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How good was Auden?

by [Jeffrey Hart](#)

Review of *Prose & Travel Books in Prose & Verse. Volume I: 1926-1938* by W.H. Auden

Professor Edward Mendelson of Columbia University now seems to own Auden country. The poet's literary executor, he has edited *The English Auden*, the convenient selected Auden (Knopf), *Complete Poems* (Vintage), and now has well in hand the vast Auden Project underway at Princeton. Though the Princeton Hydrogen Fusion Project is on hold because of funding problems, the Auden Project moves smoothly ahead. Of *The Complete Works of Auden*, we so far have had *Plays and Other Dramatic Writings 1928-1938*; *Libretti and Other Dramatic Writings 1939-1973*; two volumes of the complete Auden poems are forthcoming. The latest offering, *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse. Volume 1: 1926-1938*, [\[1\]](#) is the first of four volumes of the poet's miscellaneous prose.

Obviously the sheer scale is overwhelming, and, to begin with, four things should be said about this volume: (1) Professor Mendelson is a splendid editor, helpful and never intrusive; (2) that Auden wrote in such quantity is amazing; he must have been writing even while taking a shower; (3) this volume, just conceivably, will be of interest to biographers, historians, and other scholars; and (4) its interest as literature approaches zero.

The two most substantial items here are *Letter from Iceland*, with Louis MacNeice (1936), and *Journey to a War*, with Christopher Isherwood (1938). They are both rather strange objects. Commissioned by Faber to write a travel book, Auden, larking, picked Iceland, was joined there by MacNeice, and stayed through the spring and summer of 1937. If you have a special interest in the topography and culture of Iceland, this book might appeal to you. Auden added a good many *Don Juan* stanzas as a "Letter to Lord Byron," and the two poets together added a terza rima "Auden and MacNeice: Their Last Will and Testament," this last consisting of veiled salacious gossip about their acquaintances in London. Neither the prose nor the verse in this book is of any distinction whatever, and the point of the whole thing is elusive. Before the reader opens the book, he might imagine that Iceland is a synecdoche for something, but it isn't. It's just Iceland. For some reason the book was reissued in 1969.

In 1937, Faber plunged again and commissioned another travel book, suggesting the Far East, so Auden—and this time Christopher Isherwood—decided to drop in on the war between Japan and China, the two writers knowing nothing about Japan or China and nothing about the war itself. Isherwood wrote the prose accounts, with the help of Auden's diary; Auden took the photographs (with decidedly mixed results) and wrote twenty-seven sonnets called "In Time of War," plus a verse commentary on them. Auden and Isherwood traveled around, listened to some distant artillery, met Chiang and Madame Chiang as well as Chou En-lai and assorted generals, and produced a book

that has nothing of interest to say about China or the war. The sonnets and the verse commentary do not amount to much.

At the beginning of 1937, Auden also traveled to Spain with the vague intention of helping the government side by becoming an ambulance driver. Nothing came of this. He sent home a couple of banal descriptions of Spain and soon returned to England thoroughly disillusioned by what he had seen, but reticent in talking about it.

During the period covered by this enormous volume of prose, he was, similarly, a tourist among ideas, variously engaged with biology, psychology, education, politics (vaguely), literature, and religion. There is little coherence in all this, no sense of a core of seriousness or intellectual direction, and no evident capacity for discriminating among ideas with regard to their importance. He was much taken, for example, by Gerald Heard's book *Social Substance in Religion*, the main point of which seems to be that agape can be experienced only in small groups of about twelve. Of course this came to nothing. And, throughout the 1930s, Auden felt the need for a "revolution" of some sort, social or personal, but could never settle on just what sort of revolution might suffice.

In sum, one reads through this material with mounting dismay. At about the same age, for example, T. S. Eliot was producing a formidable body of critical prose intimately involved with his poetry of the time and powerful enough to produce a revolution in taste, making us view seventeenth-century poetry in a new way. We know that later on Auden could produce critical work of great distinction, as in *The Enchafèd Flood* (1950), an exploration of some central themes of Romanticism. Yet what connection there might be between Auden's prose and his poetry remains to be established. So far, I have to conclude that there is very little.

But what now, as this vast publishing project goes forward at Princeton, do we think of Auden as a poet? Those two great definitive volumes of his poetry are in the offing, and it is with the poetry that our interest surely lies.

During the 1930s it was not uncommon to rank Auden very high, among, or even superior to, the best poets of the time. In 1937, to cite a typical example, Geoffrey Grigson's magazine *New Verse* published a special double issue devoted to Auden as a poet. He was hailed there as "the finest living poet," and such expressions as "greatness," and "the Auden age" were scattered widely in the tributes. In all of this one senses a long-nourished irritation with T. S. Eliot, which tended to elevate Auden. But Eliot, Yeats, Stevens, Pound, and Frost were still alive and writing in 1937, and so one way to pose the Auden question would be to ask whether he was a sixth among them. Coordinate with that question would be an attempt to define the precise nature of his poetic achievement. We have to say that overall Auden stands well outside the tradition of high modernism. Four of the poets just mentioned belong to that tradition quite obviously; and so does Frost, though in a slightly disguised way.

Auden as a poet is a sort of journalist of the modern experience, but he himself remains apart from that experience. He makes his visits to the Front, so to speak— even as he did in China and Spain—and he files his poetic dispatches to a rather snug audience back home. To the considerable extent that Auden's poetry is related to Victorian light verse (Professor Mendelson's volume contains his Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*), Auden's poetry assumes his audience of like-minded readers. This audience, of presumed sophisticates, stands in relation to events and ideas more or less as the poet does. Thus Auden is, broadly, Horatian. One point of the Horatian is that it is not Virgilian: Horace writes epistles and not epics, and he does not internalize such complexities as Virgil's. One point of Auden is that, analogously, he is not Eliot. In no sense is Eliot's poetry "social verse" in the Horatian manner.

The assumption of the high modernist is that order has collapsed in a comprehensive way, and in

every realm except one. It has collapsed religiously, metaphysically, morally, and socially. Only in the realm of art can order be sustained, and is sustained there with great difficulty. Art is the last refuge of the Logos. (Of course, Eliot did arrive at Christianity, but very importantly via correspondences with linguistic and artistic experience.) For the high modernist, artistic order is a matter of extreme exigency. Each line, each metaphor, each suggestion arrives under immense pressure. “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?” Or: “What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands/ What water lapping the bow ... ?” These are not reports from the Front. These are the Front itself. High modernism tends toward concentration and difficulty. Its presumed audience is anything but snug back in London. In fact, London Bridge is falling down, falling down... . The real war is not over there somewhere in China or in Spain. The audience must be able at least to imagine a cosmic chill.

Auden does write often of this or that catastrophe, but as “current events,” and he brings back his reports to an audience secure in its “sophistication.” There is also an unmistakable note of play here, as if when drastic experience occurs it does so to the sensibility of schoolboy chums.

Our hopes were still set on the spies’ career,
Prizing the glasses and the old felt hat,
And all the secrets we discovered were
Extraordinary and false.

That, from 1926. The enjambment between lines three and four is effective, and the let-down joke isn’t bad. But other poems play the same tune, as in the widely anthologized “Secret Agent” from about the same time:

Control of the passes was, he saw, the key
To this new district, but who would get it?
He, the trained spy, had walked into the trap
For a bogus guide, seduced by the old tricks.

That’s fun, but there really isn’t much more to say about it, is there? This is the Byronic Auden, the Auden who “sat in one of the dives/ On Fifty-second Street,/ Uncertain and afraid” as the panzers crashed into Poland. (About his omission of this and other poems from his final canon a comment in a moment.) This Byronic Auden is a persistent figure in his poetry until his more domestic last phase. It does not lack a certain understated power:

It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens,
Hearing the frogs exhaling from the pond ...
Season when lovers and writers find
An altering speech for altering things ...

Yes, things are bad, and the poet-as-journalist does touch ordinary life. We have all read the bad headlines and taken a walk in the public gardens. These certainly are not Marvell’s gardens or the garden in “Burnt Norton,” but our ordinary garden, and ordinariness has its power. Auden’s language barely nudges itself out of banality and into poetry, but it does do so. Still—and maybe this is its ironic point—the poem itself really cannot offer that “altering language” it talks about. There are no Nightingales or Golden Birds in these gardens. We, Auden says, cannot sing. That is one part of our pathos. We are little more than “children afraid of the night,/ Who have never been happy or good,” as Auden wrote in another poem. It is troubling to ponder the sort of acquiescence Auden expected from his “sophisticated” audience for lines like that, for that kind of self-pity.

But let us take Auden at his very best. Everyone, I think, could list perhaps thirty poems by Auden that we would not willingly do without, and perhaps a dozen that are commonly considered part of the twentieth-century canon. In that latter category I doubt that anyone would argue against the inclusion of “*Musee des Beaux Arts*,” one of Auden’s most anthologized poems. In fact, it is an emblematic poem for Auden. He placed it first in his *Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (1945), a defining volume, implicitly asserting his bid to become the great poet at the war’s end. “About suffering they were never wrong,/ The Old Masters: how well they understood/ Its human position, how it takes place/ While someone else is eating or opening a window ...” This is Auden at his best. Its idea has merit. Yes, life goes on, and there will be Monday and Tuesday after Easter Sunday. In the poem this idea seems perfectly realized, though it is a limited idea in itself.

And yet we run up against something that happens often in Auden, even thus at his best. When you have read the poem, what more is there to say about it? Does it open up into further reaches of reflection? To be sure, the Auden audience would be charmed by its own agreement with the idea in this poem, but like the ship that “Had somewhere to go and sailed calmly on” after witnessing the fall of Icarus, they, too, would sail calmly on. Moreover, the poem itself is so assured, so “complete,” that it would seem unmannerly to point out that the Old Masters knew no such thing, that the poem rests on a single canvas by Brueghel, and that the Old Masters were attuned, certainly, to the extraordinary. They painted madonnas, crucifixions, martyrdoms, Annunciations, John the Baptists, even the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—just to mention a few items. The “*Musee des Beaux Arts*” is light verse, social verse really, and it expects uncritical agreement from its presumably charmed audience.

Certainly, no one in that audience would be rude enough to say that this poem, standing there at the forefront of the *Collected Poetry*, can be read as an emblem of Auden as a poet, proclaiming him no Icarus—and, indeed, he isn’t. He will not rise too near the sun. He writes about many Icari—Yeats, Freud, Melville, Voltaire, Homer, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, and, yes, Henry James—but he is not of their company. When he writes on them, his poems are reports about them, and comfortable ones at that.

Apropos of “*Musee des Beaux Arts*,” I said that such successful Auden poems as this undertake an idea, present it, and insofar as it goes leave nothing more to be said. For successful Auden poems of this sort, try such a sample as “*The Fall of Rome*,” “*The Shield of Achilles*,” “*Fleet Visit*.” These are all rather late in his career, but nothing has changed; they are achieved and complete. Nothing more can be said. After you have read Yeats’s “*Among School Children*,” Eliot’s “*Gerontion*,” or Frost’s “*Birches*,” there is a lot more to be thought and said. These are poems of a different kind, achievements of a different order.

Even at his very best, in poems everyone agrees represent Auden at his best, there are peculiar problems. One can address them by beginning with a lesser poem about a huge subject—Montaigne, no less. Well, Auden does like the big subjects. Auden essentially writes “social poetry,” but in what society, for what audience, is it acceptable to write about Montaigne this way?

Outside his library window he could see
A gentle landscape terrified of grammar,
Cities where lisping was compulsory
And provinces where it was death to stammer.

The hefty lay exhausted. O it took
This donnish undersexed conservative ...

Wait a minute. On that last point, has anyone in his audience read “*On Experience*”? Much of what

I've quoted here depends for its effectiveness on an unjustified "sentiment of knowledge": the references to "grammar," "lispering," and "stammering," for example. The poem virtually depends upon these supposed historical "allusions."

That is a minor Auden poem, but everyone agrees that his elegy on Yeats is major Auden, and there is much to praise here. Yet Auden thought that his audience would let him get away with this:

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well.

That's the last stanza of the poem. "Pardons him"? Pardons Yeats? Yeats needs no pardon from anyone, least of all "Time." And what "views" of these three writers require "pardon"? They had hundreds of different "views." The nouns "Kipling" and "Claudel" are mere conventional poker chips here, but Auden's audience knew what to think before they read the stanza. And so it goes.

With the excuse that these episodes are not recorded in the Auden biographies, I will append a personal note about him. Auden was highly visible in Manhattan during the 1950s and 1960s, but the first time I engaged him in genuine conversation was during his visit in 1963 to Dartmouth, where by that time I was teaching. A previous visit by Auden had been a legendary disaster, but in 1963 he was on his best behavior, and was entirely charming. His only public responsibility was a "conversation" in a *gemütlich* room with a smallish group of students and faculty. He read some of his poems and commented on them, answered questions, and joked pleasantly. Throughout, his manner was Oxford and self-deprecating, always the master poet as worldly friend.

How much had he been influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr? "I once read a great deal of him. He has a sound sense of human limitation. No utopias. I admired him greatly. Probably didn't understand a word of him." Why did he go to Spain during the war? "Awfully young then, you know." I tried out a defense of "Spain 1937" and "September 1, 1939" as dramatic monologues from that period that expressed what one shocked individual at that time might have felt. Auden was firm, or, at least as firm as his manner would permit. He took the position that there were lines in the poems that might be a "bad influence," no doubt meaning the one in "Spain" about the "necessary murder." Later, in his forward to a 1965 collection, he took another position, that he had not really meant these poems, that they were only rhetoric. I think them good Byronic period pieces. But so that afternoon of 1963 went.

Auden's previous visit to Dartmouth, I was given to understand, had been very different. It must have occurred in the late 1940s when he was working on *The Enchafèd Flood*. He had given one of those "conversations," and then gone on to a faculty cocktail party at which he drank a notable number of martinis, and then on to a faculty dinner at which he drank more martinis and a lot of wine.

When he arrived at the auditorium where he was to deliver a paper on Romanticism, he tripped over the top step while mounting to the stage and his typescript spilled across the platform. Putting the pages back in correct order was of course beyond him. So, with his Oxford aplomb, he pulled them together out of order and read whatever page came to the surface. The audience thought the essay had many fine insights, but was a bit lacking in structure, though charming.

Notes

[Go to the top of the document.](#)

1. *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse. Volume I: 1926–1938* by W. H. Auden, edited by Edward Mendelson; Princeton University Press, 952 pages, \$59.50. [Go back to the text.](#)

Jeffrey Hart's most recent book is *The Making of the American Conservative Mind* (ISI).

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