hopes that day will bring some blessing in the mortal world, beyond which he will not seek for beatitude. The poem does not explain what “the involuntary powers” are that feed the abandoned lover, but given Auden’s earlier identification of unconscious human drives with *eros*, it is reasonable to conclude that the speaker hopes that future experiences of love, whether sexual or otherwise is not clear, will sustain the beloved. The poem ends with a wish that

the abandoned lover will be “watched by every human love,” a line that transfers the responsibility for love from the individual to the society. It is not a wholly hopeless conclusion, although the fact that the speaker is abdicating his responsibility to love another person also implies that the poet is finally irresponsible in love. *Eros*, in this case, does not lead the individual lover to the neighborly *agape* that Venus offered in the middle of the poem. Nevertheless, the poem does represent “another of Auden’s innovations in love poetry,” as Mendelson explains:

It is the first English poem in which a lover proclaims, in moral terms and during a shared night of love, his own faithlessness. Hundreds of earlier poems lamented or confessed faithlessness; but the lyric tradition complained of the beloved’s inconstancy, not the poet’s, while the libertine tradition, in admitting inconstancy or alluding to the transience of beauty, ignored the moral consequences. Innovative as it is in the history of poetry, “Lullaby” represents a transitional stage in the history of Auden’s work. He admits faithlessness, but here he blames it on the human condition. Later he will blame it on himself. (*EA* 233)

In fact, it was less than one year later that Auden wrote his famous lyric “As I Walked Out One Evening,” in which he places all the blame for infidelity on himself.

Self-Assessment and Self-Implication in the Late 1930s

Auden wrote “As I Walked Out One Evening” in November 1937, and unlike his other popular poems from the 1930s, this one underwent no revision whatsoever in later reprints, which suggests that as Auden aged, he found that the poem still represented an honest view of romantic love, even though he had written it before many of his political and religious views changed in the later 1930s and early 1940s. The poem is also important because it collects and reenergizes many images and themes that Auden’s earlier poems had used, though often with less poignancy. The mirror as a place of self-assessment, the sea as a symbol of primal desires, the hyperbole of the lyric tradition, the

mixture of pastoral and urban imagery, the inevitability of unfaithfulness, and the overwhelming feeling of guilt all coincide in this poem to achieve a unified critique of the love-lyric tradition of which the poem is a part, but more specifically of a tendency toward infidelity that permeates relationships based exclusively on *eros*.

The poem is spoken by three voices: the initial speaker (the “I” in the poem) overhears a lover singing and then hears the responses of the city’s clocks, who chide the lover for overlooking the effects of time on his relationship. The initial speaker does not directly comment on the dialogue between the lover and the clocks, but he does establish the mood for the poem by describing the urban setting in terms of rural fertility: “The crowds upon the pavement / Were fields of harvest wheat. . . .” (*CP* 133). The speaker then introduces the lover, whom he hears singing both “down by the brimming river” and “under an arch of the railway,” and whose song is a hyperbolic lyric:

“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,

“I’ll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.

“The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world.” (*CP* 133-34)

Read in the context of Auden’s earlier poems of the 1930s, the images of animals and water in the lover’s song have much darker overtones than the lover himself recognizes. They suggest that underneath the lover’s idealism lies a self-centered desire to satisfy physical drives. And despite the lover’s language relating to time—“until,” “years,”

“ages”—it is clear that the lover, like an animal, has no clear conception of real time at all. Instead, he imagines an improbable future that he juxtaposes with the immediate present in which he exists, presumably already having achieved possession of the beloved, saying in the present tense “in my arms I hold / The Flower of the Ages. . . .” (CP 134). But the lover who thinks only in terms of the present and of “forever” is not thinking in terms of time at all, but only of his immediate desires. He is thinking only in terms of *eros*, as Auden would point out later in his “unwritten” poem “Dichtung und Wahrheit”:

“I will love You forever,” swears the poet. I find this easy to swear too. *I will love You at 4:15 p.m. next Tuesday*: is that still as easy?

“I will love You whatever happens, even though. . . .”—there follows a list of catastrophic miracles—(*even though*, I should like to say, *all the stones of Baalbek split into exact quarters, the rooks of Repton utter dire prophecies in Greek and the Windrush bellow imprecations in Hebrew, Time run boustrophedon and Paris and Vienna thrice be lit again by gas. . . .*)

Do I believe that these events might conceivably occur during my lifetime? If not, what have I promised? *I will love You whatever happens, even though You put on twenty pounds or become afflicted with a moustache*: dare I promise that? (CP 662-63)

By this standard, the lover in “As I Walked Out One Evening” has promised nothing at all.

The city clocks, whose chiming answers the lover’s vacuous vows, point out lover’s ignorance of the real effects of time on an erotic relationship: “O let not Time deceive you, / You cannot conquer Time” (CP 134). Even if the relationship is prolonged, monotony and boredom will result when “In headaches and in worry / Vaguely life leaks away” (CP 134). In a later stanza “The desert sighs in the bed” (CP 134), suggesting the future infertility of the lover’s *eros*—from Auden’s personal perspective, the bed of homosexual lovers has zero potential for procreation and is thus

even more barren than is the bed of the presumably heterosexual lovers in the poem. But as in all of Auden's love poems, the greatest threat to the relationship is infidelity. While the possibility of infidelity is not explicitly mentioned in the poem, several stanzas strongly suggest it. The lover's song has already made an empty promise, which betrays his unwillingness to make an authentic promise of fidelity. The clocks' further statement that "Time breaks the threaded dances" also implies the future dissolution of the relationship.

The clocks command self-examination in three separate stanzas, and in each one the result is the revelation of personal guilt:

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

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

"O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart." (*CP* 134-35)

The first imperative, to wash his hands, superficially implies a cleansing from guilt, but the stanza also conjures the image of Pontius Pilate washing his hands in front of the crowd after handing over Jesus to be crucified, saying "I am innocent of this man's blood. . ." (Matt. 27:24). The act that is supposed to symbolize the denial of responsibility for a crime actually reinforces the guilt. The basin in the poem also acts as a mirror, but an imperfect one in which self-assessment is not actually possible, since the person gazing into it can only wonder what is missing. The second imperative, to look in

the mirror, implies a more honest self-assessment that reveals the lover's own moral impoverishment, but also graciously indicates that the blessings of life are not diminished by the lover's failure to contribute to them. The third imperative urges the lover on to full admission of guilt, including penitential tears. Both the basin and the mirror are necessary steps on the way to confession, though they could lead to narcissistic despair if their images were indulged indefinitely, but the window is an object that reflects an undistorted image while revealing the presence of persons besides oneself. In the window, the lover can recognize the beloved as an equal, both as a human being and as a sinner. The stanza conflates the greatest and second-greatest commands from the Gospels⁸ while acknowledging the equal "crookedness" of both lover and beloved. The lines anticipate a statement Auden would make three years later in "New Year Letter," in which acknowledgement of equal sinfulness is necessary in both individual and political relationships: "true democracy begins / With free confession of our sins" (CP 241). The image of sin as "crooked" is both an oblique reference to homosexuality and a strong suggestion that even in 1937 Auden was thinking about human evil in Augustinian terms of privation, which I have examined in previous chapters.

But unlike some of Auden's other poems from the 1930s, the initial speaker of "As I Walked Out One Evening," through whom the other voices are mediated, is not

⁸According to Matthew, when Jesus was asked which command in the Mosaic law was the most important, he replied, "You shall love the Lord your God with all *your heart* and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall *love your neighbor* as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (22:37-40, emphasis added). Thus, Auden's phrase "you shall love your crooked neighbor" is derived from the second commandment, but the phrase "with all your crooked heart" uses the wording of the first. But Auden was likely only using the biblical language with which he was familiar, rather than invoking the love of God at this point.

directly implicated in faithlessness. The poem's dramatic structure recalls Auden's ongoing interest in verse drama and his later enthusiasm for opera, but it also distances the initial speaker from the sharp criticism of the clocks, which is directed not at the speaker but at the singing lover specifically and at an entire tradition of lyric love poetry more generally. Whereas in "Lullaby" the poetic voice implicates itself directly, in this poem most of the speech is reported. The poem's initial speaker speaks for himself hardly at all, and instead transmits the central drama of the poem's dialogue between lover and clocks in quotation marks. However, the poem's final stanza suggests that the initial speaker is somewhat affected by the dialogue he reports:

It was late, late in the evening,
The lovers they were gone;
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the deep river ran on. (*CP* 135)

The initial speaker's repetition of "late, late" parallels the clocks' repetition of the imperatives, "stare, stare"; "look, look"; and "stand, stand," so even though the clocks are now silent, the speaker's echo indicates that he has assimilated the clocks' words into his own consciousness. Gone are the lovers—besides the lover's song's reference to holding the beloved, this is the only indication that the beloved was actually present in the scene. They have very likely gone to bed; at least, it is hard to imagine them going anywhere else. The river, which was "brimming" at the beginning of the poem, is now ambiguously "deep." Certainly the initial speaker's understanding of romantic love has become more profound, if also more painful.

"As I Walked Out One Evening" represents a coalescence of Auden's conflicted feelings in the 1930s about the nature of romantic love. While some of Auden's poems from the 1930s frankly celebrate the ephemeral nature of his sexual encounters, few if

any of these poems entirely lack the sense of regret and guilt that would be foregrounded in “As I Walked Out One Evening,” where the lover is fully culpable in the disintegration of the relationship. On the other hand, Auden attempted in the original version of “Summer Night” to see the disinterested, neighborly *agape* as a possible step towards a permanent personal relationship that would include sex, but other poems from the period, such as “Meiosis” and “A Bride in the ‘30s,” suggest that the introduction of *eros* into a relationship automatically eliminates the prospect of permanence. So for Auden in the 1930s, *eros* and *agape* must remain mutually exclusive.

Auden’s situation, though homosexual, was not far removed from the position in which Augustine found himself as a young man. As he records in the *Confessions*, he had been cohabiting with a woman with whom he had a son, but he was persuaded to get married and so dismissed his mistress in order to be free to marry, and in the meantime he procured yet another mistress with whom he could satisfy himself while he waited to be married (6.12-15). Augustine says of his sexual addiction, “Fettered by the flesh’s morbid impulse and lethal sweetness, I dragged my chain, but was afraid to be free of it” (C 6.12). Later Augustine adds,

By this liaison the disease of my soul would be sustained and kept active, either in full vigour or even increased, so that the habit would be guarded and fostered until I came to the kingdom of marriage. But my wound, inflicted by the earlier parting, was not healed. After inflammation and sharp pain, it festered. The pain made me as it were frigid but desperate. (C 6.15)

Augustine’s descriptions of his own struggles with sexual infidelity would have been strikingly familiar to Auden, as they articulate an acute distress that approximates much of the erotic angst that permeates Auden’s poetry and reaches what seems to be a final impasse in “Lullaby” and “As I Walked Out One Evening.”

Both are important poems in Auden's corpus, since they summarize much that Auden believed about romantic love, and since they offer an honest assessment of human nature. But by themselves the poems do not come much closer than Auden's earlier works to resolving the continual problem of *eros* and *agape*. The resolution of opposites, such as *eros* and *agape*, vexed Auden in the late 1930s, and shows in his 1938 essay "Jehovah Houseman and Satan Houseman": "Heaven and Hell. Reason and Instinct. Conscious Mind and Unconscious. . . . Yes, the two worlds. Perhaps the Socialist State will marry them, perhaps it won't. . . . Perhaps again the only thing which can bring them together is the experience of what Christians call Charity. . ." (*Prose I* 438-39). By his own testimony, Auden hoped for a marriage of opposites through the agency of charity, but it would take a radically new personal experience flesh out Auden's hopes.

Denis de Rougemont and Christian Marriage, 1939-1941

In April of 1939, just a few months after he had emigrated to America with Christopher Isherwood, Auden met a young Jewish man named Chester Kallman in New York City, and the two quickly entered into a close friendship. The development of the relationship between Auden and Kallman is well documented in several books, particularly in Carpenter's biography, in Richard Davenport-Hines's *Auden*, and in Dorothy Farnan's *Auden in Love*. It is beyond the scope of this study to treat the details of the relationship, but a brief survey will help to contextualize Auden's statements on love during the early 1940s. By all accounts, Kallman was bright and well-read, and Auden found him attractive both physically and intellectually. It was Kallman who introduced Auden to opera, a genre to which Auden had previously paid scant attention but about which he was enthusiastic ever afterwards. The two would go on to collaborate

on several libretti, including *The Rake's Progress*, set by Igor Stravinsky, and a translation of *The Magic Flute*. Only a few weeks after the two first met, Carpenter says, Auden was contemplating entering into “a marriage with all its boredoms and rewards” (261). By May of 1939, Auden’s friends found him referring to his relationship with Kallman as a marriage, and he had begun to wear a wedding band (Carpenter 262). With considerable relief, Auden now believed that sex and friendship could harmoniously coincide within his presumptive marriage to Kallman, and it was against the background of this relationship that Auden began his long trek back to the church.

From 1939 on, Auden would address many poems to Kallman, explicitly or implicitly. One of the first is “Every eye must weep alone,” which bears a dedication to Kallman and which Mendelson dates “? 1939,” though it must have been written after he met Kallman in April of that year (*TEA* 456). The poem uses language from Augustine’s *Confessions* to explore the implications of selfless love within a marriage:

Every eye must weep alone
Till I Will be overthrown.

But I Will can be removed,
Not having sense enough
To guard against I Know,
But I Will can be removed.

Then all I’s can meet and grow,
I Am become I Love,
I Have Not I Am Loved,
Then all I’s can meet and grow.

Till I Will be overthrown
Every eye must weep alone. (*TEA* 456)

The poem appropriates Augustine’s explanation in the *Confessions* of the three aspects of the self: “being, knowing, willing. For I am and I know and I will. Knowing and willing

I am. I know that I am and that I will. I will to be and to know” (C 13.11).⁹ In this passage, Augustine is comparing the unity of the three persons of the Trinity with what he identifies as the three basic faculties of the human being, but Auden’s use of Augustine’s language discards the original theological context—at the time of writing it is unlikely that Auden was even a theist, much less a Christian—and focuses instead on the way in which these three aspects of the human being interact in a loving relationship.

In this poem, the phrase “I Will” suggests the self-centered *eros* described in Auden’s earlier poetry; Lucy McDiarmid explains that “I Will” is synonymous with “what I want, what I insist on, what I determine” (67). In that egotistical sense the “I Will” “can be removed” and “overthrown,” presumably in order to subject it to the *agape* of “I Love.” It may seem odd that Auden opposes “I Am” and “I Love,” since being would seem to be a prerequisite to loving. The phrase “I Am” recalls God’s self-identification to Moses in Exodus 3.14, but when spoken in a human voice the phrase suggests a pretended self-sufficiency. The human who says “I Am” is playing at being a god and is thus likely to say “I Will,” a phrase that the poem uses to designate exploitative desire that regards its object only as something to be possessed. While Auden’s earlier poems had frequently used the word “love” to designate *eros*, here he is beginning to describe *eros* as an act of sheer willfulness and to contrast it with what he now calls “love,” which is redefined as an event in which “all I’s can meet and grow.” That this newfound “love” corresponds to *agape* is suggested by the phrase “all I’s”; rather than limit the love to an exclusive relationship between two people, the poem says “all,” opening the possibility of mutual love to a potentially infinite number of other

⁹Auden would quote this passage again in a 1967 lecture, the text of which was later printed in *Secondary Worlds* (119).

people. The poem's third stanza indicates that the *agape* inherent in reciprocal love ("I Love. . . I Am Loved") replaces the desire to possess inherent in "I Have Not," which is the defining characteristic of the narcissistic "I Am" that isolates itself in its own sorrowful weeping.

Randall Jarrell, who objected strongly to Auden's penchant for abstraction and personification, cites this poem as a particularly egregious level of abstraction: "In *Another Time* there is one thirteen-line menagerie in which the capitalized abstractions I Will, I Know, I Am, I Have Not, and I Am Loved peer apathetically out from behind their bars" (49-50). Besides the fact that Jarrell seems unaware of the phrases' origin in Augustine, and that the poem has only twelve lines, he also misses the poem's use of puns and double-meanings, in which abstract language suggests concrete images. For example, the "eye" that weeps alone is also the "I" in "I Will" and "I Am" that must be overthrown by *agape*. The eye is a synecdoche for the whole person, the "I," that emphasizes the tendency of the *eros*-driven person to objectify other persons. The phrase "I Know" suggests the carnal "knowledge" of sexual intimacy, which the poem says the faculty of the will does have the sense to resist. The phrase "I Will" may even be a mockery of wedding vows, in which the traditional "I do" is sometimes replaced by "I will," at least in some American ceremonies. The poem's "I Will" suggests that *eros* is not automatically checked by a wedding; on the contrary, two people may very well marry for entirely selfish reasons. The poem also uses opposing concrete images of organic growth and crying to illustrate the difference between *agape* and *eros*, respectively. This, then, is clearly a more physical poem than Jarrell allows.

In the summer of 1939, the same year in which “Every eye must weep alone” was written, Auden and Kallman took a bus trip to New Mexico and California, partly to visit Christopher Isherwood, but also to celebrate what Auden was calling their “Honeymoon” (Carpenter 266). Kallman, as would later become obvious even to Auden, was more ambivalent about the “marriage,” but at the time he seems to have been content to play along. It was during that summer that Auden wrote “The Prolific and the Devourer,” in which he set out his political and aesthetic beliefs at the time, and in which he also maintained his dissatisfaction with all forms of organized Christian religion. Just after he and Kallman returned to New York, the Nazis invaded Poland.

Marital *agape* had been prominent in the few poems Auden had recently written, so it is hardly surprising that “September 1, 1939” contained the line “We must love one another or die” (*TEA* 246). It is arguably the best-known line Auden ever wrote, though the poem contains several other frequently quoted lines such as “a low, dishonest decade” and “Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return” (*TEA* 245). Auden’s repudiation of the poem has become almost as famous as the poem itself and the provenance of this poem has been ably traced by Mendelson and others (see *EA* 325-26). It has been irrepressibly popular despite Auden’s eventual renunciation of its most famous line as “a damned lie” (qtd. in *EA* 326), and it achieved notable prominence among New Yorkers after 9/11. The poem’s view of love, however, is characteristic of Auden’s vague and shifting ideas about love in the 1930s. *Eros* appears in the poem, this time not in sexual terms, but as a general self-centeredness:

the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,

Not universal love
But to be loved alone. (*TEA* 246)

That is, *eros* is not only an unalterable fact of human existence, but a fundamental aspect of the physical body. The desire “to be loved alone” is “bred in the bone”; that is, the lines suggest that the will to deny love to others is inherent in the very physical nature of all humans (*TEA* 246). The last stanza of the poem returns to this account of human nature. The poet says he is “composed like them / Of Eros and of dust” (*TEA* 247). “Dust” is a reference to the story of the creation of man in Genesis, where God “formed the man of dust from the ground” (2.7), and “Eros” here suggests the natural impetus towards self-actualization that Auden’s earlier poems, such as “Meiosis,” attribute to all forms of organic life. It is in this sense that Auden used the word “love” in the infamous line, “We must love one another or die” (*TEA* 246).

This love is not the *agape* of “Summer Night” in which love generates mutual respect and kindness, but as Mendelson explains in his analysis of the line’s context in the stanza, “His lines say we must love one another because hunger allows us no choice. This is a statement of necessity: love is a biological need which must be satisfied lest we die. Auden had said as much repeatedly during the past five years” (*EA* 326). At the same time, as Mendelson points out (*EA* 327), Auden had also characterized love as an act of the will, as “voluntary love,” three years earlier in a poem that became the fifth of “Twelve Songs” (*CP* 139). Eventually Auden recognized that the poem’s use of the word “love” in the sense of *eros* made nonsense of the line, “We must love one another or die.” Auden came to believe, as we shall see, that *eros* is a love of self, not a love of another person, so it is a contradiction in terms to imply that *eros* can impel us to “love one another.” The love of the other is not *eros*, but *agape*, which, to be fair, Auden did

suggest could also be an irresistible compulsion that nevertheless required the lover's assent. The word "love" is nevertheless constantly ambiguous in Auden's poetry. In "As I Walked Out One Evening," the lover sings "I'll love you dear, I'll love you" (*CP* 133), and in "Lullaby" the speaker hopes his lover will be "Watched by every human love" (*TEA* 207), but Auden also hopes in "Every eye must weep alone" that "I Am [will] become I Love" (*TEA* 456). In his poems from the late 1930s, Auden never seems exactly sure what he means by the word "love."

It was not only Auden's personal relationships that fixed his writing so intently on love in the late 1930s. The political situation in Europe was quickly worsening, and war with Nazi Germany already seemed inevitable to Auden. Soon a rapid series of important personal and political events in 1939 and 1940 would fix Auden's poetic attention on the nature of human relationships. In November of 1939, as the Nazis invaded Poland, Auden had his startling experience with Nazi sympathizers in a Manhattan theater, where he found that his longstanding middle-class liberalism could not offer a compelling rationale for his own sense of ethics that he had heretofore taken for granted. About the same time he also met Elizabeth Mayer, to whom he would soon dedicate "New Year Letter," which he began in January of 1940. While he was at work on the poem in the first part of that year, he read Charles Williams and Kierkegaard, and probably Cochrane as well. In the fall of 1940, Auden met the Niebuhrs, and it was about this time that his friends began to notice that he was slipping away on Sunday mornings to attend church. Between the time Auden met Kallman early in 1939 and his decision to attend church late in 1940, Auden wrote very few poems that could be called "love poems." This was partly because he had spent much of 1939 and 1940 writing "The

Prolific and the Devourer,” “New Year Letter,” and “The Quest,” a sonnet sequence that would be published in the same volume as “New Year Letter” in March 1941.

“The Quest” does, however, touch on the nature of love. It is an apt companion piece for “New Year Letter” since it begins in metaphysical uncertainty and ends with a tentative affirmation of Christian hope. A later poem in the sequence, titled merely XVIII in the *Collected Poems* but in other editions titled “The Adventurers,” pictures the Desert Fathers attempting their own quest to escape the temptations of the flesh through the *via negativa*, a subject Auden likely derived from Charles Williams’s description of these early Christian ascetic mystics in *The Descent of the Dove* (see Williams 57-59). These mystics recall the ecstatic hermit of “Lullaby,” though while the hermit of “Lullaby” achieves a “sensual” or “carnal” vision and is ultimately self-deceived, the mystics of “The Quest” do not achieve the desired spiritual vision. Auden describes them as “Spinning upon their central thirst like tops” and following “the Negative Way towards the Dry” (*CP* 294). The “thirst” that paradoxically drives them to the asceticism of “the Dry” suggests a desire akin to the hunger that “September 1, 1939” established as a biologically necessary *eros*. But the result, in the case of the Desert Fathers, is almost comically paradoxical:

yet,
Still praising the Absurd with their last breath,

They seeded out into their miracles:
The images of each grotesque temptation
Became some painter’s happiest inspiration,

And barren wives and burning virgins came
To drink the pure cold water of their wells,
And wish for beaux and children in their name. (*CP* 294-95)

While the Desert Fathers rejected both art and sex, the poem shows their asceticism enabling both pictorial art and sensual pleasure as their memories are invoked on behalf of painters, would-be lovers, and those who hope to bear children. Individually the ascetics' rejection of *eros*, though that rejection is itself identified as a form of *eros*, is absolute; but when their lives are merged into the larger, catholic community, their personal barrenness enables fruitfulness in others.

Just as the poem shows the asceticism of the *via negativa* being subsumed into a broader whole of Christian experience, the poem itself is but one aspect of the larger "Quest" sequence in which a set of average people undertake a heroic search for significance that turns out to be impossible. The penultimate poem of the sequence, untitled in the *Collected Poems* but elsewhere titled "The Waters," describes a generally unsuccessful quest, as "Poet, oracle, and wit / Like unsuccessful anglers by / The ponds of apperception sit" (*CP* 295), lines that evoke a similar image at the end of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. But the poem's final couplet suggests that it is the fishermen themselves, not the water, that is to blame for the lack of vision: "The waters long to hear our question put / Which would release their longed-for answer, but" (*CP* 295). Since the philosophical fishermen do not know what question to ask, they can only "tell the angler's lie" and pretend that their pronouncements are the products of genuine insights instead of concocted fish stories (*CP* 295).

The last poem of "The Quest," sometimes titled "The Garden," envisions a state of renewed innocence¹⁰ where "all opening begins" and "flesh forgives division as it

¹⁰The third and fourth lines sound less than innocent: "Where children play at seven earnest sins, / And dogs believe their tall conditions dead" (*CP* 295). But Fuller's illuminating gloss on these lines points out that the seven sins are "earnest" but not

makes / Another's moment of consent its own" (CP 295). The poem continues, "All journeys die here: wish and weight are lifted" (CP 296). In this garden, the demands of *eros* ("wish") "are lifted" along with "weight." Auden's use of the word "weight" in the context of love clearly draws on the *Confessions* in which Augustine describes his love for God using the metaphor of physical weight (13.9). According to Augustine, he is raised to God, or "lifted" as Auden's poem puts it, by his love, which he likens to fire that seeks its proper place above the other elements. The poem's last lines reiterate the identification of deliberate love with weight: "The gaunt and great, the famed for conversation / Blushed in the stare of evening as they spoke / And felt their centre of volition shifted" (CP 296). The poem does not actually use the word "love," but the sense of *agape* is unmistakable in the connections it establishes between "wish," "weight," and "volition." The last line implies that the movement of the "centre of volition" is itself prior to the conscious will, that what moves the will cannot itself be willed but must be an outside agent that the poem leaves unnamed. But "New Year Letter," originally published in the same volume as "The Quest," had already named the agent, using a line from the *Confessions*, "*O da quod jubes, Domine*" (CP 242), or, "O give what you command, Lord." An earlier poem in the sequence, "XVII" or "Adventure," wryly comments, "Successful men know better than to try / To see the face of their Absconded God" (CP 294), and the last poem of the sequence is content merely to imply the necessity of divine grace rather than name it explicitly.

deadly, and that they are objects of mere play, such that the scene "is a state of authenticity of being that is achieved largely through love" (W. H. Auden 343). Fuller also explains that "the body ('dogs') is free of the interfering super-ego ('their tall conditions', i.e. their masters)" (W. H. Auden 343).

As the poems of “The Quest” demonstrate, Auden’s view of love becomes more consistently linked with an Augustinian sense of love as a volition after 1939. Before that year, Auden had never sounded quite sure in his poems whether the various thoughts, emotions, and desires he called “love” were biological impulses or conscious choices, but he was coming to define love more and more in terms of volition. Since the tension and anxiety that had marked Auden’s earlier erotic relationships was not initially present in his relationship with Kallman, his love poems of 1939-1940 replace the anguish of his earlier love poetry with anticipation of the difficulties of committed love. It was that erotic tension and uncertainty that appears to have been the emotional impetus behind much of Auden’s early love poetry—as he had said in the notes to “New Year Letter,” “poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings” (NYL 119). But having achieved what he said was a “happy personal life” (qtd. in Carpenter 290), Auden’s inner conflicts now arose from the demands that his renewed Christian faith was making on him. But by the end of 1940 Auden felt that his “marriage” to Kallman had set his sexual life in order, and that his sexual fidelity might be energized by a newfound fidelity to God.

The timing of Auden’s return to Christianity was crucial. In 1936, the Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren had published the second volume of his monumental work *Agape and Eros*, in which he argued that *eros*, desire that seeks its own satisfaction, had no place in Christianity, and that that Augustine and the Medieval theologians had perverted Christian *agape*, a totally selfless love, by attempting to recover *eros* as a valid element of Christianity. Against this background of a Protestant theology that viewed *eros* and *agape* as diametrically opposed, Auden was discovering that sexual fidelity was

possible for him, and was also making his way back to the Church. In 1940, the year Auden reentered the Anglican communion, Denis de Rougemont published his book *Love in the Western World* in an English translation.¹¹ Rougemont's book begins with a close analysis of the legend of Tristan and Isolde, in which he argues that the two lovers constantly seek out obstructions to their love, so as to heighten their emotional passion at the expense of consummation. Rougemont concludes that the *eros* that Tristan and Isolde experience is not ultimately desire for companionship or sex, but for disembodiment in death, hence *eros* is a form of suffering desire, an idea that is implicit in the word "passion." Rougemont proceeds to trace the origins of the "courtly" lyric poetry of the Troubadours, which shares with the Tristan story a prolonged passion without consummation, to the allegorical hymns of the Cathars, a heterodox mystical sect that flourished in southern France during the early Middle Ages.¹² Rougemont argues further that the passionate *eros* of French lyric poetry, which began with the Cathars, extended in various forms into the modern novel of his present day, and that it maintained its roots in Gnostic mysticism, which has always been starkly opposed to the Christian idea of *agape* as demonstrated in Christian marriage.

¹¹The book's title in England was *Passion and Society*. All references are to this 1940 edition, which Auden read some time between its publication and June 1941, when he reviewed it for *The Nation*. Rougemont later revised the book thoroughly, and he published an English translation of the revised edition in 1956.

¹²Despite his engaging analysis of the Tristan myth, Rougemont's theory about the connection between the Troubadours and the Cathars is based largely on conjecture and has been discredited by subsequent scholarship. Even so, the connection has entered the popular imagination in some venues, for example in Umberto Eco's medieval detective novel *The Name of the Rose*, which is premised partly on a connection between sexual promiscuity and an early fourteenth century monastic sect called the Apolstolic Brothers, which bears some resemblance to the Cathars as Eco's novel describes them (see esp. 225-36).

Auden favorably reviewed Rougemont's book in June 1941, and Donald Pearce, who took one of Auden's classes at Michigan in the fall of 1941, reports that "Auden lectured fairly frequently on the theme of love. We were assigned the libretti of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Carmen*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and a new book which he was enthusiastic about by Denis de Rougemont called *Love in the Western World*" (138). Rougemont's book identifies the Tristan legend as quintessentially Gnostic, or, to use the term that Rougemont prefers, Manichean, and from 1941 on, Auden would refer to the *Tristan* story regularly in his prose, especially *The Dyer's Hand*, as an example of self-obsessed love. Auden had been familiar with the legend of Tristan since childhood, when his mother taught him to sing Isolde's part in a duet from Wagner's opera (Osborne, *W. H. Auden* 11), but the myth only took a serious hold on his imagination after he read Rougemont's book, which he did just as Kallman was reintroducing Auden to Wagnerian opera. Throughout his subsequent poetry and prose, he would use Tristan as an example of the quintessential suffering lover who is in love, not with a woman, but with love itself and ultimately with his own destruction—Don Giovanni and Don Juan were for Auden the mirror images of Tristan. Perhaps Auden recognized that his own early anxiety over the impermanence of his string of homosexual relationships resembled the suffering lover of whom Tristan and Don Giovanni were antitypes, but in any event, after 1938 he wrote fewer and fewer love poems, and those he did write were very different from his earlier love poetry.

One of these was "In Sickness and in Health." Mendelson dates it "? Autumn 1940" (*CP* 320), though Auden certainly wrote it after he read Rougemont, since the poem mentions that

Tristan, Isolde, the great friends,
Make passion out of passion's obstacles,
Deliciously postponing their delight,
Prolong frustration till it lasts all night,
Then perish lest Brangaene's worldly cry
Should sober their cerebral ecstasy. (CP 318)

The stanza reworks "The hermit's carnal ecstasy" (CP 157) in "Lullaby" while neatly summarizing Rougemont's argument in the first chapters of *Love in the Western World* that Tristan and Isolde intentionally obstruct their illicit relationship: "Tristan and Iseult do not love one another. They say they don't, and everything goes to prove it. *What they love is love and being in love.* They behave as if aware that whatever obstructs love must ensure and consolidate it in the heart of each and intensify it infinitely in the moment they reach the complete obstruction, which is death" (Rougemont 51). Rougemont later argues that this process is true of all expressions of unbridled *eros*: "Eros, object of our supreme Desire, intensifies all our desires only in order to offer them up in sacrifice. The fulfilment of Love is the denial of any particular terrestrial bliss. *From the standpoint of life, it is this Love which is the absolute woe*" (Rougemont 80). Auden had been associating *eros* with death for most of his poetic career, an association he likely derived from Freud, among others. But Rougemont offered him a more plausible mythic and historical structure in which to place the association, and Rougemont also explained why Auden's sexual encounters, before Kallman at least, could never produce a permanent friendship.

Eros is a desire to prolong desire indefinitely, Rougemont argues, and as such it is an ultimately Gnostic zeal for disembodiment. Thus Randall Jarrell gets Auden exactly backwards when he claims, "the *We must love one another or die* of Auden's middle period had developed out of the earlier, odder motto, *If we love one another, we die*; but

the original *love* is the concrete, surprising Eros of case histories, the later *love* is the abstract, acceptable, ethereal Agape of speeches and sermons” (26). But after reading Rougemont, Auden began to see *eros* as a finally abstract form of love, in contrast to *agape*, which he came to see as a concrete love that ultimately affirmed the goodness of the body and of its existence in space and time. Increasingly in the 1940s, Auden would link concrete *agape* with the Incarnation. This is not to say that Auden always used concrete images to talk about *agape* in his poems, and many of his poems after the 1940s deal in abstractions, whatever their topic. But when his poems from the early 1940s do discuss *agape*, they tend to mix important concrete images with philosophical and theological abstractions.

The rest of “In Sickness and in Health,” for example, both recalls the “praise” of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” and anticipates the admonition to “praise” directed at Joseph in “For the Time Being”:

Rejoice, dear love, in Love’s peremptory word;
All chance, all love, all logic, you and I,
Exist by grace of the Absurd,
And without conscious artifice we die:
So, lest we manufacture in our flesh
The lie of our divinity afresh,
Describe round our chaotic malice now,
The arbitrary circle of a vow. (CP 319)

Until the last line, the most concrete word in the stanza is “flesh.” The last line, which evokes the “ring” of companions in “Summer Night,” refers to a wedding ring, a concrete object that symbolizes a permanent commitment. In the context of marriage, Auden owes the word “arbitrary” to Rougemont, who argues that the decision to marry “must always be arbitrary” (313), by which he means that a Christian marriage must be entered into with the understanding that it is an irrevocable choice that is not based on any

calculation of the likelihood of future happiness. It is possible, Carpenter indicates, that Auden and Kallman had actually sworn marriage vows (312). Carpenter cites this poem as the only substantial evidence of real vows between the two (312), and he notes that the poem does express hope “That this round O of faithfulness we swear / May never wither to an empty nought, Nor petrify into a square” (*CP* 320). The “round O” is both the vow and, presumably, the wedding band that symbolizes the promise of fidelity. Although Auden frequently used autobiographical material in his poetry, he did often modify details significantly, making it difficult to use the poems to establish biographical facts that are not corroborated elsewhere. But if Auden and Kallman did make explicit vows to each other, Auden’s reading of Rougemont very likely suggested the idea to him.

Another poem from 1940, “Leap Before You Look,” takes up an image from Kierkegaard to describe both marital *agape* and religious faith. The last stanza states,

A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear:
Although I love you, you will have to leap;
Our dream of safety has to disappear. (*CP* 314)

The poem is generally read partly as an encouragement to Kallman to convert to Christianity, though Kallman never did. Auden drew the image of floating over “ten thousand fathoms” from Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, where the image characterizes the “religious stage” which one can enter only by a “leap of faith.” Auden had been reading Kierkegaard’s works in 1940, and some of the other books he was reading at the time, such as Williams’s *Descent of the Dove*, as well as Rougemont, who explains the connection between Kierkegaard’s three stages and romantic love: “Kierkegaard . . . extolled passion as being the highest value in the ‘aesthetic stage’ of life; then rose above passion by extolling marriage as being the highest value in the ‘ethical stage’ (the

‘fullness of time’); and finally condemned marriage as the highest obstruction in the ‘religious stage,’ since marriage fetters us to time where faith requires eternity” (Rougemont 309). Since Kierkegaard saw marriage as an obstruction to the religious stage, Auden’s use of Kierkegaard’s flotation metaphor to refer positively to marriage appears to be drawn from Rougemont’s modification of Kierkegaard, which is somewhat less negative about the value of marriage. “Everything to be urged against marriage is true, and therefore should be urged against it,” Rougemont argues, but once all the difficulties are acknowledged, “I adopt an open mind towards the imperfect poise of marriage and—happily or unhappily—live in wait of perfection. I realize that it is a *wild* attempt I am making (although at the same time an altogether natural one) to live perfectly in imperfection” (310-11). Auden’s invitation in his poem to abandon the “dream of safety” and “leap” into faith, both faith in God and fidelity to each other, owes something to Rougemont’s suggestion that marriage be a “wild attempt.” In his 1941 review of Rougemont’s book, Auden indicates that he took seriously the book’s argument on marriage:

In the last few chapters of his book Mr de Rougemont states the Christian doctrine of marriage, which will seem absurdly straitlaced to the hedonist and shockingly coarse to the romantic. But perhaps the unpleasant consequences of romantic love and romantic politics are making thoughtful people more willing to reconsider it than they were while a bourgeois convention, which professed to be Christian but was nothing of the kind, was still *à la mode*. (*Prose II* 140-41).

Auden was certainly among those “thoughtful people” who had been reconsidering, and in his case embracing, Rougemont’s account of Christian marriage, inasmuch as it was possible for him as a homosexual.

It is important to note that Rougemont's view of marriage as he expresses it in *Love in the Western World* is quite close to Augustine's position on marriage in the *Confessions*, and that Rougemont's thought is an outgrowth of an Augustinian tradition. In the *Confessions*, as in some of his other works, Augustine juxtaposes illicit sexual relationships, which he knew from personal experience were based on selfish, acquisitive passion, with a proper marriage, in which, he says, "the beauty of having a wife lies in the obligation to respect the discipline of marriage and bring up children" (C 6.12). As Rougemont would explain, marriage in the Augustinian tradition is conceived as a relationship between an man and woman in which sex is not merely for pleasure, but for the purposes of procreation. Sex in marriage should not be just an "outlet" for otherwise uncontrollable sexual desires, but should rather be one important aspect of an entire life lived within the bounds of self-restraint and duty to a family. Uncontrolled *eros* (or *cupidity*, the word Augustine would use) was for Augustine hardly less sinful inside a marriage than outside it. Augustine believed that sex was an instrumental good in that it led to procreation, rather than a pleasure to be sought for its own sake. Such a view is strongly implied throughout the last few chapters of Rougemont, which Auden clearly read with studious attention. While Auden could not himself hope to procreate, he did hope that marriage would provide him with a sort of family within which he could exercise his moral duty.

There are many more references in Auden's works to ideas in Rougemont's book than I can discuss here, and Auden's reliance on Rougemont has never been adequately explored. For this study I must hereafter confine my analysis to the ways in which Rougemont mediated and modified certain Augustinian ideas which Auden absorbed.

Rougemont's debt to Augustine is largely implicit, but one important clue is the fact that he tends to use the term "Manichaeism" to refer to the heterodox Gnostic mysticism that he identifies with the Cathars and denounces throughout his book. It might have been more accurate to refer to this broad phenomenon merely as "Gnosticism," but Rougemont is convinced that the medieval Cathars, the various Gnostic sects of the late Roman Empire, and a wide variety of cultic religions from the Near East including Zoroastrianism are all versions of the same secretive, mystical religion, and he suggests a rough-and-ready genealogy:

a kind of Indo-European unity may be seen looming over like a watermark upon the background of medieval heresies. As early as the third century, there spread over the geographical and historical area that is bounded by India on the one hand and by Britain on the other, a religion that syncretized all the myths of Night and Day, a religion which had been elaborated first in Persia and then by the Gnostic and Orphic sects. This religion actually spread underground, and it is known as Manichaeism. (Rougemont 78)

In his overview, Rougemont collapses some important differences between the various mystic sects he identifies, but his preference for the term "Manichaeism" suggests an implicit reliance on Augustine, who devoted much space in his most widely-read works denouncing the Manichees.¹³

Furthermore, Rougemont does refer to Augustine in his book, most notably in his explanation of one of the important characteristics of *eros* as he defines it: "To love love

¹³Augustine's description of the Manichees in the *Confessions* has few of the overtones of cultic secretiveness that Rougemont attributes to the sect. However, in his *Heresies* Augustine does accuse the Manichees of secretly practicing obscene rites, but his accusations are based on others' testimony and not on his own first-hand experience. As Augustine portrays them in the *Confessions*, the Manichees of the late fourth century were relatively open about what they believed, their philosophy being not so much secretive as obscure and ill-defined. As Augustine found in his conversations with the Manichean teacher Faustus, Manichean doctrines were difficult to understand largely because they were incoherent (see *C* 5.3-7).

more than the object of love, to love passion for its own sake, has been to love to suffer and to court suffering all the way from Augustine's *amabam amare* down to modern Romanticism" (Rougemont 61). The phrase *amabam amare*, "I longed to love," comes from the *Confessions*, where Augustine relates his experiences as a young man in Carthage: "I came to Carthage and all around me hissed a cauldron of illicit loves. As yet I had never been in love and I longed to love [*amabam amare*] . . . I sought an object for my love; I was in love with love . . ." (3.1). From this and similar passages in the *Confessions*, Rougemont reasonably links what he calls by the Greek word *eros* with Augustine's Latin term *cupiditas*, which for Augustine is a love directed primarily at self-gratification. Augustine defines the term in *On Christian Doctrine*, where he juxtaposes it with what he calls *caritas*, or "charity":

But Scripture teaches nothing but charity, nor condemns anything except cupidity . . . I call "charity" the motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and of one's neighbor for the sake of God; but "cupidity" is a motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of one's self, one's neighbor, or any corporal thing for the sake of something other than God. (*OCD* 3.10)

For Augustine, "cupidity" is love directed at an object other than God for that object's own sake, whether that object is a thing, a person, or even a figment of the imagination. But while Rougemont appropriates this language from Augustine's works, there remain some significant differences between Augustine's conception of *cupiditas* and Rougemont's account of *eros*. For Rougemont, *eros* only appears to desire another object but is ultimately directed only at itself, whereas Augustine believed that cupidity could be directed towards the object itself, and that while the object of cupidity could indeed be the self, it could just as easily be another person or object. In contrast, Rougemont asserts, "Let us remember, however, that the passion of love is at bottom

narcissism, the lover's self-magnification, far more than it is a relation with the beloved. . . . Passion requires that the *self* shall become greater than all things, as solitary and powerful as God" (267). For Rougemont, *eros* is never actually directed at an object other than the self, an idea that may very well be derived from book three of the *Confessions* where Augustine does characterize his ill-formed love as ultimately self-centered. But Augustine's other writings do specify that cupidity also may be genuinely directed at another person or thing for its own sake. So while Rougemont does sometimes rely on Augustine's language, the meanings of his terms are not always identical with Augustine's.

There is one important aspect of love in which Rougemont does follow Augustine more closely. Rougemont has been criticized for setting up an absolute division between *eros* and *agape*,¹⁴ but that characterization is not quite fair. While Rougemont's book does begin by setting up *eros* and *agape* in strong opposition to each other, he does so with an eye toward reconciling them in the end. In the final chapters of *Love in the Western World*, he explains that while *eros* tends to isolate itself from *agape* and to lead ultimately to death, Christian *agape* seeks to redeem *eros* and return it to its proper subservient place. Before Christianity, Rougemont argues, the "natural man," or humans under the control of *eros*, found that death was the only escape from servitude to *eros*:

Thus Eros could lead him but to death. But a man who believes the revelation of Agape suddenly beholds the circle broken: faith delivers him

¹⁴In a recent article, Avery Cardinal Dulles states that "De Rougement, like Nygren, confronts us with a stark choice between *eros* and *agape*" and criticizes both Rougement and Nygren for "set[ting] up an unbridgeable gulf between *eros*, as a passion arising from below, and *agape*, as a totally altruistic gift from on high" (21). While that is a fair assessment of Nygren, Dulles's criticism is less applicable to the argument in favor of Christian marriage that Rougement sets out at the end of *Love in the Western World*.

from natural religion. Now he *may* hope for something else; he is aware that there is some other release from sin. And thereupon Eros in turn has been relieved of his fatal office and delivered from his fate. *In ceasing to be a god, he ceases to be a demon.*¹⁵ And he finds his proper place in the provisional economy of Creation and of what is human. (321)

Here Rougemont sets himself in opposition to Anders Nygren, who had argued that *agape* and *eros* are irreconcilable. Rougemont instead states that *eros* has a legitimate if minor place within the rightly ordered loves of Christianity.

In his 1941 review of the book, Auden was quick to emphasize this crucial point, and he chided Rougemont for not being clearer on the matter all along:

My only criticism of Mr de Rougemont's profound and brilliant study is that I find his definition of Eros a little vague. He sometimes speaks as if he meant, which I am sure he does not, that Eros is of sexual origin and that there is a dualistic division between Agape and Eros rather than—what I am sure he believes—a dialectical relation. For Eros, surely, is *'amor sementa in voi d'ogni vertute, e d'ogni operazion che merta pene,'*¹⁶ the basic will to self-actualization without which no creature can exist, and Agape is that Eros mutated by Grace, a conversion, not an addition, the Law fulfilled, not the Law destroyed. (*Prose II* 139)

Auden's clarification thus brings Rougemont's work much closer to agreement with Augustine. In *The City of God*, Augustine argues that according to Scripture, charity (*caritas*), love (*amor*), fondness (*diligis*), and even desire (*cupiditas* or *concupiscentia*) may have good or bad connotations in Scriptural use depending on what is loved or desired and for what reasons¹⁷ (14.7). Augustine concludes, "a rightly directed will is

¹⁵"Sin, it has been remarked, is not Eros, but the sublimation of Eros" (Rougemont's note).

¹⁶Auden quotes from Dante's *Purgatorio* (17.104-5). In Allen Mandelbaum's translation, the passage reads, "love is the seed in you of every virtue / and of all acts deserving punishment" (17.104-5).

¹⁷In this passages and in those that follow, Augustine is refuting the Stoics, who, Augustine notes, believed that the "passions" of desire, joy, fear, and grief were always

love in a good sense and a perverted will is love in a bad sense” (*City of God* 14.7). For Augustine, the rightness or wrongness of a passion is always judged primarily by the motive for the passion, and then by the object of the passion, and not by the fact of desire itself. Desire (*cupiditas*) for Augustine, and for Auden as well, might be properly directed towards God himself and therefore could not be in itself sinful.

According to the Gospels and to the longstanding tradition of the church of which Augustine is a significant part, the love of God is the basis of a rightly-ordered love, and out of that love of God comes a love of one’s neighbor. After all, the second greatest commandment, according to Jesus Christ, is “you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” (Matt. 22.39), the wording of which does imply a love of self. Once *eros* or *cupiditas*¹⁸ (“desire,” or the survival instinct, as Auden saw it) is put into its proper place within the orderly loving of God and neighbor, Augustine finds himself free to speak of his relationship to God using erotic imagery. For example, he exclaims in the *Confessions*, “You pierced my heart with the arrow of your love . . .” (9.2), and in a later passage he says, “My love for you, Lord, is not an uncertain feeling but a matter of conscious certainty. With your word you pierced my heart, and I loved you” (10.6). In these clear references to the arrow of Cupid/Eros, Augustine envisions the pagan god as a type of Christ. Augustine’s justification for this identification of the erotic love of Cupid/Eros

inappropriate for the wise man (14.8). Augustine argues that, on the contrary, Christians can demonstrate such “passions” appropriately, since Scripture teaches that the apostles and saints also demonstrated rightly-ordered desire, joy, fear, and grief (14.9). In Augustine’s mind, passions can be good or bad depending on motivation and circumstance.

¹⁸The mythological relationship between the two words should not be overlooked. The Greek god Eros was generally equivalent to the Roman god Cupid; their names connote desire in general, and usually sexual desire in particular.

with the divine love of God is also derived from a long mystical tradition—both Jewish and Christian—in which the erotic imagery of the Song of Songs was interpreted allegorically so as to picture the love between God and humans.

It was to this Augustinian conversion of *eros* into *agape* that Auden aspired in his attempt to form a “marriage” with Kallman at the same time that he was in the process of returning to Christianity. But by Auden’s own account, his conversion to Christianity was not complete until, he wrote in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, “I was forced to know in person what it is like to feel oneself the prey of demonic powers, in both the Greek and the Christian sense, stripped of self-control and self-respect, behaving like a ham actor in a Strindberg play” (*MCP* 41). Auden refers to his furious and almost violent reaction to his discovery in July of 1941 that Kallman had taken a lover besides Auden, and that furthermore Kallman had never really intended to remain faithful to Auden in the first place (see Carpenter 311-12). As Carpenter describes it, their relationship had never had the equality of status that Auden’s poetry had hoped for, but instead “Auden tended to treat [Kallman] as a schoolmaster treats a clever pupil, showing him off to friends when it was convenient and pleasant to do so, but brushing him aside or leaving him in the background when there was serious conversation to be had” (312). Once Auden discovered Kallman’s infidelity, the two stopped having sexual relations, even though they remained close friends and even occasionally lived together for the rest of Auden’s life. After the dissolution of his “marriage” to Kallman, Auden’s love poetry reflects a subtle shift away from the celebrations of difficult but obligatory fidelity that had characterized the few love poems from the early 1940s. Some of his post-Kallman poetry reflects a sad indulgence in ephemeral *eros* that is similar to the regret of his earlier

poems but that lacks even the wish for permanence. But other poems of the same period celebrate the difficult development of *agape* through care for one's neighbor. In the next chapter I will discuss the odd ways in which Auden would continue to rely on Augustine in both types of poems.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Eros Playing Hard-to-Get

I'm sorry I'm not sorry. . .
Make me chaste, Lord, but not yet.

—W. H. Auden “The Love Feast”

Even before Auden had brought Augustine’s thought to bear on his love poetry in the late 1930s, he had expressed doubt about the conventions of love poetry in the Western tradition. His love poetry had never been “conventional” in the sense of offering unqualified praise to the beloved, and his love poems generally avoid the unrequited love that energizes some medieval and Renaissance lyrics. He had even openly mocked the hyperbolic conventions of love lyrics in “As I Walked Out One Evening,” and he would again satirize those conventions in the 1953 poem ““The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning.”” Yet his early love poems had been conventional in one crucial regard: they all focused on obstacles to love. Auden’s thematic innovations in love poetry had mainly to do with ways in which such obstacles were viewed. Love lyrics of the Renaissance tended to identify obstacles that are, strictly speaking, external to the lovers—class differences, physical distance, death, and even marriage to someone else—but the obstacles to love in Auden’s early poetry are almost wholly internal to the lovers themselves. While internal obstacles to love are not wholly novel to the Western lyric tradition, Auden explored them in far greater depth than had any English poet before him. In Auden’s lyrics from the 1930s, the main obstacles to lasting commitment are the lovers’ own acquisitive desires and their consequent propensities towards infidelity. Then in 1940 Auden read Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World*, which told him that

the entire history of love poetry, from the “courtly love” of the troubadours to the repressed passion of the modern novel, was rooted in the same Manichean dualism that he had just finished denouncing in “New Year Letter.” Rougemont’s book also argued that love poetry focused on obstacles to love because *eros* was not really a desire for gratification, though it often seemed so, but was actually a desire to go on desiring. Therefore, according to Rougemont, *eros* seeks to prolong itself indefinitely and is thus always desiring the final obstacle to gratification, which is death. As such, *eros* seeks disembodiment in death as its ultimate good and so denies the goodness of the material world.

Since Auden’s works in the late 1930s and early 1940s had appropriated Augustine’s critique of Manichean dualism and, like Augustine, affirmed the goodness of the material world, it was understandable that Auden would take very seriously Rougemont’s argument that lyric love poetry was the direct descendent of a heterodox mysticism that grew out of Manichaeism. Rougemont asserts that the members of this heterodox mysticism, as expressed in the heretical Cathar sect of the early twelfth century, composed hymns that praised a metaphorical lady who represented the sect itself, and that the troubadour poets seized on these esoteric hymns and applied their conventions to actual ladies in various medieval courts in southern France (97-104). As a poet, Auden would surely have been struck by Rougemont’s claim that “the structure of the Manichaeic faith was ‘in essence lyrical’” (79). Rougemont argues that for both the Manichees and the Cathars,

the nature of this faith made it unamenable to rational, impersonal, and “objective” exposition. Actually, it could only come to be held in being experienced, and the experience of it was one of combined dread and enthusiasm—that is to say, of invasion by the divine—which is essentially

poetic. The cosmogony and theogony of this faith became “true” for a believer only when certitude was induced by his recital of a *psalm*. (Rougemont 79)

Rougemont claimed that the essence of Manichaeism could be expressed only in lyric poetry, an argument that could not have escaped the notice of a poet who had recently written poems of his own that denounced Manichaeism. As it turned out, Rougemont’s theory that the poetry of “courtly love” was rooted in neo-Manichean mysticism was discredited by later scholarship, which even called into serious question whether there really ever was such a thing as “courtly love” as Rougemont and others had described it.¹ But by that time Rougemont’s account of the connections between Manichaeism and lyric poetry had become an indelible feature of Auden’s poetic and critical consciousness,² and because of Rougemont, Auden could never again write a love poem without being thoroughly conscious that he was, as he saw it, flirting with Manichean dualism.

¹The history of modern ideas about medieval “courtly love” is long and complicated, and the matter has yet to be settled absolutely. For a trenchant critique of the idea that “courtly love” was a real historical phenomenon in the Middle Ages, see D. W. Robertson’s 1967 essay in *The Meaning of Courtly Love* (1-18). An example of a more measured critique is Henry Ansgar Kelly’s *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (see especially 19-28). Despite these and other attempts to demonstrate that “courtly love” was not a medieval phenomenon at all but a romanticized Victorian misreading of several medieval texts, use of the term persists in some circles. For example, see Sarah Kay’s essay “Courts, Clerks, and Courtly Love” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (81-96).

²Scholarly critiques of Rougemont began to appear in the 1960s and 1970s, long after Auden had absorbed the ideas into his thinking. In a 1967 lecture, the text of which is printed in *Secondary Worlds*, Auden unreservedly quotes Rougemont’s account of the development of “the cult of courtly love” and also quotes a passage from *Love in the Western World* that summarizes the book’s general argument that *eros* can exist only in the presence of barriers to consummation (SW 75). Clearly Auden was unaware that, as he was giving his lectures in the late 1960s, the tide of critical and historical opinion was turning against Rougemont’s theory.

“L’affaire C”: *The Early 1940s*

The connection between Manichaeism and *eros* appears in a few of the poems that Auden wrote in the immediate aftermath of his discovery of Kallman’s infidelity. One such poem, written in July 1941, titled “VIII” in the sequence “Ten Songs” from the *Collected Poems*, but better known by its first line “Though determined Nature can,” warns of the dangers of even committed love. In several ways the poem is a continuation of “In Sickness and in Health” (1940), which had anticipated the difficulties of commitment to fidelity in marriage and had yet acknowledged “an absurd command—Rejoice” (CP 319). But “Though determined Nature can” implicitly views the rejoicing in painful retrospect:

Hearts by envy are possessed
From the moment that they praise;
To rejoice, to be blessed,
Places us immediately
In mortal danger. (CP 270)

Fidelity always risks infidelity, and analogously, to be happy always opens up the possibility of becoming unhappy again. The poem goes on to suggest that lovers’ vows always involve the demon *eros*:

Though we cannot follow how
Evil miracles are done
Through the medium of a kiss,
Aphrodite’s garden is
A haunted region;
For the very signs whereby
Lovers register their vow,
With a look, with a sigh,
Summon to their meetings One
Whose name is Legion. (CP 271)

The “evil miracles” that come through a kiss evoke Judas’s betrayal of Christ with a kiss in the Garden of Gethsemane, but also, more obliquely, the death of Auden’s namesake,

St. Wystan, who was murdered when his uncle Bertulph, “while giving Wystan the kiss of peace, . . . drew a sword from beneath his cloak [and] struck Wystan on the head, and killed him” (Osborne, *W. H. Auden* 9). Osborne quotes a local account of the event, which claims that “for thirty days a column of light, extending from the spot where he was slain to the heavens above, was seen by all those who dwelt there, and every year, on the day of his martyrdom, the hairs of his head, severed by the sword, sprang up like grass” (9). In the poem, the treacherous kiss is associated with “Aphrodite’s garden,” and in Greek myth, Aphrodite is the mother of the god Eros. In the poem, every romantic kiss is potentially a traitors’ kiss.

The lovers “register their vow” with looks and sighs, rather than concrete objects such as the wedding ring to which “In Sickness and in Health” alludes. They do not even use words; the “vow” is entirely implicit in the relationship, and it becomes an explicit vow only as it is articulated in the poem. The tokens of the vow, the look and the sigh, suggest that the underlying motivation for the relationship is an acquisitive *eros* unmitigated by a self-giving *agape*. Vows based on sheer *eros* in turn invite “Legion,” the collective name of the many devils who are exorcized by Christ in the Gospels (see Mark 5:1-20). The legion of devils also recalls sections of “New Year Letter,” in which the Devil is a personification of conflicting and irreconcilable desires that compete for dominance within the human mind. But in this poem, the choice to satisfy the desire for a stable fidelity inevitably stimulates contrary desires, the Legion of demons, the divided and contradictory desires of the fallen human mind. Despite the presence of the demonic in the relationship, the last stanza indicates that the failed relationship has nevertheless produced empathy, since “We, my darling, for our sins, / Suffer in each other’s woe.”

That shared suffering becomes a not-very-reassuring plea: “O my love, O my love, / In the night of fire and snow / Save me from evil” (CP 271). The poem had initially placed the blame for the relationship’s failure on the *eros* of both lovers, but the end of the poem somewhat disingenuously places the hope of restoration on only one of them.

Soon after he wrote “Though determined Nature can,” Auden began writing his Christmas oratorio. It is widely acknowledged that Auden’s crisis with Kallman, or “*l’affaire C*” as Auden sometimes called it, also contributed to several passages in “For the Time Being,” which he began writing in October 1941 (see LA 175, 179-83 and Carpenter 312-13). One section of the poem, “The Temptation of St. Joseph,” is frequently pointed out as one of the best parts of the oratorio, mainly because its emotional intensity resembles the lover’s anxiety that had characterized earlier poems. The passage depicts Joseph as a cuckolded lover whose demands for a divine explanation go unanswered:

Where are you, Father, where?
.....
Father, what have I done?
Answer me, Father, how
Can I answer the tactless wall
Or the pompous furniture now?
.....
All I ask is one
Important and elegant proof
That what my Love had done
Was really at your will
And that your will is Love. (CP 363-64)

Gabriel’s answer is both jarring and assuring: “No, you must believe; Be silent, and sit still” (CP 364). The passage recalls both the tenor of Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday” and the conclusion of Milton’s sonnet “When I consider how my light is spent” in that it

emphasizes the necessity of faith without empirical proof that God has the speaker's best interests at heart.

While the existence of *eros* is easily evidenced by greedy and acquisitive behavior, the existence of *agape* is much more difficult to prove, as Auden would explain years later in *The Dyer's Hand*:

When a lover tells his beloved that she is his mistress and that he desires to be her servant, what he is trying, honestly or hypocritically, to say is something as follows: "As you know, I find you beautiful, an object of desire. I know that for true love such desire is not enough; I must also love you, not as an object of my desire, but as you are in yourself; I must desire your self-fulfillment. I cannot know you as you are nor prove that I desire your self-fulfillment, unless you tell me what you want and allow me to try and give it to you." (*DH* 139)

Auden's interpretation of the honest lover's offer to be the servant of the beloved suggests that in a romantic relationship *eros* and *agape* always coexist and that even the hypocritical lover must pay lip-service to *agape*. The honest lover clearly desires to possess the beloved (*eros*), but he also desires the beloved's own self-fulfillment (*agape*), and he hopes that these two desires will not be contradictory. But the honest lover cannot prove the existence of *agape* unless the beloved expresses her desires. Joseph's dialogue with Gabriel in "For the Time Being" illustrates the point. Joseph may demand "proof / . . . / that your will is Love" (*CP* 364), but God will reject such demands to prove that he desires Joseph's self-fulfillment. Instead, it is God who gives a command to silently believe, obedience to which will be the proof of Joseph's own *agape* love for both God and Mary. As far as the metaphor goes, God will be the beloved who gives commands (typically the female), but never the lover who obeys commands (typically male), hence the further reversal of gender roles when Gabriel tells Joseph, "To-day the roles are altered; you must be / The Weaker Sex whose passion is passivity" (*CP* 365).

Other parts of “For the Time Being” provide a more encouraging account of the transformation of *eros* into *agape*. For example, Mary says in “The Annunciation,”

My flesh in terror and fire
Rejoices that the Word
Who utters the world out of nothing
As a pledge of His word to love her
Against her will, and to turn
Her desperate longing to love,
Should ask to wear me,
From now to their wedding day,
For an engagement ring. (CP 360)

The stanza is perhaps the clearest expression in all of Auden’s poetry of the way in which *eros*, or the “desperate longing” of the world, can be transformed into love, specifically *agape*. It is particularly through Mary’s personal assent to the Incarnation that God’s grace can express itself in human history. While the divine love expressed in the Incarnation opposes the general will of the world—Herod speaks for all who are thoroughly unwilling to accept divine love—Mary’s willful acceptance of God’s love makes possible the alteration of the corrupted loves of others. Gabriel reemphasizes the fact that Mary’s consent is freely willed: “child, it lies / Within your power of choosing to / Conceive the Child who chooses you” (CP 360). Adam’s free choice to sin greatly diminished human freedom, but Mary’s free choice to do right restores the possibility of *agape* within human history. Simeon’s speech offers a further explanation of the relationship between freedom and love. He asserts that “the course of History is predictable in the degree to which all men love themselves, and spontaneous in the degree to which each man loves God and through him his neighbour” (CP 388). Simeon indicates that in the world of natural necessity driven by *eros*, the selfish will to self-actualization is the “natural” state of all living creatures, including humans; so just as

animal behavior is largely predictable because based on *eros*, all human actions based solely on *eros* are conditioned behaviors and therefore not truly free acts at all. Human actions based on *agape*, however, are not conditioned behaviors but are freely willed, and thus they are not predictable but always novel and surprising.

Mendelson reports that an early draft of Simeon's speech paraphrased a passage from Augustine's *Confessions* in which Augustine comments on his excessive response to the death of a close friend (LA 214). Auden's draft has Simeon saying, "At eighty bereavement has become a familiar experience / But every time some dear flesh disappears / What is real is the arriving grief" (qtd. in LA 214). The idea of bereavement being more real than a human friend derives from Augustine's statement that, after the death of his friend Nebridius, "I was so wretched that I felt a greater attachment to my life of misery than to my dead friend. Although I wanted it to be otherwise, I was more unwilling to lose my misery than him. . ." (C 4.6). Augustine then castigates himself for allowing his grief to overwhelm him with a fear of death, and for loving his friend without being aware of their mutual mortality (C 4.6-7). In Auden's draft version of this sentiment, Simeon is an old man who is still tempted by seductive griefs as Augustine was. The death of a friend can still lead to a disordered preference for grief, which is a kind of *eros*. Auden later discarded the passage, but as Mendelson observes, he eventually incorporated some of the ideas in the draft into the beginning Prospero's speech in *The Sea and the Mirror* (LA 214). Prospero says to Ariel, "every time some dear flesh disappears / What is real is the arriving grief; thanks to your service, / The lonely and unhappy are very much alive" (CP 404). Prospero holds Ariel responsible for making grief seem more real than the dead friend, since Ariel is the artist's inspiration.

But Ariel is also prone to encouraging the artist to indulge in what Simeon called, in Augustine's language, *fantastica fornicatio*, or the fornication of the mind with its own fancies. Even grief can be a form of unredeemed *eros*.

Nevertheless, Auden also envisioned *eros* as the general survival impulse in all sentient life, without which no life would exist, and he explores the idea of *eros* as the "natural" state of humans in "Mundus et Infans," which Auden wrote about a month after finishing "For the Time Being." The poem describes the tyrannical *eros* of a baby:

Kicking his mother until she let go of his soul
Has given him a healthy appetite: clearly, her rôle
In the New Order must be
To supply and deliver his raw materials free;
Should there be any shortage,
She will be held responsible. . . . (CP 324)

The first line's reference to kicking one's mother at first suggests to the reader that the poem is about the Roman emperor Nero, who kicked his mother to death, and the next few lines suggest further parallels between dictatorships and the autocratic desires of the infant, who demands that his desires be met immediately and without regard to the well-being of other people. The poem implicitly extrapolates from Augustine's account in the *Confessions* of the jealous baby, who for Augustine demonstrates that the human will is corrupted from birth (1.7). We have already seen in chapter three how "For the Time Being" makes use of this passage from the *Confessions* in the voices of human embryos whose primal cell divisions are analogous to the divided consciousness that is already arising in them before birth. But the use of Augustine's description of the jealous baby in "Mundus et Infans" even more closely approximates the context in which Augustine's discussion appears. In both the *Confessions* and "Mundus et Infans," the baby's angry cries are reminders that, as Auden's poem puts it, "we had never learned to distinguish /

between hunger and love. . .” (CP 325). Selfish desire, or *eros*, which in the baby is primarily expressed as hunger, is the initial motivation of every human being, though as Augustine remarks, such selfish behavior “cannot be borne without irritation when encountered in someone of more mature years” (C 1.7). Childish selfishness is intolerable in adults, though both Augustine and Auden recognize that the loves expressed even by adults more often approximate childish *eros* than mature *agape*. As Prospero puts it in “The Sea and the Mirror,” “seducers / Are sincerely puzzled at being unable to love / What they are able to possess” (CP 405). The unbridled expression of *eros*, whether as hunger, as libido, or as any other natural desire, precludes the expression of *agape*.

Because *eros* is the natural condition of all humans—“natural” in the sense of existing from birth as a result of the Fall, rather than in the sense of being part of the originally good creation—the transformation of *eros* into *agape* is never easy. For instance, “Canzone,” written soon after “Mundus et Infans,” struggles to articulate the strained relationship between the demands of *eros* and *agape* in what Mendelson calls “the cramped, knotted style Auden favored when writing in the first person about emotional agonies he did not want to identify” (LA 215). As Mendelson notes, the form of the poem is modeled on Dante’s use of the canzone, and Auden’s poem uses only five end words throughout: day, love, know, will, and world (LA 215-16). The poem is manifestly about Auden’s emotional turmoil regarding Kallman’s infidelity. Auden’s later essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims* would even repeat phrasing from the poem’s third stanza, which reads “In my own person I am forced to know / How much must be forgotten out of love” (CP 331); the essay states, “I was forced to know in person what it

is like to feel oneself the prey of demonic powers. . .” (*MCP* 41). While the poem itself never positively identifies its own subject, the obscurity fits the mood of the speaker, who is not sure of his own feelings about the unidentified crisis of love.

However, at the outset of “Canzone,” the demands of *agape* are clearly stated: “When shall we learn, what should be clear as day, / We cannot choose what we are free to love?” (*CP* 330). The question sounds like a contradiction in terms, but it indicates that we are existentially free to give or withhold love, but we are not morally free to choose to love one person but not another. The Christian is obliged to love everyone, even though free will allows the Christian to disobey. The poem’s premise as stated in the first two lines is that the speaker knows he has a moral obligation to love (in the sense of *agape*) all other humans, but genuine *agape* cannot be coerced; it must be freely given. The next stanza states that “we are required to love / All homeless objects that require a world,” which expands the objects of obligatory *agape* to even insentient things. *Eros* is disallowed, since “Our claim to own our bodies and our world / Is our catastrophe” (*CP* 330). Possessiveness, even of one’s self, is a feature of *eros*, which may express itself in acquisition, or conversely by withholding *agape*: “What we love / Ourselves for is our power not to love. . .” (*CP* 330). The refusal to love selflessly, the poem indicates, is yet another manifestation of *eros*, this time expressed as sheer vindictiveness. In the speaker’s case, *agape* recognizes “how much must be forgiven, even love (*CP* 331), a statement which makes little sense outside the context of Kallman’s betrayal of Auden, which necessitated Auden’s forgiveness of Kallman for loving someone else.

At the same time, the poem hints that the self-willing *eros* is redeemable because, as a desire, it points out the possibility of divine *agape*. The poem characterizes *eros* as

“blind monsters” who reside “in the depths of myself” and who are afraid of “Love / That asks its images for more than love” (CP 331). If the capitalized “Love” is God—an inversion of 1 John 4.8 in which “God is love”—then Love’s “images” are humans, who are made in God’s image. As it appears in Auden’s poem, human nature correctly fears that God demands “more than love,” that is, *agape* and not just *eros*, love freely given rather than appetites selfishly satisfied. The demands of *agape*, however, also provoke *eros*: “The hot rampageous horses of my will, / Catching the scent of Heaven, whinny” (CP 331). But the poet immediately reminds himself of his responsibility to keep *eros* on a tight rein, since “Love / Gives no excuse to evil done for love” (CP 331). The proper response to the temptation to indulge in *eros* is to “praise the God of Love / That we are so admonished, that no day / Of conscious trial be a wasted day” (CP 331). The exhortation to praise in the midst of a relational crisis appears again and again in Auden’s poetry, and almost always, as here, against a background of emotional pain and insecurity. The last line reminds us that “There must be sorrow if there can be love,” that *agape* always involves personal risk (CP 331), but even in the event of unrequited *agape*, the poet says that he can at least be grateful that his experience has taught him a lesson.

But what lesson did Auden learn from what he called a “day / Of conscious trial”? (CP 331) In “Canzone” he is honest about the ethical demands that Christian love has begun to make on him, and he is also honest about his own failure to develop *agape* in response to Kallman’s infidelity. *Agape*, he recognized, was a sacred duty, but after he and Kallman broke off their “marriage,” it was no longer clear to Auden how the demands of *eros* that his sexuality made on him could be reconciled with the demands of *agape* that his renewed faith made on him. He had thought that, by entering into what he

considered to be a Christian marriage, he could express his sexuality within the confines of a monogamous relationship, which would moderate *eros* and keep it subjected to the *agape* that was expressed by his vow of faithfulness. It is a testament to Auden's strength of character that he was able to maintain his fidelity to Kallman for two years, and but for Kallman's infidelity, Auden might have remained monogamous indefinitely. But after the crisis, Auden gave up the idea that his homosexuality could be reconciled with his Christianity. For Auden, sex was an addiction that had to be regularly satisfied. Like many addicts, he sometimes regretted and resisted it, and at other times he happily indulged in it. According to Christopher Isherwood, Auden's "religion condemned it and he agreed that it was sinful, though he fully intended to go on sinning" (Isherwood 249). Isherwood's statement is, perhaps, an oversimplification of Auden's complex and conflicted attitudes about his own sexuality, but whether he was unable or unwilling to give up his homosexuality, Auden's sexuality eventually settled into an odd coexistence with his faith.

In "The Sea and the Mirror," Auden is quite likely referring to his own conflicted attitudes towards his homosexuality when Caliban, as the voice of the body, says, "Had you tried to destroy me, had we wrestled through long dark hours, we might by daybreak have learnt something from each other; . . . we might both have heard together that music which explains and pardons all" (CP 434).³ The subjunctive "had you tried" presumes, of course, that this has not happened. The poet to whom Caliban addresses this segment

³Caliban's image is, of course, drawn from the story of the patriarch Jacob wrestling with an angel (or God, the text is ambiguous) until dawn (Genesis 32.24-32). A typical post-Freudian reading of the story would interpret it as an analogue of the internal struggle between the id and the ego, though in "The Sea and the Mirror" Auden uses it to picture the struggle between the subjective *I* and the objective body.

of his monologue has not wrestled with the *eros* of his physical desires, but neither has the poet allowed his *eros* total liberty “to be drunk every day before lunch, to jump stark naked from bed to bed, to have a fit every week or a major operation every other year, to forge checks or water the widow’s stock. . .” (CP 434). The only option left for him, Caliban says, is “to forgive and forget the past, and to keep our respective hopes for the future within moderate, very moderate, limits” (CP 435). While it is not immediately obvious that this passage refers to Auden’s personal life at all, much less to his difficulties to his homosexuality, Auden did say in a letter to Stephen Spender, “I’m extremely pleased and surprised to find that at least one reader feels that the section written in a pastiche of James is more me than the sections written in my own style, because it is the paradox I was trying for, and am afraid hardly anyone will get it” (qtd. in Kirsch, Introduction xxxii). Auden’s claim that Caliban’s voice is “more me” than the other voices in the poem is most clearly applicable to the view Caliban expressed about the nature and limitations of art, but since Auden tended to write much of his poetry out of his own experience, it is not improbable that he would allude to his struggles with his sexuality in Caliban’s speech. Caliban’s final statement about his relationship with the unnamed poet whom he addresses is an exact description of the uneasy settlement to which Auden came with his homosexuality; he kept his expectations for reconciliation between his faith and his sexuality “within moderate, very moderate, limits.”

After Auden’s “marriage” to Kallman disintegrated, Auden continued to write some poems about love, although in the direct aftermath of what he would afterward refer to as “*l’affaire C*,” he wrote comparatively fewer lyric poems than he had in the past, and he spent most of the 1940s composing several long poems: “For the Time Being,” “The

Sea and the Mirror,” and “The Age of Anxiety.” While each of these long poems touches on the nature of romantic love, Auden’s poetry returns to a serious consideration of the continuously problematic relationship between *eros* and *agape* only in the late 1940s. But few of Auden’s poems of this period make any attempt to reconcile *eros* and *agape*. Most of them treat the two loves separately. Quite a few of Auden’s later love lyrics picture a self-conscious indulgence in Manichaeian *eros* in that they portray an occasionally successful attempt to cordon off the poet’s active homosexuality from his religious beliefs. Other poems from the same period make serious attempts to discuss the obligations and rewards of neighborly *agape*, though they often focus on the ultimate failure of humans to properly express *agape*. Nevertheless, the poems on *agape* do develop a nuanced account of *agape* that connects it theologically with the goodness of the material world and the freedom of the will. Such poems stand in stark contrast to Auden’s poems on *eros*, even though both strains of poetry continue paradoxically to rely on Augustine’s understanding of love.

After “L’affaire C” : Self-Conscious Manichaeism

The most self-consciously Manichean poem of Auden’s corpus is “The Love Feast” (1948), which is rife with ironic references to rituals of Christian worship. The poem begins,

In an upper room at midnight
See us gathered on behalf
Of love according to the gospel
Of the radio-phonograph.

Lou is telling Anne what Molly
Said to Mark behind her back;
Jack likes Jill who worships George
Who has the hots for Jack. (CP 613)

The references to the Last Supper are obvious, and the poem's title refers to the communion service as well, which is frequently referred to as a "love feast" in some Christian traditions, such as the Moravians and some Brethren sects. But in the poem's first stanza, the "love" on whose behalf the group is gathered is not Christ's self-sacrificial *agape*, but the *eros* as celebrated by popular culture and mass media. And like the Last Supper, the feast includes unfaithful lovers.

The poem's next stanzas shift away from a parodic treatment of Last Supper specifically towards a more general parody of religious language, and with this subtle shift in metaphor comes a shift in tone. While the first two stanzas are irreverently funny, the next few stanzas take on a surprising moral seriousness while maintaining their humorous veneer:

Catechumens make their entrance;
Steep enthusiastic eyes
Flicker after tits and baskets;
Someone vomits; someone cries.

Willy cannot bear his father,
Lilian is afraid of kids;
The Love that rules the sun and stars
Permits what He forbids.

Adrian's pleasure-loving dachshund
In a sinner's lap lies curled;
Drunken absent-minded fingers
Pat a sinless world. (CP 613-14)

The party, while pleasurable, is not an idyllic aesthetic experience. The wide-eyed *eros* of neophyte revelers co-exists with sickness and sadness, and each named person in the poem is undergoing some kind of emotional pain. Troubled family relationships remind the poet of his own guilty relationship with God, from whose gaze he cannot escape. The juxtaposition of the pain-causing *eros* with the divine *agape* that will not violate free will

is poignant, as is the contrast between the dog that is incapable of sin and the sinner who gratuitously gives the dog pleasure by petting it. The petting of the dog is perhaps the only example of human *agape* in the poem, since the fingers that pet the dog are “absent-minded,” suggesting that dog is being given pleasure freely, without being expected to offer any in return.

The last two stanzas of the poem replicate the structure of the poem’s fourth stanza, in which the first two lines describe the revelers and the next two lines offer a theological commentary of sorts:

Who is Jenny lying to
In her call, Collect, to Rome?
The Love that made her out of nothing
Tells me to go home.

But that Miss Number in the corner
Playing hard to get. . . .
I am sorry I’m not sorry
Make me chaste, Lord, but not yet. (*CP* 614)

The last line of the poem quotes from Augustine’s *Confessions* to at once acknowledge the ethical demands the poet’s faith makes on him and temporarily resist those demands.

Auden’s reference to Augustine is apt; in the original context in the *Confessions* the phrase is part of Augustine’s explanation of his early struggle between his emerging sexuality and his awareness of divine regulations:

at the beginning of my adolescence . . . I prayed you for chastity and said: “Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.” I was afraid you might hear my prayer quickly, and that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust which I preferred to satisfy rather than suppress. I had gone along ‘evil ways’ with a sacrilegious superstition, not indeed because I felt sure of its truth but because I preferred it to the alternatives. . . . (*C* 8.7)

Auden’s “prayer” at the end of “The Love Feast” exactly represents Augustine’s early preference of sexual indulgence to an morally consistent life. Both Auden and Augustine

frankly acknowledge the incoherence of their aspirations, based as they are on conflicting and irreconcilable desires.

Augustine's immediate connection of his adolescent incontinence with his foray into Manichaeism—the “sacrilegious superstition”—is also significant in this context, since Auden would explicitly link unrestrained sexuality with Manichaeism in a 1969 poem, “Doggerel by a Senior Citizen.” The poem contrasts the poet's Edwardian upbringing that inculcated staunchly middle-class values with the more permissive world of the late 1960s. The poem includes a stanza that compares and contrasts Edwardian and modern attitudes towards sex:

Sex was, of course—it always is—
The most enticing of mysteries,
But news-stands did not yet supply
Manichaeian pornography. (*CP* 852)

The lament that the modern world is more sexually permissive than the nineteenth century had already become a commonplace in the 1960s, but the connection between pornography and Manichaeism requires some explanation. At one level, the connection recalls Augustine's youthful preference for Manichaeism over Christianity because the former allowed him to be sexually promiscuous. But at a deeper level, pornography is “Manichean” because it treats people as mere sexual objects, as mere bodies rather than as whole persons. The objectification of the body as separate from the soul denigrates the person as a whole, but also justifies aggression and violence against the body, which is not far removed from the Manichean denunciations of the human body as intrinsically evil. Auden later wrote, “all pornography is Manichean. Its purpose is to throw shame on the bodily functions” (qtd. in Bridgen 3). Yet another reason for Auden to connect pornography with Manichaeism is Rougemont's attempt to link the *eros*, or passion, of

Manichean mysticism with the development of erotic literature in Western culture.

Auden had ample reason for calling pornography “Manichean.”

1948 marks the height of Auden’s self-conscious indulgence in Manichaeism, for in that year, he produced not only “The Love Feast,” but also a pornographic poem called “The Platonic Blow,” which was published by some New York magazines in the 1960s without his permission (see Osborne, *W. H. Auden* 283-84; Carpenter 359-60). Both Carpenter and Mendelson agree that the word “Platonic” in the title denotes nothing more than “ideal” in the sense that the homosexual encounter the poem describes is perfect in every detail, rather than a transcending of the body by way of appreciation of physical beauty, as in Plato’s *Symposium* (Carpenter 358, *LA* 298). But given Auden’s penchant for conflating what he saw as similar philosophies, he may have had something more in mind. In the poem’s third stanza as Carpenter reproduces it, the conventions of “courtly love” clearly appear: “Our eyes met. I felt sick. My knees turned weak. / I couldn’t move. I didn’t know what to say” (qtd. in Carpenter 359). The otherwise virile lover feeling sick and weak at the sight of the beloved has been commonly identified as a mark of the “courtly love”⁴ that Rougemont had associated with Manichaeism. In “New Year Letter,” Auden had accused Platonism of denigration of the body, and as we saw in chapter four, Augustine also denounced the tendency of Platonism to deny the goodness of the human body (*City of God* 14.2-5). Auden did associate Platonic dualism with Manichaeism because both valued the soul at the expense of the body. So it is likely that Auden uses the word “Platonic” in two senses, both to mean merely “ideal” but also to

⁴For example, see Rougemont’s chapter on Petrarch (176-81). Troilus in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* also exhibits these traits, and as such has often been identified as a “courtly lover.” See D. W. Robertson for both explanation and rebuttal.

suggest the pornographic denigration of the body he associated with Platonism and ultimately with Manichaeism.

Another 1948 poem, which treats Manichean *eros* more seriously, is “Pleasure Island,” which Auden wrote about the social atmosphere at Fire Island, an island near New York City where Auden had rented a summer cottage two years earlier. Carpenter reports that Fire Island suited Auden not only because the beach offered cooler weather in the summer than did the city, but also because it was becoming a local magnet for homosexuals (345). The poem describes a locale surrounded by an indifferent ocean, a place “where nothing is wicked / But to be sorry or sick, / But one thing unneighbourly, work” (*CP* 343). It is a place wholly unsuited to literary work especially, and the poem follows a once-busy writer (apparently not Auden) who soon finds himself relaxed on the beach where he

lies, like us, on his stomach watching
As bosom, backside, crotch
Or other sacred trophy is borne in triumph
Past his adoring by
Souls he does not try to like. . . . (*CP* 344)

In this environment, the writer is faced with an irresistibly Manichean temptation to abstract the soul from the body, or even body parts from the body as a whole. He begins to objectify body parts and even worship them as “sacred trophies,” and in doing so he separates bodies from the souls that animate them, an activity that makes artistic production impossible for the writer. Auden would later comment on the ultimate irreconcilability of Manichaeism and artistic production in *Secondary Worlds*, where he claimed, “Whatever heresies they fall into, by the very nature of their work, an artist cannot become a gnostic Manichee, nor a scientist a Pelagian” (137). The statement

would seem to contradict the fact that Auden himself wrote some pornographic poetry which he frankly associated with Manichean denigration of the body, but here it is important to distinguish between the work of art itself and the deep personal beliefs of the artist. Certainly Auden would admit that some works of art could be Manichean. He wrote some himself, and he also accused Shakespeare of writing one (*The Tempest*; see *DH* 130). But the artist as a person, Auden said in *The Dyer's Hand*, could not totally reject the physical world as evil and unredeemable since the work of art must exist as a physical entity (69-70). Thus, the writer in "Pleasure Island" finds he must abandon his art when he allows himself to accept a Manichean devaluation of bodies.

The Manichaeism of "Pleasure Island" ultimately leads to isolation when "our friendships / Prepare for a weekend / They will probably not survive" (*CP* 344). In these lines the poem momentarily returns to the sadness of ephemeral relationships that characterized Auden's poems in the 1930s. But the poem has no praise for the momentary pleasures of promiscuity as it follows a lonely soul down the beach:

the bar is copious
With fervent life that hopes
To make sense, but down the beach some decaying
Spirit shambles away,
Kicking idly at driftwood and dead shellfish
And excusing itself
To itself with evangelical gestures
For having failed the test. . . . (*CP* 345)

The person walking down the beach and away from the lively bar is merely a "spirit," though not exactly a disembodied one since it kicks at the flotsam on the sand. But the language of the passage depicts the person as an abstracted spirit to such an extent that it obscures even the person's gender. The poem's connection of isolation with Manichean abstraction of the soul from the body recalls Rougemont's argument that *eros* is

ultimately a form of morbid, narcissistic isolation (Rougemont 117, 135). The poem's title, "Pleasure Island" with its Arcadian overtones is therefore highly ironic, since Fire Island is a "Place of a skull, a place where the rose of / Self-punishment will grow" (CP 344). The lines obviously refer to the hill of Golgotha outside Jerusalem, the "place of the skull" where Christ was crucified, but they also evoke a trope in several seventeenth century paintings in which Arcadian shepherds gather around a newly discovered human skull that has disrupted their idyllic existence.⁵ The association of *eros* and death was hardly escapable once Auden had read Rougemont.

Later in life Auden wrote a few more self-consciously Manichean poems, which were circulated among his friends but not published until after his death. Three of these poems from the 1960s were collected under the heading "Three Posthumous Poems." All three frankly celebrate the poet's homosexual relationships, but the second, titled "Aubade,"⁶ looks forward with some apprehension to the time when he will have to give up sex and "put on / The Widow's Cap" (CP 747). The other poems express unreserved gratitude for lovers whom the poet names, "Hugerl" who "for a decade now" has been "An unexpected blessing / In a lucky life" (CP 746), and "Bert," whose visit has made it possible for the poet to "listen to the piercing screams / of palliardising cats / without self-pity" (CP 748). These poems represent Auden's later work in its most comfortable Manichaeism in which his sex life has been largely isolated from the rest of his existence. He tells Hugerl that he is

⁵See Nicolas Poussin's two paintings titled *Et in Arcadia Ego*, as well as Guercino's painting of the same name.

⁶Auden wrote two late poems with this title. This "Aubade" (CP 747) was written in 1964 and is part of "Three Posthumous Poems." The other "Aubade" was written in 1972 and quotes Augustine on being, knowing, and willing (CP 881).

Glad our worlds of enchantment
Are so several
Neither is tempted to broach:
I cannot tell a
Jaguar from a Bentley,
And you never read. (*CP* 746).

According to Mendelson, Hugerl was an auto mechanic in Vienna whom Auden paid for sex (*LA* 375). The partners inhabit totally separate worlds, the one of machines and the other of books. The relationship consists of pure *eros* in that each partner participates solely to get something he needs from the other. In contrast to his early love poems, Auden has no illusions in this poem that this sexual relationship could ever become a close friendship. But Mendelson points out another significant difference; Auden's "idealizing or animalistic moods of the 1930s, when he addressed his beloved impersonally as 'my dove, my coney' or as 'you, my swan,' were gone, and not regretted" (*LA* 375). So in one sense the poems are Manichean in their indulgence of *eros*, but at least the first poem in the series, "Glad," which is addressed to Hugerl, resists becoming a fully Manichean poem because it recognizes the particularity of the relationship and describes it as a good thing in all its physicality. It could hardly be called a "Christian" poem, except in the broadest sense that it presumes the fundamental goodness of physical existence. It has been suggested that, in these poems in which Auden frankly celebrates his own sexuality, Auden is working in the Platonic-Catholic tradition of Dante in which erotic love becomes a ladder to love of God, but such a reading ignores both Auden's earlier critiques of Platonism and the fact that none of the poems show any element of divine love being revealed through erotic love. When it came to relating his homosexuality to his faith, Auden kept his expectations within very moderate limits.

After "L'affaire C": Aspirations to Agape

Partly because of his homosexuality, and partly because of the ambiguity of the terms, Auden's various statements about the exact relationship between *eros* and *agape* are not entirely consistent with each other. Monroe Spears plausibly argues that Auden's views changed significantly in the 1940s, during which time "Auden shifts from this initial tendency to regard Eros and Agape as wholly distinct (in the manner of Kierkegaard, Barth, Nygren, and extreme Protestants in general) to the view that they are conjoinable in the Catholic concept of *Caritas*. This trend away from Gnostic or Manichean tendencies is very much in the spirit of Dante" ("Divine" 60). But Spears also claims that "The classic Protestant exposition of the radical distinction between Agape and Eros is Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros* . . . ; the Roman Catholic position is that the two are united in *Caritas* (as in M. C. D'Arcy, S.J., *The Mind and Heart of Love* . . .). Auden's attitude has always been Protestant in this respect" (*Poetry* 164n). Whether Auden had ever fully agreed with Nygren's total denunciation of *eros* is highly debatable, for as we have seen in the previous chapter, Auden had always aspired to a reconciliation of *eros* with other kinds of love, but the actual possibility of achieving such a reconciliation was not always present, either in his poetry or in his personal life. But there can be no doubt that Auden was attracted to the Catholic⁷ and specifically Augustinian concept of *caritas* as a fusion of *agape* and *eros*.

⁷A few of Auden's statements suggest that he was quite sympathetic to Catholicism. In his essay in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, Auden refused to say why he had become an Anglican and not a Roman Catholic (43), but in *The Dyer's Hand* he said that the religion of his personal Eden would be "Roman Catholic in an easygoing Mediterranean sort of way [with] lots of local saints" (7). After he moved to Kirchstetten, Austria, he regularly attended mass at the village parish church. Certain aspects of Catholicism, particularly its Latin mass and its rich artistic tradition, greatly

In a favorable 1947 review of *The Portable Dante*, Auden praised M. C. D’Arcy’s *The Mind and Heart of Love* as well, recommending that a modern reader of Dante should, “in view of the infinite distance between the common modern meaning of the word *love* and the *amor* of Dante, . . . read a first-rate study of the subject by M. C. D’Arcy which has recently appeared, *The Mind and Heart of Love*” (*Prose II* 325). D’Arcy’s book offers a much more nuanced treatment of Western ideas of love than does Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World*, but essentially the book, as Spears states, “joins Eros and Agape in the concept of *Caritas*” (“Divine” 60n). D’Arcy’s work refutes Nygren’s hypothesis of an irreconcilable difference between *eros* and *agape*, but it also argues that Rougemont’s account of the conflict between *eros* and *agape* is not historically warranted and that it overlooks other kinds of love, such as friendship, or *philia* (D’Arcy 40-41). D’Arcy also notes that Nygren’s and Rougemont’s accounts are not wholly inconsistent with each other in that they articulate differing perspectives on the same basic conflict between *agape* and *eros* (199). In contrast, D’Arcy argues that *eros* and *agape*, respectively the acquisitive and sacrificial impulses, or as he calls them, “centripetal” and “centrifugal” loves, can peacefully coexist within the Christian life (200).

Auden had made a very similar argument in his 1941 review of Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World*, that *eros* and *agape* could reconcile within a dialectical relationship (*Prose II* 139). Auden found in D’Arcy’s book a Christian account of love that went much further than Rougemont in explaining in detail how *agape* and *eros*, along with other forms of love, such as *philia*, could exist side-by-side with each other,

appealed to Auden, though he objected to what he saw as a Rome’s mistaken theological preference for Thomism over Augustinian theology (see *FA* 76).

maintaining their differences without conflict or violence. It may seem strange that Auden was attracted both to Rougemont's ideas and to D'Arcy's, since Spears suggests that they represent each side of a Protestant/Catholic debate, but in theological matters Auden liked to find continuities between different traditions, a habit of thought that he first got from Charles Williams's *The Descent of the Dove*, and he was able to admire both Rougemont's and D'Arcy's works as different articulations of the Christian concept of *caritas* (charity) that is traceable to Augustine. Rougemont emphasized the conflict between *eros* and *agape*, and D'Arcy emphasized their union, but Auden's praise of both suggests that he interpreted them as fundamentally in agreement with each other, despite differences in details and emphases.

One of D'Arcy's many significant contributions to the debate on *eros* and *agape* is his opening up of the debate to a consideration of more than two forms of love. The book is subtitled, "Lion and Unicorn, a Study in Eros and Agape," but instead of allowing Nygren and Rougemont to set the terms of the discussion as a debate between only two opposing loves, *eros* and *agape*, D'Arcy explores the ways in which other loves, such as friendship (*philia*), relate to centripetal *eros* and centrifugal *agape*. As we have seen, Auden's early poetry had also endeavored to relate friendship to other forms of love, but after his breakup with Kallman, the term "love" never appears in his poetic discussions of friendship, even though friendship continues to be an important element of Auden's later poetry. He dedicates many of his later poems to various friends and acquaintances, and in "Thanksgiving for a Habitat," he includes several poems on friendship, such as "The Cave of Making," which is addressed to his deceased friend Louis MacNeice, "For Friends Only," which explores the implications of the guest room, and "The Common

Life,” which comments on the relationship between common living space and friendship. But these poems are not about what Auden would call “love”; for Auden, the word “love” never entirely rids itself of sexual connotations. In this respect, Auden’s later work continues to rely less on D’Arcy than on Rougemont, for whom Christian charity exists primarily in Christian marriage, an institution in which Auden found he could not participate.

It is unfortunate that Auden never wrote a review of D’Arcy’s book, although it is not surprising since almost all of his book reviews were commissioned. But the book’s impact on Auden was nonetheless significant. Between 1940 and 1948, Auden had written almost no lyrics that could be considered “love poems” in any sense. Then, within a year of the release of *The Mind and Heart of Love* in 1947, Auden wrote three of his most significant post-conversion love poems, “The Love Feast,” “Pleasure Island,” and “In Praise of Limestone,” all of which comment on the troubled but necessary interrelationship between *agape* and *eros*. Philip Larkin once famously complained that Auden’s later poetry was based, not on experience, but on books (125), and Auden’s reliance on books is particularly strong in “In Praise of Limestone”—D’Arcy and Wallace Stevens are clearly present in the poem, and Dante and Augustine linger under the surface—but no one could accuse the poem of ignoring personal experience. “In Praise of Limestone” is one of Auden’s most successful attempts to integrate experience with “bookish” knowledge, and it was likely written with D’Arcy’s analysis of Christian love in mind.

“In Praise of Limestone” relies heavily on D’Arcy’s exploration of the fact that, while there is an ongoing tension between *agape* and *eros*, there is also the possibility of

a reconciliation between the two. The poem's opening evokes Auden's 1930s love poems with its focus on a limestone landscape that appeals to "we, the inconstant ones" (CP 540). In the poem's schema the characteristics of a landscape reflect a certain type of person, such that the average "inconstant ones" appreciate the limestone landscape because, although looks like solid rock, "it dissolves in water" so that "beneath, / A secret system of caves and conduits" permeates it (CP 540). Both landscape and lover play at permanence but acknowledge transience and change. Other types of people appreciate other landscapes, so the "saints-to-be" prefer the "granite wastes" because they are solid and constant, and the "Intendant Caesars" prefer "clays and gravels" because of their malleability (CP 541). But there are still others, whom the poet calls "the really reckless," who respond to "an older colder voice, the oceanic whisper" (CP 541). Auden would soon explore what he called the "Romantic iconography of the sea" in *The Enchafèd Flood* (1950), in which the ocean often represents subconscious desires, and in "In Praise of Limestone" the ocean speaks distinctly in terms of Rougemont's description of *eros* as an escape into nothingness: "I am the solitude that asks and promises nothing; / That is how I shall set you free. There is no love; / There are only the various envies, all of them sad" (CP 542). To indulge completely in the *eros* of "various envies" isolates the person completely, denying the possibility of *agape*, here simply called "love," whose expression requires a sympathetic recognition of the real existence of other people.

But in the poem's second stanza, the poet, speaking for "the inconstant ones," reveals that the limestone landscape "is not the sweet home it looks" (CP 542). The locale, the Italian island of Ischia where Auden rented a summer home between 1948 and 1958, also contains marble statuary that makes a poet uneasy because they "so obviously

doubt / His antimythological myth” of “calling / The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle. . . .” (*CP* 542). The poet identified here is, for once, not Auden himself but Wallace Stevens,⁸ as Fuller and Mendelson both explain (*W. H. Auden* 408, *LA* 295). Fuller quotes an unpublished poem that Auden wrote about Stevens, and eventually sent to Ursula Niebuhr:

Dear, O dear. More heresy to muzzle.
No sooner have we buried in peace
The flightier divinities of Greece,
Than up there pops the barbarian with
An antimythological myth,
Calling the sun, the sun,
His mind “Puzzle”. . . . (qtd. in Fuller, *W. H. Auden* 408)

The classical statues in Italy disquiet the modern poet not only because they give credence to myths, but because, as Mendelson suggests, the poet “elevates his mind over the glories of the created world. . . .” (*LA* 295). Ironically, art that affirms the goodness of physical existence troubles the modern artist, a category in which Auden would have to include himself. The poem’s speaker, speaking on behalf of all “the inconstant ones,” offers what he calls “our Common Prayer” that wishes

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. . . . (*CP* 542)

⁸Some critics, writing before Fuller and Mendelson, have taken the poet in the poem to be Auden himself. Lucy McDiarmid, for example, makes much of this supposed identification, and given Auden’s penchant for self-referentiality, it is not an unreasonable mistake to make. While the poem’s speaker, presumably Auden himself, clearly uses his “Common Prayer” to draw parallels between himself and the figure of Stevens in the poem, certain details of Auden’s description of this poet should have suggested that the poet was not Auden, who was never known for “calling / The sun the sun,” nor even particularly interested in demythologization (*CP* 524).

The prayer's real content is vague, but that is part of the point; it is finally an ironic prayer for disembodiment offered by petitioners "whose greatest comfort is music / Which can be made anywhere, is invisible, / And does not smell" (*CP* 542). The lines characterize music as the least physical of the arts, since its existence seems to be independent of physical space, and since it is undetectable to most of the senses. But as a prayer, it is an impossible request, not unlike Augustine's prayer, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet" (*C* 8.7).

What bothers the modern artist most is his own embodiment, which is the real subject of the poem, as Mendelson argues: "The poem treats the limestone landscape as an allegory of the body and of the body's relation to ultimate questions" (*LA* 293). The "ultimate questions" that the poem engages are theological, particularly the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the dead, which the poem suggests are the basis for art:

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. . . . (*CP* 542).

The doctrine of the resurrection validates the existence of the physical world because it envisions salvation as a transformation of the body rather than an escape from it. In many previous works, but particularly "For the Time Being" and *The Dyer's Hand*, Auden had affirmed the fundamental goodness of human embodiment, including even the sex drive. "In Praise of Limestone" is more elusive, but it too affirms the value of the human body in the complex analogies it draws between the human body and the limestone landscape. Thus, the transformation of stone into human-like statues at the end

of the poem reflects the poem's initial analogy between stone and the human body. But the end of the poem reminds us that it is, above all, a love poem:

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. (CP 542)

The limestone that had represented inconstancy and even infidelity at the beginning of the poem also points towards the "faultless love" that may occur in "the life to come," at least "if bodies rise from the dead." What is now inconstant and mutable may yet be transformed, although the last lines imply that "a faultless love," or a complete redemption of *eros* by *agape* in charity, is possible only in the afterlife. And the possibility of the afterlife is somewhat undermined in the poem by the hedging "if" and "when I try to imagine" that frame the poem's evocation of "the blessed" who have "nothing to hide" (CP 542). But, if the poem reveals ambivalence about the afterlife, its subjunctive mood also invites the reader to consider alternate possibilities: if sins cannot be forgiven, and if bodies do not rise from the dead, the "modifications of matter" into statuary, "made solely for pleasure," are pointless, and the poem's entire analogy between stone and the body is undermined as well (CP 542). The poem does not deny that possibility, but neither does it deny the reality of "the life to come," though the speaker is more ambivalent about his own prospects of sharing in "faultless love."

Richard Bozarth is partially right when he argues that "In Praise of Limestone," "written the same year as 'Pleasure Island,' . . . suggests that even in the 1940s, [Auden] was of two minds about the spiritual meaning of the body and sex—that he was quite able to conceive of homosexual eros as sacred" (243). Bozarth indicates that the conflict between the sacred and the sexual in Auden's work might be resolved by an appeal to

“the Catholic tradition of natural theology, with its Platonic view of human love as figuring the divine. . . . [I]t was the tradition of natural theology that explained why the Vision of Eros could happen at all and why it meant more than transitory physical intoxication” (Bozarth 243-44). Bozarth is correct that Auden’s appreciation for natural theology⁹ in the Catholic tradition gives even sexual love a new, transcendent significance, but he seems unaware of Auden’s absorption of a certain strain of natural theology through writers such as D’Arcy, Cochrane, and ultimately Augustine, all of whom acknowledge important distinctions between Christianity and Platonism. So while some natural theology does incorporate Platonic ideas, Auden frequently distinguished between the Platonic philosophies that he denounced as dualistic and the Augustinian theology that he saw as transcending classical dualism.

Auden’s continuing antipathy towards Platonism found much reinforcement in Cochrane, who explains this delicate but important difference between Platonism and Christianity:

on examination, the analogy between Platonic and Christian love is revealed as nothing more than superficial. For the ‘passion’ of Plato is a passion for transcendence; behind it lurks the assumption of an hiatus or discontinuity between the sensible and the intelligible worlds which this concept is intended to bridge. . . . In this case the fallacy lies in the original assumption; and from this standpoint, Plato’s invention turns out to be entirely gratuitous, since the connexion which he labours so industriously to establish already exists. . . . This connexion, however, does not . . . have to be ‘established’; it needs only to be recognized. . . . To recognize its existence is to recognize the existence of divine grace. (Cochrane 502)

⁹Mendelson makes the plausible suggestion that, while Auden was suspicious of natural theology during the 1940s, he became more sympathetic to it later in life (*LA* 484n).

It could be argued that Cochrane is overstating the difference between Platonism and Christianity at this point—some Christian theologies, including Augustine, owe a significant debt to Platonism—but Auden seems to have agreed with Cochrane’s critique of Platonism, and this passage certainly reflects views that Auden had come to hold by the time he wrote “In Praise of Limestone.” While Platonism would use the body as only a temporary ladder to transcendence, to be kicked away once it had been climbed, Augustinian theology would pull up the ladder after itself, bringing the body into transcendence by way of the resurrection. Auden would later write in his essay on “The Protestant Mystics” that “The Vision of Eros is not, according to Dante, the first rung of a long ladder: there is only one step to take, from the personal creature who can love and be loved to the personal Creator who is Love. And in this final vision, Eros is transfigured but not annihilated” (FA 68). Or, as D’Arcy explains in a sympathetic summary of Rougemont’s account of *eros*, “The temporal is not just a shadow, not a ladder to be kicked away; the overflowing life of communion with God begins here and now in the present, as the Word of God was made flesh and dwelt amongst us” (39).

For Augustine, as Cochrane explains, the intrinsic goodness of the physical world makes possible the transformation of *eros* into *agape*: “The problem of salvation is thus not to destroy or to suppress the affections; it is rather that they should be reoriented with a view to the supreme good. That good lies in God, the search for whom (*secutio*) may be thus described as the *appetitus beatitudinis*, of which love constitutes the dynamic” (Cochrane 342). Desire, or *eros*, is not wrong in itself, but it is wrong when it desires a wrong thing, or when it desires a right thing in a wrong way. Auden would announce in a 1972 fragment, “Nothing can be loved too much, / but all things can be loved / in the

wrong way” (885). For Auden, a complete rejection of *eros* is not Christian at all, but fallaciously dualistic, and in 1950 he stated,

In some circles recently there has been a tendency to see the notion of love as *eros* or desire for getting and the notion of love as *agape* or free-giving as incompatible opposites and to identify them with Paganism and Christianity respectively. Such a view seems to me a revival of the Manichean heresy which denies the goodness of the natural order. (qtd. in Fuller, *W. H. Auden* 412)

Auden is perhaps referring to Nygren’s denunciation of *eros* as inherently anti-Christian, but Auden argues that such a view is actually closer to Manichaeism. In contrast, he believed that a perfected love, an *agape* that includes a redeemed *eros*, is the basis of all ethical behavior, a concept that Cochrane explains:

From this point of view, love subsumes the four cardinal virtues of Classicism which, at the same time, it irradiates with fresh significance. In this way the self-same principle which, when directed to the pursuit of mundane ends, gives rise to moral confusion and ruin, is conceived by Augustine to yield the motive power necessary to a realization of creative peace, the Kingdom of God. (342)

So, when *eros* is a desire for self-aggrandizement or for exploitation of others, it is destructive and deadly, but when *eros* is a desire for reconciliation and for close proximity to God, it is healthy and productive. As Auden said in his review of Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World*, *eros* and *agape* are not dualistically opposed, but dialectically related (*Prose II* 139).

Ideally, Auden would like to have experienced *agape* within a mutual relationship between human equals, which is probably why Cicero Bruce argues that, for Auden, *agape* “always entails a love relation between those who love each other equally, or who share a common object of desire” (Bruce 53). However, as Auden says in “The More Loving One” (1957), a selfless, admiring *agape* is not always reciprocated:

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well
That, for all they care, I can go to hell.
.....
How should we like it were stars to burn
With a passion for us we could not return?
If equal affection cannot be,
Let the more loving one be me. (CP 584)

But the speaker does not “burn with passion” for stars any more than they do for him, since he says, “I cannot, now I see them, say / I missed one terribly all day” (CP 585). Instead, he is a distant admirer, though he also calls his admiration “affection” and even “loving.” His love of the stars is disinterested, and as such quite close to *agape*, which he shows exists even in the absence of reciprocity. Bruce’s narrow definition of *agape* is too limiting for a critic who is attempting to rehabilitate Auden as a Christian poet. After all, if *agape* exists only between peers who love each other equally, then God could not possibly have *agape* love towards humans. Auden believed instead that, in the absence of equal love, he was personally responsible to be the more loving one.

At least, that is what Auden said he believed about love in his most lucid statements on the subject. The fact that he did not always act or write in accordance with these beliefs is obvious and forgivable. He faced strong temptations from a misguided *eros*, and these were temptations were not always sexual in nature. For example, Auden explores the temptation to pride, an intellectual form of *eros*, in *The Dyer’s Hand*, which was published in 1948, the same year as “The Love Feast,” “Pleasure Island,” and “In Praise of Limestone,” though many of the essays it contained were written earlier. In one essay in the book, “The Joker in the Pack,” on Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Auden argues that the character of Iago is especially relevant to the modern world because he is “a parabolic figure for the autonomous pursuit of scientific knowledge through experiment” (DH 270).

In Auden's reading of the play, Iago is "trying to find out what Othello is really like," since for Iago, "to-know in the scientific sense means, ultimately, to-have-power-over" (*DH* 271, 270). Iago becomes for Auden a figure of the modern Baconian scientist who seeks empirical knowledge for the sake of technological control.

The lust for knowledge and control is a purely intellectual form of *eros*, but Auden argues that it is not on that account any less sinful than sexual lust. As a social phenomenon, Auden argues, intellectual *eros* is far more dangerous:

in our culture, we have all accepted the notion that the right to know is absolute and unlimited. The gossip column is one side of the medal; the cobalt bomb the other. We are quite prepared to admit that, while food and sex are good in themselves, an uncontrolled pursuit of either is not, but it is difficult for us to believe that intellectual curiosity is a desire like any other, and to realize that correct knowledge and truth are not identical. . . . [T]o entertain the possibility that the only knowledge which can be true for us is the knowledge we can live up to—that seems to all of us crazy and almost immoral. But, in that case, who are we to say to Iago—"No, you mustn't"? (*DH* 271-72)

Auden's belief that "intellectual curiosity" can be a dangerous form of *eros* has led some critics, particularly A. S. P. Woodhouse, to identify a streak of "anti-intellectualism" in Auden (290), but Auden's choice of the word "curiosity" is telling in its derivation from Augustine. In the *Confessions* Augustine identifies what he calls "curiosity" (*curiositas*) as a sin that arises from "a cupidity which does not take delight in carnal pleasure but in perceptions acquired through the flesh. It is a vain inquisitiveness dignified with the title of knowledge and science" (*C* 10.35). Earlier in the *Confessions* Augustine identifies his appetite for theatrical shows as one symptom of his intellectual "cupidity" (*C* 3.2), a passage that is often unjustly cited as a categorical rejection of art. But while Augustine did deplore the erotic and obscene nature of the shows he attended as a young man, his primary objection was not to their content but to his own corrupt motivation for attending

them. As Auden explains, the only knowledge that is good for humans to have is “knowledge we can live up to” (*DH* 272), whether that knowledge be sexual or scientific. Augustine’s argument that curiosity was a lust like any other took on new urgency for Auden, living as he did in an era of technological propaganda and biological and nuclear weaponry. For Auden and Augustine, knowledge could never be separated from ethics.

Several years earlier, in 1944, Auden had explained in his review of Cochrane that Augustine’s ethical sensibilities were rooted in his understanding of humanity as fallen, even though “his existence was and still is meant to be, capable of loving God in the same way that God loves him” (*FA* 36). Auden continues, “When a Christian, like Augustine, talks about ethics, therefore, he begins not with the rational act or the pleasant act, but with the *acte gratuite*, which is neither reasonable nor physically pleasant, but a pure assertion of absolute self-autonomy” (*FA* 36-37). Auden then gives as an example Dostoyevsky’s protagonist in *Notes from the Underground*, but in a later lecture on *Othello* he would give Augustine’s account of the pear tree from the *Confessions* as a quintessential example of the *acte gratuite* (*Lectures* 196-99). In book two of the *Confessions*, Augustine recounts a time when, as an adolescent, he and his friends stole pears from a nearby orchard, “not for our feasts but merely to throw to the pigs. Even if we ate a few, nevertheless our pleasure lay in doing what was not allowed” (*C* 2.4). His desire to sin, his “cupidity” as he calls it, was not motivated by a rational desire for pleasure, but was instead an irrational and arbitrary decision to break a just law. Auden explains, “Man, that is to say, always acts either self-loving, just for the hell of it, or God-loving, just for the heaven of it; his reasons, his appetites are secondary motivations. Man chooses either life or death, but he chooses; everything he does, from going to the

toilet to mathematical speculation, is an act of religious worship, either of God or of himself" (FA 37). In Auden's reading of Augustine, the *acte gratuite*, the pure assertion of free will, can take the form either of *eros* or of *agape*.

It is important to note that the *acte gratuite*, whether expressed as *eros* or *agape*, is not consciously motivated by biological self-interest, strictly speaking, even though it does result in a mental satisfaction the pursuit of which might legitimately be called *eros*. But the *acte gratuite* is an arbitrary assertion of the will that cannot be traced directly to a conscious desire for pleasure or to rational calculation; if there is an identifiable motive, it is wholly subconscious. Most of the examples that Auden gives in his works of the *acte gratuite* are negative, and as such they are examples of unmitigated, subconscious *eros*. Besides the example of Iago that Auden gives in his lecture on *Othello*, one of Auden's lectures in *The Enchafèd Flood* identifies Claggart, the fiendish accuser in Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*, as another example of a literary character whose motivation can be reduced to the *acte gratuite*. As such, Auden sees the motivation of a literary characters like Iago as "purely" evil in the sense that his act has no motivation whatsoever; it is an entirely gratuitous act. For Auden a purely evil motivation is a contradiction in terms, since pure evil is, as we have seen in previous chapters, a complete privation of existence. There are, however, good forms of the *acte gratuite*. In earlier poems like "Leap Before You Look" and "In Sickness and in Health," both written in 1940, Auden pictures Christian marriage as a positively gratuitous act, which is an idea that he drew from Rougemont's argument that Christian marriage must ultimately be an "arbitrary decision" in the sense that it is a deliberate, gratuitous act that is not based either on an emotional impulse or on a rational calculation of probable

consequences (Rougemont 307-20). Auden seems to have believed, at least in the early 1940s, that *eros* could be redeemed by *agape* through the *acte gratuite* of Christian marriage, such that the married partners would both desire to benefit personally from the relationship at the same time that they sacrifice their own self-interests for the good of the other partner.

Later in life, after “*l’affaire C*” convinced Auden that marriage was impossible for him, he began to look in other directions for positive examples of the *acte gratuite*. His 1954 poem “Sext,” part of the “*Horae Canonicae*” sequence, identifies the discovery of vocation as a form of the *acte gratuite*. The poem describes the way in which a cook, a surgeon, and a clerk all “wear the same rapt expression, / forgetting themselves in a function” (CP 630). Mendelson observes that “Vocation, as always in Auden, is the most innocent form of love, a voluntary loss of self in an object, an renunciation of appetite that does not offer the compensating flattery that one has renounced something worth having” (LA 348). The *acte gratuite* that characterizes the discovery of vocation is a disinterested love that gives time and attention to the object of affection without expecting to receive in return, yet not indulging in the false humility of a refusal to receive when one’s giving is freely reciprocated. Such love, Auden’s poem argues, is the basis of culture:

There should be monuments, there should be odes,
to the nameless heroes. . .

to the first flaker of flints
who forgot his dinner,

the first collector of sea-shells
to remain celibate. . . . (CP 630)

Auden certainly thought of his own poetry as another example of a gratuitous vocation, and he suggests in the *Dyer's Hand*, the *acte gratuite* exists in a pure form only inside a work of art, for "in the real world, no hatred is totally without justification, no love totally innocent" (*DH* 235). In the real world, one can always offer a rationalization for an *acte gratuite*, and even in its most innocuous form as a disinterested absorption, those who pursue a vocation in "Sext" produce disquieting results. "Where should we be but for them?" the poem asks of the flaker of flints and the collector of seashells (*CP* 630).

Humans would be

Feral still, un-housetrained, . . .
.....
slaves of Dame Kind, lacking
all notion of a city,
and, at this noon, for this death,
there would be no agents. (*CP* 630)

The pursuit of a vocation, while innocent in itself, also enables the founding of civilization through the shedding of innocent blood. Because of the Fall, Auden suggests, no human love can be totally innocent. While Auden did aspire to a reconciliation of human and divine loves, he would not let himself forget that, since the Fall, human motivations are never purely good any more than they can be purely evil.

But despite the crimes that inevitably underpin a society, Auden also recognized that human societies have an important and distinct role to play in history and human relationships, and that real communities are based on the same sort of free-willing and gratuitous love that drives a person to immerse himself or herself in a vocation. Auden was fond of quoting Augustine's definition of a community as a group of people untied by their common love (see *CG* 1.15, 14.28). Auden used this definition no less than six separate times in his prose, usually attributing it to Augustine (see *Prose II* 436, *DH* 64,

FA 410, SW 120, EF 30, and *Lectures on Shakespeare* 299), so he clearly valued Augustine's idea that love is the basis even of a political community. There is no space here to elaborate on the relationships between Auden's views of love and his views of politics, but based on some of the poems in "Horae Canonicae" such as "Sext," it appears that Auden saw the vocational form of the *acte gratuite* as the basis of human civilization and culture. This is why civilizations are always both beneficial and deeply corrupt: the human impetus towards the gratuitous act cannot but lead to injustice, no matter what kind of love impels it.

Because there is always an element of unredeemed *eros*—purely selfish and destructive motives—in every human love, there will always be an apparent tension between *eros* and *agape*. As Auden says in the last lines of "Thanksgiving for a Habitat," "always, though truth and love / can never really differ, when they seem to, / the subaltern should be truth" (CP 716). Even though *eros* and *agape* are hypothetically reconcilable, they will always be in conflict for those who prefer "love" to "truth," a juxtaposition that suggests that by "love" Auden means in this poem something closer to *eros* than to *agape*. Humans can fool themselves into thinking that their *eros* is actually an expression of *agape*, so it is necessary to privilege truth over any impulse that seeks to establish its own supremacy by claiming to be "love." That is one reason that Auden wrote so few poems that say anything explicitly about *agape*; the *agape* that has redeemed *eros* is seldom found in a pure form among humans.

Another, more important reason that Auden did not write many poems about *agape*, or charity (*caritas*) as Augustine uses the term, is that *agape* is expressed by rightly-motivated actions, not by words alone, however well-intentioned. In *The Dyer's*

Hand, Auden claimed that “A direct manifestation of charity in secular terms is, therefore, impossible. One form of indirect manifestation employed by religious teachers has been through parables in which actions which are ethically immoral are made to stand as a sign for that which transcends ethics” (*DH* 202). Auden may have in mind the parable of the unjust steward in the Gospel of Luke, in which the steward’s cheating of his master becomes a lesson in serving God with the world’s goods (Luke 16.1-9). There are, of course, many other parables in the Bible, such as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), that do depict acts of pure *agape*. But Auden’s point is that, outside of an explicitly religious context, it is very difficult to portray a saint acting on pure *agape*. Even within such a religious context, artistic depictions of pure charity tend not to be aesthetically convincing. Furthermore, in Auden’s understanding, his faith did not require him to write about *agape* at all, but it did require him to perform acts of charity. The final chapter will comment further on the Auden’s ideas about the relationships between art, love, and truth.

But literary criticism cannot, by itself, comprehend Auden’s view of Christian charity. To understand Auden’s conception of love, we must look not only at what he wrote, but at what he did. For example, Mendelson (*LA* 401) and Carpenter (382) both report that, in 1956, Auden heard that the Catholic social worker Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker organization had been fined because its homeless shelter had violated fire code regulations, and that the court had ordered the shelter to be closed down. As soon as he found out, Auden met Day at the shelter. At first Day mistook him for a bum, but then he handed her a check, muttering, “Here’s two-fifty.” Day thought Auden had given her \$2.50 until she looked at the check and found that Auden had actually given her a check

for \$250, the entire amount of the fine. Mendelson adds that the story was soon picked up by *The New York Times*, and that Auden was consequently allowed to make a short fundraising speech on television on behalf of Day and the Catholic Worker (LA 401-2). The court rescinded the eviction order soon afterwards. Auden's paying of Day's fine was an act of charity. His act happened to become public, but had Auden himself written a poem about his gift, he would have exploited the act for aesthetic purposes and emptied the act of all *agape*. Auden firmly believed that *agape* consists of good actions, rightly motivated, and not of writing about ethics. As Auden was fond of saying, orthodoxy is reticence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion: Poetry and Truth

Speech can at best, a shadow echoing
the silent light bear witness
to the Truth it is not.

—W. H. Auden “The Cave of Making”

According to Auden’s own accounts in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims* and elsewhere, he had always believed in the Christian doctrines of “freedom of the person, equal justice for all, respect for the rights of others, etc.,” which as a liberal humanist he had held to be “self-evident truths” (*MCP* 40). That such values were not universally self-evident became clear to Auden when he personally encountered virulent, uncoerced fascism for the first time in a New York movie theater in 1939. But Auden’s inquiries into the reasons for these moral truths, whose validity he never questioned, had actually begun some time earlier. For example, in “The Prolific and the Devourer” (1939), the first signs of what would become a thoroughly Augustinian theology are already present in Auden’s argument that evil is a privation of goodness. Augustine was an important influence in this conclusion, but by no means the only one. Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, as well as Freud’s analysis of the relationships between the parts of the mind, also would have suggested to Auden that existences in themselves are not evil, but rather that evil consisted of the discordant relationships between otherwise good existences. But as Auden pointed out later in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*, Blake, Freud, and many other modern writers had always operated on the basis of distinctly Christian assumptions that the apostle Paul, Augustine, and other ancient theologians had definitively

articulated, and whose values had been woven into the very fabric of Western culture (38). One could protest against Christianity but not escape its influence.

From the observation that evil is privation, it was a short logical step for Auden to the affirmation of the physical world as fundamentally good, despite its manifest corruption. Auden again derived his affirmation of the goodness of existence, and of human embodiment in particular, from Augustine, though as with the idea of evil as privation, Auden had already been attracted to variations of the idea in the works of Lawrence, Blake, Freud, and Marx (*MCP* 38). But the insistence on physical existence as intrinsically good took on new and broader significance with Auden's acceptance of the Incarnation as a historical reality. In Auden's view, as in Augustine's, the Incarnation is proof that the physical world is valued by God and is redeemable. Auden recognized that if neither the physical world nor the human body are intrinsically evil, then the physical desires of the body, such as *eros*, the acquisitive, self-interested survival instinct, cannot be intrinsically evil in themselves. Thus, the conflict between *eros* and *agape* is not a Manichean struggle of darkness against light, but a struggle for appropriate placement in a hierarchy of values, and Auden again derived much of his anti-Manichaeism, directly or indirectly, from Augustine.

All three of these Augustinian ideas—the definition of evil as privation, the affirmation of physical existence as intrinsically good, and the efforts of *agape* to redeem and order *eros*—had important implications for Auden's concept of art, and of his view of himself as a professional artist. Auden's statements on the nature and status of art fill several volumes, and it is not my intention to attempt a synthesis of all of them, but rather to identify and explain two important aesthetic ideas that Auden derived directly from

Augustine. First, Auden believed that art is gratuitous. The creation of a work of art, Auden thought, was an *acte gratuite*, and he found the idea of the *acte gratuite* most thoroughly explained in Augustine's *Confessions*. As a gratuitous act, a work of art is answerable to aesthetic rules, such as the necessity that the work be internally coherent and pleasurable, rules which are not binding on the rest of the world. Secondly, Auden asserted over and over that art was not exempt from ethical claims, and that the attempt to isolate art within an autonomous realm of amoral self-referentiality was a fallacious and dangerous endeavor. He referred to such self-referentiality using a form of Augustine's phrase *fantastica fornicatio*, the fornication of the mind with its own images. Therefore, Auden believed that works of art are subject to both aesthetic and ethical claims. Stan Smith suggests a similar reading of Auden's views on this relationship when he argues that Auden's prose continually deals with what Smith calls "the doubleness of the text, which is both a historical product, subject to all the pressures on language of its originating moment, and yet a discourse that floats free of its origins, finding as many moments of meaning as it has readers, in a perpetually open-ended play of history and signification" (4). But for Smith, the impetus of art toward self-referentiality is an advantage; for Auden, it was an aberration. While Auden did frequently allude to just such a "doubleness" inherent in poetry as well as in the human mind, he also saw that the "double" claims on art of ethics (which Smith reduces to mere "ideology") and aesthetics could meaningfully interrelate, and Smith's neo-Marxist reading of Auden's statements on the subject can hardly acknowledge the fact that Auden's poetry and prose attempts to make both the aesthetic and ethical (historical/political) aspects of art co-inhere. In Auden's view, when the aesthetic claims overrule the moral claims, the result is

meaninglessness, and when the moral claims override the aesthetic ones, the result is propaganda. Instead, Auden believed that ethics and aesthetics could and should peacefully co-exist in the process of artistic making.

The Gratuitous Act

Auden's 1947 essay "Squares and Oblongs," which was a contribution to *Poets at Work*, a collection of essays on the Poetry Collection at the University of Buffalo, is a series of fragments in which Auden comments on the nature of poetry as art, and in one of the longer fragments, Auden explicitly links Augustine's idea of the *acte gratuite* with the craft of writing poetry:

St. Augustine was the first real psychologist for he was the first to see the basic fact about human nature, namely that the Natural Man hates nature, and that the only act which can really satisfy him is the *acte gratuite*. His ego resents every desire of his natural self for food, sex, pleasure, logical coherence, because desires are given not chosen, and his ego seeks constantly to assert its autonomy by doing something of which the requiredness is not given, that is to say, something which is completely arbitrary, a pure act of choice. The psychoanalyst can doubtless explain St. Augustine's robbing of the pear-tree in terms of natural desire, as, say, a symbolic copy of some forbidden sexual act, but this explanation, however true, misses the point which is the drive behind the symbolic transformation in consequence of which what in its original form was felt as a given desire now seems to the actor as a matter of free and arbitrary choice.

Similarly, there are no doubt natural causes, perhaps very simple ones, behind the wish to write verses, but the chief satisfaction in the creative act is the feeling that it is quite gratuitous. (*Prose II* 341)

We have seen in the previous chapter that Auden associates love, both as *eros* and as *agape*, with the *acte gratuite*, and that he further associates both loves as well as the *acte gratuite* with the discovery and execution of one's vocation. Working within one's vocation is a form of gratuitous love, but the *acte gratuite* is never wholly innocent. Being a free act of a fallen, divided will, the "arbitrary act of choice," as Auden called it,

is inevitably corrupted and corrupting (*Prose II* 341). As Auden suggests in “Nones,” “This mutilated flesh, our victim, / Explains too nakedly, too well,” the fact that all hobbies and games, as gratuitous acts, always point to the gratuitous act of crucifixion:

We shall always now be aware
Of the deed into which they [games] lead, under
The mock chase and mock capture,
The racing and tussling and splashing,
The panting and the laughter,
Be listening for the cry and stillness
To follow after: wherever
The sun shines, brooks run, books are written
There will also be this death. (*CP* 635)

The passage implicates the literary arts by including the writing of books along with other frivolous and gratuitous games that implicate the participants in the death of the innocent victim, and in his *Lectures on Shakespeare*, Auden identifies art, and particularly literary art, as an *acte gratuite* that is made possible by the Fall (198).

Auden’s frequent references to art as gratuitous, or “frivolous,” in *The Dyer’s Hand* and elsewhere in his prose, are puzzling to many readers. But the distinction Auden makes between the “frivolous” and the “serious” is not the same as the general differences that readers make between, for instance, “popular” and “classical” music, or between “light verse” and “Poetry.” For Auden, the idea of “frivolity” has nothing whatsoever to do with artistic merit. While Auden often juxtaposes what he calls “frivolous” occupations such as poetry or music with what he calls “serious” concerns, it is important to recognize that by “serious” Auden means a moral obligation. In Auden’s thinking, an object or activity is frivolous if the choice whether or not to create it or engage it is not regulated by moral principles, but an object or activity is serious if the choice to create or engage, or to refrain, is subject to a moral law. As Auden explains in

The Dyer's Hand, of most occupations “one must say that, in themselves, they are frivolous. They are only serious in so far that they are the means by which those who practice them earn their bread and are not parasites on the labor of others, and to the degree that they permit or encourage the love of God and neighbor” (*DH* 432). For example, a man is not ethically obliged to make shoes instead of poems, or to grow wheat instead of building houses. He is morally free to choose his vocation, and in that sense, his vocation is frivolous; he is not morally obliged to choose one particular vocation. (There are, of course, vocations from which he is ethically barred, such as being a burglar or a hired assassin.) But once he chooses a particular vocation—a frivolous decision in itself—the way in which he goes about pursuing that vocation is serious. He must make an honest wage so as not to be a parasite, and his vocation must enable the love of God and of his neighbor. An action is serious to the degree that it is subject to the judgment of moral laws, and it is frivolous to the degree that it is amoral.

For Auden, most acts of making are, in themselves, frivolous because the rules that govern them are internal to them. Each rule by which a sonnet or a concerto or a football game must abide is not a moral law; the game might easily have developed different rules without violating any ethical principle. Each rule is arbitrary in the sense that it is itself an *acte gratuite*, a limit imposed on the activity in order to heighten pleasure. But to say that such activities are arbitrary and frivolous is not the same as saying that they are unimportant. Auden's “In Sickness and in Health” speaks of the “arbitrary circle of a vow” (*CP* 319), which follows Rougemont's statement that the decision to marry “must always be arbitrary” (313) in the sense that it should not be based on rational calculation. Marriage is “arbitrary” (and thereby “frivolous”) in the

sense that no one is morally obliged to get married. So Auden might have thought of his own “marriage” as frivolous and not serious, but he certainly did not think it unimportant. Nor did he think that, once his “marriage” was established, it was exempt from the ethical demands of fidelity. For Auden, all forms of frivolity are deeply important elements of human existence, and certain aspects of them are regulated by universal moral laws. But the decision to engage in the frivolous endeavor is not itself a moral act. Auden argues in *The Dyer’s Hand* that “The peasant may play cards in the evening while the poet writes verses, but there is one political principle to which they both subscribe, namely, that among the half dozen or so things for which a man of honor should be prepared, if necessary, to die, the right to play, the right to frivolity, is not the least” (*DH* 89). The “right to frivolity” is worthy of martial defense because it is, at its base, the right to exercise free will. To deny the right to play is to place all aspects of human existence within the strict confines of moral or legal obligations, which is tyranny.

Such an exemption of poetry and other forms of play from ethical demands may seem an unfair extrapolation from Augustine’s idea of the *acte gratuite*. Augustine’s views on poetry and art are often seen as puritanically dour, but that is largely a caricature that distorts his complex views on poetry and art, of which I can only outline portions here. Augustine does object to obscenity and heresy in art, but he also sees art as largely gratuitous. He would never say that a knowledge of poetry, or an education in the liberal arts, is necessary for salvation, but he does argue that a knowledge of the liberal arts is a necessary aid to a thorough study of Scripture (see *OCD* 2.16, 28, 32). Augustine also notes that a broad knowledge of the liberal arts is a vocation appropriate to a few Christians who wish to study Scripture in depth, but not to all, “so that,”

Augustine says, “it is not necessary for Christians to engage in much labor for a few things” (*OCD* 2.39). At the same time, Augustine also judges the value of art—visual, theatrical, poetic—primarily on its content. Augustine believed that works of art, and especially poems, should tell the truth. For example, in the first few books of *The City of God*, Augustine approvingly quotes from several poets while disputing with others: he accuses Virgil of lying (1.2); he notes that Lucan is close to the truth in certain matters (1.12); he approvingly quotes Persius at length (2.6); he criticizes Varro for espousing the Noble Lie of Plato (3.4); he cites Lucan as an example of just opposition to criminal acts (3.12); he agrees with Virgil’s grim assessment of political murder (3.16); he quotes Horace and Claudian with approval (5.14, 26); and he asserts that his own knowledge of secular history must necessarily rely on pagan sources, including the poets (3.17). Unlike Plato, Augustine would not banish poets either from the earthly city or from the City of God, but he would instead have them speak truth in praise of God.¹

Augustine’s attitude towards poetry is quite close to Auden’s own assessment of it in his 1961 essay on C. P. Cavafy, in which he states,

Poems made by human beings are no more exempt from moral judgment than acts done by human beings, but the moral criterion is not the same. One duty of a poem, among others, is to bear witness to the truth. A moral witness is one who gives true testimony to the best of his ability in order that the court (or the reader) shall be in a better position to judge the case

¹This aspect of Augustine’s thought is too seldom recognized even by theologians, to say nothing of literary critics. Even Alan Jacobs has claimed in a recent essay that Augustine “has no use for [pagan poets], or at least no use for their literature” (“Paganism” 669). Jacobs goes on to argue that “to Nietzsche’s claim that for the Christian ‘the truth of God. . . relegates. . . all art to the realm of *falsehood*,’ Augustine would surely reply, ‘Of course’” (“Paganism” 119-70). But that is not quite true. While Augustine is no aesthete—he does not accept all poetry without qualification as valuable—he does, in fact, use even pagan poetry in *The City of God* and other works as evidence for his arguments and as subjects for analysis, and he commends certain statements in pagan poetry for their truthfulness.

justly; an immoral witness is one who tells half-truths or downright lies: but it is not a witness's business to pass verdict. (In the arts, one must distinguish, of course, between the lie and the tall story that the audience is not expected to believe. The tall-story teller gives himself away, either by a wink or by an exaggerated poker face: the born liar always looks absolutely natural.) (*FA* 336)

So Auden agrees with Augustine that it is immoral for poems to misrepresent events or feelings or principles. But, it will be objected, Auden also claimed in *The Dyer's Hand* that a poem cannot lie. That is true, but the context in which he makes the claim is telling:

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. A poem might be called a pseudo-person. Like a person, it is unique and addresses the reader personally. On the other hand, like a natural being and unlike a historical person, it cannot lie. We may be and frequently are mistaken as to the meaning or the value of a poem, but the cause of our mistake lies in our own ignorance or self-deception, not in the poem itself. (*DH* 68)

Auden's argument with Archibald MacLeish's "Ars Poetica" has to do with the relationship of words to intentions, not the relationship between words and their referents. That is, Auden argues here that a poem cannot lie in the sense that it cannot be hypocritical. It cannot, by itself, mean or intend something other than what it says. Auden uses the word "lie" in this passage to denote a statement that is at variance with an inner disposition, not a statement that is at variance with the true nature of the outside world.

However, Auden does say clearly in *The Dyer's Hand* that a poem can lie in the sense that it can say something that does not correspond to the nature of the real world outside the poem:

What makes it difficult for poets not to tell lies is that, in poetry, all facts and all beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting

possibilities. The reader does not have to share the beliefs expressed in a poem in order to enjoy it. Knowing this, a poet is constantly tempted to make use of an idea or a belief, not because he believes it to be true, but because he sees it has interesting poetic possibilities. (*DH* 19)

That is, a poem, like any work of literary or pictorial art, creates what J. R. R. Tolkien called a “secondary world,” a term that Auden used as a title for his publication of lectures he gave in 1967. Because the “secondary world” is understood by the readers to be fiction, it is under no necessary obligation to be “true” to the primary world of real human experience. A “secondary world” is not a lie, but a “tall story,” as Auden puts it in his essay *C. P. Cavafy*, and the “tall story” always presents itself as a self-conscious fiction (*FA* 336). But a poem that purports to relate genuine experiences or feelings must, in Auden’s view, represent them accurately. A poem “lies” if it misrepresents the poet’s own feelings or experiences. Augustine recognizes just such a distinction between the “tall story” and the “lie” when, in the *Confessions*, he states, “Verses and poetry I can transform into real nourishment. ‘Medea flying through the air’ I might recite, but I would not assert to be fact. Even if I heard someone reciting the passage, I would not believe it. Yet the other [Manichee] myths I did believe” (*C* 3.6). In the *Confessions*, Augustine sees little enough harm in fiction so long as no one believes it to be fact, as he once believed the Manichean myths to be fact.

Auden, too, was concerned that poetic fiction not be taken as fact, but also that dishonest poetry not be presented as honest poetry. He probably has some of his own poems like “Spain” and “September 1st 1939” in mind—both of which he repudiated quickly after writing—when he states in *The Dyer’s Hand* that “The most painful of all experiences to a poet is to find that a poem of his which he knows to be a forgery has pleased the public and got into the anthologies. For all he knows or cares, the poem may

be quite good, but that is not the point; *he* should not have written it” (18). Presumably, a poem is a “forgery” if it misrepresents a feeling or experience that it purports to be representing accurately. Auden believed that a poet should accurately represent both the real world and the poet’s own beliefs about it. As such, when Auden says that a poem is a lie, he means that it misrepresents what it purports to portray accurately. When he says that a poem cannot lie, he means that the poem itself, apart from its author, cannot intend anything other than what it actually says. This is not to defend Auden’s choice of words, but all too many critics overlook the distinction and either seize on one of Auden’s statements while ignoring the other, or assume that Auden is simply contradicting himself. Auden’s dual use of the word “lie”—a word which he was fond of punning in his poems—may not be clear, but it is not self-contradictory.

Truthfulness, or accurate representation, is important to poetry partly because, in Auden’s opinion, one of the chief aims of poetry is to praise what is good, and Augustine would surely agree: “If physical objects give you pleasure,” Augustine says in the *Confessions*, “praise God for them and return love to their Maker lest, in the things that please you, you displease him” (4.12). The necessity of praise appears repeatedly in Auden’s poems both from before and after his conversion—see for example “A Bride in the 30’s” (*CP* 139), “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” (249), “Canzone” (*CP* 331), “For the Time Being” (*CP* 365), “Precious Five” (*CP* 590), and, obviously, in “In Praise of Limestone” (*CP* 540). As Auden argued in *The Dyer’s Hand*, “Poetry can do a hundred and one things, delight, sadden, disturb, amuse, instruct—it may express every possible shade of emotion, and describe every conceivable kind of event, but there is only one

thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being and for happening” (*DH* 60).

One of Auden’s most famous statements on the laudatory function of poetry is “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” which ends with the command, “teach the free man how to praise” (*CP* 249). A poem should point out and compliment what is good, hence the poem’s exemplification of its own imperative as an elegy, which traditionally concludes with a consolation. The poem famously states that “poetry makes nothing happen,” but it also says that poetry “survives, / A way of happening, a mouth” (*CP* 248). “Mouth” is a pun on the river metaphor Auden uses to represent poetry in the poem’s second section, but it also speaks to the orality of poetry, an aspect of the poetic arts that much interested Yeats. I argued in chapter four that the line “poetry makes nothing happen” should be taken to mean that poetry cannot force social change by violating free will. But the poem’s juxtaposition of “makes nothing happen” with “a way of happening” further suggests that a poem is itself an historical event, but it is not a cause of further historical events. Auden’s poem states that poetry is a witness to the process of history, but it is not itself an agent of historical change. Still, by their nature, most historical events can be both effects and causes, but that is a question that the poem evades. Because of such ambiguities, it is perhaps unfortunate that the lyrical strengths of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” lead many readers to take the poem as Auden’s definitive statement on the social status of poetry, especially since Auden does make clearer statements elsewhere.

It will be remembered that, in “New Year Letter,” Auden claims that “Art is not and cannot be / A midwife to society” (*CP* 201), and he was fond of claiming that “the political and social history of Europe would be what it has been if Dante, Shakespeare,

Goethe, Titian, Mozart, Beethoven, *et al.*, had never existed” (*Secondary Worlds* 141). The latter statement is rhetorical hyperbole, but it reemphasizes Auden’s disdain both for propagandistic verse and for “serious” poetry that thinks too much of itself. As Auden claims in his essay on Cavafy, poetry is a witness to truth, and in “The Cave of Making,” he tells the ghost of Louis MacNiece that “Speech can at best, a shadow echoing / the silent light bear witness / to the Truth it is not” (CP 693). Language is not, then, the locus of truth. The difference between language and truth, between signifier and signified, is original neither to Auden nor to Augustine, but it is worth pointing out that in his *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine writes at length about distinguishing between what he calls “signs” and “things” (2.1-3, 12-25, and 3.1-5). To take the sign for the thing itself—to locate Truth in a text that is only a witness to Truth—is, Augustine indicates, “a miserable servitude of the spirit” (*OCD* 3.5).

“*The Prostitution of Mind to Its Own Fancies*”

Augustine was also concerned, as was Auden, that language not be used as mere propaganda for unethical ends. In several places in the *Confessions* (e.g. 4.2), Augustine deplores the use of his professional craft, rhetoric, to deceive or manipulate people in order to advance an ideology. Nor should untruths be used to bolster truths, Augustine believed, a temptation common to orators making arguments in courts of law. Cochrane explains that Augustine’s Christianity condemns the use of language as sheer propaganda, arguing that Christian theology was not a mere propagandistic ideology formed in order to prop up Constantinian Rome:

For an ideology, in this sense, is simply a rationalization invented by the discursive reason in order to bridge a chasm which its own activity creates; its value for this purpose being in no sense dependent upon its

inherent truth but wholly upon its capacity to stimulate “action”. . . . For such perversions of intellectual activity Augustine has a name and it is a strong one; he calls them *fantastica fornicatio*, the prostitution of mind to its own fancies. (481)

Auden makes direct reference to *fantastica fornicatio* in Simeon’s speech in “For the Time Being,” where, as we have seen in chapter four, it is used in a slightly different way (CP 388). In that poem, the phrase refers not to the intellect in general, but to the artistic impulse specifically, which tends toward mere self-referentiality. For Auden, art is never an entirely closed system, though the aesthetic principles on which it operates are different from the physical and ethical principles upon which the real world operates. Simeon indicates that the fact that the Word has become flesh makes real signification possible—meaning is no longer infinitely deferred² (CP 388). As Auden would state later, “The Incarnation, the coming of Christ in the form of a servant who cannot be recognized by the eye of flesh and blood, but only by the eye of faith, puts an end to all claims of the imagination to be the faculty which decides what is truly sacred and what is profane” (DH 457). Imagination is not wrong in itself, any more than *eros* as a survival instinct is wrong in itself, but once sublimated, it seeks only to perpetuate itself at the expense of all other aspects of the human person. Auden recognized that the capacity for artistic creation, like all other faculties of the human mind, was beneficial only when moderated and ordered by divine Love.

But Auden had no naïve illusions about the relationship between love and language, and indeed, many critics seem to think his statements on the subject

²Emig rightly suggests that “For the Time Being” anticipates the emergence of Deconstruction and other Poststructural theories of signification (139-44), but he seems entirely unaware that Simeon’s speech also includes a pointed critique of self-referential tendencies in art that Poststructuralism would later celebrate; Auden bases his critique on Augustine’s critique of the tendency of the human mind toward *fantastica fornicatio*.

excessively strict, especially as he treats it in “Dichtung und Wahrheit,” a series of pensées subtitled “An Unwritten Poem,” written in 1959. McDiarmid argues that “Dichtung und Wahrheit” plays out “with philosophical fastidiousness,” and Mendelson calls the work’s aphoristic arguments “elaborations on the emotional grammar set out in the essays on language Auden had been writing for several years” (LA 432). Indeed, the work is skeptical of the ability of language to genuinely represent personal love almost from the start: “Expecting your arrival tomorrow, I find myself thinking *I love You*: then comes the thought:—*I should like to write a poem which would express exactly what I mean when I think these words*” (CP 649).³ For this proposed poem, Auden sets himself very high standards: the poem must be good, it must be genuine, and it must be true (CP 649). He does not doubt his ability to write an aesthetically good poem, nor does he anticipate difficulty making it “genuine,” by which he means “recognizable, like my handwriting, as having been written, for better or worse, by me” (CP 649). The main difficulty for the poet is to write “I love You” in such a way that it is true, that is, that it accurately represents the inner disposition of one real, historical person for another. Auden is quick to point out, however, that the concern for truth in the poem exists only for the poet, not for the reader:

I read a poem by someone else in which he bids a tearful farewell to his beloved: the poem is good (it moves me as other good poems do) and genuine (I recognize the poet’s “handwriting”). Then I learn from a

³Mendelson explains that “The ‘You’ who was arriving in Kirchstetten was not Kallman, who was already there, but Adrian Poole, later an academic sociologist, then a twenty-five-year-old student working towards an honors degree in jurisprudence at Oxford, where Auden had met him, and who visited Kirchstetten for about two weeks in September 1959” (LA 433). Mendelson also explains that “Poole enjoyed Auden’s company but felt no sexual attraction to him; Auden, who sensed Poole’s feelings, never made a closer approach, but enjoyed an exhilarating sexual attraction to the younger man without intruding on him by expressing it” (CP 433).

biography that, at the time he wrote it, the poet was sick to death of the girl but pretended to weep in order to avoid hurt feelings and a scene. Does this information affect my appreciation of his poem? Not in the least: I never knew him personally and his private life is no business of mine. Would it affect my appreciation if I had written the poem myself? I hope so. (*CP* 649)

That is, Auden speaks strictly from the point of view of the author of the poem, and as such, the poet makes demands on his work which readers, on the whole, do not. As a reader, Auden indicates that he does not care whether a poem is a lie in the sense in which he uses the term in *The Dyer's Hand*. A poem's aesthetic quality does not depend on its correspondence to any reality that it purports to represent.⁴ However, as a poet, Auden is concerned with more than his poem's aesthetic quality; he is also concerned that his poem transmit an honest message to a specific person.

The primary difficulty, Auden argues, is that a poem cannot identify "I," the speaker of the poem, and "You," the addressee and object of the poem, as specific, historical people without also making "I" and "You" fictional characters: "this poem I should like to write is not concerned with the proposition 'He loves Her' (where He and She could be fictitious persons whose characters and history the poet is free to idealize as much as he may choose), but with my proposition *I love You* (where *I* and *You* are persons whose existence and histories could be verified by a private detective)" (*CP* 656). Auden admits that if the verb in the phrase "I love You" were changed to something different, and if it were in the third person, the difficulty would disappear: the validity of statements like "She marries Him" or "He fights with Him" can be independently verified, which is why the epithalamion and the heroic narrative are easy to write (*CP*

⁴Given these sentiments, it is interesting that, as Mendelson notes, Auden began writing "Dichtung und Wahrheit" only after Poole, the "You" of the unwritten poem, had left Kirchstetten, not the day before his arrival as the "poem" indicates (*LA* 433).

652-54). “But,” Auden asks, even given the phrase “He loves Her,” “how is [the poet] to speak truthfully of lovers? Love has no deed of its own: it has to borrow the act of kind which, in itself, is not a deed but a form of behavior. . .” (CP 652). Auden uses the word “kind” in its archaic sense of “nature,” such that, he argues, the poet must borrow the language of sex to talk about love.

Even though Auden says explicitly that the “unwritten poem” is “speaking of *eros* not of *agape*,” the fact remains that no act is in itself an unquestionable proof of love, even as mere *eros* (CP 655). For the same reason, it is even more difficult to write a poem about *agape*, because “it is as much the essence of erotic love that it should desire to disclose itself to one other, as it is of the essence of charity that it should desire to conceal itself from all” (CP 655). According to Auden’s argument, *eros* wishes, if only subconsciously, to disclose itself, but it cannot actually do so in language, whereas *agape*, or charity, wishes to conceal itself entirely, so as we saw in chapter seven, writing a poem about one’s own *agape* is impossible because a desire for self-disclosure is entirely foreign to *agape*. Auden concludes, “So this poem will remain unwritten” (CP 663).

“Dichtung und Wahrheit” is a direct, philosophical restatement of an idea Auden had actually written a poem about in 1953. “The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning,” whose title is one of Touchstone’s lines in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, mocks poetic hyperbole while offering a tongue-in-cheek exposé of the poet’s disingenuous tricks. The poem begins with the premise that Christian charity is no subject for poetry, not because charity is unwilling to disclose itself, but because it is not exciting enough for poetic diction:

When ladies ask *How much do you love me?*
The Christian answer is *così- così*;
But poets are not celibate divines:
Had Dante said so, who would read his lines? (CP 619)

Christian charity, being a moral obligation, is in a sense too serious a subject for poetry,
but *eros* can be a moving poetic subject, provided it is exaggerated:

Suppose your Beatrice be, as usual, late,
And you would tell us how it feels to wait,
You're free to think, what may be even true,
You're so in love that one hour seems like two,
But write—*As I sat waiting for her call,*
Each second longer darker seemed than all
(Something like this but more elaborate still)
Those raining centuries it took to fill
That quarry whence Endymion's Love was torn;
From such ingenious fibs are poems born. (CP 619-20)

Readers of poetry, Auden argues, are not interested in strict realism, but in the ability of poetic exaggeration to heighten emotional tension. Although Auden does admit there are some critics “Whose crude provincial gullets crave in books / Plain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks” (CP 619), he suggests that most readers prefer an vicarious experience of aestheticized emotion. In fact, the poem argues, realism in poetry is impossible:

Then, should she leave you for some other guy,
Or ruin you with debts, or go and die,
No metaphor, remember, can express
A real historical unhappiness;
Your tears have value if they make us gay;
O Happy Grief! is all sad verse can say. (CP 620)

As Auden would argue a few years later in “Dichtung und Wahrheit,” a poem can never quite represent “persons whose existence and histories could be verified by a private detective” (CP 656).

To reinforce the nature of poetry as hyperbolized fiction, Auden gives the example of political propaganda. Take your conventional love poem, he tells a novice poet, and then

Re-sex the pronouns, add a few details,
And, lo, a panegyric ode which hails
(How is the Censor, bless his heart, to know?)
The new pot-bellied Generalissimo. (*CP* 620)

As it turns out, the same conventions dictate both lyric love poetry and propagandistic poetry, and “in an hour your poem qualifies / For a State pension or His annual prize” (*CP* 621). While some “honest Iagos” will object to using the conventions of propaganda to write a covert love poem, “True hearts, clear heads will hear the note of glory / And put inverted commas round the story” (*CP* 621). Good readers come to poems expecting fiction and overstatement because they understand something of human nature:

For given Man, by birth, by education,
Imago Dei who forgot his station,
The self-made creature who himself unmakes,
The only creature ever made who fakes,
With no more nature in his loving smile
Than in his theories of a natural style,
What but tall tales, the luck of verbal playing
Can trick his lying nature into saying
That love, or truth in any serious sense,
Like orthodoxy, is a reticence? (*CP* 621)

There is, then, some real moral value in poetic exaggeration, for the more obvious a poet’s fictionalization becomes, the more he or she reveals the duplicity which the Fall introduced into human nature. And to recognize the possibility of lying is to presuppose that it is also possible to tell the truth; or, as Auden put it in “New Year Letter,” “So, hidden in his [the Devil’s] hocus-pocus, / There lies the gift of double focus” (*CP* 220). Man, the poem indicates, can be tricked by “tall tales” into acknowledging that serious

love and truth elude poetry's grasp, and as Jacobs observes, "Auden uses poetry to remind us of what poetry can never give us. But, in the end, this assigns poetry a genuine and important role, as it points always beyond itself in a strangely mute witness to that of which it is unable definitively to speak" ("Auden" 32).

That is not to say that poetry is entirely devoid of all truth. Rather, the truth to which poetry speaks is often the true nature of emotional tension or inner conflict. As Auden put it in the notes to "New Year Letter," "poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings" (*NYL* 119). If a poem cannot express transcendent theological truths, it can at least speak of universal human experience. Fremantle relates her dialogue with Auden on the subject of mystical experiences, at the end of which Auden quoted Augustine's maxim, (which Augustine derived from Cicero [see *C* 3.4]), "that the truth is neither mine nor his nor another's, but belongs to us all, and that we must never account it private to ourselves, lest we be deprived of it" (*Tribute* 91). The quotation is taken inexactly from Pusey's translation of the *Confessions* (12.25). Auden used the same quotation in the last entry of his 1970 commonplace book, *A Certain World* (425), in which he gives his own views on the topic of "Writing":

I cannot accept the doctrine that in poetry there is a "suspension of belief." A poet must never make a statement simply because it sounds poetically exciting; he must also believe it to be true. This does not mean, of course, that one can only appreciate a poet whose beliefs happen to coincide with one's own. It does mean, however, that one must be convinced that the poet really believes what he says, however odd the belief may seem to oneself.

What the poet has to convey is not "self-expression," but a view of reality common to all, seen from a unique perspective, which it is his duty as well as his pleasure to share with others. To small truths as well as great, St. Augustine's words apply.

"The truth is neither mine nor his nor another's; but belongs to us all whom Thou callest to partake of it, warning us terribly, not to account it private to ourselves, lest we be deprived of it." (425)

Augustine is cited several other times in the book,⁵ but it is significant that this statement is used at the end of the book to justify the entire project of the commonplace book.

But Auden's insistence that a poem genuinely express the author's beliefs seems to be at odds with ideas he had advanced earlier in his career. That is, he states in *A Certain World* that "one must be convinced that the poet really believes what he says" (425), but in "Dichtung und Wahrheit" he said explicitly that, as a reader, he did not care whether a poem was "genuine," that is, whether it was a true representation of the poet's feelings at the time. It is certainly possible that Auden's taste in poetry changed during the decade between which he wrote the two statements. But the two statements are not, upon close examination, wholly irreconcilable. In the passage from *A Certain World*, Auden does not say that the poem must say what the poet really believes, but only that the reader "must be convinced" that he does (425). That is, the poem itself should appear to be wholly sincere, even if external evidence might indicate that it is not. Auden appears to be talking about reading the poem by itself, rather than about reading the poem alongside biography, history, and literary criticism.

Then, Auden refers in the passage from *A Certain World* to the poet's "duty as well as his pleasure to share with others" the truth on which he has a unique perspective (425). But Auden had argued earlier in *The Dyer's Hand* that the act of writing poetry was an *acte gratuite*, that it was specifically not an moral or civic duty at all, but a gratuitous activity undertaken by the will of the poet merely for its own sake. However, the parallel Auden sets up between "pleasure" and "duty" suggests that the two are interlinked. Once the poet makes the free, gratuitous decision to write a poem, the

⁵*Caveat lector*: unlike most other books, the index of *A Certain World* lists Augustine and other canonized saints under "S" for "Saint."

activity of writing is governed by certain moral laws, among which is not to represent “tall tales” as honest fact. That is, once the poet decides to play the game, the rules of the game are binding, while they are not binding on non-participants. As we have seen, Auden had also argued in *The Dyer’s Hand* and elsewhere that poetry does fall under certain ethical obligations, but that those obligations are not exactly the same as the obligations that govern the rest of the poet’s life. For Auden, poetry was neither its own private realm to which ethics did not apply, nor a wholly public activity subject to all the moral obligations that govern human relationships. Rather, Auden’s fondness for poetical allegorization should be kept firmly in mind: the realm of poetry is an analogy to real life, and the rules that govern it are like, but only like, the rules that govern life.

The Conclusion of the Matter

In 1968, Auden wrote “The Ballad of Barnaby,” a piece of light verse that tells “the Tale of Barnaby, who was, they say, / The finest tumbler of his day” (CP 824). McDiarmid rightly suggests a strong parallel between Barnaby’s vocation as a tumbler and Auden’s as a poet (4-5). The poem introduces Barnaby as a popular but debauched public entertainer:

His eyes were blue, his figure was trim,
He liked the girls and the girls liked him;
For years he lived a life of vice,
Drinking in taverns and throwing dice. (CP 824)

But he is converted when he hears ravens on a gallows call out to him while he is riding between two cities—“two cities of a very probably Augustinian nature,” McDiarmid remarks (3-4). Barnaby joins a monastery where, being unable to read or write, he finds a statue of the Virgin Mary in the crypt and addresses her:

“Blessed Virgin,” he cried, “Enthroned on high,
Ignorant as a beast am I:
Tumbling is all I have learnt to do;
Mother-of-God, let me tumble for you.” (*CP* 825)

So each day while the other monks are at prayers, Barnaby slips away to perform for the Virgin. One day, as the Abbot watches from behind a pillar, Barnaby performs his last vault and falls dead, whereupon the devils come to take his soul to hell, claiming “every tumbler belongs to us,” but the Virgin herself appears in her statue and bears Barnaby’s soul to heaven (*CP* 827). Barnaby’s offering of secular entertainment as a form of sacred worship bears not a little resemblance to Augustine’s famous metaphor of “spoiling the Egyptians,” with which he argues that pagan literature can be “pillaged” for the truth it contains, and that, by implication, a work even of profane literature can be in some way appropriated to serve sacred ends (*OCD* 2.40).

McDiarmid also points out that “Tumbling before the Virgin, Barnaby does not change his talent; . . . What changes is the philosophical ground of Barnaby’s performance. His vaulting, originally part of a guilty ‘staginess,’ a narcissistic showing-off of his blue eyes and trim figure, a mode of seduction, becomes an act of worship and homage” (5). In an analogous way, McDiarmid argues, Auden’s poetry was an act of sheer virtuosity that, after his conversion, he attempted to turn to more virtuous ends, with varying degrees of success: “Tumbling—or so it would appear—signifies all artistic talents because it is beautiful, because it is a gift, and because it so demonstrably has no spirituality in itself. But the paradigm offered by the poem is nostalgic and regressive: it is a paradigm of the conversion Auden could never have” (5-6). Indeed, Barnaby’s conversion is quicker and simpler than was Auden’s gradual return to Christianity, and

Auden's Christian beliefs were never as uncomplicated as is Barnaby's wholehearted devotion as it appears in the poem.

The poem is only an analogy, a self-consciously stylized poetic fiction that represents something akin to a conversion without pretending to portray a real conversion. But it is nevertheless a real analogy, and as an analogy, "The Ballad of Barnaby" offers some valuable though limited insights into the nature of conversion, especially when it happens to an artist. The artist's gifts do not change; the poem makes a point of listing the vaults that Barnaby performs for crowds and for the Virgin, and the two lists are identical, forming a sort of chorus for the poem: "The French Vault, the Vault of Champagne, / The Vault of Metz, and the Vault of Lorraine" (*CP* 824, 865). The intentions of the artist, however, do change drastically. Whereas Barnaby first tumbles in order to support his drinking and gambling, he later tumbles in order to honor the Virgin. But the act of tumbling does not, in itself, necessarily reveal anything about the intentions of the performer. So with poetry.

As I pointed out in the introduction, Auden's own conversion has been seriously questioned by critics who identify what they consider to be unchristian elements in his poetry and prose. In some cases, Auden himself would surely agree. But more often, what is mistaken in his works for doubt or even agnosticism is a combination of poetic indirection and reticence. Nevertheless, Auden did make statements that sound as if he doubted his own conversion as much as some of his critics do. As Mendelson observes, "Auden referred to himself as a 'would-be Christian' . . ." ("Auden and God" 70), and in an oft-quoted footnote, Carpenter remarks on "The dry, almost agnostic character of Auden's faith," citing a sermon Auden gave at Westminster Abbey in 1966:

Those of us who have the nerve to call ourselves Christians will do well to be extremely reticent on the subject. Indeed, it is almost the definition of a Christian that he is somebody who *knows* he isn't one, either in faith or in morals. Where faith is concerned, very few of us have the right to say more than—to vary a saying of Simone Weil's—"I believe in a God who is like the True God in everything except that he does not exist, for I have not yet reached the point where God exists." As for loving and forgiving our enemies, the less we say about that the better. Our lack of faith and love are facts we have to acknowledge, but we shall not improve either by a morbid and essentially narcissistic moaning over our deficiencies. Let us rather ask, with caution and humour—given our time and place and talents, what, if our faith and love were perfect, would we be glad to find it obvious to do? (qtd. in Carpenter 298n)

The second sentence in the quotation given by Carpenter, that "it is almost the definition of a Christian that he is somebody who *knows* he isn't one," would be misleading if quoted alone, as a few critics have done, but Carpenter gives enough context for the statement that Auden's meaning is clearer. A Christian aspires to be truly Christian in the sense that he or she wants to believe and act perfectly, even though perfection remains elusive.

Auden said much the same thing in his foreword to Emile Cammaerts's autobiography *The Flower of Grass*, in which he lists the Incarnation, the cross, original sin, and the forgiveness of sins as difficult but essential dogmas of the Christian faith. He then states,

If he is to become a Christian, a man has to believe them all, for the Catholic faith, while it condemns no temperament as incapable of salvation, flatters none as being less in peril than any other. In the same way he has to make his public confession of belief in a church which is not confined to his sort, to those with whom by nature he feels at home, for in it there is neither Jew nor German, East nor West, boy nor girl, smart nor dumb, boss nor worker, Bohemian nor bourgeois, no elite of any kind; indeed there are not even Christians there, for Christianity is a way, not a state, and a Christian is never something one is, only something one can pray to become, aware always both of one's infinite capacity for rebellion and self-deception and of the infinite patience and love of God. (*Prose II* 250)

While it is common to speak of Auden's conversion as synonymous with his return to Anglican communion in 1940, or with some other specific event in his life, that view belies Auden's own assertions that conversion was, for him and for all other Christians, an ongoing process during which both belief and morals can wax and wane drastically. He saw Christianity as a journey, not as merely a destination, and certainly not as a destination that he had already reached. That true conversion is not so much a past event as an ongoing process is a sentiment that accords very well with the tenor of Augustine's *Confessions*.

Besides those that I have explored in these pages, there are other important links between Auden and Augustine that the limits of space and time, and often of my own expertise, have not allowed me to explore. For example, I have only touched on Auden's use of Augustine's ideas about politics and history as he articulates them in *The City of God*; Auden frequently quotes Augustine's definition of a community from *The City of God* as a group of people united by their common love of something else, and the political significance of Auden's use of that definition has never been adequately explored. Auden also credited Augustine's exploration of the nature of time as a significant contribution to the development of the "Punctual Man," of which Auden considered himself a type (*DH* 140). I have largely used Auden's prose to gloss his poetry, but there are other important prose passages, such as "The Virgin and the Dynamo" in *The Dyer's Hand* and "Tennyson" in *Forewords and Afterwords*, which make significant use of Augustine's works and should be examined in their own right. Perhaps the largest gap in my analysis is my omission of Augustine's *On the Trinity*, a work that likely informs "The Sea and the Mirror," among other of Auden's later poems.

But my purpose has never been to exhaust every reference Auden makes to Augustine in his works. Rather, I have endeavored to reveal several key Augustinian ideas that permeate Auden's poetry and his prose, and to explain how those ideas relate to Auden's theology and, to some extent, his aesthetics. I will be content if I have convinced a few readers of Auden to pay more careful attention to the Augustinian theology that informs so much of Auden's work, but I hope that this project has revealed the later Auden to be worthy of high regard as a theological poet of the first order.

Epilogue

While I have not said in this work all I had hoped to say, it is nevertheless longer than I had intended for it to be, and I find that position here is not very far removed from that in which Augustine placed himself at the end of one of his most important books, *On Christian Doctrine*, when he stated, "This book has turned out longer than I wished, and longer than I had thought it would be. But to that reader or listener to whom it is pleasing it is not long. He who finds it long and wishes to know more about it may read it in sections. He who does not wish to know about it, however, should not complain about its length" (4.31). But in writing about the interaction of two prolific authors, one will always be left with more to say. The wide range of possible interpretations, criticism, and commentaries afforded by both Auden and Augustine testifies to their inexhaustible breadth and depth of insight. Still, Auden gives sound advice at the end of "Under Which Lyre": "trust in God; / and take short views" (*CP* 339).

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