NOTE TO USERS

SACRED PLAY

Parable, Morality, Myth

W.H. Auden as Dramatist

by

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Credo ut itelligam

--St. Anselm

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1945, in a small theatre at Swarthmore College, several dozen spectators gathered for a student revival of a rarely performed play, cowritten by one of the most celebrated poets of the twentieth century. The anticipation was profoundly heightened by the fact that the poet, who was then teaching at Swarthmore, was set to perform a small, silent role in the production. Near the beginning of Act Two, the audience gazed intently at the tiny stage, on which a rickety set had been erected. The set represented a dank chamber in an isolated Asian monastery, which sat atop a great glacier near the summit of an ominous mountain called F-6. The gloomy, vaulted chamber was illuminated by the feeble glow of a few flickering church candles. Five mountain-climbers bounded nervously about the room, trying their best to conceal a growing and combustible anxiety. From outside the chamber, the climbers heard the haunting sounds of a strange, funereal chant and watched, through the vaulted arches in the back wall, the slow procession snaking its way through the adjacent cloister. One of the jitterty climbers then spoke the following words:

> I've read about these rites, somewhere. They're supposed to propitiate the spirits which guard the house of the dead.[1]

The words are revealing--they reflect the great poet's unabashed reverence for a deceased ancestry and the formal rites designed to resurrect their writhing, restless spirits. A few moments later, a cowled monk emerged from the darkness. He moved slowly, deliberately; his halting steps and mannered gestures invoking the solemnity and hoary seriousness of a sanctified ritual. He carried in his hands a glowing crystal which emitted a faint, bluish light. Through the teasingly small opening of his limp hood, one could make out the beginnings of what the English sculptor

[1] W.H. Auden, ***The Ascent of F-6. The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Plays and Other Dramatic writings (1928-1938)***, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 323.

Henry Moore would describe as the "monumental ruggedness of his face, its deep furrows like plough marks crossing a field."[2]

By all accounts, W.H. Auden derived immense pleasure from playing the silent role of the monk in the Swarthmore production of ***The Ascent of F-6***, a play he co-wrote with his childhood friend Christopher Isherwood. In many ways, the role and the scene are embematic of all that Auden found valuable in theatrical performance--it features a formal, sacred rite, designed and performed for a practical purpose, and actively invoking "the spirits which guard the house of the dead." In his essay "Yeats as an Example," Auden writes: "In poetry as in life, to lead one's own life means to relive the lives of one's parents and through them, of all one's ancestor's; the duty of the present is neither to copy nor to deny the past but to resurrect it."[3]

Like many of his Modernist contemporaries, Auden was profoundly influenced by a wide variety of antecedent forms. His decidedly anti-Romantic posture favored what John Blair describes as "orientation to the poetic tradition over self-generated originality, self-contained poetic structure over personal catharsis, and conscious craftsmanship over inspiration."[4] This unwavering respect for literary precursors, coupled with an unabashed disdain for the inward-looking nature of the Romantic sensibility, led Auden to marshal a significant array of traditional forms in support of his own political leanings, philosophical presuppositions, theological beliefs, and poetic aims. It should be noted, however, that Auden and the Modernists' devotion to precursory traditions was not rooted in a desire to slavishly imitate them, but, rather, to judiciously appropriate them in order to assemble a fragmentary pastiche that would both reflect the fractured, formless modern world and resuscitate the perceived order of a lost golden age.

The manifold goals of Modernism were articulated by many of its

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[2] Henry Moore, ***W.H. Auden: A Tribute***, ed. Stephen Spender (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1974) 171.

[3] W.H. Auden, "Yeats as an Example," ***Kenyon Review*** (Spring 1948), 188.

[4] John Blair, ***The Poetic Art of W.H. Auden*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) 14.

practitioners, most notably T.S. Eliot, who was the first to publish Auden outside of university walls. But while Eliot and his teachings served as a lasting influence on the young poet, Auden's relationship with Modernism's principle tenets was unstable, constantly evolving, at times combative. The result of Auden's ultimate deference to his own aesthetic and philosophical instincts (as opposed to simple adherence to prefabricated theoretical doctrines) was a large, eclectic body of work which many critics and scholars have found intellectually fickle and stylistically inconsistent. Roger Kimball, for example, has argued that Auden's "movement from lyric isolation to deliberate didacticism" is an unfortunate trajectory which "has to do with what we might call diminishing poetic tautness."[5] Kimball invokes Phillip Larkin's assertion that Auden became an "unserious" poet who "no longer touches our imaginations."[6] Conversely, much scholarship has concentrated on those common formal and thematic characteristics which permeate and bind the various components of Auden's entire poetic oeuvre and contribute to its unity and continued relevance. In his ***The Poetic Art of W.H. Auden***, Blair has passionately insisted "that there is a fundamental wholeness and consistency in his poetry--considered as poetry. Obviously, contradictions abound in the shifting themes and poetic styles that are so prominent at first glance. But in the poetic means he has brought to bear on basic artistic problems, Auden has been consistent enough to justify speaking of his characteristic 'mode' of poetry, as opposed to his various 'manners.'"[7]

A significant part of Auden's entire corpus are the plays and libretti written between 1928-1973--many in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood and Chester Kallman. As a dramatist, Auden cultivated his own self-conscious placement within drama's evolutionary continuum, and operated from a thoughtful, sophisticated theoretical foundation; one well-steeped in the history and traditions of dramatic literature. He was, he believed, responding to a particular and peculiar set of historical conditions which both affected his world-view and informed his artistic

[5] Roger Kimball, "The Permanent Auden," ***The New Criterion*** (May 1999) 15.

[6] Ibid. 17.

[7] Blair, ***Poetic***, 6.

conceits. Hoping to reinvigorate the once vital influence of poetic verse drama, for example, he attacked what he believed to be the shortcomings of contemporaneous practitioners of the form. In a review of an anthology entitled ***Modern Poetic Drama***, he described the collection as being

> like an exhibition of perpetual motion models. Here they all are, labeled Phillips, Davidson, Yeats, some on the largest scale, some on the tiniest, some ingenious in design, some beautifully made, all suffering from only one defect--they won't go...modern English poetic drama has been of three kinds: the romantic sham-Tudor which has occasionally succeeded for a short time on the strength of the spectacle; the cosmic-philosophical which theatrically has always been a complete flop; and the highbrow chamber-music drama, artistically much the best, but a somewhat etiolated blossom. Drama is so essentially a social art that it is difficult to believe that the poets are really satisfied with this solution.[8]

From this perspective, Auden set about to resuscitate the once grand tradition of English verse drama while acknowledging and embracing the theatre's inherently communal, stylized nature.

Auden's drama remains disturbingly neglected in the theatre community, marginalized, perhaps, as a result of marked discomfort with his subtle blend of disparate poetic, theatrical, and dramaturgical principles, his decidedly overt brand of theatricality, and his ostensibly Christian, parabolic didacticism. Furthermore, critical analyses of his plays and libretti most often concentrate on their respective positions and relative merits within the Auden canon, but tend to ignore their proper placement in the theatre's broader historical context. Despite high-profile theatrical collaborations with such eminent artists as Igor Stravinsky, Benjamin Britten, and Christopher Isherwood, Auden's contributions to the theatre have been dismissed as negligible.

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[8] Edward Mendelson, ***W.H. Auden: Plays and Other Dramatic Writings, 1928-1938*** (Princeton: Pronceton University Press, 1988) xiii-xiv.

Any detailed and comprehensive treatment of Auden's drama, however, will expose a rich, textured, imaginatively conceived set of structural and thematic designs which draw, deftly and liberally, from a wide array of precursory and contemporaneous literary/dramatic material, including, most notably, works from the Classical, Medieval, German Expressionist, and Modern Epic traditions, and a set of still relevant philosophical propositions which attempt to impose unity and order on an increasingly fractured civilization.

In ***The Idea of a Theater***, Francis Ferguson describes the climate in which the concept of a poetic theatre was self-consciously resucitated:

> The most considerable effort in our times to make a poetry of the theater [sic] comparable to that of the masterpieces of the tradition, centered in Paris during the 'twenties and early 'thirties. In that brief period, in the center of Western Europe, the theater lived "at the height of its times": it was contemporary with the thought of Bergson, Valery, and Maritain, the "metapoetic" labors of Joyce, the painting of Picasso, the music of Stravinsky and Milhaud. It enjoyed the resources of the Russian and Swedish ballets, of the never-quite-broken French theatrical tradition, and of the patient labors of M. Jacques Copeau of the Theatre du Vieux Colombier. This theatrical activity was centered in Paris but it was shared by many artists from other countries, some of whom did not even live and work there. Eliot, Lorca, and the later Yeats all belong in one way or another to this movement--this quest for a contemporary poetry of the theater.[9]

Auden was one of those "many artists from other countries" who developed a like-minded sensibility--one which was to assume a wide-angled view of the human experience, an unabashedly theatrical mode of expression, and a classical aesthetic posture. In his analysis of the poetic drama of Jean Cocteau, Andre Obey, and T.S.

[9] Francis Ferguson, ***The Idea of a Theater*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949) 207.

Eliot, Ferguson describes a set of dramaturgical aims which could well be applied to Auden. After acknowledging that the respective works under consideration "are quite different from each other: integral and incommensurable as works of art in their own right," he proceeds to outline their unarguable similarities:

> But at this distance it appears that they accept certain problems and intentions in common. They are all strictly after Wagner, in the sense of having followed him to the end of his road, and then sought a further path beyond him. Like Wagner, they reject as meaningless and deathly the standard images and stereotyped dramaturgy of the commercial theater. Like him they seek a renewal of the dramatic art in the more direct modes of action and awareness associated in our time with poetry in the widest sense, and in other periods with myth, ritual, and traditional (as opposed to machine-made) popular art. But, having seen and experienced the finality of ***Tristan***, they refuse, as it were, to join the cult: they all reject the prophetic, revivalistic, or hypnotic attitudes and strategies of Wagner, in the name of the intelligence, the classic spirit, or the integrity of Art. If the cliches of the tyrannical market are false, and the ever-present clue of passion--the nocturnal world, the different tyranny of ***Tristan***--is illusory also, where, in the public consciousness of the commercial city, is the art of drama to be placed? The only plea upon which it may claim to exist would seem to be--on the analogy of music and painting--the plea of "art."[10]

The "plea of art" saturates Auden's entire corpus. Beneath the political, moral, and philosophical pretensions of his stage works lies the stubborn desire to be recognized and appreciated from aesthetic and formalistic perspectives. As Jose Ortega y Gassett so eloquently observes, "Even though pure art may be impossible there doubtless can prevail a tendency toward a purification of art. Such

[10] Ibid. 207.

a tendency would effect a progressive elimination of the human, all too human, elements predominant in romantic and naturalistic production. And in this process a point can be reached in which human content has grown so thin that it is negligible.We then have an art which can be comprehended only by people possessed of the peculiar gift of artistic sensibility--an art for artists and not for the masses, for 'quality' and not for hoi polloi."[11] While many might wince at the baldly elitist character of such sentiments--including Auden himself, who publically espoused the civic reponsibilities of the artist in general and the communal nature of theatre in particular--there is no denying the high premium Auden placed on a purely aesthetic engagement with a given work of art.

Wystan Hugh Auden was born on February 21, 1907 in York, England to Dr. George Augustus Auden and his wife, Constance. Dr. Auden was a well-respected physician with wide-ranging interests. In addition to his medical practice, Dr. Auden became well-versed in the Classics and Icelandic sagas--a passion he would bequeath to young Wystan. In his biography ***Auden***, Richard Davenport-Hines writes:

> His father's love of Nordic history had an early and lasting influence on young Wystan's imaginative development. He identified himself with northerness, and constructed a world of private associations around latitudes and longitudes: his artistic, moral and sensual criteria were all related to his personalised reordering of the planet.[12]

Davenport-Hines quotes Auden's own descriptions of how his imagination was, in part, formed by geography:

> My feelings have been oriented by the compass as far back as I can

[11] Jose Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art," ***Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski***, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974) 759.

[12] Richard Davenport-Hines, ***Auden*** (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955)16.

> remember. Though I was brought up on both, Norse mythology has always appealed to me infinitely more than Greek; Hans Andersen's ***The Snow Queen*** and George Macdonald's ***The Princess and the Goblin*** were my favorite fairy stories, and years before I ever went there, the North of England was the Never-Never Land of my dreams. Nor did those feelings disappear when I finally did; to this day Crewe railway Junction marks the wildly exciting frontier where the alien South ends and the North, my world, begins.[13]

Dr. Auden also cultivated an interest in archaeology and edited a handbook for the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He maintained a large an eclectic library, with which Wystan would become intimately familiar. On his father's shelves Wystan found a diverse collection of materials, "the nature and scope of which, he was to later claim, afterwards dictated his own adult taste. His father's shelves contained few novels, but a heterogenous collection of books on many subjects, with the consequence that Wystan's adult reading was, according to him, 'wide and casual rather than scholarly, and in the main non-literary.'"[14]

In 1908, Dr. Auden took a substantial pay cut to become the first School Medical Officer in Birmingham, where Wystan and his two older brothers would spend many formative years. After the outbreak of World War I, Dr. Auden joined the war effort as an officer in the Royal Army Medical Corps, and spent five years abroad in Egypt, Gallipoli, and France. According to Osborne, "George Auden's absence during those psychologically important years, combined with the fact that Constance Auden was the stronger personality of the two parents, led to Wystan's drawing closer to his mother. She was capable, at times, of behaving rather oddly. When Wystan was six years old, she taught him the words and music of the love duet from Wagner's ***Tristan and Isolde***, which mother and son sang together on

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[13] Ibid. 17.

[14] Charles Osborne, ***W.H. Auden: The Life of a Poet*** (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979) 14.

several occasions, Wystan taking the role of Isolde"[15]--the beginnings, perhaps, of what would become a passionate and lifelong devotion to opera. His older brother John remembered family vacations during the war years, replete with the kinds of encounters which were to have a deep and long-lasting impression on Wystan--experiences which would inform his burgeoning artistry:

> From 1915 to 1918 our holidays were spent in Dyffryn, Rhayader, Monmouth, Bradwell in Derrbyshire, Clithero, Cleeve Hill and Totland Bay, with occasional visits to Horninglow, near Burton-on-Trent, where our paternal grandmother lived in a house surrounded by poplars. There were long walks over the moors and bicycle rides. We studied menhirs and stone circles, gold and lead mines, blue-john caverns, pre-Norman crosses and churches...We had to go to church twice on Sundays which created a side interest as we had developed a graded scale of degrees of Anglo-Catholic ritual; most of the churches, especially in Wales, alas from our point of view, falling far below the practice of St Albans, Holborn, which was the church we attended while visiting the aunts in their Brooke Street apartments, and which had become the standard.[16]

Lead mining and its attendant equipment were a great source of fascination to Wystan. In addition to the aforementioned fairy-tales, some of his favorite books from childhood included ***Machinery for Metalliferous Mines*** and ***Lead and Zinc Ores of Northumberland and Alston Moor***. Indicative of this fascination are the following lines from his poem "Letter to Lord Byron":

> Long, long ago, when I was only four,

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[15] Ibid. 11.

[16] John Auden, "A brother's viewpoint," ***W.H. Auden: A Tribute***, ed. Stephen Spender (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1975) 26.

Going towards my grandmother, the line
Passed through a coal-field. From the corridor
I watched it pass with envy, thought 'How fine!
Oh how I wish that situation mine.'
Tramlines and slagheaps, pieces of machinery,
That was, and still is, my ideal scenery.[17]

Of this formative period, Davenport-Hines writes:

> From the age of six to twelve...[Auden] was "the sole autocratic inhabitant of a dream country of lead mines, narrow-gauge tramways, and overshot wheels". He elaborated what he called in 1965 "a private sacred world, the basic elements of which were a landscape, northern and limestone, and an industry, lead-mining". Under his self-imposed rules, the young Auden could incorporate real objects like turbines but not wizardly devices or imaginary inventions of his own. Though this "sacred world contained no human beings" and "was constructed for and inhabited by myself alone", Auden needed help in its construction. His father procured textbooks, maps, catalogues, guidebooks and photographs for him, and took him down mines.[18]

Auden's preoccupation with practical machinery is akin to his interest in the mechanics of poetic composition. To Auden, poetry was, first and foremost, a practical mechanism, designed and built by a learned craftsman toward a specific and pragmatic end. Although his expressed purposes would change throughout his literary career, his deep devotion to the formal, structural components of the poetic apparatus remained constant. His college classmate Gabriel Carritt recalled how

[17] W.H. Auden, "Letter to Lord Byron," ***W.H. Auden: Collected Poems***, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage International, 1991) 88-89.

[18] Davenport-Hines, ***Auden***, 19.

"[Auden] was vastly read and greatly interested in prosody and the mechanics of poetry"[19] --Auden himself would one day boast that he had written in every verse form contained in George Saintsbury's monumental ***Historical Manual of English Prosody***.

Likewise, the "pre-Norman crosses" and "Anglo-Catholic ritual" to which John Auden refers are reflected in Wystan's lifelong love of sacremental worship and its attendant formal trappings. For Auden, the church and its various rites and ceremonies were a neverending source of aesthetic inspiration, as well as a constant, comforting reminder of a unified, orderly, all-encompassing theology--one which served as a majestic salve for a fragmented and dislocated contemporary world. He would later abandon the church and its teachings, but only temporarily. Once the promise of a left-wing political order began to disintegrate and the horrors of fascism began to emerge, he returned to the High Anglicanism of his youth. Of his much publicized reconversion in 1940, Anne Fremantle recalls:

> When we met, I asked him what made him come back to God, and he replied "I was always very lucky with God. You see, I was a choirboy, and so I always enjoyed singing, and I was a boat-boy. So even when I got bored with God, I always enjoyed his worship." "What made you come back?" I repeated, and he replied "Partly Charles Williams[20], though we never discussed it. And then Hitler. At sixteen I had no need for a theological basis for my nice liberal views--everybody had them. But then when Hitler came along there had to be some reason why he was so utterly wrong. Also, when I was in Spain during the Civil War and all the churches were shut, I realized I didn't like it. I wanted them to be open. I didn't at this point want particularly to pray myself, but I wanted people to be able to."

[19] Gabriel Carritt, "A Friend of the Family," in Spender, ***Tribute***, 48.

[20] Charles Williams wrote a theological work entitled ***The Descent of the Dove***, which was to have a huge impact on Auden.

> My own reason for "verting"--that I am an historical and linguistic snob, preferring a faith that goes back nearly two thousand years to one which stems from about 1500, and to sing the liturgy, that is, public worship, in an unchanging language, rather than in a language subject to the vagaries of slang and fashion--were approved by Wystan. In fact, he was heartbroken by what he called the "mucking up" of the Book of Common Prayer as I was by the change from Latin to the vernacular.[21]

From 1925-1928, Auden read English at Oxford University. He was a precocious student who quickly established himself as a formidable intellect and charismatic presence. Oxford provided Auden a forum within which he could cultivate his teacherly instincts. Sir John Betjeman, the Poet Laureate, recounted his earliest impressions of Auden:

> When we first met we were Oxford undergraduates...I felt I knew as much about poetry as a schoolmaster, nearly as much as a don and certainly much more than my fellow undergraduates. Witness then my horror on being introduced to a tall milky-skinned and coltish member of "The House" (Christ Church), who contradicted all my statements about poetry, who did not think Lord Alfred Douglas was a better sonneteer than Shakespeare, who read Ebenezer Elliott and Phillip Bourke Marston and other poets whom I regarded as my special province and who was not in the least interested in the grand friends I had made in the House...who dismissed the Sitwells in a sentence and really admired the boring Anglo-Saxon poets like Beowulf whom we had read in English school; and who was a close friend of John Bryson and Nevill Coghill, real dons who read Anglo-Saxon, Gutnish, Finnish and probably Swedish and Faroese as easily

[21] Anne Fremantle, "Reality and Religion," in Spender, ***Tribute***, 89.

> as I read the gossip column of the ***Cherwell*** of which I was then an editor. And yet there was an oracular quality about this tough youth in corduroys that compelled my attention. He was very attractive and quite unselfconscious and already a born schoolmaster and lecturer.[22]

Auden's schoolmasterly quality, remarked upon by most all of his friends and colleagues, would manifest itself in his plays and libretti--a didactic approach to dramatic composition which issued from an inherently pedantic personality.

In 1927, Auden submitted a collection of his poems to the publishers Faber and Faber: "T.S. Eliot, who then read poetry for the firm of which he later became a director, took a good three months to reply, and then returned the poems to Auden with a letter of qualified rejection: 'I am very slow to make up my mind. I do not feel that any of the enclosed is quite right, but I should be interested to follow your work.'"[23] But not three years later, in January 1930, Eliot published ***Paid on Both Sides***, Auden's very first play, in ***The Criterion***, Eliot's quarterly arts journal. Although never performed, ***Paid on Both Sides*** marked the beginning of Auden's lifelong association with poetic verse drama.

In 1932, Rupert Doone, a young dancer and choreographer founded The Group Theatre, a theatrical enterprise whose purpose was to produce new plays and stylized theatrical works of social and political import. Doone, a vain, ambitious, and idealistic man, had danced for Sergei Diaghilev and had staged ballets for both the Sadler's Wells Theatre and Max Reinhardt. In order to insure an auspicious beginning, he enlisted the services of several established and emerging artists, including Tyrone Guthrie and the painter Robert Medley, a close friend of Auden's. In the autumn of 1932, Doone and Medley asked Auden to write plays for the fledgling company. Doone suggested a verse drama based upon the myth of Orpheus, on which Auden immediately began work. In addition to his creative contributions, Auden helped compose the company's various and evolving

[22] Sir John Betjeman, "Oxford," in Spender, ***Tribute***, 43-44.

[23] Osborne, ***Poet***, 57.

manifestos, of which the following policy statement appeared in a production program in 1934:

> the GROUP THEATRE is not an academy, although it trains actors.
>
> It is not a PLAY-PRODUCING SOCIETY, although it produces plays.
>
> It is not a building.
>
> It is a permanent group of actors, painters, singers, dancers, and members of the audience, who do everything, and do it together, and are thus creating a theatre representative of the spirit of to-day.
>
> It trains actors in the belief that by working together they will evolve a common technique with new means of expression.
>
> It produces plays from any age which are of importance to us to-day.
>
> It does not quarrel with the commercial theatre, but as the commercial theatre is not able to achieve these ends it sets out to find a new way.[24]

In 1933, Auden submitted to Doone a short, one-act play called ***The Dance of Death*** . Although a departure from the original Orpheus-based project, ***The Dance of Death*** was enthusiastically accepted by The Group Theatre for production, and was first performed in 1934 to decidedly mixed reviews. Despite the tepid critical response, Auden would continue writing for the theatre until his death in 1973. While the accolades for his poetry collections would establish him as one of

[24] Mendelson, ***Plays***, 492.

the most respected poets of the twentieth century and overshadow his work for the stage, his attendant career as playwright and librettist had begun.

The following study is an attempt to locate, explicate, and analyze three general characteristics which are consistently and manifestly present in Auden's drama: I) a peculiar, idiosyncratic form of parable born from, but not restricted to, political didacticism. In addition to examining the plays' specific utilitarian aims, I will discuss how Auden's various parables and allegorized abstractions are heavily informed by a variety of Classical and Medieval antecedents as well as by many contemporaneous dramatic forms including, most notably, Brecht's Epic Theatre. 2) an unbashed espousal of a Christian-informed morality in theatrical and dramaturgical terms often inspired by Anglo-Catholic liturgy and sacramental ritual. Despite Auden's appreciation of Classical mythology--which he understood as a large scale imitation of fixed, timeless, universal truths regarding man's inability to determine his own fate--we find in his plays and libretti the decidedly Christian assertion that man's destiny is governed by his own choices and subsequent actions which issue from a reasoned morality. Furthermore, his preoccupation with the formal trappings of Christian liturgical worship lent his drama the unmistakable air of sacramental ritual, and led to his deepening interest in opera. His fondness for the pantomime and the music hall and his willingness to be vulgar only highlight, by comparison, those formal characteristics inspired by the High Anglican Mass of which he was so enamored. 3) a strong penchant for archetypal myth which illustrates a variety of timeless and universal themes. Auden, it will be demonstrated, drew a clear line of distinction between parable and myth, and I will first examine both his understanding of their differences and his manner of reconciling their seemingly antithetical functions. Through detailed analysis of specific plays and libretti, I will illustrate how Auden's notion of archetypal myth was a vital and omnipresent component in his drama throughout his career, and how his ultimate acceptance of myth as his primary mode of dramatic expression led naturally to a profound interest in opera. Although contemporaneous dramatists like Samuel Beckett also cultivated a universalist aesthetic, their metaphysical assumptions (and, thus, dramaturgical techniques),

differed greatly from Auden's.

The ostensible disparities amongst the above-mentioned tendencies create dynamic tensions in Auden's drama which issue from an underlying contradiction between the poet's professed (albeit amorphous) philosophical/dramaturgical aims and a set of oppositional tendencies which assert themselves with equal force and conviction. His political parables of the 1930s, for example, often incorporated features indicative of archetypal myth, while his dramaturgical excursions into mythical realms often relied on techniques of parable; the foundations of a Christian world view, furthermore, are omnipresent, even in those dramas written before his much-ballyhooed reconversion to Christianity in 1940.

Finally, it should be noted that Auden's understanding of poetry as a "verbal contraption" first and foremost and his frequent insistence that art is, in the end, rather useless except as an interesting personal diversion seem to place him in alignment with a certain brand of aestheticism. To Auden, art is essentially a form of "play"--a sophisticated game, not necessarily devoid of profundity or the ability to provoke genuine contemplation, but ultimately impotent in affecting any real moral or socio-political change. But, as Professor Mendelson points out, "an aesthetically tolerant reader" who prefers to forego the moral implications of the work in favor of the "pleasurable difficulties" of a purely aesthetic engagement will soon be made uncomfortable by "the moral intelligence of the poems, by their transformation from a beautiful picture into an unflattering mirror."[25] As I will demonstrate, Auden's plays and libretti represent a thorough blend of sophisticated formulaic designs with penetrating responses to subtle and profound political, moral, metaphysical, and aesthetic questions.

[25] Edward Mendelson, ***Later Auden*** (New York: Farrar,Straus and Giroux,1999) xxii.

CHAPTER ONE

A PUBLIC ART

Politics, Parable, and the Civil Tradition

Drama began as the act of a whole community.

Art is of secondary importance compared with the basic needs of Hunger and Love, but it is not therefore necessarily a dispensable luxury. Its power to deepen understanding, to enlarge sympathy, to strengthen the will to action and, last but not least, to entertain, give it an honourable function in any proper community.

--W.H.Auden

CHAPTER ONE

A PUBLIC ART

Politics, Parable, and the Civil Tradition

Stephen Spender once wrote, "genuinely didactic by nature [Auden] is one of the outstanding teachers of his time."[26] Auden's unrelenting didacticism permeated most every aspect of both his personal and professional lives. Always the teacher, his good-natured pedantry strongly asserted itself in his drama--especially those political parables written for the stage in the 1930s. The social, utilitarian goals of these parables stand in stark contrast to Auden's latent aestheticism. But while he would one day argue the "uselessness" of art, his devotion to parable as an effective teaching tool and his subsequent mastery of its various techniques betray an underlying, if unrealized, desire to affect social change.

By the time Auden wrote ***Paid on Both Sides***[27], his first play, in 1928, he had already immersed himself in the principle tenets of English Modernism. Modernism's self-appointed spokesmen had always positioned themselves in opposition to the Romantic zeitgeist which, despite growing skepticism, still flourished in the first quarter of the twentieth century. As John Blair explains, T.S. Eliot, of whom the young Auden was a devoted disciple, conceived of poetry in a way which might be divided into three major areas of concern:

> (1) the relation of the poet to the body of existing poetry--the problem of tradition; (2) the relation of the poet as a man to his poem as an aesthetic artifact--the problem of personality; and (3) the relation of the poem to the audience--the problem of communication. Eliot's position in all three of these categories may be roughly described as "anti-Romantic" and as formulated in reaction against dominant literary

[26] Blair, ***Poetic***, 35.

[27] Mendelson, ***Plays***, 14.

> notions of the nineteenth century. Eliot, and Auden after him, favors orientation to the poetic tradition over self-generated originality, self-contained poetic structure over personal catharsis, and conscious craftsmanship over inspiration.[28]

But despite the Modernists' anti-Romantic posturings, their poetry is still marked, to no small degree, by significant remnants of Romanticism's frontal assault on idiomatic norms and formulaic conventions; most conspicuous, perhaps, are a pervading sense of isolation and dislocation, an omnipresent irony, and an unflagging faith in the ability of the poetic imagination to create and/or restore order. As David Spurr writes in his analysis of Modernism's debts to the Romantic tradition:

> modern poetry not only reflects the historical background of Romanticism but also extends and transforms the basic principles of Romanticism: sensation as primary experience, transcendence of time and space, organic form, the sympathetic and visionary imagination. Apart from these fundamental values, modern poetry also carries forward certain Romantic conventions of poetic practice: the enlivening attention to concrete particulars, the uses of suggestion and ambiguity, the spontaneity and naturalness of diction and syntax, the merging of tenor and vehicle, the fusion of literal and figurative language, and the correspondences, in the sense implied by Baudelaire's poem of that title, among different objects in the natural landscape.[29]

Auden, however, despite early allegiances to Modernist doctrine, was to sever any ties which he believed bound modern poetry to the solipsistic, isolationist tendencies of the Romantic tradition--a poetry "in exile from the shared life of the

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[28] Blair, ***Poetic***, 13.

[29] David Spurr, "Eliot, Modern Poetry, and the Romantic Tradition," ***Approaches to Teaching Eliot's Poetry and Plays***, ed. Jewel Spears Brooker (New York: MLA, 1988) 33-34.

city."[30] He strove instead to break out of the personal realms of self-analysis and self-expression (which marked his earliest poetry) in favor of a more public and pragmatic approach to poetic composition. This led to a profound reformulation of the nature and purpose of his art.

In order to contextualize Auden's dilemma, Edward Mendelson draws a clear line of distinction between the vatic and civil traditions.[31] Vatic poetry, according to Mendelson, disenfranchises itself from public concerns and the moral, religious, socio-political foundations upon which a given civilization or tradition rests. Instead, it centralizes the internal dilemmas of the individualized personality as it struggles in a restrictive, suffocating, formless, and/or hostile environment. The primacy of the prophetic visions, heroic battles (actual or psychological), and expressions of feeling of the individual artist-genius displaces any responsibility, or even interest in, the pragmatic concerns of the community at large. Civil poetry, in contrast, subordinates the internal life, idiosyncratic longings, and potentially unique voice of the individual poet in favor of more practical contributions to the commonweal. Its purpose is predicated upon the particular needs of a given community rather than the more personal desire for self-expression.

Civil tendencies have, of course, been manifestly present, in greater and lesser degrees, since the beginnings of dramatic expression. The Abydos ritual of ancient Egypt, for example, documented as early as the twelfth century B.C., was not merely a religious ceremony dramatizing a popular myth, but also a communal event with profound civil import, as it was designed, in part, to lend legitimacy to the power of the ruling monarchy. The event dramatized the murder and ultimate resurrection of the Egyptian god Osiris. According to the myth, Osiris, the son of Geb (the earth) and Nut (the sky), married his sister Isis and succeeded his father as supreme ruler. Following Osiris's murder by his brother Set, Horus, the son of Osiris, avenged his father's murder and reclaimed the kingdom. Horus was, in fact, represented in the ritual by the contemporaneous pharoah, making manifest for the

[30] Edward Mendelson, ***Early Auden*** (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983) xx.

[31] Ibid. xv-xix.

entire community the unchallengable sense of continuity which linked the original Horus to their current ruler. In this way, the ritual self-consciously contributed to the justification and maintenance of the community's political and social order.

In that same spirit, we find in John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin's ***Nothing To Do With Dionysus?*** a collection of essays reminding us of the larger civic contexts in which Classical Greek dramas were first presented and the utilitarian functions they, in turn, attempted to serve. In his "The Theater of Polis," Oddone Longo describes the "collective character of ancient drama and its pertinence to the citizen community."[32] According to Longo, the various dramatic performances of ancient Athens

> were not conceivable as autonomous productions, in some indifferent point in time or space, but were firmly located within the framework of a civic festival, at a time specified according to the community calender, and in a special place expressly reserved for this function. This place, which was the scene of the collective festival, provided a proper home not only for the dramatic contest but also for other celebrations, which were no less strictly tied to the civic system: at the City Dionysia, honors voted to citizens and foreigners were proclaimed in the theater; the tribute from Athens' allies was exhibited in the theater; the orphans of war who had been raised at the city's expense were paraded in the theater in full panoply in the year when they reached their majority. These rituals were understood to be celebrations of the *polis* and of its ideology, and they constituted the immediate framework of the plays. The community of the plays' *spectators*, arranged in the auditorium according to tribal order (no different from what happened on the field of battle or in the burial of the war dead), was not distinct from the community of *citizens*. The

[32] Oddone Longo, "The Theater of Polis," ***Nothing to Do With Dionysus?***, ed., John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 15.

> dramatic spectacle was one of the rituals that deliberately aimed at maintaining social identity and reinforcing the cohesion of the group.[33]

Yet it was not merely the circumstances under which the plays were produced that lent the dramas their "pertinence to the citizen community." In "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology," Simon Goldhill explains how the thematic conceits of the plays, as composed by socially aware dramatists, were also inextricably linked to the civil concerns of the community at large. After dismissing critical theories which attempt to disregard the connections between Greek drama and its immediate socio-political contexts, Goldhill analyzes the plays in terms of how they "seem to question, examine, and often subvert the language of the city's order."[34] By citing some of the same festival activities to which Longo makes reference, Goldhill first describes how the various ceremonies contributed to "the city's sense of itself,"[35] and created a certain brand of cohesion and common purpose. Many of the individuals honored in pre-theatre ceremonies, for example, were chosen for recognition based upon the great sacrifices they had made on behalf of Athens. He then goes on to explain how many of the Greek dramas which followed the ceremonies challenged and/or undermined generally accepted notions of self-sacrifice and good citizenship. Antigone, for example, must choose between her passionate devotion to her brother and the general health of her *polis*, while Ajax, an acknowledged hero of the Trojan conflict, is portrayed as a grand warrior who subverts traditional codes of conduct in pursuit of his own selfish desires. In this way, the ambiguous, political nuances of the plays are animated by the particularities of the civil context in which they were first performed. Note how this manner of interpretation does not necessarily reinforce traditional codes of conduct, but, rather, challenges them--a characteristic germane to any discussion of Auden's drama.

The tensions descibed by Goldhill betray two oppositional tendencies

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[33] Ibid. 15.

[34] Simon Goldhill, "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology" in Winkler, ***Dionysos***, 114.

[36] Ibid. 14.

inherent in didactic approaches to dramatic composition and presentation--competing impulses which Auden would have to negotiate in his own writings. The tensions ran parallel to (or, perhaps, issued from) two distinct modes of education which collided in fifth-century B.C. Athens. More conservative elements of the Athenian community insisted that the inculcation of an accepted set of theological, political, and moral values was the purpose of a sound education, while educators emerging from the sophistic tradition, which included Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, believed that nurturing a student's ability to think critically was the proper aim of the teacher. The former was predicated upon the strict maintenance of the staus quo, the latter concerned with challenging accepted premises in order to prove or disprove their validity. As we shall see, Auden was to cultivate his skill in marrying these two ostensibly antithetical modes of instruction by creating drama which combined cold intellection with a professed adherence to both political and religious orthodoxies.

Medieval theatre, from which Auden also drew great inspiration, was no less imbued with a decidedly civil and didactic sensibility. In order to fully comprehend Auden's debts to the Medieval tradition, it is necessary to confront some common misconceptions regarding the alleged naivete of the Medieval world-view and its various theatrical manifestations. Dismissed by generations of scholars as merely a crude precursor to the great Elizabethan dramas which would soon follow, Medieval drama was said to be an unsophisticated, popular vehicle for the transmission of Christian dogma to a largely illiterate lay community. In fact, Medieval theatre betrays a startling complexity, both in terms of its formal designs and in the philosophical justifications of the theology it unabashedly espouses. Firstly, the idea that the intellectual foundations for Christian belief systems in Medieval Europe were non-existent, unsupported, or entirely undermined by a more advanced classical humanism is a notion which demands increased scrutiny. In attempts to combat such misconceptions, F.C. Copleston has explained the manner in which the Medieval mind distinguished between theology and philosophy; the former being an accepted set of metaphysical assumptions, the latter merely a mode of intellectual

inquiry.[36] Copleston describes how Christian theologians of the Middle Ages mastered and appropriated Aristotelian methods of induction in support of Christian precepts. In his ***Summa Theologica***, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas constructs a masterfully sophisticated defense of Christianity in philosophical terms rooted in the Aristotelian system. It is, therefore, unfair to suggest that the didactic aims of Medieval religious drama were inherently crude or backward-glancing. On the contrary, the most celebrated theologians of the epoch were not merely employing the most sophisticated and fashionable dialectical systems but, in many cases, the very same ones favored by the classical humanists to whom they were ostensibly opposed. Secondly, the formal designs and typological networks of the Mystery, Miracle, and Morality plays are rooted in the kind of self-consciously theatrical and didactic methods of composition to which Auden would enthusiastically subscribe.

While the religiously didactic nature of Medieval drama is self-evident, the additional civic functions (and aforementioned aesthetic complexity) of the plays have only recently begun to receive serious scholarly attention. Following the pioneering work of such scholars as Harold C. Gardiner[37], F.M. Salter[38], Richard Southern[39], and Glynne Wickham[40], more contemporary Medievalists have subsequently explained, through detailed descriptions of stage practice, how Medieval theatre was often the source of great civic pride, especially amongst the growing and ever-more significant trade and craft guilds whose newly won prominence was affecting the socio-economic landscape of Medieval Europe. In England, for example, the guilds' de facto sponsoring of theatrical events lent them prestige in the community and, as each guild was responsible for a specific paegent in the great Cycle Plays, a certain healthy competition developed amongst them.

[36] For Copleston's detailed analysis, see Frederick Copleston, ***A History of Philosophy: Volume II: Mediaeval Philosophy: Part I: Augustine to Bonaventure*** (New York: Image Books, 1962).

[37] See Harold C. Gardiner, ***Mysteries' End*** (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books,1967).

[38] See F.M. Salter, ***Mediaeval Drama in Chester*** (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968).

[39] See Richard Southern, ***The Medieval Theatre in the Round*** (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

[40] See Glynne Wickham, ***Early English Stages*** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul,1959).

As a result, the socio-political functions of the dramas supplemented the dramatic illustration of Judeo-Christian doctrine.

The Renaissance continued the didactic tradition in service of civic utility. Most Neo-Classical theorists of the late sixteenth century wholeheartedly embraced the Horatian prescription that instruction should be one of the principle aims of all artistic endeavor. In his oft-cited commentary on Aristotle, Julius Caesar Scaliger maintains that "Imitation...is not the end of poetry, but is intermediate to the end. The end is the giving of instruction in pleasurable form, for poetry teaches, and does not simply amuse, as some used to think."[41] The wide-scale acceptance with which the theories of Scaliger (and his many fellows) were met both nurtured and solidified the still-popular assumption that all art which aspires to greatness must neccessarily assume some didactic posture. While the dissemination of a Christian world-view continued to be of primary importance to Renaissance artists, an equally concertive attempt to glorify the benevolence and legitimancy of various monarchies also permeated Renaissance culture.

In ***Art and Power***[42], Roy Strong describes how Renaissance theatre transcended the individual aesthetic accomplishments of its artists by contributing to the way in which the socio-political landscape was interpreted by contemporaneous audiences. In his analysis of seventeenth-century court entertainments, for example, Strong explains that the theatrical proceedings "were devised and understood by the audience at the time as having a quite specifically political connotation...It is some measure of how far we have lost this way of thinking that politics is the last aspect that would cross our minds when examining these glittering performances three hundred years later."[43] The point was certainly not lost on Auden, who was to appropriate the formal techniques of court entertainments in support of his own

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[41] Julius Caesar Scaliger, "Poetics," ***Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski***, ed. Bernard F. Dukore (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974)138.

[42] Roy Strong, ***Art and Power***, ***Renaissance Festivals, 1450-1650*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984)

[43] Ibid. 4.

political didacticism--albeit in a subversive rather than a conservative manner. Strong emphasizes the links between politics and pageantry by expressing his desire "to make real to the reader...that such festivals were 'Allegories de l'Estat des temps...a unique alliance of art and power in the creation of the modern State."[44]

Thus the civil tradition remained in a relatively healthy condition, eclipsing vatic impulses and asserting its prominence as the more noble and morally righteous of the two competing tendencies; superior because it selflessly placed the interests of the community ahead of the self-expressive instinct of the individual artisan. But, as Mendelson argues,

> During the eighteenth century the balance between them shifted. Poetry's civil purposes came to be felt as restraints on the free personal voice. The romantics inverted the ancient poetic hierarchy that saw dramatic and epic poetry as superior to lyric, poetry of action and relationship more consequential than poetic expressions of feeling.[45]

Romanticism's cultivation of the vatic impulse continued throughout the nineteenth century, reaching fruition in a series of poetic verse-dramas which explored the internal, spritual, idiosyncratic struggles of their respective protagonists. They eschewed the idea that art must fulfill a social function, and even rejected the notion that theatre was an essentially communal experience by writing plays "of the mind" which were, by design, unstageable.

As Spurr has explained, Modernism, despite spirited claims to the contrary, carried many of the vatic tendencies into the twentieth century. And while Auden would initially surrender to these tendencies, he soon abandoned them in favor of the utilitarian nature of the civil tradition. In order to illustrate the competing impulses and characterize Auden's attempt to position himself in what he believed to be the

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[44] Ibid. 173.

[45] Mendelson, ***Early***, xvi.

most responsible manner, Mendelson invokes a celebrated example from classical literature:

> The first critic who judged between these two kinds of poet, the civil and the vatic, was the god Dionysus. In Aristophanes' ***The Frogs*** Dionysus is the god of wine, but he is also a god of Athens, and he seeks a poet who can save his city from disaster. Descending into the underworld, he presides over a contest between the shades of Aeschylus and Euripides, and weighs in his scales the art of civil responsibility against the art of inner vision. Aeschylus prays to the traditional gods, invokes the ancient tradition of the poet as moral teacher, and condemns the self-centeredness encouraged by his rival. Euripides prays to a private pantheon of the sky and his own tongue and senses, claims that when he writes his extravagant modern fictions he does no harm to society, and praises the doubt and questioning his work provokes in Athens. Dionysus finds he loves both poets equally, but at last he must select one of them for his city. He chooses Aeschylus. So, in effect, did Auden.[46]

Auden's embrace of the civil tradition led him to cultivate his didactic instincts in service of a public art designed to instruct. But it took some time before Auden was able to locate an adequate alternative to what he regarded as the detrimentally inward-looking nature of Modernism and its attendant forms. As Mendelson explains:

> Auden's complaint against the limits of the language available to him should be read as a poet's complaint as well as a citizen's. Politics and sociology offered adequate rhetoric for the arguments he wanted to make; what he needed was a way of incorporating this rhetoric into a

[46] Ibid. xvi.

> memorable language for poetry. He began to recognize that the literary manner he inherited from his modernist predecessors had rendered practical social issues invisible by assimilating all experience into a private introspective order. The rhetoric of modernism [...] excluded the characteristic patterns of the social order.[47]

Auden found "a way of incorporating this rhetoric," both political and sociological, "into a memorable language for poetry." Parable--a literary or dramatic stratagem designed to compel the ponderance of moral, ethical, and/or religious issues--informed by a variety of precursory traditions, became for Auden the most efficacious form in creating a politically-minded, public theatre which satisfied his teacherly and poetic instincts. As Auden wrote in "Art and Psychology," "you cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables; and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences, from which each according to his immediate and peculiar needs may draw his own conclusions."[48] Bertolt Brecht, of course, had already begun to mine similar territory by the time Auden saw his work in Berlin in 1928:

> As Auden sought a poetic language of choice and community [...] Bertolt Brecht was tackling the same problem. He had already recognized what Auden now began to understand: that to turn away from the closed intensity of modernism required more than an enlargement in vocabulary and style such as Auden had begun in 1930. It required a thorough change in the artist's relation to his audience. Instead of composing his unique experience into idiosyncratic structures, or transmitting the forms of his vision to an audience of the aesthetically initiated, an artist must convey knowledge that is not exclusively his own, and that he and others can put to use.

[47] Ibid. 131.

[48] W. H. Auden, "Art and Psychology," ***The Arts Today***, ed. G. Grigson (London, 1935) 18.

He must become a teacher of both theory and practice.[49]

In Brecht, Auden saw a fellow poet who was finding interesting ways of employing anti-realist techniques in service of a civc-minded, didactic theatre devoted to socio-political change. In addition to the stylized, abstract, parabolic nature of their respective drama, both poets harbored a keen interest in precursory material in general, and the high artifice of opera in particular.

Auden, it should be noted, denied any direct Brechtian influence. According to John Haffenden, "it was purely by coincidence that the ideas motivating [...] Auden's play's often appeared to match those of Bertolt Brecht. Auden had seen 'Die Dreigroschenoper' in Berlin, but later disclaimed the influence of Brecht on his own work."[50] Christopher Isherwood went a step further in a 1975 interview:

> I simply didn't know that much about Brecht at that time. For example, if you go right back to a much earlier period, when Auden wrote ***The Dance of Death***, he had a speech to the audience about, "we show you death as a dancer," which sounds Brechtian on the surface, but I don't think he could possibly have read this stuff then. I don't think it was physically possible. So that, you know, maybe we influenced Brecht--who knows? If such a blasphemy can be permitted.[51]

Whether or not Brecht was influenced by Auden is unclear, but Auden's name did appear on Brecht's short list of theatre practitioners with whom he was interested in exchanging "methods, knowledge and experience" with regard to "theatrical science."[52] In any case, Auden claimed, in a 1965 letter to Margrit Hahnloser-Insold,

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[49] Mendelson, ***Early***, 132.

[50] John Haffenden, ***The Critical Heritage: W.H. Auden*** (London: Routledge, 1983) 14.

[51] Ibid. 62-63.

[52] Ibid. 63.

"If there are aspects of the plays which remind the reader of German expressionist drama, this is an accident--the real influence were the English Mystery and Miracle plays of the middle ages."[53]

Auden's relationship to Expressionism was, indeed, ambivalent. On the one hand, he would remain enamored of Expressionism's stylized characteristics, dramaturgical structures, and Christian imagery. Likewise, the civic-minded Auden was sympathetic to the Expressionist Ernst Toller's "deep-felt belief in the ultimate moral regeneration of mankind and the possibility of a new and better social order."[54] Yet he was also becoming increasingly hostile to what Renate Benson described as Expressionism's defining features: "While Impressionism may be said to represent a subjective rendering of the visible world, Expressionism is basically the subjective expression of an inner world (vision); in representing his personal reality the artist has to free himself from all academic rules and traditional aesthetic concepts (especially norms of beauty)"[55] --the remnants, one might persuasively argue, of a still influential Romanticism against which was Auden was rebelling.

In what could have been an account of Auden's drama, Meg Twycross describes the distinguishing features of Medieval theatre in ways which help explain how Auden's Medieval influences were too often mistaken for Brechtian ones:

> It is not only in the spectacle that these plays give a sense of being artefacts, presented for our delight and edification. The way in which the narrative is conducted is often far more like story-telling than what we would regard as drama...Modern theatre, under the influence of Brecht, is partly returning to this stance: it is not as unfamiliar to us at it was a few decades ago. Medieval theatre is merely less self-conscious about it. There was no need to create the 'illusion' of naturalistic theatre, the self-contained hermetically sealed world

[53] Ibid. 15.

[54] Renate Benson, ***German Expressionist Drama*** (London: MacMillan Press, 1984) 16.

[55] Ibid. 2.

> in which the characters are aware only of each other, and on which we eavesdrop. If the audience needs to know something, it is told directly...Presumably this running commentary draws the audience's attention to actions that some of them might not be able to see: it also adds an emphasis to significant action...it has the effect of ritual. Besides this, for the characters to pass on this information is to emphasise the fact that they are communicating with the audience: these actions are not private, but are done for the benefit of the audience, that they may see.[56]

Brecht, who once famously remarked that his was the first non-Aristotelian brand of theatre, seemed unaware of the fact that the Medieval theatrical tradition employed most all of the dramatic, didactic, parabolic techniques he claimed were both original and revolutionary in his Epic theatre. Auden, however, was acutely aware of the possibilities inherent in Medieval dramaturgy and stage practice. The similarities between Twycross's descriptions and Auden's dramaturgy are manifold. Her observation that the plays have "the effect of ritual" is especially germane to any discussion of Auden's aesthetic--a characteristic which will be examined in detail in Chapter Two. She also describes how the dramas "emphasize the fact that they are communicating with the audience: these actions are not private, but are done for the benefit of the audience, that they may see." Twycross's observations are neatly applicable to Auden's didacticism--a public art committed to the education of an audience who, according to Auden, remained ignorant of the moral implications of its inability and/or refusal to make informed choices. Twycross continues her discussion in terms equally applicable to Auden's dramaturgy:

> The extreme manifestation of [the didactic function] is the creation of the Presenter figure, sometimes called Expositor or Doctor, whose sole function is to be an interface between the play and the audience. The

[56] Meg Twycross, "The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," ***The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre***, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 54.

> plays are openly meant to teach. The actor in a mystery play must make himself first and foremost a communicator of his material, not a medium of his own personality and feelings. Actors trained in modern schools are often very uncertain at this, because they are not used to giving prominent expression to the content of what they are saying: they look for the motivation and emotion behind it. Working on these plays requires a lot of strenuous thinking over and above what is needed to tease the meaning out of the unfamiliar fifteenth and sixteenth-century English. For all their apparent simplicity or even naivety of mode, these are extremely intellectual plays, written by people whose main training was theological and rhetorical.[57]

Auden's ubiquitous Choruses serve the same function as the Presenter figure which Twycross describes; and her observation that "these are extremely intellectual plays, written by people whose main training was theological and rhetorical," is most applicable to Auden's own dramatic corpus.

It should be noted, however, that much socially conscious theatre of the 1930s employed an entirely different--even oppositional--set of generic and modal features in its attempt to provoke political action. Realism became the most favored style with which to both illustrate the grave injustices of the contemporary world and incite genuine revolt against a morally bankrupt status quo. Because of its more superficial resemblance to empirical reality, Realism seemed to many to be the most appropriate style in which to confront public concerns--an assumption too often based upon a failure to grasp many of the fundamental conceits of so-called "anti-realism." In his essay, "Public and Private Problems in Modern Drama," Ronald Peacock attempts to remedy the misapprehension:

> It has become common to view drama in the post-Ibsen period as falling into two broad categories. On the one hand there was a strong

[57] Ibid. 54.

> and persistent tradition of the ***A Doll's House*** type of play, called for convenience "social problem plays," and on the other a number of diverse styles of drama that represent counter-realism; plays in verse, expressionism, formalistic styles as in Yeats' plays, revivals of myths, fantastic drama, surrealism, plays of Freudian psychology, Cocteau-ish *poesie de theatre*, and so on, all of which, however different from each other, have in common that they turn away both from social problems and from the dramatic style associated with them. They do not necessarily, however, renounce realism for "romance," or for something poetic in the escapist sense. Neither are the themes they treat always without relevance to the social situation. The point is that the social situation changed radically in the decade of World War I, making social problem drama of the older kind and its particular mold of realism out of date. But the antiquated forms had no monopoly on all realism or all social problems. The new forms, superficially judged to be anti-realistic, often represent in fact an artistic adjustment to a new social situation.[58]

By way of example, Peacock cites the work of such Auden contemporaries as Georg Kaiser, T.S. Eliot, and Jean Giraudoux:

> The world of ***A Doll's House*** and plays like it was real to Ibsen; it was the world he experienced. But it was no longer real in 1918 to Kaiser, for whom the middle-class home, with a certain set of private beliefs and social attitudes, had been pushed out of the center of the picture to give place to the new reality of highly technical and industrial social organization. In order to show this he devised his expressionistic form which presents not private lives and homes but the skeletal

[58] Ronald Peacock, "Public and Private Problems in Modern Drama," ***Theatre in the Twentieth Century***, ed. Robert W.Corrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1963) 304.

> structure of a whole society which in that contemporary situation was more real than the surfaces of bourgeois life. In a similar way Eliot's plays contain a view and criticism of a given society. They are determined by a religious interpretation, which means that the judgement is one of several possible ones. But the interpretation is neither fanciful nor wilful; it does refer to a social reality. The argument applies also to the work of Giraudoux which to a superficial glance seems to seek refuge in "myths" in order to say something "universal" about life, transcending the localized situation, but it is in fact profoundly rooted in that situation.[59]

The same could have been written about Auden. While he was certainly interested in the dramatization of myths "in order to say something 'universal' about life, transcending the localized situation," his plays and libretti, like those described by Peacock, are also "profoundly rooted in that situation." For Auden, the poet and dramatist, politics became the public arena in which he could exercise his formidable didactic talents. The myriad precursory forms he chose to appropriate and amalgamize in his own verse-dramas proved conducive to the creation of an unacknowledged but unmistakable Brechtian ouevre--one which featured, among other things, a powerful predilection for political parable and the distancing effects created by stylized approaches to both dramatic composition and theatrical presentation.

The details of Auden's politics are rather shadowy. His communist leanings were no secret, even though the sincerity and passion of his political convictions would one day be persuasively challenged--most harshly by Auden himself. But a general mood of impending revolution marked Auden's generation, even if its details were never adequately articulated. In 1931, John Lehman attempted to place Auden and his contemporaries in some kind of context with regard to the generation of writers they were beginning to replace. His descriptions give a small indication of

[59] Ibid. 305.

the growing sense of political unrest with which Auden would soon be associated:

> These new poems and satires by W.H. Auden, Julian Bell, Cecil Day-Lewis, Stephen Spender. A.S. J. Tessimond, and others, are a challenge to the pessimism and intellectual aloofness which has marked the best poetry of recent years. These young poets rebel only against those things which they believe can and must be changed in the postwar world, and their work in consequence has a vigour and width of appeal which has long seemed lacking from English poetry.[60]

In his autobiography ***World Within World***, Stephen Spender contributes his own summary of the relationships and atmosphere of this new generation of English writers; a generation self-consciously committed to change:

> These writers wrote with a near-unanimity, suprising when one considers that most of them were strangers to one another, of a society coming to an end and of revolutionary change...
> Perhaps, after all, the qualities which distinguished us from the writers of the previous decade lay not in ourselves, but in the events to which we reacted. These were unemployment, economic crisis, nascent fascism, approaching war...the older writers were reacting in the 'twenties to the exhaustion and hopelessness of a Europe in which the old regimes were falling to pieces. We were a "new generation."[61]

Communism emerged as both the most efficacious antidote to the ills wrought by an unbridled capitalism and the best alternative to an encroaching Fascism. Auden's practical committment to communism was, however, decidely half-hearted. As

[60] Haffenden, ***Heritage***, 4.

[61] Ibid. 6.

Charles Osborne explains:

> Auden was...generally regarded as a Marxist and thought to be a paid-up member of the Communist Party. Isherwood, who was as close to him as anyone, has implied that this was actually not the case, and that, though Auden outwardly supported Marxism, "or at any rate didn't protest when it was preached", his support was, at best, half-hearted and, in any case, undertaken mainly to humor Isherwood and a few other friends who had stronger and firmer feelings about politics. In fact, unlike Spender, Day-Lewis and others of his friends, Auden never joined the Communist Party and never showed any inclination to do so.[62]

In a letter to Rupert Doone, he wrote, "No. I am a bourgeois. I shall not join the C.P."[63] It is quite evident, however, that a socialistic assault on bourgeois complacency and immorality was becoming conspicuous in Auden's work by the time he began writing plays--even though a more pointed articulation of Marxist principles would not appear in his writings until the early 1930s.

T.S. Eliot described ***Paid On Both Sides***, Auden's first play, as "the forerunner of contemporary poetic drama."[64] Written in 1928 and first published by Eliot in the ***Criterion*** in 1930 (indeed, it was the first of Auden's works to be published outside of Oxford), ***Paid On Both Sides*** deftly incorporates thematic and stylistic characteristics of Classical drama, Anglo-Saxon poetry (the title, in fact, is an allusion to ***Beowulf***), the seventeenth-century court masque, German Expressionism, and, most notably, the Medieval mummers' play. Varied in tone and style, ***Paid On Both Sides*** exemplifies what John Fuller describes as

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[62] Osborne, ***Poet***, 118-19.

[63] Humphrey Carpenter, ***W.H. Auden: A Biography*** (Boston: Hought Mifflin, 1981) 153.

[64] Mendelson, ***Plays***, xvi.

Auden's belief in "the compatibility of, say, the vulgarity of the music-hall and the ritual of the Mass because these were both, simply, manifestations of that communal emotion which constitutes dramatic experience."[65] Originally subtitled "*A Parable of English Middle Class (professional) family life 1907-1929*," ***Paid On Both Sides*** was succinctly summarized by William Empson in the Cambridge magazine ***Experiment***:

> There is a blood feud, apparently in the North of England, between two mill-owning families who are tribal leaders of their workmen; it is at the present day, but there are no class distinctions and no police. John, the hero of the play, is born prematurely from shock, after the death by ambush of his father; so as to be peculiarly a child of the feud. As a young man, he carries it on, though he encourages a brother who loses faith in it to emigrate. Then he falls in love with a daughter (apparently the heiress) of the enemy house; to marry her would involve ending the feud, spoiling the plans of his friends, breaking away from the world his mother takes for granted, and hurting her by refusing to revenge his father. Just before he decides about it, a spy, son of the enemy house (but apparently only her half-brother) is captured; it is the crisis of the play; he orders him to be taken out and shot. He then marries Anne; she tries to make him emigrate, but he insists on accepting his responsibility and trying to stop the feud; and is shot on the wedding day, at another mother's instigation, by a brother of the spy.[66]

While the play has been rightly described in terms of its Jungian-influenced psychology (which will be discussed in Chapter Three), it also subtlely betrays the tentative beginnings of the poet's forays into more public-minded terrain. Auden's

[65] John Fuller, ***W.H. Auden: A Commentary*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998) 19.

[66] Osborne, ***Poet***, 83.

burgeoning interest in the immediate political landscape is not entirely eclipsed by the charade's "enigmatic and mythical evaluation of the middle-class ethos of its day."[67] As Osborne explains:

> ***Paid on Both Sides*** is susceptible of more than one interpretation. It can be seen, for instance, as a parable of growing up, as a study in types of strength and weakness, or as demonstration of the important past weighing heavily and to devastating effect on the trivial present. Its obscurity may be a stumbling block to some, but its poetic ambiguity is really one of its strengths.[68]

The idea of "the important past weighing heavily and to devastating effect on the trivial present" can certainly be read in terms of a universal, timeless, and cyclical phenomenon. But the concrete particularities of "Middle Class (professional) family life 1907-1929"--not coincidentally marking the years between Auden's birth and the play's composition--ground the play in a kind of contemporaneous specificity. The sobering effects of World War I and the combustible elements of post-War Europe caused Auden to examine the implications of the past's influence upon the present. The result is a parabolic critque of the socio-political realities of Auden's epoch, and not exclusively a mythical illustration of timeless dilemmas. Auden's mistrust of the ruling class and its apparent desire to maintain an increasingly dangerous staus quo--one crudely informed by an ignoble history--is one of the more conspicuous themes. In a moment of self-conscious contemplation, for example, John Nower, the play's protagonist, speaks the following words:

> Always the following wind of history
> Of others' wisdom makes a buoyant air
> Till we come suddenly on pockets where

[67] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 19.

[68] Osborne, ***Poet***, 83.

Is nothing loud but us; where voices seem
Abrupt, untrained, competing with no lie
Our fathers shouted once. They taught us war,
To scamper after darlings, to climb hills,
To emigrate from weakness, find ourselves
The easy conquerors of empty bays:
But never told us this, left each to learn,
Hear something of that soon-arriving day
When to gaze longer and delighted
A face or idea be impossible.
Could I have been some simpleton that lived
Before disaster sent his runners here;
Younger than worms, worms have too much to bear.
Yes, mineral were best: could I but see
These woods, these fields of green, this lively world
Sterile as moon.[69]

This pessimistic analysis of the crippling atrophy the contemporary world experiences as a result of its inability (or unwillingness?) to shed the past's dangerous legacies was particularly topical--being offered, as it was, between World Wars I and II. And while the charade's mythic qualities ultimately transcend localized particularities, its distancing effects provoke critical thought regarding the immediate choices available to a contemporary world. In Brechtian fashion, the play posed challenging questions to a community which was beginning to negotiate complex moral and political terrain in a new and uncharted European landscape.

In order to provoke cerebral rather than emotional responses, Auden uses a series of alienating devices, a few of which are especially conspicuous. From the beginning of the play, the stilted, archaic syntax of even the expository prose passages is both unfamiliar and jarring, self-consciously shattering any sense of

[69] Auden, ***Plays***, 21.

verisimilitude:

> In Kettledale above Colefangs road passes where high banks overhang dangerous from ambush. To Colefangs had to go, would speak with Layard, Jerry and Hunter with him only. They must have stolen news, for Red Shaw waited with ten, so Jerry said, till for last time unconscious. Hunter was killed at first shot. They fought, exhausted ammunition, a brave defence but fight no more.[70]

Likewise, Auden's use of a reflective chorus necessarily affects the manner in which the narrative action is received and interpreted by the audience. The distancing effects created by the Chorus self-consciously separate the dramatic incidents from detached reflection upon their meaning and import. The idea is to increase the audience's self-awareness of their critical responses to the events of the drama--a technique at the core of Brecht's version of Epic Theatre. Friedrich Schiller had described the effect as early as 1803:

> The Chorus thus renders more substantial service to the modern dramatist than to the old poet--and for this reason, that it transforms the commonplace actual world into the old poetical one; that it enables him to dispense with all that is repugnant to poetry, and conducts him back to the most simple, original, and genuine motives of action...
> The Chorus thus exercises a purifying influence on tragic poetry, insomuch as it keeps reflection apart from the incidents, and by this separation arms it with a poetical vigor; as the painter, by means of a rich drapery, changes the ordinary poverty of costume into a charm and an ornament...
>
> ...The commonplace objection made to the Chorus, that it disturbs the illusion, and blunts the edge of the feelings, is what

[70] Auden, ***Plays***, 15.

> constitutes its highest recommendation; for it is this blind force of the affections which the true artist deprecates--this illusion is what he disdains to excite [...] It is by holding asunder the different parts, and stepping between the passions with its composing views, that the Chorus restores us to our freedom, which would else be lost in the tempest.[71]

Schiller's insightful analysis is applicable to Auden's aesthetic and didactic sensibilities; a stubborn insistence on a cerebral engagement with the drama presupposes a tempering of the passions. Schiller's description of how the Chorus "restores us to our freedom" is comparable to Auden's wish to highlight an audience's freedom of choice--the bedrock of his moral didacticism.

In alignment with these distancing effects, Auden inserts an Expressionistic dream sequence which features both Father Christmas and the aforementioned Expositor, or Doctor-figure from the Medieval mummer's play. The jarring effect of the sequence operates in a manner similar to the Chorus in its formal disengagement with the action and reliance on precursory forms. By virtue of its placement the audience is forced to rexamine the import of both the preceding and succeeding scenes. Fuller adds that the "terse style of the poetry was developed here for urgency,"[72] a tactic more conducive to Brecht's expressed goal of political action than to what Arthur Schopenhauer had described as mythical tragedy's less animated effect of resignation.[73]

It must be conceded that ***Paid On Both Sides*** ultimately drowns in its own maddening obscurity, with the one moment of respite being the farcical Doctor scene, which, not coincidentally, was pulled almost verbatim from the popular Medieval mummers' play. The abstract quality of the verse never allows the play to

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[71] Friedrich Schiller, "On the Use of the Chorus in Tragedy," in Dukore, ***Theory***, 474-75.

[72] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 19.

[73] Arthur Schopenhauer, "The World as Will and Idea," in Dukore, ***Theory***, 520.

establish its own dramatic momentum--an ironic deficiency in light of Auden's own biting criticism of modern-verse-drama's general failure to operate effectively as theatre. In all fairness, it is not at all clear to what degree Auden ever imagined the play being performed before the general public. He had originally conceived it to be presented privately during a holiday at Tapscott, the country estate of his college friend William McElwee. Auden would, after all, insist that the "Music Hall, the Christmas Pantomime, and the country house charade are the most living drama of to-day."[74] The notion of the charade being performed by guests in a private residence is connected to Auden's idea that "ideally there would be no spectators. In practice every member of the audience should feel like an understudy."[75] Fearing a minor scandal, the McElwee's refused permission to stage the charade. And while the play never established itself as particularly stageworthy, it does provide an interesting window into the beginnings of Auden's growing devotion to dramatic parable as an instrument of social reform.

Auden had begun to acclerate his interest in political parable by the time he wrote ***The Dance of Death*** in 1933. Commissioned by Rupert Doone's Group Theatre in 1932, ***The Dance of Death*** was originally conceived as a *danse macabre* (in the style of the medieval allegory). In a 1934 review in ***New English Weekly***, Desmond Hawkins decribes the play in the following terms:

> It is a Marxist morality play, eschewing "natural" representation, and using a chorus (embodying the Bourgeois principle) as the central player with Death the Dancer. Lacking the literary virtues of the same author's "Charade" it was clearly written for an immediate dramatic purpose, and its performance makes plain that there is sufficient dynamite in Mr. Auden to destroy the sad garbage of the contemporary theatre. To have verbal dexterity, poetic quality, and metrical resourcefulness allied to studied and significant movement on

[74] Mendelson, ***Plays***, 497.

[75] Ibid. 497.

a stage was a pleasure made almost uncritical by its rarity.[76]

Mendelson claims that this "brash, irreverent allegory of the latter days of the middle class was unlike anything written for the English stage. It combined Marxist analysis in rhymed verse, and," in the Epic manner, "offered an active and decisive role to its audience."[77] Cecil Day Lewis was not so enthusiastic:

> "The Dance of Death" is an attempt at didactic writing from a Marxian viewpoint. If it fails, the failure must be imputed to the fact that the classless society is not established in England, for we have seen that social satire requires an established system from which to work: the poet cannot satirize the present in the uncertain light of the future...The poet is a sensitive instrument , not a leader. Ideas are not material for the poetic mind until they have become commonplaces for the 'practical' mind...
>
> ...English revolutionary verse of to-day is too often neither poetry nor effective propoganda for the cause it is intended to support. Its vague *cris-de-coeur* for a new world, its undirected and undisciplined attack upon the staus quo, are apt to produce work which makes the neutral reader wonder whether it is aimed to win him for the communist or the fascist state.[78]

While the reviews were decidedly mixed, most critics recognized the urgency of Auden's political pleas, even if the specifics of a revolutionary model were shrouded in ambiguity. The beginning of the play, for example, has the disillusioned CHORUS chanting predictably propogandistic Marxist slogans: "This is an attack on

[76] Desmond Hawkins, "Recent Verse," in Haffenden, ***Heritage***, 150.

[77] Mendelson, ***Plays***, xx.

[78] Cecil Day Lewis, "A Hope for Poetry," in Haffenden, ***Heritage***, 149.

the working class./ Workers unite before it's too late. Down with the bosses' class,/ Up with the workers' class...Seize the factories and run them yourself...We will liquidate,/ The capitalist state/ Overthrow,"[79] etc. But although it is clear that Auden is championing the overthrow of a dangerously lethargic, myopic, and exploitive middle-class, the manner and final outcome of the rebellion remain unarticulated. In what initially appears to be a shamelessly pedantic prose passage, Auden seemingly employs the ANNOUNCER, the ostensibly objective "umpire"[80] of the stage proceedings, as his own mouthpiece, echoing his beliefs regarding the differences between Russian and English brands of communism:

> ANNOUNCER
>
> Comrades, I absolutely agree with you. We must have a revolution. But wait a moment. All this talk about class war won't get us anywhere. The circumstances here are quite different from Russia. Russia has no middle class, no tradition of official administrative service. We must have an English revolution suited to English conditions, a revolution not to put one class on top but to abolish class, to ensure not less for some but more for all, a revolution of Englishmen for Englishmen. After all, are we not all of one blood, the blood of King Arthur, and Wayland the Smith? We have Lancelot's courage, Merlin's wisdom.[81]

The bald-faced sermonizing notwithstanding, the speech seems to offer a reasonably sober appeal to a more inclusive, altruistic version of Marxism than the increasingly corrupted version offered up by the Bolsheviks. But a disturbing irony soon emerges from the ANNOUNCER's rhetoric, transforming his pleas from rational evenhandedness to nationalistic venom:

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[79] Auden, ***Plays***, 90.

[80] Ibid. 83.

[81] Ibid. 90-91.

ANNOUNCER

Our first duty is to keep the race pure, and not let these dirty foreigners come in and take our jobs. Down with the dictatorship of international capital. Away with their filthy books which corrupt our innocent sons and daughters. English justice, English morals, England for the English.[82]

The ANNOUNCER's rallying cry reaches an ugly fruition when he urges the CHORUS to begin their revolution by attacking the MANAGER, "a dirty Jew,"[83] who is the very symbol of capitalistic greed and exploitation. The CHORUS responds to the ANNOUNCER's exhortations and viciously beats the MANAGER. Thus, from the audience's perspective, the call for revolution is tempered by concerns regarding its very nature, and the appeal to overthrow a feeble and dangerous status quo is complicated by questions regarding what will actually replace it. Later in the play, the very same ANNOUNCER seems to voice an implicit warning:

The condition of these people is so drastic
Any prophet can make them enthusiastic.
It is pleasant to march about and all shout "glory"
But the after results are another story.[84]

This kind of ambiguity renders simplistic interpretations problematic. Contrary to many critical opinions, the necessity of a socialist revolution is not the play's conclusion, but, rather, an accepted premise. The more pressing didactic, rhetorical

[82] Ibid. 91.

[83] Ibid. 91.

[84] Ibid. 94.

questions posed by the play concern the specific complexion and ultimate goals of revolutionary activity--a much more resonate and compelling inquiry given the historical context in which the play was written and first performed. The audience is meant to confront and answer these questions in a responsible manner, while resisting the now exposed temptation to shout "glory" in the midst of a reactionary frenzy.

A similar kind of thematic ambiguity can be found in George Bernard Shaw's precursory ***Major Barbara***. A devoted and outspoken Fabian Socialist, Shaw was certainly a strong critic of capitalist excess, profiteering, and economic injustice, and a passionate proponent of the implementation of socialist--if idiosyncratic--reforms. Yet the ostensible hero of the play is none other than Andrew Undershaft, an unrepentant arms manufacturer who has made a fortune by exploiting the horrors of war and extolling the virtues of corporate greed. In this way, prefabricated ideologies are challenged and the intellectual underpinnings of even the most radical factions are obliterated. As in ***The Dance of Death***, the most obvious didactic postures are undermined by more subtle and nuanced investigations and probings. Of this type of ambiguity, Empson writes that "these methods can be used to convict a poet of holding muddled opinions rather than to praise the complexity of the order of his mind."[85]

The final moment of the play is probably the best example of how Auden's subtle ambiguity was sometimes eclipsed by flashier rhetorical flourishes which were misread as dogma by critics, scholars, and audiences alike. Following the death of the DANCER, for example, none other than KARL MARX appears onstage, accompanied by two young communists. To the melody of Mendelssohn's *Wedding March*, the CHORUS sings:

> O Mr Marx, you've gathered
> All the material facts
> You know the economic

[85] William Empson, ***Seven Types of Ambiguity*** (London: New Directions, 1947) 154.

Reasons for our acts.[86]

A solemn MARX declares: "The instruments of production have been too much for him. He is liquidated."[87] In an annotated copy to Albert and Angelyn Stevens, Auden wrote, "The Communists never spotted that this was a nihilistic leg-pull."[88] The irony, it seems, was mistaken for naivete.

Despite the profound differences of opinion regarding the play's merits, Harold Hobson, writing in the ***Christian Science Monitor***, confidently declared that "'The Dance of Death,' Mr. W.H. Auden's brilliant, and in my opinion, entirely successful, attempt to work out for the theater a new, significant art-form, may, in the strictest sense of the term, prove epoch-making. This, however, depends far less upon its intrinsic merits than on what is to be done in the same line in the future by Mr. Auden and his followers."[89]

From the cannibalized remains of ***The Enemies of a Bishop*** (1929), ***The Fronny*** (1930), and ***The Chase*** (1934), three discarded attempts at a follow-up to ***Paid on Both Sides***, emerged ***The Dog Beneath the Skin***, Auden's first published collaboration with Christopher Isherwood. Published in 1935 and first produced in 1936, ***The Dog Beneath the Skin*** is a subtle blend of quest/ journey play and political drama. It also marks a profound advance in Auden's maturation as a dramatist.

The Dog Beneath the Skin tells the story of Alan Norman, a citizen of the imaginary English village of Pressan Ambo, who is selected in an annual lottery to find the long-missing Francis Crewe, the only son of a well-respected member of the community. Crewe ran away from the village ten years earlier and hasn't been heard from since. The play opens with the descriptive Chorus both providing

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[86] Auden, ***Plays***, 107.

[87] Ibid. 107.

[88] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 125.

[89] Harold Hobson, "Christian Science Monitor" in Haffenden, ***Heritage***, 154-55.

expository information and establishing the foundation for Auden's parabolic techniques:

> We would show you at first an English village: You shall choose its location
> Wherever your heart directs you most longingly to look; you are loving towards it[90]

The Chorus establishes the village as a kind of everytown, and encourages the individual members of the audience to find the locale's connective relevance to their own lives and experience. It also describes the village's general state of disrepair:

> I see barns falling, fences broken,
> Pasture not ploughland, weeds not wheat.
> The great houses remain but only half are inhabited.[91]

The Chorus ends its prologue by reiterating the self-consciously artificial nature of the play while emphasizing the village's spreading decay:

> Stand aside now: The play is beginning
> In the village of which we have spoken; called Pressan Ambo;
> Here too corruption spreads its peculiar and emphatic odours
> And Life lurks, evil, out of its epoch.[92]

In the Epic manner, the audience has been compelled to find the contemporary relevance of the ensuing action and to observe the dramatic events in a detached and critical fashion.

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[90] Auden, ***Plays***, 191.

[91] Ibid. 191.

[92] Ibid. 192.

It is in this context that Norman's selection by lottery and his subsequent quest for the missing Crewe are launched. Through three acts, each composed of five scenes and preceded by a choral prologue, Norman traverses a wide variety of landscapes and milieus (both actual and stylistic), while encountering a disparate array of over-sized characters abstractly representing a fractured and atrophic society. Norman's grail-like quest assumes mock-heroic proportions, as the fiscal and psychological well-being of an entire community, and his own happiness and security, depend upon his success in finding the elusive Crewe. The journey takes him from the saloon of a Channel steamer to a Royal Palace in the fictional Ostnia; from a Red-Light District to a lunatic asylum; from a railway train to the beautiful gardens of Paradise Park; and, eventually, to the well-tended garden of the Vicarage back at Pressan Ambo, where Noman finally presents Crewe to the shocked villagers. Along the way, Norman encounters an odd and interesting cross-section of types: barmen and journalists, kings and cops, priests and courtiers, prisoners and whores, lunatics and financiers, lovers and poets, all the while accompanied by the remarkable dog who, of course, turns out to be none other than Francis Crewe in disguise.

The play's episodic structure supports a host of jarringly incongrous elements which contribute to its overarching alienating effects and burlesque mode: a reflective chorus, patter-songs, juggling, soft-shoe numbers, music-hall buffoonery, earnest political appeals, and dialogue in both prose and verse. Of its consciously hodepodge amalgam of stylistic components, Derek Verschoyle writes: "The choruses, in which the authors underline the purport of ther satire, are eloquent and often moving, the dialogue has a competence of wit, and the prose scenes, which range from the burlesque to the gravely ironic, bear the mark of a genuine dramatic talent."[93]

I.M. Parsons, the distinguished critic and publisher, describes ***The Dog Beneath the Skin*** as

[93] Derek Verschoyle, "The Spectator," in Haffenden, ***Heritage***, 183.

> a shoddy affair, a half-baked little satire which gets nowhere. If it had been written by Mr Brown and Mr Smith instead of by two intelligent young men like Mr Auden and Mr Isherwood, nobody would have bothered to publish it, and nobody would have been the loser. For of all the dreary jokes imaginable it must surely be the dreariest, the flattest, and the stalest that has managed to get into print for some time. Dreary, because it is set out with a great deal of extravagant pretension; flat, because the satire is so crude that it completely misses fire; and stale, because the objects against which it is directed have been objects of ridicule for the last ten years or more...One wonders what fun an audience not entirely composed of morons could conceivably extract from so much knocking about of battered Aunt Sallies, and so much preaching to the converted.[94]

Stephen Spender was more tactful, but not uncritical, when he wrote that the play draws "a picture of a society defeated by an enemy whom the writers have not put into the picture because they do not know what he looks like although they thoroughly support him."[95] While it might be effectively argued that Auden, like Marx himself, expended much more energy railing against the status quo than he did describing what a post-revolution society would resemble, the play does contain an implicit nudge toward socialist values, as evidenced in Crewe's public appeal to the General:

> And you, General, what are you fighting for? Once wealth was real. The world did not produce enough to go round and there was necessarily a struggle over the sharing of it. But now it is possible for everyone to have all they can require. What are you afraid of, then? This. You've lost belief in yourself. There will always be clever and

[94] I.M. Parsons, "The Spectator" in Haffenden, ***Heritage***, 169-70.

[95] Mendelson, ***Plays***, xxiv.

> stupid people, successes and failures in the world, you say. You can't change human nature. Men are not equal. Precisely. You are terrified that perhaps after all you are not a superior person. Take away the visible signs of superiority, take away Conyers Hall and the peacocks, or let everybody else have them, and is there anything about Mrs Hotham that will command respect? Suppose no one was to call you Sir, would you still exist as a personality? That is the question you dare not answer.[96]

And, a few moments later: "What you really hate is a social system in which love is controlled by money. Won't you help us to destroy it?"[97]

But, in the end, the play consciously neglects to outline any detailed, comprehensive alternative to the staus quo because it refuses to be dogmatic. Crewe neatly explains Auden's own rhetorical stratagem when he declares: "I can't dictate to you what to do and I don't want to either. I can only try to show you what you are doing and so force you to choose."[98] The lines are a concise summation of Auden's understanding of parable as a dramatic technique--a story told in terms which compel its audience to make a moral choice. Despite the play's socialist sympathies, Auden still insists that, rather than preaching any prefabricated ideology, he is merely being truthful with regard to a particular set of circumstances in ways which force audiences to make more urgent and informed choices.

A similar brand of didacticism can be found in Auden and Isherwood's ***The Ascent of F-6*** (1936), about which E.M. Forster declared "at least four pairs of spectacles are necessary before we can examine it properly."[99] One of those pairs

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[96] Ibid. 287.

[97] Ibid. 287.

[98] Ibid. 286.

[99] E.M. Forster, "The Listener" in Haffenden, ***Heritage***, 189.

of spectacles he describes as "politico-economic."[100] Spender outlines the play's action in the following terms:

> The story is the ascent of a mountain called F6 on the English maps, and Chormopoluda by the natives, lying between Ostnia and British Sudoland. The Ostnian colonisers are conducting a rival expedition from their side, and Imperial interests--prestige, coffee, domination, etc.--make it essential that the British expedition, led by Michael Ransom, should win. The public, represented by Mr. and Mrs. A, seated in boxes near the stage, follow broadcast accounts of the expedition with varying degrees of interest as it stimulates or depresses them in conducting their private affairs.[101]

The action revolves around Michael Ransom, who, while being a "colossal prig" and unadulterated egomaniac, is also "presented sympathetically and his characteristics are evidently meant to be those of someone possessing a certain nobility of character."[102] Loosely based on T.E. Lawrence, Ransom, the ostensibly idealistic mountaineer, initially refuses the British government's offer (proffered by his brother James, a government official) to sponsor him in an expedition to the summit of the imposing mountain, F-6. Ransom believes that the government's motives are purely imperialistic, and he refuses to corrupt the purity of his mountaineering exploits by accepting such a commission. At the behest of his mother, whose love and approval he desperately craves, he finally agrees and finds himself energized by the perceived adulation of the British public, represented by Mr. and Mrs. A, who Spender describes as "choric spectators."[103]

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[100] Ibid. 189.

[101] Stephen Spender, "The Left Review" in Haffenden, ***Heritage***, 191.

[102] Ibid. 195.

[103] Ibid. 195.

Auden and Isherwood wrote ***The Ascent of F-6*** in Portugal in March-April 1936, following Auden's interesting but ultimately disillusioning work with John Grierson's Film Unit, a documentary film production company operating under the fiscal and administrative auspices of the British government. Dedicated to making socially didactic documentaries which illustrated the significance, vitality, and dignity of the myriad working classes, Grierson assembled an impressive team of artists, many of whom had theretofore no experience in movie-making; they included Auden, Benjamin Britten, and the painter William Coldstream. Auden was assigned to contribute text commentaries to films such as ***Coal Face***, a short documentary about mining, and ***Night Mail***, a film chronicling the activities of the British Postal services. What began as an exciting and potentially efficacious project through which Auden might contribute to the large-scale dissemination of socialist values in a noble and feasible way, soon became for him the epitome of hypocrisy and self-deception. As Mendelson describes the situation, "How could bourgeois artists--which most of Grierson's recruits were--serve revolutionary purposes in a medium that required funding from government and big business? This contradiction was less malign than was the filmmakers' refusal to acknowledge it. No one could survive as an artist in an atmosphere of self-deception."[104]

The Ascent of F-6 might be read as a parabolic illustration of the above-described dilemma. Ransom, being courted by his brother James, a government official, for purely imperialistic purposes, chooses to disregard the political implications of his ascent in order to achieve personal glory. If Ransom is the metaphoric stand-in for the ambitious, vainglorious artist, than Auden's examination of the nature of the individual artist's relationship to the politics he both relies upon and, thus, inadvertently supports is foregrounded.

As will be discussed in Chapter Three, ***The Ascent of F-6*** contains the most personal and timeless of public confessions, but its immediate political overtones are quite conspicuous when one considers both the source and context of the play's conception and subsequent composition. As both communistic and

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[104] Mendelson, ***Early***, 292.

fascistic impulses battled for the soul of post-World War I Europe, the nascent imperialistic character of both ideologies was becoming apparent in ways reminiscent of England's own colonial predispositions. To Auden and Isherwood, T.E. Lawrence (the loose model for Ransom) embodied not merely courage, resolve, and ingenuity, but also the prideful arrogance and overweening ambition of the Imperial enterprise, and his popularity amongst the British public only betrayed its startling willingness to submit to the messianic hero in the heat of nationalistic fervor. Consistent with his habit of attacking what he perceived to be the most malevolent and oppressive of political institutions (as opposed to detailing any feasible alternative), Auden took aim at both the dictatorial tendencies becoming shockingly manifest throughout Europe and the obliviousness of an ignorant public which unwittingly nurtures them.

At the beginning of the play, we find Mr. and Mrs. A drowning in their own maddening obscurity, unremittant boredom, and quiet desperation. Mrs. A longs for some shocking and galvanizing event which might shake them loose of their drab existence. Anesthesized by routine, and numbed by the apparent apathy of the ruling class, they voice their frustration and disaffection with their staus quo. Mrs. A begins by describing the growing impotency of her beloved empire at the hands of a "slick and unctuous Time" :

> The drums of an enormous and routed army,
> Throbbing raggedly, fitfully, scatteredly, madly.
> We are lost. We are lost.[105]

She reiterates her despondency by insisting that "Nothing that matters will ever happen."[106] Mr. A, rather than providing comfort, echoes her dissatisfaction:

> Nothing interesting to do,

[105] Auden, ***Plays***, 297.

[106] Ibid. 297.

Nothing interesting to say,
Nothing remarkable in any way[107]

Her final exhortation of the scene is also the most pointedly desperate, but not yet despairing: "Give us something to live for. We have waited too long."[108]

From the midst of this psychological atrophy emerges Ransom and his ostensibly patriotic expedition, assembled and launched for the good of the empire. Mr. and Mrs. A closely follow Ransom's progress through a series of radio broadcasts which keep the public abreast of the climbers' heroic efforts. Mrs. A continually articulates the effect Ransom and his fellows have on the British populace. As she cuts out photographs and articles from the daily newspapers, she exclaims:

Cut out the photos and pin them to the wall,
Cut out the map and follow the deatils of it all,
Follow the progress of this mountain mission,
Day by day let it inspire our lowly condition.[109]

But the play slowly begins to reveal the dictatorial and fascistic character of the entire endeavor. The dangerous combination of the charismatic leader hellbent on conquest, an army of enthusiastic followers who unquestioningly follow their superior, and an anonymous, adoring throng bathing them in nationalistic glory and adulation, is a potentially disastrous mixture. As Shawcross, one of Ransom's climbers, makes hauntingly clear: "You know I'd follow you anywhere. We all would."[110] To what does Ransom lead them and himself? Death, of course, in pursuit of an ignoble cause.

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[107] Ibid. 297.

[108] Ibid. 299.

[109] Ibid. 316.

[110] Ibid. 320.

In Act II, scene i, Ransom has a lengthy conversation with the Abbot at the monastery on the mountain. The Abbot, in his attempts to increase Ransom's self-awareness, describes the mountaineer's exploits in decidedly socio-political terms which reveal the destructive, if not sinister, component of it all:

> You could ask the whole world to follow you and it would serve you with blind obedience; for most men long to be delivered from the terror of thinking and feeling for themselves. And yours is the nature to which those are always attracted in whom the desire for devotion and self-immolation is strongest. And you would do them much good. Because men desire evil, they must be governed by those who understand corruption of their hearts, and can set bounds to it. As long as the world endures, there must be order, there must be government: but woe to the governors, for, by the very operation of their duty, however excellent, they themselves are destroyed. For you can only rule men by appealing to their fear and their lust; government requires the exercise of the human will; and the human will is from the Demon.[111]

In addition to its frighteningly modern relevance, the passage is a most concise summation of the fascistic spirit of Ransom's mode of endeavor, and of the manner in which a desperate public, represented by Mr. and Mrs. A, are whipped into the kind of jingoistic frenzy which supports such political phenomena. Indeed, in the prologue to Act II, scene ii, we find the following exchange:

> MRS A
> You see? The foreigner everywhere,
> Competing in trade, competing in sport,
> Competing in science and abstract thought:

[111] Ibid. 327.

And we just sit down and let them take
The prizes! There's more than a mountain at stake.

MR A

The travelogue showed us a Babylon buried in sand.

MRS A

And books have spoken of a Spain that was the brilliant centre of an Empire.

MR A

I have found a spider in the opulent boardroom.

MRS A

I have dreamed of a threadbare barnstorming actor, and he was a national symbol.

MR A

England's honour is covered with rust.

MRS A

Ransom must beat them! He must! He must!

MR A

Or England falls. She has had her hour
And now must decline to a second class power.[112]

Mendelson seems to imply that Auden abandons his typical rhetorical challenges to audiences, which were so integral to his idea of parable, when he suggests that the

[112] Ibid. 332.

"play presents no challenges to awareness or action."[113] But the idea of choice, both free and essential, is something of which Ransom and, by extension, the audience become acutely aware. In Act II, scene i, Ransom, in a moment of self-critical reflection, makes it clear in an unusual plea to God:

> Is it too late for me? I recognize my purpose. There was a choice once, in the Lakeland Inn. I made it wrong; and if I choose again now, I must choose for myself alone, not for these others. Oh, You who are the history and the creator of all these forms in which we are condemned to suffer, to whom the necessary is also the just, show me, show each of us upon this mortal star the danger that under his hand is softly palpitating. Save us, save us from the destructive element of our will, for all we do is evil.[114]

Auden's parabolic stratagem is preserved: a compulsion toward choice is highlighted through Ransom's self-awareness, and the consequences of his questionable decisions are dramatized. While his Freudian reunion with his mother at the top of the mountain, at the moment of his death, certainly implies the presence of some general, unalterable, and innately human character trait, the hauntingly literal parade of the dead is a powerful reminder of the costs of Ransom's obsessive pride and self-absorption made manifest through choice. At the end of the play, the Chorus reiterates the point in no uncertain terms:

> But between the day and night
> The choice is free to all, and light
> Falls equally on black and white.[115]

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[113] Mendelson, ***Early***, 286.

[114] Auden, ***Plays***, 329.

[115] Ibid. 354.

On June 15, 1935, Auden suddenly married Erika Mann, the eldest daughter of Thomas Mann, so that she could secure a British passport. Through Erika, Auden met the actress Therese Giehse, for whom he wrote a short cabaret sketch entitled ***Alfred*** (1936). Giehse was touring Europe with Die Pfeffermuehle, Mann's cabaret troupe, which specialized in anti-Nazi satire. In ***Christopher and His Kind***, Isherwood recalls seeing Giehse, whom he described as an "unforgettable actress," perform "in a scene in which she nursed the globe of the world on her lap like a sick child and crooned weirdly over it."[116] The image, it seems, inspired both the premise and tone of ***Alfred***, which features an old woman preparing a meal and her ominous monologue to "a magnificent white gander."[117] The sketch ends with the old woman caressing the goose on her lap while preparing the knife for the impending slaughter.

The old woman, who is described by Auden in the stage directions as having "something about her that reminds us of certain prominent European figures,"[118] is the proverbial hag who killed the goose that laid the golden egg. But who exactly are the "prominent European figures" to whom Auden refers, and what exactly does the goose represent? Fuller suggests that the "goose is a less obvious symbol than a globe, but the intention is comparable...If she is Hitler, then the goose may be the German people who have been stupid enough to give him power. Perhaps more particularly he represents the Jews (the eggs being cultural or financial prosperity)."[119]

In 1940, Auden greatly revised and expanded ***Alfred*** for radio broadcast on CBS featuring the actress Dame Mae Whitty. Renamed ***The Dark Valley***, the monodrama was a more generalized and wide-angled illustration of themes found in ***Alfred***. It still, however, issued from the kind of contemporaneous specificity which

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[116] Christopher Isherwood, ***Christopher and His Kind*** (New York: Methuen, 1977) 156.

[117] Auden, ***Plays***, 437.

[118] Ibid. 437.

[119] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 225.

marked his previous plays. In a letter to Wolfgang Koehler, Auden wrote: "I have been struggling to finish a radio play. It's supposed to be an old woman talking to a goose, but I believe she's really Knut Hamsun."[120] Hamsun was, of course, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist who wrote vividly about rural life in his native Norway. He had infamously become a champion and defender of the Nazi occupation of his country, ostensibly believing that Hitler's fascism might provide a comprehensive and efficacious solution to Europe's many social ills.

In a subsequent "Open letter to Knut Hamsun" published in ***Common Sense*** in 1940, Auden lambasted Hamsun for his embrace of fascism and its attendant machinations. He accuses Hamsun of secretly lusting for "prophetic fame"[121] and harboring an "impatience with social evils that baffle even the experts."[122] It was, in part, this combination of character flaws which led Hamsun to undermine his own previous exaltation of Norwegian rural life and embrace the violent energy of a fascistic machine age. Auden satirizes Hamsun's New Man through the ironic pleas of the old woman as she urges the goose to observe an airplane overhead:

> Look up, Nana, look up. There he goes. Do you see him? The new man in his new machine. Applaud him, Nana.[123]

The corresponding sense of order and efficiency which Hamsun seemed to value in the Nazi occupation was likewise ridiculed:

> Think of it, Nana. Every evening at six o'clock, week in and week out, winter or summer, storm or sunshine, that plane with its mail and its

[120] Ibid. 306.

[121] Ibid. 307.

[122] Ibid. 307.

[123] W.H. Auden, ***The Dark Valley, W.H. Auden: Libretti and Other Dramatic Writings: 1939-1973***, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 377.

> millionaires pass over this spot, punctual to the second. Think of that. What a triumph of organization. What a brain he must have, stuffed with wonderful plans for the future of humanity, for you and for me.[124]

Like ***Alfred***, the play ends chillingly with the old woman, invoking the spirit of her beloved father, about to destroy the thing which she claims to love and respect:

> For the All-Father is proud of his pretty world, and takes her on his knees, Nana, as I take you now, and strokes her back smiling till she squirms with pleasure, and feels with his fingers in her feathery neck, and calls her his daughter and his dear darling, his treasure, his princess, his precious goose, and she looks into his eyes and is ever so happy, for the sunset is beautiful and the bells are ringing, though she wonders a little why his loving hands are gripping so tightly that she gasps for air. "Father, why--what is the matter? What have I done? Father, why are you looking so fierce? Father, don't you remember, I'm the world you made. Father, I'm so young and white, I don't want to die. Father..."[125]

Auden, it seems, while beginning to recognize that he himself had sought solutions in a misguided political ideology, could not forgive Hamsun for subscribing to the false promises of an increasingly sinister fascism which destroys the thing it purports to defend. Beneath Hamsun's apparent recognition of the nobility of Norwegian rural life, writhed the unacknowledged potential to support one of the twentieth century's most destructive forces--a lesson, Auden believed, to which all of Europe must pay heed. As Auden writes in the "Open letter to Knut Hamsun": "Some worm there must have been, lying dormant in the heart which even while the life affirmed life, denied it, and only waited for the hour to strike, to rear its ugly little head and declare

[124] Ibid. 377.

[126] Ibid. 381.

its blind animus against the human spirit."[126]

Three years before he completed ***The Dark Valley***, Auden and Isherwood set to work on ***On the Frontier*** (1937-38), a startlingly timeless illustration of opportunities squandred, ignorance perpetuated, and nationalism gone awry. Originally conceived as a topical drama suitable for the West End stage and a popular audience, ***On the Frontier*** strikes an interesting balance between subtle psychological investigations and remarkable political prescience. The power of the play's intended topicality, however, was diluted by very real contemporaneous political upheavals, not the least of which was Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938. In the midst of such political turmoil and military maneuverings, Auden was compelled to insist that for a poetic dramatist "to choose as a subject a contemporary political subject is a mistake, because history is always now more terrible and more moving than anything you can possibly invent and more extravagant than anything you can imagine."[127] It was this sentiment which contributed to Auden's abandonment of politically motivated theatre and poetry--a transformation which will be explored in Chapters Two and Three. Despite his regrets and/or reservations regarding the play's merits, however, ***On the Frontier*** stands as a remarkably penetrating and shockingly timeless examination of a cyclical political phenomenon from which Western civilization has yet to extricate itself. Of the play's public-minded, communal brand of topicality, Kingsley Amis writes: "The play is precisely topical; for it deals not only with dictators and war, but boldly and sincerely with the problems which dictatorship and war have set for every member of the audience."[128]

The play alternates between two distinct but complementary plots, through which are interwoven a series of choral interludes containing predictably straighforward Marxist philosophy. The first plot unfolds in fictional Westland, where Valerian, a powerful industrialist, manipulates his nation's political situation so that he

[126] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 307.

[127] W.H. Auden, "The Future of English Poetic Drama," in Mendelson, ***Plays***, 522.

[128] Kingsley Amis, "New Statesman and Nation" in Haffenden, ***Heritage***, 278.

can continue to profit from an ongoing arms race with neighboring Ostnia. Westland's Leader, a ineffectual but beloved buffoon, was whisked into power on the promise of destroying the Valerian Works. Through Valerian's manipulative powers, however, the Valerian Works has remained a large and vital force behind Westand's military might and ostensible econimic success.

Valerian is a charismatic and frighteningly articulate Shavian character who bears a striking resemblace to ***Major Barbara*** 's Andrew Undershaft. Despite Valerian's final miscalculations, which lead to both war and his own murder at the hands of a disgruntled ex-employee, his no-nonsense pragmatism and unapologetic self-interest are refreshingly seductive. Like Undershaft, Valerian invites the audience to experience the unmistakable lure of capitalist greed and the free-market's version of utilitarianism. The Works, according to Valerian's flattering descriptions, translate into a sort of bourgeois utopia:

> The Valerian Works...How beautiful they look from here! Much nicer than the cathedral next door...A few people still go there to pray, I suppose--peasants who have only been in the city a generation, middle-class women who can't get husbands...Curious to think that it was once the centre of popular life. If I had been born in the thirteenth century, I suppose I should have wanted to be a bishop. [*Factory sirens, off, sound the lunch hour.*] Now my sirens have supplanted his bells. But the crowd down there haven't changed much. The Dole is as terrifying as Hell-Fire--probably worse...Run along, little man. Lunch is ready for you in the Valerian Cafeteria. Why so anxious? You shall have every care. You may spoon in the Valerian Park, and buy the ring next day at the Valerian Store. Then you shall settle down in a cosy Valerian Villa, which, I assure you, has been highly praised by architectural experts. The Valerian School, equipped with the very latest apparatus, will educate your dear little kiddies in Patriotism and Personal Hygiene. A smart Valerian Family Runabout will take you on

> Sundays to picnic by the waterfall, along with several hundred others of your kind. The Valerian Bank will look after your savings, if any; our doctors will see to your health, and our funeral parlours will bury you...[129]

It is not merely a positive presentation of the alleged virtues of capitalism and the underlying moral assumptions upon which it rests which drives Valerian's rhetoric, but also a wry, unadulterated assault on socialist values. Within the context of the play's own rhetorical stratagem, Valerian's arguments become ironic; but that does not diminish the initial effectiveness of his polemical rants. His nuts-and-bolts pragmatism and unsentimental brand of social observation are both refreshingly candid and strangely seductive:

> And then you talk about Socialism! Oh yes, I am well-aware that university professors, who ought to know better, have assured you that you are the heir to all the ages, Nature's last and most daring experiment. Believe them, by all means, if it helps you to forget the whip. Indulge in all the longings that aspirin and sweet tea and stump oratory can arouse. Dream of your never-never land, where the parks are covered with naked cow-like women, quite free; where the rich are cooked over a slow fire, and pigeons coo from the cupolas. Let the band in my park convince you that Life is seriously interested in marital fidelity and the right use of leisure, in the reign of happiness and peace. Go on, go on. Think what you like, vote for whom you like. What difference does it make? Make your little protest. Get a new master if you can. You will soon be made to realise that he is as exacting as the old, and probably less intelligent...The truth is, Nature is not interested in underlings--in the lazy, the inefficient, the self-indulgent, the People. Nor, for that matter, in the Aristocracy, which is

[129] Auden, ***Plays***, 364-65.

> now only another name for the Idle Rich. The idle are never powerful. With their gigolos and quack doctors, they are as unhappy as the working classes who can afford neither, and a great deal more bored. The world has never been governed by the People or by the merely Rich, and it never will be. It is governed by men like myself--though, in practice, we are usually rich and often come from the People.[130]

Valerian's pseudo-Darwinian analysis of socio-economic order rings with a certain inescapable truth; yet Auden refuses to confuse the realities of nature with the self-consciously created moral codes of an enlightened civilization. While Valerian's adherence to his own clearly defined philosophy might bring him financial and political rewards in the short-term, the circumstances under which he exists and thrives ultimately collapse before the forces that he himself has set in motion. The Leader's fateful decision to go to war with Ostnia, and Valerian's murder both represent the grave consequences of Valerian's failure to recognize that he is not immune to the destructive character of the base impulses he so eloquently champions.

The second plot unfolds in what Auden describes as the "*Ostnia-Westland Room. It is not to be supposed that the Frontier between the two countries does actually pass through this room: the scene is only intended to convey the* idea *of the Frontier--the L. half of the stage being in Westland: the R. being in Ostnia.*"[131] On one side of the Ostnia-Westland room, we observe the Vrodny-Hussek family, proud subjects of the King of Ostnia, whose regal portrait adorns their home; on the other side of the room lives the Thorvald family, patriotic citizens of fascist, dictatorial Westland. Throughout the course of the play, the two families remain unaware of the other's existence--except, perhaps, for Anna Vrodny and Eric Thorvald, the two young lovers whose love compels them to symbolically bridge the frontier and

[130] Ibid. 365.

[131] Ibid. 375.

meet in a kind of transcendent limbo.

The march toward war is dramatized through the respective families' surrender to their most base and passionate prejudices. The irrationality of their proffered opinions is deftly highlighted by dialogue which neatly straddles the specific contomperaneous crisis on the one hand, and a universally propagandistic vitriol on the other. Dr. Thorvald, for example, exclaims "This crime strikes at the whole basis of European civilisation," while his sister adds that "The Ostnians aren't civilized! They're savages! They burn incense and worship idols!"[132] The Vrodny-Hussek's, for their part, fan the flames of war by remaining blindly loyal to an unenlightened, increasingly decadent Ostnian monarchy. The frenzy reaches a fever pitch during simultaneous radio broadcasts by the Westland Leader and the Ostnian King. The climax of their dueling speeches is worth quoting in its entirety, as it is a vivid illustration of how the rhetoric of war bears a striking similarity between one epoch and another:

KING

How deeply touched we have been...

LEADER

Westland is restored to her greatness...

KING

By all the offers of service and sacrifice...

LEADER

One heart, one voice, one nation...

KING

Which have poured in from every corner of Our country...

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[132] Ibid. 384.

LEADER

It is a lie to say that Westland has ever stooped to baseness...

KING

And from every class of people, even the poorest...

LEADER

It is a lie to say that Westland could ever stoop to baseness...

KING

These last few days of terrible anxiety have brought us all very close together...

LEADER

It is a lie to say that Westland wants war...

KING

We all, I know, pray from the bottom of our hearts...

LEADER

Westland stands in Europe as a great bastion...

KING

That this crisis may pass away...

LEADER

Against the tide of anarchy...

KING

Our ministers are doing everything in their power...

LEADER

Westland lives and Westland soil are sacred...

KING

To avoid any irreparable step...

LEADER

Should any human power dare to touch either...

KING

But should the worst happen...

LEADER

It will have to face the holy anger of a nation in arms...

KING

We shall face it in a spirit worthy of the great traditions of our fathers...

LEADER

That will not sheathe the sword...

KING

To whom honour was more precious than life itself...

LEADER

Till it has paid for its folly with its blood...

KING

We stand before the bar of history...

LEADER

For, were Westland to suffer one unrequited wrong...

KING

Confident that right must triumph...

LEADER

I should have no wish to live!

KING

And we shall endure to the end![133]

Throughout the play, Valerian continues his ostensibly common-sensical analysis. In language which should strike a note of familiarity to audiences of all generations, especially those living in a post 9/11 West, the Steel executive Stahl and Valerian engage in a coversation which is, by turns, frustratingly reactionary and wryly cynical. Stahl seems to speak for a fearful and suspicious elite when he questions the Leader's motives and warns that "We're dealing with a madman."[134] Valerian, on the other hand, remains grounded in a cold reality when he declares: "Do you seriously imagine that wars nowadays are caused by some escaped lunatic putting a bomb under a bridge and blowing up an omnibus? There have been worse provocations

[133] Ibid. 386.

[134] Ibid. 393.

in the past, and there will be worse in the future."[135] Of common responses to the impending war, Valerian describes "Students' demonstrations. Patriotic speeches. All the customary nonsense..."[136] and ridicules the "handful of intellectuals, who, for the last twenty years, have signed letters of protest against everything from bi-metallism in Ecuador to the treatment of yaks in Thibet..."[137] Auden's didactic stratagem is to accurately reflect the climate of a politically turbulent Europe and anticipate his audience's reactions to the immediate situation. Valerian's cruel calculations are always one step ahead of the predictable, banal, communal responses illustrated in the Ostnia-Westland room, which are, in turn, reflective of the audiences' presumed nationalism in the face of very real threats. Yet Auden is sure to insinuate the moral bankruptcy of Valerian's positions which leads to both Valerian's demise and the collapse of his model of cold war escalation.

What emerges from the dust and ash of the play's assault on Europe's pre-War mentality is a certain hope issuing from both the political sentiments of Auden's well-placed Choruses and the power of Eric and Anna's love which traverses the man-made boundaries of political efficacy. The Choruses' twofold rhetorical strategem is to warn audiences of domestic rather than foreign threats--the kind of dangers which emanate from a nation's ill-advised decision to corrupt its own declared principles--and a not-so-subtle espousal of Marxist principles. The former is reflected in such choral passages as the following:

> Don't believe them,
> Only fools let words deceive them.
> Resist the snare, the scare
> Of something that's not there.
> These voices commit treason

[135] Ibid. 393.

[136] Ibid. 393.

[137] Ibid. 408.

Against all truth and reason,
Using an unreal aggression
To blind you to your real oppression;
Truth is elsewhere.
Understand the motive, penetrate the lie
Or you will die.[138]

And later:

The country is in danger
But not from any stranger.
Your enemies are here
Whom you should fight, not fear,
For till they cease
The earth will know no peace.
Learn to know
Your friend from your foe.[139]

The latter is reflected in the Choruses' constant attacks on the bourgeoisie and in such pat statements as "The day is coming, brother, when we shall all be free!"[140] and "Unite and act."[141]

But the play's most pointed moral tag issues from the manner in which Eric and Anna overcome the hostilities of their respective nations (and families) by figuratively transcending the boundaries which separate them. Their union, even in death, is designed to undermine any sense of glory or moral necessity in a war which has devastated the two nations. Once again, through Auden's manifold

[138] Ibid. 390-91.

[139] Ibid. 392.

[140] Ibid. 362.

[141] Ibid. 391.

criticisms of the myopia of modern civilization, there emerges a plea to make more enlightened choices; so that the play aspires to be more than the mere examination of cyclical political phenomena, but an active agent of social change.

The characteristics most germane to Auden's understanding of Public Art were described by an anonymous critic writing about ***On the Frontier*** for the ***Times Literary Supplement***:

> For years we have complained, concerning the average modern drama, that it has not been contiguous with modern life. It has been a drama of little detached intrigues, usually erotic. Here is the swing of the pendulum--a drama so much absorbed with characteristic world events that the play hardly stays in the theatre at all. Its whole reference is outside. We, the audience, are present at a running commentary. Working always by allusion, the persons remain all the time, as it were, members of a chorus annotating something "off." There is no *inner* development in the course of the acts. We might parallel it some ways with the morality play. The response to be evoked is 'This is wicked. It ought not to be.' It is also like a superb parody of public life, where Truth is borne through the theatre on a placard.[142]

If one subscribes to Thomas Weiskel's startling assertion that "a humanistic sublime is an oxymoron,"[143] then Auden's civic-minded didacticism falls hopelessly short of the kind of universal transcendence to which, on some level, he most certainly aspired. Or, as Harold Bloom describes the quandary: "Sublime poets who are crucially humanistic in some aspects--Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Whitman, Stevens,--must forsake the sublime when they foreground

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[142] Haffenden, ***Heritage***, 276.

[143] Harold Bloom, ***Ruin the Sacred Truths*** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 117.

humanistic concerns."[144] It might follow, then, that Auden's decision to ground his early plays in contemporary political specificity relegates them to a superficial brand of irony, which, according to Bloom, "destroys the sublime."[145] But the always inventive Auden soon found ways of translating his parabolic techniques into a dramatic language which espoused the virtues of a Judeo-Christian worldview, and thus confronted the kinds of metaphysical questions to which a pure sublimity would prove more hospitable.

Chapter Two will examine, in part, how Auden continued to appropriate and cultivate the techniques of parable while reinvigorating his devotion to a didactic, public art long after his political orthodoxies were replaced by religious ones.

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[144] Ibid. 117.

[145] Ibid. 119.

CHAPTER TWO

SHADOW OF THE CROSS

Opera, Christian Morality, and the Liturgical Aesthetic

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?

--W.H. Auden

We know now that the gesture of daily existence is inadequate for the stage; instead of pretending that the stage gesture is a copy of reality, let us adopt a literal untruth, a thorough-going convention, a ritual. For the stage--not only in its remote origins, but always--is a ritual, and the failure of the contemporary stage to satisfy the craving for ritual is one of the reasons why it is not a living art.

--T.S. Eliot

Wystan doesn't love God; he's just attracted to him.

--Marc Blitzstein

CHAPTER TWO

SHADOW OF THE CROSS

Opera, Christian Morality, and the Liturgical Aesthetic

Christopher Isherwood once famously remarked, "If Auden had his way, he would turn every play into a cross between grand opera and high mass."[146] Even while he somewhat reluctantly espoused the anti-religious sentiments of Marxist doctrine during the 1930s, Auden remained fascinated by the formal trappings of sacramental ritual and liturgical worship. And, on a much deeper and more profound level, he never abandoned the most fundamental moral and metaphysical assumptions embedded in Christian theology. His unshakable devotion to the High Anglicanism of his youth and his unabashed belief in the aesthetic value of its formal rites and ceremonies are clearly evident in most all of his works for the stage, even those written before his public reconversion to Christianity in 1940.

Auden's conscious and enthusiastic embrace of Christian-based religious allegory coincided with his passionate rejection of a politically didactic theatre--the result of his disheartening resignation to what he came to believe was art's impotence in the face of very real horrors. His subsequent statements that "art makes nothing happen," and "the political history of the world would have been the same if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted nor a bar of music composed"[147] were indicative of his growing disaffection with the ostensible failures of so-called "social art."

This dramatic change in his way of thinking began in and around 1939. In ***W.H. Auden: A Biography***, Humphrey Carpenter details several of the events leading to Auden's conversion. One of the more haunting episodes concerns a trip

[146] Christopher Isherwood, "Some Notes on the Early Poetry," ***W.H. Auden: A Tribute***, ed. Stephen Spender (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1975.) 74.

[147] W.H. Auden, ***The Prolific and the Devourer*** (New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1981) 26.

to a New York movie theatre in November of 1939:

> Two months after the outbreak of war, in November 1939, [Auden] went to a cinema in Yorkville, the district of Manhattan where he and Isherwood had lived for a few weeks in the spring. It was largely a German-speaking area, and the film he saw was *Sieg im Poland*, an account by the Nazis of their conquest of Poland. When Poles appeared on the screen he was startled to hear a number of people in the audience scream 'Kill them!' He later said of this: 'I wondered then, why I reacted as I did against this denial of every humanistic value. The answer brought me back to the church."[148]

The episode was a stark illustration of the sad and degenerating state of geo-political affairs which followed the initial spirit of promise and renewal marking post-World War I Europe. The apparent failure of his generation of artists to affect any positive social change caused Auden to assert that "Art is a product of history, not a cause," and to constantly reiterate his growing belief in Art's inability to alter mankind's material situation. As Carpenter explains, Auden "had been through many changes of heart since reaching adulthood, but 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...Auden's experience in the Yorkville cinema in November 1939 radically shook this belief."[149] Because of his need (both artistic and personal) to impose order, he set about to locate an alternate belief system which might replace his failed political ideology:

> It was not just a question of shattered optimism: the whole ground of

[148] Carpenter, ***Biography***, 282.

[149] Ibid. 282-83

> his outlook had shifted beneath his feet. If humanity were not innately good, then on what basis could he legitimately object to the murderous shouts of the Germans in that cinema audience, or indeed to the behaviour of Hitler himself? Were not the Nazis merely being true to their own nature, to all our natures? What reason could he give for his strong, instinctive, ineradicable hatred of the Nazis and all that they stood for? He had to find some new objective ground from which to argue against Hitler.[150]

For Auden, the "objective ground" was a sound theology rooted in absolutism: "The whole trend of liberal thought has been to undermine faith in the absolute...It has tried to make reason the judge...But since life is a changing process...the attempt to find a humanistic basis for keeping a promise, works logically with the conclusion, 'I can break it whenever I feel it convenient.'"[151] Auden's renewed committment to Christian absolutism was bolstered by his readings of several books of theology, the most influential of which were Charles Williams's ***The Descent of the Dove*** and the collected works of Soren Kierkegaard. Of this period, Auden wrote: "So, presently, I started to read some theological works, Kierkegaard in particular, and began going, in a tentative and experimental sort of way, to church."[152]

In Williams, Auden found "a historical account of Christendom from its beginning to the present age," designed to illuminate the manner in which "the Church reveals the divine purpose behind history."[153] Williams's chronicle was, in large part, an attempt to explain how the Incarnation of Christ ultimately reconciled nature and humanity with the divine kingdom of God.

In Kierkegaard, Auden found a religious thinker unflinchingly interested in the

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[150] Ibid. 283

[151] Ibid. 283.

[152] Monroe K. Spears, ***The Poetry of W.H. Auden*** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 176.

[153] Carpenter, ***Biography***, 284.

consequences of choice in a truly existential sense--a philosophy which takes "account of personal experience" and recognizes "the personal nature of God. Man's relation to God is, indeed, the dominant theme in Kierkegaard's works."[154] D.W. Hamlyn explicates Kierkegaard's existential approach to Christianity:

> Truth...is constituted by subjectivity, by which [Kierkegaard] does not mean to advocate a thesis of the relativity of truth, despite the similarity to Nietzsche's claim. The point is rather that attempts at objectivity on the pattern of Hegel's system cannot deal with the individual and his existence. In its place Kierkegaard advocates 'subjective thinking' and inwardness. Only the truth that edifies,' he says, 'is the truth for you.' The human being is caught between time and eternity, and his decisions and choices determine what is so for him. In the end it is between him and God, and the search for what truth there is must be personal.[155]

As Hamlyn notes, Kierkegaard's theology "is a very Protestant one, and a great deal of what he wrote can be classified as a very curious form of theology of that kind."[156] But it should be clear how Kierkegaard's emphasis on existential decision-making appealed to Auden, who had himself always harbored a strong interest in the necessity of individual choice--even when the context was political rather than religious.

In 1939, Auden began work on a book of reflections and aphorisms which was modelled on both Pascal's ***Pensées*** and William Blake's ***The Marriage of Heaven and Hell***. Although not published during his lifetime, ***The Prolific and the Devourer*** remains an informative testament to Auden's evolving beliefs at the time, and a penetrating chronicle of how religion began to replace politics as the key

[154] D.W. Hamlyn, ***A History of Western Philosophy*** (London: Penguin Books, 1987) 272.

[155] Ibid. 273.

[156] Ibid. 273.

component in his search for social order and a workable ideology. Of his generation's attempts to affect socio-political change through intellectual and artistic endeavors, Auden offers harsh criticism:

> Few of the artists who round about 1931 began to take up politics as an exciting new subject to write about, had the faintest idea what they were letting themselves in for. They have been carried along on a wave which is travelling too fast to let them think what they are doing or where they are going. But if they are neither to ruin themselves or harm the political causes in which they believe, they must stop and consider their position again. Their follies of the last eight years will provide them with plenty of food for thought
>
> If one reviews the political activity of the world's intellectuals during the past eight years, if one counts up all the letters to the papers which they have signed, all the platforms on which they have spoken, all the congresses which they have attended, one is compelled to admit that their combined effect, apart from the money they have helped to raise for humanitarian purposes (and one must not belittle the value of that) has been nil. As far as the course of political events is concerned they might just as well have done nothing.[157]

Having dispensed with politics as an effective and/or legitimate theme for the artist, Auden turns his attention toward religion. He begins constructing the foundation for his theological arguments by invoking the Western philosophical idea of non-contradiction:

> There are two and only two philosophies of life, the true and the false; all the apparently infinite varieties are varieties of the false. Or rather

[157] Auden, ***Prolific***, 20.

> there is only the True Way and the false philosophies. For the Way cannot be codified as a philosophy: that would be to suppose that perfect knowledge of the whole of reality is possible, indeed that it is already known. The Way is only a way, the method we must adopt if we are to obtain any valid knowledge.[158]

He then draws a clear line of distinction between "primitive" and "advanced" religions:

> Primitive religions are practical and political: a list of actions to do and actions to perform in order to survive from one day to the next. This do, and thou shalt live. The wages of sin is death. They assume that society will always remain the same. Advanced religions are based on the knowledge that society is changing, and attempt to forecast the direction of change. They conceive of an ideal society in the future, try to deduce what its divine laws will be, and set them down now so that when man has reached that stage, he will be prepared and know how to act. Until then he must necessarily be sinful.[159]

Having begun to establish the criteria for classification as an "advanced religion," Auden makes the case for Christianity:

> Jesus convinces me that he was right because what he taught has become consistently more and more the necessary and natural attitude for man as society has developed the way it has, i.e., he forecast our historical evolution correctly. If we reject the Gospels, then we must reject modern life. Industrialism is only workable if we accept Jesus' view of life, and conversely his view of life is more workable

[158] Ibid. 30-31.

[159] Ibid. 40.

> under industrialism than under any previous form of civilisation. Neither the heathen philosophers, nor Buddha, nor Confucius, nor Mohammed showed his historical insight.[160]

It must be conceded that the actual details of Auden's newly professed religious beliefs--and their theological/philosophical implications--are rather vague, despite his many attempts to clarify them. One of the more successful of these attempts can be found in an untitled essay which first appeared in an anthology entitled ***Modern Canterbury Pilgrims***, in which Auden writes:

> As a spirit, a conscious person endowed with free will, every man has, through faith and grace, a unique "existential" relation to God, and few since St. Augustine have described this relation more profoundly than Kierkegaard. 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.[161]

Having established that the existence of both God and the "creature" presupposes a relation between the two, he then elaborates on the nature of that "relation":

> ...if I try to banish it permanently from consciousness, I shall not get rid of it, but experience it negatively as guilt and despair. The wrath of God is not a description of God in a certain state of feeling, but of the way in which I experience God if I distort or deny my relation to him.

[160] Ibid. 40.

[161] Spears, ***Poetry***, 173.

> The commands of God are neither the aesthetic fiat, "Do what you must" nor the ethical instruction, "These are the things which you may or must not do," but the call of duty, "Choose to do what at this moment in this context I am telling you to do."[162]

But an inherent uneasiness with traditional notions of the supernatural and his criticisms of both the Catholic and Protestant churches result in a Blakean brand of heterodoxy--a theology in accordance with the basic spirit of Christian morality, if not the letter of Judeo-Christian metaphysical assumptions. He claimed, for example, that "there are not 'good' and 'evil' existences...[but] everything that is is holy."[163] As Carpenter notes, this position is in direct alignment with the one posited by Williams:

> The history of Christendom is the history of an operation. It is the operation of the Holy Ghost...Our causes are concealed, and mankind becomes to us a mass of contending unrelated effects. It is the effort to relate the effects conveniently without touching, without (often) understanding, the causes that make life difficult. The Church is...the exhibition and correction of all causes.[164]

This assertion not only contradicts one of the fundamental premises of Deism, which had gained much credence in the nineteenth century, but also seems to undermine the more orthodox view as expressed by the Romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his ***Aids to Reflection***:

> A moral evil is an evil that has its origin in a will. An evil common to all must have a ground common to all. But the actual existence of moral

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[162] Ibid. 182.

[163] Auden, ***Prolific***, 33.

[164] Carpenter, ***Biography***, 284.

> evil we are bound by conscience to admit; and that there is an evil common to all is a fact; and this evil must therefore have a common ground. Now this evil ground cannot originate in the divine Will: it must therefore be referred to the will of man. And this evil ground we call original sin.[165]

On the other hand, Auden, like Kierkegaard before him, did seem to adhere to the Coleridgean notion of mystery being central to Christian faith. Of original sin, Coleridge writes: "It is a mystery, that is, a fact, which we see, but cannot explain; and the doctrine a truth which we apprehend, but can neither comprehend nor communicate."[166] Although Auden's conception of original sin differed from Coleridge's, he did find value in the willingness of Kierkegaard's "existential Christianity" to perceive "its relation to an absolute value" and its understanding "that it could never claim to know or embody that value"[167] --a sentiment leading directly to Kierkegaard's prescriptive "leap of faith." As Carpenter explains: "Faith itself might be irrational, but it was the door to a system of thought which could explain the whole of human existence; and it was for such a system that [Auden] had been searching throughout his adult life."[168] Or, as Charles Osborne puts it:

> It would seem that what Auden sought, after an experience that frightened him, was a set of rules which would protect him against unknown terrors. He had always, like most liberal humanists, accepted the moral tenets of Christianity. Now he was prepared to swallow its supernatural aspects as well for the sake, one might say, of a quiet

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[165] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Aids to Reflection," ***Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Edition of the Major Works***, ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 682.

[166] Ibid. 682.

[167] Edward Mendelson, ***Later Auden*** (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux,1999) 130.

[168] Carpenter, ***Biography***, 298.

life.[169]

Auden's shift from political secularism to religious faith is neatly summarized by Carpenter in a passage which outlines Kierkegaard's theory of the various stages of experience. The pattern Kierkegaard describes is conspicuously similar to Auden's own intellectual and spiritual development:

> Kierkegaard's first stage of experience was the "aesthetic", in which the individual lives merely for the joys of the present moment--much as Auden had done in his largely amoral days as an undergraduate. This, said Kierkegaard, would soon prove inadequate and would offer the individual the choice of moving into a higher, "ethical" stage. If he took that choice, this "ethical" stage would be one in which he made moral judgements and abided by them--much as Auden had tried to do during the years in which he interested himself in politics and the crises of society. But, declared Kierkegaard, this "ethical" stage would soon in its turn prove inadequate, because it made no claims on any transcendent notion of eternity, and because its foundation, a belief in the individual's (or humanity's) basic righteousness would soon prove false--which was precisely what Auden had just realised. In consequence, Kierkegaard argued, a new decision becomes necessary. The individual must either abandon himself to despair, or must throw himself entirely on the mercy of God.[170]

Spears suggests, however, that Auden's transformation was not so much the result of a linear development, but, rather, the product of a more circular phenomenon: "Auden's religious position is not a denial but a fulfillment of his earlier beliefs; the religious values do not contradict the others, but clarify them and take them to another

[169] Osborne, ***Life***, 203.

[170] Carpenter, ***Biography***, 285.

level. It is no accident nor effect of temporary intellectual fashions that his religious approach should be existential, for this type of religious philosophy starts from the same kind of psychological analysis that had formed the perduring basis of Auden's various attitudes and convictions."[171]

It is important to stress that the complex dialectic through which Auden worked in order to arrive at his theological conclusions is not evident in his drama. As Auden understood, "versified metaphysical argument is very difficult."[172] What we do find in the plays and libretti, however, are the final results of his intellectual/philosophical inquiries--a set of metaphysical assumptions consistent with, but not exclusive to, fundamental Judeo-Christian precepts. In other words, Auden's drama does not feature Christianity, but, rather Christianity's shadow; not the espousal of a uniquely Christian theology, but a generalized moralism more closely akin to a universalized, liberal humanism. As Auden himself writes: "There can no more be a 'Christian' art than there can be a Christian science or a Christian diet. There can only be a Christian spirit in which an artist, a scientist, works or does not work."[173] This "Christian spirit" can be located in Auden's work, and the familiarity and relative simplicity of his final assumptions led naturally to moral allegory.

As previously noted, Auden had always been intimately familiar with the great traditions of moral allegory. In Medieval poetry and religious drama in particular, Auden found forms and themes which operated in perfect alignment with his newly professed theological/philosophical perspectives and dramaturgical predilections; a vital literary tradition illustrating a Christian world-view through parable and allegorical abstraction. The works of William Langland, the fourteenth-century English poet, proved particularly instrumental in shaping the young Auden's poetic sensibility. In Langland's ***Piers Plowman***, Medieval Liturgical Drama, the great English Cycle Plays, the Mummers' Plays, and the surviving Moralities, Auden found many of the basic features which would mark his own plays and libretti:

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[171] Spears, ***Poetry***, 171-172.

[172] Carpenter, ***Biography***, 288.

[173] W.H. Auden, ***The Dyer's Hand*** (New York: Random House, 1962) 458.

abstraction, allegory, anachronism, a protagonist's "journey," traditional verse forms, and, most important, the Christian notion that choice, not predestination or the unpredictable currents of a fickle, uncaring universe, governs one's destiny. As Auden explains in "The Christian Tragic Hero: Contrasting Captain Ahab's Doom and its Classic Greek Prototype":

> Greek tragedy is the tragedy of necessity; i.e., the feeling aroused in the spectator is "What a pity it had to be this way"; Christian tragedy is the tragedy of possibility, "What a pity it was this way when it could have been otherwise"; secondly, the hubris which is the flaw in the Greek hero's character is the illusion of a man who knows himself strong and believes that nothing can shake that strength, while the corresponding Christian sin of Pride is the illusion of a man who knows himself weak but believes he can by his own efforts transcend that weakness and become strong.[174]

Even in the 1930s, when Auden proclaimed his devotion to a politically didactic theatre which ostensibly espoused the principle aims of Communism, the foundations of a Christian morality are clearly evident in his drama. From ***Paid on Both Sides***, which prominently features both Father Christmas and dialogue lifted verbatim from a mummers' play, to ***The Dark Valley***, with its Dantesque imagery and themes of Christian redemption; from the quest-like tragedy of ***The Ascent of F6*** to ***On the Frontier***'s hymn to a heavenly utopia, Auden's drama ubiquitously contains complex networks of Christian imagery which indirectly highlight the moral and supernatural assumptions that underlie them.

Auden was often accused, however, of being more enraptured with the formal trappings of Christian worship--the sacredness of a liturgical aesthetic--than with the theological/philosophical presuppositions upon which they rested. As Igor

[174] W.H. Auden, "The Christian Tragic Hero: Contrasting Captain Ahab's Doom and Its Classical Greek Prototype," ***The New York Times Book Review***, December 16, 1945.

Stravinsky once declared: "What his intellect and gifts require of Christianity is its form--even, to go further, its uniform."[175] Marc Blitzstein was more blunt: "Wystan doesn't love God. He's just attracted to him."[176] Auden himself even declared that "however bored I might be at the very thought of God, I enjoyed services in His worship very much."[177] In 1937 Isherwood wrote: "When we collaborate, I have to keep a sharp eye on him--or down flop the characters on their knees (see ***F6*** *passim*): another constant danger is that of choral interuptions by angel-voices."[178] While there is no question regarding Auden's unabashed fascination with the formality, solemnity, and sacred, ritualistic adornments indicative of Christian ceremonial worship, the manner in which he deftly incorporated them into his already stylized drama is worthy of examination.

Perhaps most exemplary of his newly articulated religious beliefs and dramatic intentions is his libretto (co-written with Chester Kallman) for Igor Stravinsky's "neo-classical" opera, ***The Rake's Progress*** (1948). In his ***Opera as Drama***, Joseph Kerman suggests that ***The Rake's Progress*** "is the most convincing of operas that have retreated even farther, to eighteenth century principles of construction. These principles were not dramatically exhausted in the early time, it appears, and much that is fresh and still impressive can be derived from them."[179] Its expert fusion of various compositional principles results in something highly unusual in opera history. This fusion is achieved, first and foremost, in the Auden/Kallman libretto, which is given slight analytical attention in Kerman's examination; instead, Kerman concentrates almost exclusively on Stravinsky's score, stubbornly insisting that "in opera the dramatist is the composer."[180] While such

[175] Osborne, ***Life***, 279.

[176] Ibid. 318.

[177] Spears, ***Poetry***, 174.

[178] Christopher Isherwood, "Some Notes on the Early Poetry," in Spender , ***Tribute***, 74.

[179] Joseph Kerman, ***Opera as Drama*** (New York: Random House, 1952) 222.

[180] Ibid. 6.

problematic assertions have become commonplace, the value of a rich and textured libretto like ***The Rake's Progress*** has been grossly underestimated. As Patrick J. Smith argues:

> The librettist...cannot be considered merely a wordsmith stringing out lines of mellifluous verse: he is at once a dramatist, a creator of word, verse, situation, scene, and character, and--this is of vital importance--an artist who, by dint of his professional training as a poet and/or dramatist, can often visualize the work *as a totality* more accurately than the composer. This totality includes not only the "story" but also the means by which that story will be most effectively presented on stage both organizationally and scenically.[181]

Auden's interest in opera as an appropriate form for the cultivation and development of his poetic inclinations had, perhaps unconciously, already begun by the 1930s. His first serious contact with Italian opera occurred while he was collaborating with Benjamin Britten on various song cycles. By 1941, Auden and Britten had created ***Paul Bunyan***, a "school opera" which was performed at Columbia University. Although both Auden and Britten deemed their effort a failure, Auden's fascination with opera continued to grow. In addition to the Auden/Kallman libretti ***Delia, or A Masque of the Night*** (1953), and ***Elegy for Young Lovers*** (1961), the ensuing years marked a vital proliferation of Auden's operatic criticism, commentary, and theory, as well as translations (also with Kallman) of Mozart's ***The Magic Flute***, ***Don Giovanni***, and Brecht/Weill's ***Seven Deadly Sins***. Blair explains that Auden "developed his theory of opera in a number of poems and critical articles, most of them written about the time of the first performance of ***The Rake*** in 1951."[182] Blair suggests that "Auden's conception of opera may be divided

[181] Patrick J. Smith, ***The Tenth Muse*** (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1970) xix.

[182] Blair, ***Poetic***, 156.

into two complimentary facets: the artifice of opera and its moral realism."[183] As we shall see, opera's high artifice was hospitable to Auden's idiosyncratic didacticism--a rhetorical stratagem now interested in general, abstract, universal truths as opposed to specific, local particularities. Likewise, Auden's "realism" is not governed by verisimilitude; it is, rather, a "moral realism," a representation of "the moral essence of human life."[184] This poetic philosophy, rooted in abstraction, led naturally to allegory and parable, those prominent features of medieval literature which Auden found so fascinating and useful. While it is easy to assert that ***The Rake's Progress*** occupies an important position in twentieth century opera, some historical contextualization is required if we are to fully understand its proper placement in opera's evolutionary continuum. It will also help to illustrate much of what Auden found interesting and attractive in the operatic form: its historical connections to religious drama, its sacred modal qualities, and the challenges which issue from attempts to reconcile the dynamic tensions between text and music--characteristics Auden recognized and which are germane to any subsequent discussion of Auden's liturgical aesthetic.

Since its self-conscious origins in the late sixteenth century, opera has experienced a rather radical departure from the pre-conceived ideals articulated by the Florentine Camerata and its major public spokesman, Giulio Caccini, whose theoretical tract ***Le Nuove Musiche*** (***The New Music***), first appeared in 1602. Originally conceived as both a reinvention of the power and grandeur of Classical Greek Drama and a combative reaction to the polyphonic musical forms which had become predominate in both religious and secular idioms, opera was built upon simple, monophonic musical lines designed to heighten and intensify the drama. The realization of such expressed intentions did not begin, however, with the Florentine Camerata's codification of their aesthetic principles. The medieval church fostered precursory forms which were later adopted by opera's earliest pioneers. Dramatic passages were inserted into the Hours services by medieval monks; these

[183] Ibid. 156.

[184] Ibid. 160.

passages were sung--first in Latin, later in respective vernaculars--and were short, concentrated dramatizations of given Biblical events. The passages were eventually expanded and "performed," as an integral part of Catholic liturgies, not merely in monasteries, but in Churches throughout western Europe. As Leslie Orrey explains, these litugical dramas included "solos and choruses, and even some provision for instrumental color."[185] The formal properties (musical and otherwise) were developed in support of the Christian themes contained in the text. Orrey writes:

> Just as for the ancient Greeks drama was primarily a religious experience, so the medieval church, seeking every means to promote the Christian message, was quick to realize drama's power in bringing home the essentials of this message to a largely illiterate congregation. Such 'liturgical' plays are known from at least as early as the tenth century, and a fair number survive...and the indications given here and in other sources as to costumes, action and scenery leave no doubt that we are dealing with works that contain all the ingredients of opera.[186]

It should be noted that these "ingredients of opera" were devised and employed in service of a decidely didactic objective; the musical, decorative components working in support of the drama. As the works became longer and more dramatically sophisticated, they began being performed independent of the liturgy, both inside and outside the Church proper. Eventually, they developed into the popular Mystery plays, with "those in Italy, known as Sacre Rappresentazioni," being "specially pertinent since they lead directly to oratorio and opera...They were for one or more voices, sung throughout, in recitative or in a more formal style...besides the liturgical plainsong there were other elements, such as instrumental effects and 'Laudi', or spiritual songs (hymns), sung in the vernacular in a simple, popular

[185] Leslie Orrey, ***A Concise History of Opera*** (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1972) 12.

[186] Ibid. 11.

idiom."[187]

The musical/dramatic components introduced to the liturgy were not entirely welcome, especially after they grew in breadth and complexity. In the early sixteenth century, the Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote:

> We have introduced an artificial and theatrical music into the church, a bawling and an agitation of various voices, such as I believe had never been heard in the theatres of the Greeks and Romans. Horns, trumpets, pipes vie and sound along constantly with the voices. Amorous and lascivious melodies are heard such as elsewhere accompany courtesans and clowns. The people run into churches as if they were theatres, for the sake of the sensuous charm of the ear.[188]

Erasmus's discomfort with the increased polyphony of this "artificial theatrical music" was not unique. In ***Osmin's Rage***, Peter Kivy suggests that formal Christian pedagogy favored simplicity over complexity with regard to prophetic speech and communication with common men[189] --an observation which will prove germane to our subsequent discussion of Auden's rhetorical stratagems. Erasmus's religious concerns ran parallel to the aesthetic concerns expressed by both the Florentine Camerata and other secular voices almost a century later: the text, the drama, the message were being subsumed, not enhanced, by purely musical considerations. As we shall see, this process of dramatic/textual subordination and musical/decorative elevation began repeating itself not long after the Camerata's manifesto and its professed adherents gave birth to opera.

Composer Jacopo Peri (1561-1633) and poet/librettist Ottavio Rinuccini (1562-1621) made great strides toward the realization of the Camerata's respective

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[187] Ibid. 13.

[188] Peter Kivy, ***Osmin's Rage*** (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) 3.

[189] Ibid. 4.

goals. Together they created ***Daphne***, often referred to as the first opera. ***Daphne***, produced in Florence in 1594, appropriated Classical Greek mythology as its subject matter, and was built upon simple, monophonic musical lines designed to support and enhance the drama. Caccini's "New Music" would not, however, reach a full fruition until the arrival in Mantua of Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643). Monteverdi's ***Orfeo*** (1607) brilliantly coupled the new monodic style with a more complete musical unity. His subsequent operas, including ***Arianna*** (1608), ***Il Rotorno d'Ulisse in Patria*** (1641), and ***L'Incoronazione di Poppea*** (1642), secured his reputation as Italy's most important operatic composer of the seventeenth century. It should be noted, however, that despite Monteverdi's aesthetic alliance with the Camerata, his later operas featured a vocal line that "was already edging away from its purist role as drama's handmaid," and "moved significantly towards the position where its subservience to the needs of dramatic truth was compromised by purely musical considerations: the 'aria' was born."[190] Perhaps ironically, Monteverdi was to both realize the Camerata's loftiest aspirations and eventually lead the way to their ultimate corruption.

Although the general trend of dramatic subordination to a musical primacy continued, the eighteenth century witnessed ongoing tensions between opposing artistic tendencies. Paul Nettl writes:

> Indeed, there is hardly a period in operatic history in which idealism and realism are not engaged in heavy warfare. Even the birth of opera around 1600 must be regarded as a protest against the non-realistic tendencies of fifteenth and sixteenth century polyphonic music. The antithesis belleza/verita prevails in the entire history of the genre and finds its most striking expression in the confrontation of recitative and aria in eighteenth-century opera. Over and again, the realistic principle asserts itself against the sensual one, with the French, as a rationalistically inclined people, insisting on a more natural use of

[190] Orrey, ***Concise***, 30.

> language and the Italians on sensual beauty. As so often in musical history, the Germans occupy an intermediate position, with Gluck taking the part of the French, Mozart that of the Italians, and Wagner creating the first efficient synthesis of realism and idealism.[191]

As Nettl observes, the works of two Germans, Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1714-1787) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791), are illustrative of the competing tendencies at play in eighteenth-century opera. Gluck preferred a more measured, austere, dignified style of musical composition and dramatic construction. In strict accordance with neo-Classical codifications, Gluck's works (none of which are in German) are direct, simple, and balanced, free of both vulgar ornamentation and gross underminings of the accepted rules of decorum. His libretti are based upon Classical mythology and the homophonic nature of his respective scores supports a nuanced, suggestive brand of restraint. Mozart, on the other hand, had little patience for the external imposition of rules governing his impetuous, idiosyncratic creative impulses. His music grew out of a complex polyphony, rich in harmony, texture, counterpoint, and orchestral color. His libretti, many in German, were based upon exotic tales (***Abduction from the Seraglio***) and scandalous plays (***The Marriage of Figaro***). ***The Magic Flute***, his final opera, was a startling "combination of ritual, magic and symbolism, interspersed with circus-like clowning which borders on the farcical [...] with its presentation on two levels, the spirituality of the Tamino-Pamina duo set off against the earthly Papageno-Papagena relationship, its half-revealed Masonic mysteries, its conflict between good and evil, perhaps even the ambivalent quality of the Sarastro-Queen of Night relationship, is seen as a quasi religious work which inspires in some quarters an almost mystic veneration."[192] ***The Magic Flute***, with its pre-Romantic characteristics, might be regarded as somewhat antithetical to the Camerata's prescriptive declarations; but Mozart's operas are not

[191] Paul Nettl, "Introduction," ***The Essence of Opera***, ed. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964) vii.

[192] Orrey, ***Concise***, 114.

only musically impressive but dramatically sound. His virtuosity is displayed in ways integral to the drama's needs and demands.

Despite the ongoing debate over the aforementioned oppositional principles, it is fair to assert that slowly, the drama was subordinated to a secondary position--subsumed by more complete, complex, and ostentatious musical compositions. The trend culminated in the nineteenth century as composers as varied as Verdi, Meyerbeer, and Bizet incorporated a much wider range of melody, harmony, and orchestral sophistication into their respective works. Despite Mozart's example of a musical elaboration inextricably linked with strong dramatic foundations, the emotionally charged spectacles created by most popular nineteenth-century composers featured weak, if not preposterous, libretti, designed solely to serve the increasing grandiosity of the musical compositions. Verdi, for example, demanded that his librettists serve him only the simplest, most straightforward, two-dimensional of characters and situations, even when the various dramas were adapted from well-respected works of literature. It should be noted that this penchant for dramatic simplicity is not necessarily antithetical to the creation of profound, well-wrought libretti. Auden himself believed that a certain brand of simplicity was not only acceptable in libretti, but desirable, and, on a certain level, necessary:

> Opera, therefore, cannot present character in the novelist's sense of the word, namely, people who are potentially good and bad, active and passive, for music is immediate actuality and neither potentiality nor passivity can live in its presence...Mozart is a greater composer than Rossini but the Figaro of the ***Marriage*** is less satisfying, to my mind, than the Figaro of the ***Barber***, and the fault is, I think, Da Ponte's. His Figaro is too interesting a character to be completely translatable into music, so that co-present with the Figaro who is singing one is conscious of a Figaro who is not singing but thinking to himself. The barber of Seville, on the other hand, who is not a person but a

> musical busybody, goes into song exactly, with nothing over.[193]

One can understand how Auden's ideas led naturally to allegory and parable, where often, a given character is "not a person" but, rather, an abstract representation of something else. Auden elaborates:

> In recompense for this lack of psychological complexity, however, music can do what words cannot, present the immediate and simultaneous relation of these states to each other. The crowning glory of opera is the big ensemble.[194]

Or, as Blair describes Auden's philosophy:

> The improbable plot with its simplified characters and their inflated emotional states is, in fact, one of the sources of greatest annoyance to those who reject opera. But Auden sees these characteristics of the genre as assets to be exploited for their ability to project archetypal or mythical situations, which are universally human by nature. Opera's obvious departure from realistic or, to use Auden's term, "documentary," presentation of life frees it to dramatize such timeless situations directly, as in a morality play."[195]

Although Auden was a professed admirer of Verdi, it is doubtful that he found much value in those nineteenth-century libretti which are merely simplistic; those devoid of the more mythically resonant simplicity he championed.

It was Richard Wagner (1813-1883) who, in theoretical tracts like ***The***

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[193] W.H. Auden, "Some Reflections on Music and Opera," in Weisstein, ***Essence***, 354.

[194] Ibid. 356.

[195] Blair, ***Poetic***, 159.

Artwork of the Future (1850) and ***Opera and Drama*** (1851) called for the reestablishment of drama to an exalted position within a total and equitable fusion of music, poetry, lighting, and stage design. Like Auden a century later, Wagner immersed himself in the techniques of medieval poetry, and through the appropriation of German mythology and folklore created sweeping morality tales steeped in allegory and mythic archetype. Paradoxically, Wagner's libretti (which he wrote himself) were thoroughly dominated by the overpowering totality of large-scale musical/orchestral designs. Though his achievements and subsequent influence are immeasurable, it might be argued that his dream of an equitable and all-subsumptive amalgam of theatrical components ultimately collapsed under the weight of his own genius as a composer.

The High-Romantic principles indicative of most nineteenth-century opera were soon challenged by many early twentieth-century composers. While Richard Strauss perpetuated many of the general principles articulated by Wagner, many others preferred a more measured, suggestive approach. Claude Debussy (1862-1918), for example, described Wagner as "a beautiful sunset that was mistaken for a dawn."[196] In a certain respect, Debussy succeeded where Wagner had failed, by reinstituting the then antiquated practice of relegating music to the service of the drama. His ***Pelleas and Melisande*** (with Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolist play serving as the libretto) is "a unique distillation of the essence of Wagner, yielding a new and purer product, purged of coarseness and over-emphasis, and for many it is the embodiment of that 'drama through music' dreamed of by the Florentine Camerata."[197]

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963), likewise, finally achieved a similar dramatic foregrounding in his ***Les Dialogues des Carmelites*** (1957). Unlike his earlier surreal, comic opera ***Les Mamelles de Tiresias*** (1947), ***Carmelites*** returns not merely to narrative simplicity but to a musical understatedness as well. As Donald Grout explains, Poulenc's brand of restraint is an outgrowth of decidedly Classical

[196] Orrey, ***Concise***, 213.

[197] Ibid. 217.

principles; Poulenc also assumes an unwaveringly obligatory position with regard to Georges Bernanos's finely tuned libretto:

> ...the drama, developed with fine psychological perception and excellent balance between inner and outer action, had obvious and terrible implications for conditions in France in the 1940s, but its topical features are less important than its universal significance. The latter is powerfully communicated by Poulenc's music, selflessly devoted to the text and bound with it in a union no less perfect than that which Debussy had accomplished in ***Pelleas***.[198]

This committment to universality and dramatic cohesion runs parallel to the foundational premises of ***The Rake's Progress***. It was also indicative of early twentieth-century movements designed to displace the perceived excesses of a well-entrenched Romanticism.

It was in this climate that Igor Stravinsky began to establish himself as one of the twentieth century's more independent-minded composers. By the time he approached Auden to write the libretto for ***The Rake's Progress*** in 1948, he had eschewed "the current techniques such as atonalism and serialism"--(like those being cultivated and employed by Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg in their own innovative assaults on Romantic practices)--and "avoided the chromatic elaboration of, the organic structural build-up into complete acts and the orchestral ascendancy that had been the nineteenth century's legacy."[199] Inspired by William Hogarth's (1697-1764) moral series of the same name, Stravinsky's ***Rake's Progress*** would be a conscious reworking of many eighteenth-century methods of composition--in alignment with the spirit, if not the letter, of the Hogarth engravings.

As has already been suggested, Auden joined the project well-steeped in the techniques of moral allegory. His mastery of medieval poetry and other

[198] Donald Grout, ***A Short History of Opera*** (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947) 541.

[199] Orrey, ***Concise***, 222.

disparate precursory forms enabled him to draw freely from a variety of antecedents and amalgamize in ways conducive to the realization of his own poetic aims. His intellectual predilections, aesthetic instincts, and newly articulated religious beliefs led naturally to opera as a dramatic form hospitable to allegory and brands of abstraction. The following detailed summary will help to illustrate how the libretto's structure is inextricably linked to its theme--it is a journey play replete with unexpected detours, various temptations, and myriad moral choices, all leading to either damnation or salvation.

The Rake's Progress begins with a duet between Tom Rakewell and Anne Trulove, two ecstatic lovers soon to be married, in the beautiful garden of the Trulove's country estate. They sing of the transcendent, redemptive, and restorative power of love. Soon, however, a soft note of reservation is injected into the proceedings when Trulove, Anne's father, arrives and voices his concerns regarding the impending union:

> O may a father's prudent fears
> Unfounded prove,
> And ready vows and loving looks
> Be all they seem.
> In youth we fancy we are wise,
> But time hath shown,
> Alas, too often and too late,
> We have not known
> The hearts of others or our own.[200]

In the exchange that follows, Trulove's mounting suspicions are confirmed:

> TRULOVE
> Tom, I have news for you. I have spoken on your behalf to a good

[200] Auden, ***Libretti***, 49.

friend in the City and he offers you a position in his counting house.

RAKEWELL

You are too generous, sir. You must not think me ungrateful if I do not immediately accept what you propose, but I have other prospects in view.

TRULOVE

Your reluctance to seek steady employment makes me uneasy.

RAKEWELL

Be assured your daughter shall not marry a poor man.

TRULOVE

So he be honest, she may take a poor husband if she choose, but I am resolved she shall never marry a lazy one. [*Exits into house.*]

RAKEWELL

The old fool.[201]

Once alone on stage, Tom invokes the Calvinist notion of predestination--which, of course, is in stark contrast toAuden's belief in the existential importance of choice--in order to justify his idleness:

> Here I stand, my constitution sound, my frame not ill-favored, my wit ready, my heart light. *I* play the industrious apprentice in the copybook? *I* submit to the drudge's yoke? *I* slave through a lifetime to enrich others, and then be thrown away like a gnawed bone? Not *I*! Have not grave doctors assured us that good works are of no avail for

[201] Ibid. 50.

> Heaven predestines all? In my fashion, I may profess myself of their party and herewith entrust myself to Fortune.[202]

Tom then elaborates the sentiment in the short aria that follows:

> Since it is not by merit
> We rise or we fall,
> But the favor of Fortune
> That governs us all,
> Why should I labor
> For what in the end
> She will give me for nothing
> If she be my friend?
> While if she be not, why,
> The wealth I might gain
> For a time by my toil would
> At last be in vain.
> Till I die, then, of fever,
> Or by lightning am struck,
> Let me live by my wits
> And trust to my luck.
> My life lies before me,
> The world is so wide:
> Come, wishes, be horses;
> This beggar shall ride.[203]

Tom quickly punctures his own soaring confidence and sense of limitless possibility:

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[202] Ibid. 50.

[203] Ibid. 50-51.

"I wish I had money."[204] Right on cue, the wily Nick Shadow appears at the garden gate, bearing the sort of fortuitous good news that Tom had counted on: Tom's long-forgotten uncle has died and has bequeathed him his entire fortune. Tom, it seems, is now a rich man. Shadow quckly wisks Tom off to London to settle the estate, but not before assuring him that in "A year and a day hence, we will settle our account," and declaiming, in an aside to the audience, "The Progress of a Rake begins."[205]

Scene Two finds Tom and Shadow in Mother Goose's London brothel. Tom soon shares with Mother Goose all that he has learned from Shadow on their journey. At Shadow's prompting, Tom insists, "One aim in all things to pursue: My duty to myself to do." In response to the question, "What is thy duty to thyself?" Tom declares, "To shut my eyes to prude and preacher / And follow nature as my teacher."[206] Just before a drunken Tom goes off to be initiated by Mother Goose, he invokes the mood and language of sanctified prayer in a brief aria:

> Love, too frequently betrayed
> For some plausible desire
> Or the world's enchanted fire,
> Still thy traitor in his sleep
> Renews the vow he did not keep,
> Weeping, weeping,
> He kneels before thy wounded shade.
>
> Love, my sorrow and my shame,
> Though thou daily be forgot,
> Goddess, O forget me not.
> Lest I perish, O be nigh

[204] Ibid. 51.

[205] Ibid. 54-55.

[206] Ibid. 56.

In my darkest hour that I,
Dying, dying,
May call upon thy sacred name.[207]

In the short Scene Three that follows, Anne kneels, bows her head, and prays: "O god, protect dear Tom, support my father, and strengthen my resolve."[208] She then makes off for London to find Tom, who she senses is in trouble.

Act Two begins in Tom's London flat, where a grief-stricken Tom is interrupted by Shadow. Shadow soon suggests that Tom marry Baba the Turk, the bearded lady from St. Giles Fair, in order to prove that he is truly free. As Shadow explains:

> Come, master, observe the host of mankind. How are they? Wretched. Why? Because they are not free. Why? Because the giddy multitude are driven by the unpredictable Must of their pleasures and the sober few are bound by the inflexible Ought of their duty, between which slaveries there is nothing to choose. Would you be happy? Then learn to act freely. Would you act freely? Then learn to ignore those twin tyrants of appetite and conscience. Therefore I counsel you, master,--Take Baba the Turk to wife.[209]

In other words, Tom should marry Baba precisely because he neither desires her nor feels an obligation to her. Shadow explains, in verse, why Tom is the author of his own fate, as opposed to his destiny being determined by the random nod of fickle Fortune:

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[207] Ibid. 57-58.

[208] Ibid. 60.

[209] Ibid. 62.

That man alone his fate fulfills,
For he alone is free
Who chooses what to will, and wills
His choice as destiny.

No eye his future can foretell,
No law his past explain
Whom neither Passion may compel
Nor Reason can restrain.[210]

Ironically, it is Shadow who convinces Tom of the Kierkegaardian notion of existential choice as the determining factor in one's destiny: a man's fate and spiritual condition are prefigured by his decisions and subsequent actions. It's just that Shadow, it seems, is tempting Tom into making the wrong choices.

Act Two, scene two finds Anne arriving in London. Once again, she quickly establishes the ritualistic, incantatory tone of prayer. She sings "with an elevated and quiet determination":

No step in fear shall wander nor in weakness delay;
Hear thou or not, merciful Heaven, ease thou or not my way;
A love that is sworn before Thee can plunder Hell of its prey.[211]

She soon discovers that Tom has married Baba and, heartbroken, hurriedly leaves London.

In addition to vividly illustrating Tom's unhappiness with the results of his impetuos marriage to Baba, Act Two, scene three features the arrival of Shadow

[210] Ibid. 62-63.

[211] Ibid. 64.

with a "phantastic baroque machine"[212] which ostensibly turns stone into bread. Armed with renewed hope and the idea of earth becoming "an Eden of good will,"[213] Tom speculates about what the contraption might mean to the world in the most ambitiously biblical terms:

> Thanks to this excellent device
> Man shall re-enter Paradise
> From which he once was driven.
> Secure from want, the cause of crime,
> The world shall for the second time
> Be similar to heaven.[214]

In an aside to the audience, Shadow mocks Tom's gullibility. Tom, meanwhile, continues his descriptions of the Eden-like utopia he is about to escort to fruition:

> When to his infinite relief
> Toil, hunger, poverty and grief
> Have vanished like a dream,
> This engine Adam shall excite
> To hallelujahs of delight
> And ecstasy extreme.[215]

Shadow, of course, tempts Tom by emphasizing the manner in which they might profit from the bread-making machine, while Tom continues to fantasize about how mankind might benefit from its implementation. The stark contrast between the two men's sentiments highlights the Christian notion of choice with respect to man's fate:

[212] Ibid. 71.

[213] Ibid. 72.

[214] Ibid. 73.

[215] Ibid. 73.

SHADOW

The idle drone and the deserving poor
Will give good money for this toy, be sure.
For, so it please, there's no fantastic lie
You cannot make men swallow if you try.

TOM

Omnipotent when armed with this,
In secular abundant bliss
    He shall ascend the Chain
Of Being to its top to win
The throne of Nature and begin
His everlasting reign.

SHADOW

So, you who know your proper interest,
Here is your golden chance. Invest. Invest.
Come, take your shares immediately, my friends,
And praise the folly that pays dividends.[216]

After casually forsaking Baba, Tom goes off with Shadow to demonstrate the wondrous machine to potential investors.

Act Three begins with a great choral cry of "Ruin. Disaster. Shame."[217] --the consequences of Tom's choices, it seems, have begun to materialize. The bread-making swindle has been exposed, and Tom's worldly goods are now being auctioned off as Anne arrives. She is told that a debt-ridden Tom has fled. But Baba convinces Anne that she shouldn't give up on him, that there is still hope, despite his

[216] Ibid. 73.

[217] Ibid. 74.

misguided actions:

> You love him, seek to set him right:
> He's but a shuttle-headed lad:
> Not quite a gentleman, nor quite
> Completely vanquished by the bad:
> Who knows what care and love might do?
> But good or bad, I know he still loves you.[218]

Refreshed in spirit, Anne goes off to save Tom.

The opera's penultimate scene is also its climax. Act Three, scene two finds Tom and Shadow in a church graveyard, next to a newly dug grave. Shadow, after a year and a day's service, is ready to claim his wages. But first he instructs Tom to "Look in my eyes and recognize / Whom,--Fool! you chose to hire."[219] Shadow demands Tom's soul. A destitute Tom has no choice but to forfeit, the price of which is his life. As Shadow explains:

> It pleases well the damned in Hell
> To bring another there.
>
> Midnight is come; by rope or gun
> Or medicine or knife
> On the stroke of twelve you shall slay yourself
> For forfeit is thy life.[220]

But just before the clock strikes twelve, Shadow stops the clock and gives Tom one

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[218] Ibid. 80.

[219] Ibid. 83

[220] Ibid. 83.

more chance to win back his soul. Shadow offers to play "a game of chance"[221] with a deck of cards. Shadow will cut the deck three times--if Tom can correctly guess each of the three exposed cards he is free; if not, he is condemned to die by his own hand. Tom agrees. Shadow cuts the deck. Thinking of Anne, Tom guesses the Queen of Hearts. He is correct. Shadow cuts the deck a second time. In an instant, a spade topples over causing Tom to exclaim: "The deuce!"[222] He trusts fate once more, and guesses the two of Spades. Again, he is correct. Shadow then turns toward the audience and, in an aside, explains how he plans to trick Tom by reinserting and again cutting the Queen of Hearts. When Tom wonders aloud if Fate will once again intervene, Shadow assures him that it will not. As Tom begins to sing for love to return, he is joined in duet with an offstage Anne. A renewed confidence overtakes him and, thinking of Anne, he inexplicably chooses the Queen of Hearts a second time. It is an absurd choice, but, as Spears makes clear, "it is an act of faith, the Pascalian 'wager' or Kierkegaardian 'leap.'"[223] Tom is saved, but not before a vengeful Shadow robs him of his rational faculties and condemns him to insanity.

Act Three, scene three takes place in Bedlam, where a repentant Tom, believing himself to be Adonis, stands before a chorus of madmen awaiting his Venus. Anne/Venus appears and soothes Tom/Adonis with a soft lullaby. Before departing, Anne sings:

> Every wearied body must
> Late or soon return to dust,
> Set the frantic spirit free.
> In this earthly city we
> Shall not meet again, love, yet,

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[221] Ibid. 84.

[222] Ibid. 85.

[223] Spears, ***Poetry***, 276.

Never think that I forget.[224]

Tom wakes, beckons his now departed Venus, and dies as the chorus sings a funeral lament. The scene is followed by a short epilogue in which the cast draws a rather pat moral conclusion. As Spears explains:

> The epilogue has been criticized as an overly abrupt return to the mood of Hogarthian comedy and moral platitude, and as nervously mocking the moral tale. But it seems plain enough that, though the obvious meaning of the proverb is certainly not denied, the "idle hands" for which the Devil finds work are those of seekers after freedom in the atheist-existentialist sense, followers of the false absurd, shown in Tom's *acte gratuit* of marrying Baba, rather than of the true absurd, shown in his act of faith in the card game, when he chooses Anne's card for the second time in defiance of reason and common sense. Similarly, the ending has been criticized as ineffectively rendering the theme of redemption since Tom, being mad, dies without understanding. But Tom's crucial act of faith has already shown the fullest understanding and most complete surrender to love ("I wish for nothing else. / Love, first and last, assume eternal reign; / Renew my life, O Queen of Hearts, again"), and his madness merely translates him to literal acceptance of the role of Adonis, in which he repents and regains innocence, Eden, before he dies. This state, being out of time, may well be represented by madness. Anne is a kind of Venus Urania, Heavenly Aphrodite, symbol and bearer of divine grace--like Dante's Beatrice; without her aid, Tom could not have been saved.[225]

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[224] Auden, ***Libretti***, 91.

[225] Spears, ***Poetry***, 277.

The Rake's Progress is built upon a traditional, three-act structure, with each act, in turn, containing three scenes. As has been noted, the libretto is reminiscent, in style, structure, and content, of medieval allegory--a "journey play" chronicling Tom Rakewell's circuitous path toward salvation or condemnation. The first scene of the parable is set in a garden, the last in Bedlam. The parallels between the garden and Eden, and Bedlam and Hell are self-evident, with the intermediate scenes showcasing Rakewell's misguided journey toward his tragic end--but it is a "Christian tragedy" because we witness the grave mistakes Tom makes along the way and think "What a pity it was this way when it could have been otherwise." And, of course, Nick Shadow, that mephistophelian serpent of a character who constantly tempts and misleads Tom, first appears in our pure, untouched garden--a not so subtle allusion to the biblical serpent of Eden. True to Auden's morality and dramatic sense, however, Shadow merely tempts Tom, whose ultimate demise is the result of his own misguided decisions and subsequent actions, not a predestined fate as, Auden maintains, we might find in Greek tragedy.

It is important to stress that Auden maintained his devotion to the techniques of parable--one of the most notable among them being the Brechtian distancing devices which both call attention to the theatre's own artifice and compel cerebral rather than emotional responses to the action. These distancing devices are just as prevalent as--and inextricably linked to--the allusive Christian imagery and sets of perspectives. Throughout the libretto, characters constantly make reference to the contrived, artificial, theatrical nature of the proceedings, so audiences might, in Brechtian fashion, interpret the drama from a critical distance. In Act Two, scene three, for example, Shadow has the following aside:

> A word to all my friends, where'er you sit,
> The men of sense, in boxes or the pit.
> My master is a fool as you can see,
> But you may do good business with me.[226]

[226] Ibid. 73.

And in Act Three, scene one, Baba the bearded lady proclaims:

My self-indulgent intermezzo ends.[227]

Perhaps most conspicuous, however, is the Epilogue, the moral tag which both ends the opera and injects a resonant ambiguity into what may have seemed to be a fairly straightforward critique of a misguided, sinful existence:

ALL

Good people, just a moment:
Though our story now is ended,
There's the moral to draw
From what you saw
Since the curtain first ascended.[228]

Baba also contributes her own idiosyncratic interpretation of the preceding events:

BABA

Let Baba warn the ladies:
You will find out soon or later
That, good or bad,
All men are mad;
All thay say or do is theatre.[229]

And, finally, the quintet of major players, "the men without wigs, Baba without her

[227] Ibid. 81.

[228] Ibid. 92.

[229] Ibid. 92.

beard," give an explicit warning to the audience, complete with biblical references:

ALL

So let us sing as one.
At all times in all lands
Beneath the moon and sun,
This proverb has proved true
Since Eve went out with Adam:
For idle hands
And hearts and minds
The Devil finds
A work to do,
A work, dear Sir, fair Madam,
For you and you.[230]

Following the success of ***The Rake's Progress***, Stravinsky asked Auden and Kallman to supply him with another libretto. The result was ***Delia or A Masque of Night*** (1952), a libretto in one act, loosley based upon George Peele's play ***The Old Wive's Tale***. ***Delia*** chronicles the adventures of the knight Orlando on his quest to find the beautiful Delia who is being held captive by the sorcerer Sacrapant. Although the libretto is more conspicuously inspired by traditionally classical themes (which will be explored in Chapter Three), the libretto does feature many passages which invoke a Christian ceremonial aesthetic.

Bungay--a comic character in the libretto's subplot--delivers an obsequious plea to Sacrapant. Despite the awkwardness of Bungay's speech, the solemnity of the prayer-like aria reaches toward sacredness. It is worth quoting in its entirety to illustrate the manner in which Auden brilliantly fuses the formal qualities of sanctified prayer (complete with latin phrases and sacred nomenclature) with a decidedly irreverent tone and highly questionable sentiment:

[230] Ibid. 92-93.

Master of wisdom magical,
Both sub-lunary and angelical,
Mighty and high one,
Forgive my intrusion.

[Pause. BUNGAY gets slowly and nervously to his feet.]

Master. I, too,...*ardor divinarum*...
You understand me...*rerum*...
Humbly...but she...
Wife...in her jealousy
Of high philosophy...
Vita contemplativa...
Would not let me leave her...
You see...here...a man
I did what I can...
Bo! and she ran.

[Pause. BUNGAY laughs nervously.]

Now that she is gone,
We men can get on,
For it is impossible
To procure a miracle
With such a manacle;
Call the Heavenly Venus
To guide us, to clean us;
Should *amor ferinus*--
--My wife you understand--

Be always at hand
With gabbles and hisses
And cloying kisses,
I wants and I wisses,
Tittling and tattling
And pots rattling
And ba-ba and s'blood,
By the rood,
Shall not and should,
Till, help me God,
I must finally say,
From all women, *libera me.*

[Pause. He kneels.]

Accept a poor disciple who in wisdom wants a master,
And I will serve you well--by Simon and Zoroaster.[231]

In a later aria, Sacrapant sings to his light in language that invokes Dante's ecstatic reunion with Beatrice in the higher spheres of Paradise:

O my immortal light!
My best of lore that fends me from the day
And change's appetite.
There's none who may thy mystery and worth,
Like mine, consign to earth,
No gaudiness that in our wisdom may
Breed folly or decay.
What! Shall this heart and brain be common food?

[231] Auden, ***Libretti***, 102-103.

Cold, rotten solitude?
Never I swear, and cry to the mocks of doubt,
As nothing lit thee, nothing shall put thee out!
No, we shall be renewed:
When time has put the elements to rout,
Into the sea of night we two shall dive
To pass like flame beyond the stars--alive![232]

And later, when an injured Orlando is thought dead, we find the following "duet leading to trio," in which liturgical Latin and vague allusions to resurrection infuse the scene with a subtle but unmistakably Christian modal quality:

BUNGAY

Kyrie eleison

XANTIPPE

We are undone.

BUNGAY

Plangere of no avail is

XANTIPPE

All hopes are vain.

BUNGAY

Magus crudelis
Our knight hath slain.

[232] Ibid. 106.

XANTIPPE

Still as a stone is
He lieth here dead.

BUNGAY

In os leonis
He put his sweet head.

BUNGAY AND XANTIPPE

Requiem aeternam toll
For Orlando's soul.

[Orlando comes to, looks round, remembers, rises to his feet, clutching his head.]

ORLANDO

Ah woe! Ah woe!

BUNGAY AND XANTIPPE

Gloria!
It is not so.
Dormiebat in a swound.

ORLANDO

With shame I am sore vexed.

BUNGAY AND XANTIPPE

Nunc resurrexit
He standeth on ground.

ORLANDO

O grief! O bitter wound![233]

And, when in a particularly difficult situation, the trio prays:

ORLANDO, XANTIPPE, AND BUNGAY

Shall we conquered be by night?
Give us light, O give us light.[234]

In 1957, Auden composed a nine-part verse narration for the New York Pro Musica's production of the thirteenth-century liturgical drama ***The Play of Daniel***, first performed in 1958 in the monastic atmosphere of New York's Cloisters. Auden's contribution is appropriately traditional in both tone and content. For the most part, the narration avoids reflective commentary and confines itself to verse summary:

Welcome, good people, watch and listen
To a play in praise of the prophet Daniel,
Beloved of the Lord. Long has he dwelt
In brick Babylon, built by a river,
Far from Jerusalem, his real home,
A son of Judah, suffering exile
Since Jehoakim turned from the true God
To worship idols in high places.[235]

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[233] Ibid. 120.

[234] Ibid. 122.

[235] Auden, ***Libretti***, 401.

Yet Auden includes in his descriptive summary the messianic quality of the Christian hymnal:

> And now, good people, our play is done.
> But, to grace our going, let God's angel
> Tell you tidings of eternal joy.
> To the maiden Mary, the immaculate Virgin,
> A baby is born in Bethlehem City
> Who is called Christ, our King and Savior.
> Sing glory to God and good-will,
> Peace to all peoples! Praise the Lord![236]

Writing of the play's reception, Mendelson touches upon some of the omnipresent qualities of Auden's drama and the manner by which religion and opera ultimately displaced politics as his over-riding concern:

> Audiences were startled to encounter a sacred medieval work with the musical variety and emotional intensity of grand opera, and the production became an international success. It was typically performed in churches, with the narrator, costumed as a monk, reading from the pulpit; Auden delighted in playing the narrator in a series of performances at an Oxford church in 1960. The rewards of shared effort that he had imagined he could find by submerging himself in political work in the 1930s finally came to him in the 1950s through musical and theological work.[237]

It is important to reiterate, however, that the foundations of a Christian morality and a fascination with the formal properties of ritual were clearly evident in the plays

[236] Ibid. 407.

[237] Mendelson, ***Later***, 283.

written before 1940. It seems that Auden's latent Christianity found ways of imposing itself on works not explicity religious in character. Of C.S. Lewis, Auden's contemporary, Judith Shulevitz writes:

> Reread the novels as an adult and you'll see that they are Christian through and through. It's not as if Lewis composed some children's stories, then sprinkled on a dusting of religious imagery that a sequel writer can easily sponge off. At every level except the most superficial, they're an explicit allegory of faith.[238]

The same might be said of Auden, even if the religious schemes of his earlier work were less self-conscious than those of Lewis. The parable ***Paid on Both Sides*** of 1928, a revenge tragedy ostensibly concerned with mythical and psychological themes, features vague Christian illusions (and pseudo-Christian references like Father Christmas in a scenario reminiscent of the Christmas pantomime) and dialogue lifted from the medieval mummers' play. Furthermore, in the final stanza of a choral passage dealing with human weakness and mortality we are comforted by an allusion to an unseen (divine?) hand:

> O watcher in the dark, you wake
> Our dream of waking, we feel
> Your finger on the flesh that has been skinned,
> By your bright day
> See clear what we were doing, that we were vile.
> Your sudden hand
> Shall humble great
> Pride, break it, wear down to stumps old systems which await
> The last transgression of the sea.[239]

[238] Judith Shulevitz, "Don't Mess with Aslan," ***The New York Times Book Review***, August 26, 2001.

[239] Auden, ***Plays***, 16.

As Fuller notes, the stanza "acknowledges a greater power, a 'watcher in the dark' who arouses the desire to awake to a different order of reality, and who proposes clear standards of morality and humility lacking in the 'old systems which await / The last transgression of the sea'...If this is not God, it is something very like God (i.e. the Hopkinsian 'we feel / Your finger')."[240] Likewise, the 1935 published edition of ***Dog Beneath the Skin*** (it was later revised for a 1936 production) includes an "Audenesque demur in the person of a curate, who speaks in rhyme and stands proleptically for Auden's later Christianity. The curate cannot choose between the two sides, and so gives no counsel to the audience. Instead he goes off 'to pray / to One who is greater.' (General: 'Greater than who?' Curate: 'Greater than you.')"[241]

The Ascent of F6 provides an interesting example of Auden's ambivalent inclusion of Christian imagery in an early drama while simultaneously resisting the moral imperative of Christian thought. The most conspicuous and problematic example in ***The Ascent of F6*** occurs at the very beginning of the play. The mountain-climber Ransom is sitting on a summit, reading a passage from a pocket volume of Dante, in which Ulysses is trying to rally his men to undertake one last journey for the sake of "virtue and knowledge":

> "'O brothers!' I said, 'who through a hundred thousand dangers have reached the West, deny not, to this brief vigil of your senses that remains, experience of the unpeopled world behind the Sun. Consider your origin: ye were not formed to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge.'" [*Putting down the book.*] Virtue and Knowledge! One can picture Ulysses' audience: a crook speaking to crooks. Seedy adventurers, of whose expensive education nothing remained but a few grammatical tags and certain gestures of the head; refugees from the consequences of vice or eccentric and conceited

[240] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 23.

[241] Mendelson, ***Early***, 278.

> opinions; natural murderers whom a peaceful winter had reduced to palsied wrecks; the ugly and cowardly who foresaw in a virgin land an era of unlimited and effortless indulgence; teachers without pupils, tormentors without victims, parasites without hosts, lunatic missionaries, orphans.[242]

The moment is layered and complex. Auden chooses to have his protagonist read from Dante, one of the most celebrated of Christian poets in all of Western literature. But the passage upon which Ransom reflects concerns a pagan hero exalting the value of virtue and knowledge, those most classical of noble traits. To complicate matters, Ransom ridicules the sentiment, and even accuses Dante of disseminating a disengenuous philosophy:

> Who was Dante--to whom the Universe was peopled only by his aristocratic Italian acquaintences and a few classical literary characters, the fruit of an exile's reading--who was Dante, to speak of Virtue and Knowledge? It was not Virtue those lips, which involuntary privation had made so bitter, could pray for; it was not Knowledge; it was Power. Power to extract for every snub, every headache, every unfallen beauty, an absolute revenge; with a stroke of the pen to make a neighbour's vineyard a lake of fire and to create in his private desert the austere music of the angels or the happy extravagance of a fair. Friends whom the world honours shall lament their eternal losses in the profoundest of crevasses, while he on the green mountains converses gently with his unapproachable love.[243]

But the play sets up Ransom, and his misguided theories, for destruction, thus vindicating that to which he was opposed--namely, the arguments espoused by the

[242] Auden, ***Plays***, 295.

[243] Ibid. 295.

pagan Ulysses and Dante, his Christian host. Auden, has, in effect, followed Dante's lead by appropriating a pagan character in order to illustrate the tenets of Christian theology. Auden, however, seemed to fight his instinct when he created an ending about which he later wrote, "The end...is all wrong because, as I now see it, it required, and I refused it, a Christian solution."[244]

Even an explicitily political play like ***On the Frontier*** cannot escape Auden's underlying religious foundations. At the end of the play, Eric and Anna, the two dying lovers, meet center stage in a circle of light, and sing the following hymn to a future Utopia:

ERIC

But in the lucky guarded future
Others like us shall meet, the frontier gone,
And find the real world happy.

ANNA

The place of love, the good place.
O hold me in your arms.
The darkness closes in.

[*The lights fade slowly. Background of music.*]

ERIC

Now as we come to our end,
As the tiny separate lives
Fall, fall to their graves,
We begin to understand.

[244] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 198.

ANNA

A moment, and time will forget
Our failure and our name
But not the common thought
That linked us in a dream.

ERIC

Open the closing eyes,
Summon the failing breath,
With our last look we bless
The turning maternal earth.

ANNA

Europe lies in the dark
City and flood and tree;
Thousands have worked and work
To master necessity.

ERIC

To build the city where
The will of love is done
And brought to its full flower
The dignity of man.

ANNA

Pardon them their mistakes,
The impatient and wavering will.
They suffer for our sakes,
Honour, honour them all.

BOTH

Dry their imperfect dust,
The wind blows it back and forth.
They die to make man just
And worthy of the earth.[245]

As Mendelson has observed, "When ***On the Frontier*** was published it was noted that the leading left-wing poet of his generation had concluded this highly topical play with something very like a Christian hymn to a better world."[246] While Mendelson adds that the hymn "forsees no union with a divine authority and source, only an ultimate flowering of human dignity,"[247] the stamp of a Christian sensibility, with respect to both style and content, is unmistakable.

We do, of course, see both the assumptions of Christan theology and the typology of Christian imagery in a host of Auden's contemporary dramatists. Writing of T.S. Eliot's ***Murder in the Cathedral***, for example, Katherine E. Kelly describes a drama "bound up with his conversion to Anglicanism and the related notion of a dramatic poetry that would move spectators much like the prayers and rites of the Anglican church were designed to move them. ***Murder in the Cathedral*** is Eliot's first experiment in liturgical drama."[248] Likewise, the Expressionist *Stationendrama* features structures based upon the stations of the cross, emphasizing a figurative link between the plays' protagonists and Christ.

Auden's devotion to Christian morality and the stylized trappings of ceremonial worship issued from a conscious desire to locate and preserve an all-encompassing universal order. The unshakeable absolutism of Christian thought and

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[245] Auden, ***Plays***, 418.

[246] Mendelson, ***Early***, 293.

[247] Ibid. 293.

[248] Katherine E. Kelly, "An Unnatural Eloquence: Eliot's Plays in the Course of Modern Drama," in Brooker Spears, ***Teaching***, 169.

the power and grandeur of its formal rituals appealed to both his philosophical and aesthetic senses--a system of time-honored beliefs and sacred rites which might unify and secure the disparate elements of an increasingly fragmented society. For Auden, the theatre was an ideal forum for the dissemination of Kierkegaard's existential Christianity through a parabolic theatrical language evocative of sanctified prayer. Simultaneously, however, Auden would embrace another dramatic/literary tradition through which an all-subsumptive brand of universal order might be established and dramatized: archetypal myth.

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMMONLY KNOWN

Myth, Archetype, and the Universal Conceit

Mythology holds the history of the archetypal world,which contains past, present, and future.

--Novalis

Auden dearly loves a generalization.

--Richard Ohmann

CHAPTER THREE

THE COMMONLY KNOWN

Myth, Archetype, and the Universal Conceit

In his ***Classic, Romantic, and Modern***, Jacques Barzun provides an economical summary of "the pre- or anti-romantic outlook; the old order which romanticism left behind when it repudiated--as the phrase goes--classicism and rationalism."[249] If we accept the generally held belief that Auden harbored a strongly anti-Romantic disposition, then Barzun's descriptions become useful to any close examination of Auden's intellectual outlook and aesthetic sensibilities. Of the Classical order, to which Auden ostensibly subscribed, Barzun writes:

> Given the absolutism of the human mind, we may take it for granted that every epoch looks for unity--unity within the human breast and unity in the institutions sheltering man. Now the straightest path to unity is to choose from all possible ways of living those that seem to the ruling powers most profitable, most sensible, most general; and to enforce these as a code for public and private behavior. The laws soon give rise to attitudes by which any man may shape his feelings, and this in turn brings about a ready understanding among men. For no matter how arbitrary, conventions are useful and can relied upon in proportion as they are held inviolable.[250]

Auden's entire literary career can be regarded as a quest for the brand of unity and order Barzun describes--a codification of the choices which are "most profitable,

[249] Jacques Barzun, ***Classic, Romantic, and Modern*** (New York: Doubleday, 1961) 36.

[250] Ibid. 36.

most sensible, most general." When a codified political paradigm failed him, for example, Auden turned to the absolutism and unifying metaphysics of Christian thought. Inherent in all his stage works, however, is the unmistakable pull toward an all-subsumptive universality best exemplified by the patterns and language of mythic archetype--patterns which do not contradict but, rather, subsume Judeo-Christian belief systems. This universality issues, in large part, from Auden's adherence to many of the fundamental principles of Classicism: order, balance, harmony, suggestiveness, and--most germane to our current discussion--abstraction and an inherent interest in general, timeless truths rather than ephemeral, idiosyncratic particularities.

Before Barzun goes on to challenge the "classic objection" to the perceived "restlessness and disorder" of the Romantic sensibility, he outlines some of the more prominent features of Classicism's self-conception:

> Such a system produces stability in the state and with it all the attributes of the static: fixed grandeur, dignity, authority, and high polish; while in the individual it produces morality and peace by showing him that values are rooted in the universe, rather than dependent upon his fallible and changing judgement. This, I take it, is the view of life properly called "classical," irrespective of whether it is enforced upon Europe under Louis IV, or advocated anywhere today by the proponents of a new or old order. It is an attractive view and it draws out the best in those who make themselves its master-builders. It calls for intelligence, discipline, unselfish renunciation of private desires, a sense of social solidarity, and punctilious behavior towards other members of one's own caste.[251]

While one might the argue the degree to which Auden paid any comprehensive adherence to the above-stated principles, his attempts to convey "values rooted in

[251] Ibid. 36-37.

the universe" and his gnawing concern for "morality and peace," as well as "social solidarity," figure most prominently in his drama.

As early as the late 1920s, Auden, under the influence of an Englishman named John Layard, began to express a profound interest in psychology. Layard, an anthropologist then living in Berlin, was introduced to Auden by a mutual friend. After suffering a nervous breakdown several years earlier, Layard had been treated by an American psychologist named Homer Lane. Layard became a disciple of the eccentric Lane, preserving and disseminating his transcripts and continuing his teachings well after Lane's death in 1925. Lane's theories were in stark contrast to those of Sigmund Freud, with which Auden was already intimately familiar. Unlike Freud, Lane believed that "to act on one's deepest impulse is to be happy and virtuous, immune to neurosis,'pure in heart,' a living beacon to the tormented and the ill. To deny one's impulse is to rebel against the inner law of one's own nature, and the self-imposed punishment for this rebellion is physical and mental disease."[252] The way to cure disease, insisted Lane, is to submit to the proper and corresponding desire. This psychological model seems grossly inconsistent with the Classical admonition of "unselfish renunciation of private desires," but it does order psychology and neuroses in a universally subsumptive manner. Most relevant to our current discussion, Layard's influence marked a new and more deliberate incorporation of psychological theories into Auden's art.

While the writings and theories of Freud and Lane would continue to occupy a prominent position in Auden's thinking, the ideas of Carl Jung would also figure prominently in his work. The notion of mythic archetype, as described by Jung, resonated with the young poet who was beginning to abandon the intensely personal expressions of feeling that characterize his earliest efforts in favor of more general, universal themes which might confront communal concerns rather than merely illuminate the internal life of a particular poet. This penchant for the general and universal was to permeate Auden's entire body of dramatic literature, even in those plays which ostensibly address particular, localized socio-political issues.

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[252] Mendelson, ***Early***, 56.

To properly understand the peculiar tensions issuing from Auden's marriage of the particular with the general one must first grapple with his idiosyncratic understanding of "parable" and "myth." According to Auden, a parable is designed to make a rhetorical point or pose a rhetorical question; myth, on the other hand, illustrates the unchanging, unalterable nature of some metaphysical and/or existential phenomenon. Parable, then, is more closely akin to the Christian concept of moral choice--in the particular, individualized Kierkegaardian sense--governing one's destiny; myth more indicative of pagan notions of resignation and predestination.

In order to negotiate the apparently disparate nature of the two modes of expression, Auden cultivated his talent for distinguishing between two extremes and then describing, with equal skill and conviction, the relative merits and shortcomings of both. As Blair explains:

> The technique of abstracting these idealized opposites has the advantage of being adaptable to any subject. Though it always oversimplifies it can push whatever tendencies the author sees in his subject out to their logical extremes where they can be easily grasped by the intellect. It is, in fact, an effective pedagogical device. Once he has abstracted the opposites, Auden's point is nearly always that neither extreme is satisfactory. Some balance or reconciliation of the opposites is desirable...the value of the process of isolating and then rejecting both extremes is that Auden can make his comment on the subject while leaving to the reader the precise formulation of the reconciliation of the extremes.[253]

Blair's formulation is equally applicable to the manner in which Auden reconciles two sets of seemingly oppositional generic principles: those governing parable and those governing myth. The result is Auden's implied assertion that while there exists an unalterable set of absolutes (as illustrated by myth), we neverheless exist in a

[253] Blair, ***Poetic***, 70-71.

context which allows, even demands, that human beings make moral choices which both determine their respective fates and affect the conditions of a shared community (as illustrated by parable).

Despite the omnipresence of Jungian brands of archetypal patterns resonating throughout Auden's drama, the pronounced emphasis of mythic qualities and Auden's public espousal of them intensified in and around 1940. It is no coincidence that this development was concomitant with both his return to the Anglo-Catholicism of his youth and his burgeoning interest in opera as the supreme form of dramatic expression. His bitter disillusionment with political activism and the failing promise of socialism led him to search for an alternative paradigm that might impose order on an increasingly fractured world. The paradigm he found, or perhaps created, accomodated both the absolutism of Christian faith and the unalterable, universal truisms animated by the world of myth. While High-Anglicanism provided Auden with a comprehensive, ordered model of the universe, opera provided him with a formal, slighly archaic set of conventions through which he might examine universal themes--a sentiment in perfect alignment with his own theory that "pure artifice renders opera the ideal dramatic medium for tragic myth."[254] Like Boccaccio before him, Auden did not find pagan mythology irreconcilable with the principle tenets of Christian theology, and found ways of appropriating Classical forms and the characteristics of archetypal myth in service of his newly found religious zeal.

It is useful to reiterate that just as Christian themes and imagery are found in Auden's pre-conversion drama, the generic characteristics of archetypal myth are likewise evident in most all of his works for the stage. Even in the early plays, written expressly as political parables, Auden's interest in the specifics of contemporary events often crumbles under the weight of his universal conceit--the need to illustrate, consciously or unconsciously, all that is general, timeless, and unchanging. These early plays are vivid illustrations of what Robertson Davies has called "the human pull toward myth, and the conversion of historical happenings that

[254] W.H. Auden, "Some Reflections on Music and Opera," in Weisstein, ***Essence***, 355.

everybody knows about into a mythical form."[255]

But before we patly describe Auden's drama as "Jungian," it is important to confront some of the subtleties of Jung's theories of art. In ***Modern Man in Search of a Soul***, Jung includes a chapter on "Psychology and Literature," in which he distinguishes between "psychological" and "visionary" modes of artistic expression. Of the former, he writes:

> The psychological mode deals with materials drawn from the realm of human consciousness--for instance, with the lessons of life, with emotional shocks, the experience of passion and the crises of human destiny in general--all of which go to make up the conscious life of man, and his feeling life in particular. This material is psychically assimilated by the poet, raised from the commonplace to the level of poetic experience, and given an expression which forces the reader to greater clarity and depth of human insight by bringing fully into his consciouness what he ordinarily evades and overlooks or senses only with a feeling of dull discomfort. The poet's work is an interpretation and illumination of the contents of of consciousness, of the ineluctable experiences of human life with its eternally recurrent sorrow and joy.[256]

In many respects, Auden's drama might be said to conform to Jung's descriptions of the "psychological" mode of artistic expression. His plays and libretti do, for the most part, contain elements with clear, identifiable correspondences to "materials...from the realm of human consciousness." The roots of Auden's various metaphors are often found in both the specificites of a contemporaneous corporeal world and its attendant human experiences in all their manifold contexts: socio-political, religious, aesthetic, and psychological. These specificities are "physically

[255] Robertson Davies, ***Happy Alchemy*** (New York: Viking Press, 1997) 312.

[256] Carl Jung, ***Modern Man in Search of a Soul*** (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1933) 155-156.

assimilated" by Auden, and "raised from the commonplace to the level of poetic experience." As Jung continues:

> Countless literary works belong to this class: the many novels dealing with love, the environment, the family, crime and society, as well as didactic poetry, the larger number of lyrics, and the drama, both tragic and comic. Whatever its particular form may be, the psychological work of art always takes its materials from the vast realm of conscious human experience--from the vivid foreground of life, we might say. I have called this mode of artistic creation psychological because in its activity it nowhere transcends the bounds of psychological intelligibility. Everything that it embraces--the experience as well as its artistic expression--belongs to the realm of the understandable. Even the basic experiences themselves, though non-rational, have nothing strange about them; on the contrary, they are that which has been known from the beginning of time--passion and its fated outcome, man's subjection to the turns of destiny, eternal nature with its beauty and its horror.[257]

It is crucial to note that Jung's descriptions of "psychological" modes of artistic expression do not preclude non-realistic forms of drama--they merely stress that the subjects of inquiry in such modes issue from "the vast realm of human experience...that which has been known from the beginning of time." Jung's observations are remarkably similar to Auden's thoughts on the preferred content of drama. In program notes for the Group theatre's first season in 1935-36, Auden wrote: "The subject of drama...is the Commonly Known, the universally familiar stories of the society or generation in which it is written. The audience, like the child listening to the fairy tale, ought to know what is going to happen next."[258]

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[257] Ibid. 156.

[258] Auden, ***Plays***, 497.

Of the visionary mode of artistic expression, Jung is equally vivid. In an attempt to illustrate his point, he invokes a well-known and celebrated example from the Romantic tradition:

> The profound difference between the first and second parts of ***Faust*** marks the difference between the psychological and visionary modes of artistic creation.The latter reverses all the conditions of the former. The experience that furnishes the material for artistic expression is no longer familiar. It is a strange something that derives its existence from the hinterland of man's mind--that suggests the abyss of time separating us from pre-human ages, or evokes a super-human world of contrasting light and darkness. It is a primordial experience which surpasses man's understanding, and to which he is therefore in danger of succumbing.The value and force of the experience are given by its enormity. It arises from timeless depths; it is foreign and cold, many-sided, demonic and grotesque. A grimly ridiculous sample of the eternal chaos--a *crimen laesae majestatis humanae*, to use Nietzsche's words--it bursts asunder our human standards of value and aesthetic form.[259]

It is easy to assert that Jung's descriptions of the decidedly Romantic "visionary" mode of expression are not at all applicable to Auden's unabashedy and self-consciously anti-Romantic approach to artistic creation. Yet some of Jung's more evocative characterizations--like those dealing with the "super-human world of contrasting light and darkness," for example--do seem peculiarly relevant to any examination of the mythic, universal components in Auden's drama.

These components Auden certainly recognized in the Norse mythology and Icelandic sagas first introduced to him by his father when he was just a child. Of C.S. Lewis, with whom Auden has much in common, Judith Shulevitz writes:

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[259] Jung, ***Modern***, 156-157.

> In "Suprised by Joy" (1955), his autobiography, Lewis talks of being seized at an early age with a passion for what he calls "Northerness." It awakened his literary faculties, filled him with unnameable longing and opened his eyes to nature. The works that aroused him in this way were the operas of Wagner and books of Norse mythology. So besides Christianity there's a great deal of "Northerness" in Narnia, and other influences too, most of all "The Faerie Queen," with its pagan and Christian imagery pressed into service in a war between the starkest moral oppositions: Light versus Dark, Truth versus Appearance.[260]

In terms equally applicable to Auden, Shulevitz describes how Christian imagery is translated into the more generally mythic contests between Light and Dark, Truth and Appearance. Those kinds of mythic themes were inextricably linked to the universalist psychological models with which Auden was so fascinated. Illustrative of how Auden's interest in psychology both embraced and subsumed his Christian beliefs is his "Glossary of Christian and Psychological terms," first recorded in a notebook in 1929:

Glossary of Christian and Psychological terms

Heaven	The Unconscious
Earth	The Conscious Mind
Hell	The repressed unconscious
Purgatory	The consulting room

The Father	{Body?}	The Ego-instincts	The self ideal
The Son	{Mind?}	The Death-instincts	The Not-self ideal

[260] Judith Shulevitz, ***New York Times Book Review***, August 26, 2001.

The Holy Ghost	The Libido	The relation between these two opposites
The Madonna	Nature	
The Four Archangels	The four great ganglia of the body	
Satan	The Censor	
The Devils	The repressed instincts	
Hell-Fire	Unhappiness, disease, and mania	
The Fall of Man	The advent of self-consciouness[261]	

The Glossary is an interesting example of Auden's fascination with the connections between archetype and psychology, which ultimately lead to those mythic qualities recognizable in his stage works. That interest in mythic archetype manifested itself through his strong poetic and dramaturgical penchant for the general--a universal conceit often in stark contrast to the increasingly naturalistic plays (Jung's purely psychological mode) which were garnering serious attention both in England and the United States. Blair provides a strong and comprehensive analysis of Auden's universalist aesthetic, and examines the manner in which the poet shaped his language and images to serve his predilections.

In a chapter on Auden's use of allegory, Blair explains how most of Auden's fellow poets and their attendant audiences "rarely feel direct personal relatedness to the larger public world."[262] At first glance, such an assertion might seem in close alignment with the civil sensibility described in Chapter One. But as Blair continues, it becomes clear that he is locating in Auden's work a universalist tendency that transcends the particulars of contemporary society:

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[261] Mendelson, ***Early***, 76.

[262] Blair, ***Poetic***, 94.

> For most the parallel connection between particular and Universal or Absolute is also severed. Yet the particular, be it a human individual or an experimental datum, only gains significance by its location in a larger world. To counter these discontinuities Auden's poetry has relied on anti-Romantic techniques that suppress the privately subjective and affirm the priority of the supra-personal and the rational.[263]

While placing priority in the rational might disqualify Auden's work from being classified as "visionary" in the Jungian sense, emphasis on the supra-personal does remove it from the localizing effects of more subjective thematic treatments. The desire to place the particular in the context of a larger world in order gain universal significance leads naturally to allegory and brands of abstraction that are indicative of mythic archetype. As Blair explains:

> Poetic particulars are important only as they can illustrate or stand for a generally applicable insight or truth. By hard-headed analysis of the human situation and the generalizing devices of rhetoric and allegory, Auden leads the reader toward recognizing a larger scheme of things in which he may have a personal place.[264]

The "generally applicable" truths to which Blair refers are those to which Classicism had always aspired--the timeless, unchanging, universal insights into the static features of the human condition. Blair ends his chapter with the following remarks:

> Auden...hopes that an understanding of the general and abstract can serve as one step toward a renewed feeling for and contact with other individuals in the world. Men feel isolated from each other partly because they fail to recognize overarching general truths to which all

[263] Ibid. 94.

[264] Ibid. 94-95.

> men are subject. Metaphorically speaking, we are all in a circus tent called the human situation...In religious terms one might state the case analagously: through a sense of the Divine, of what is beyond the human, one can come for the first time to love one's neighbor. This process, as so often with Auden, is highly indirect, but it does propose a reasonable poetic means for coping with the modern sense of isolated subjectivity.[265]

In ***The Making of the Auden Canon***, Joseph Warren Beach provides a lucid and insightful analysis of the ways in which Auden coped "with the modern sense of isolated subjectivity" to which Blair eludes. Beach mines both ***Paid on Both Sides*** and ***The Dance of Death***, Auden's first two stage works, in an attempt to uncover those features embematic of Auden's universalist aesthetic. In them he finds some of "the marks of the typical Auden poem of the period"--characteristics germane to any analysis of Auden's interest in archetypal patterns with mythical resonance: "the staccato movement, the clipped syntax suggestive of Anglo-saxon verse, the esoteric symbolism, and the riddling enigmatic suggestion of hidden depths of meaning."[266]

Of ***Paid on Both Sides***, Beach writes:

> This piece is a charade in the sense that the pictures, tableaux, and dramatic actions represent something beyond themselves. This is, of course, transparently a manifesto against national wars, and an illustration of the way that many of men's finest qualities--their manliness and their family feeling--may conduce to the perpetuation of a senseless way of life.[267]

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[265] Ibid. 95.

[266] Joseph Warren Beach, ***The Making of the Auden Canon*** (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957) 167.

[267] Ibid. 144.

In part, the play is clearly "and transparently a manifesto against national wars" which espouses the most general principles of liberal humanism; one which transcends the particulars of post-World War I Europe. But Beach's analysis of the manner in which Auden achieves symbolic relevance is more problematic:

> The term charade is also suggested by many features of the drama which are purely symbolic and make it as different as possible from the ordinary realistic play.[268]

To classify any feature of an Auden play as "purely symbolic" is to invite close scrutiny of the term, both in a semiotic sense and from Auden's own perspective. In describing the relationship between allegory and symbolism, Auden himself has written:

> Allegory is a form of rhetoric, a device for making the abstract concrete; in nearly all successful allegory the images used do in fact have a symbolic value over and above their allegorical use, but that is secondary to the poet's purpose.[269]

Blair interprets Auden's understanding of symbolism in terms which challenge the potentially arbitrary nature of the signified-signifier realtionship in a purely semiotic sense; Auden's allegorical/symbolic correspondences are, according to Blair, concrete and created through conscious acts of the intellect rather than through emotional, visceral, or subconscious responses--they are not attempts "to probe the unknown and mysterious without being able to pin down its nature with any precision":

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[268] Ibid. 144.

[269] W.H. Auden, "Introduction" to ***Poets of the English Language***, ed. W.H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Viking Portable Library), xix.

> Auden...seems always committed to conceptual formulations of the unknown. Often he borrows the categories and concepts of an existing intellectual framework, whether it be Freudian (as in ***The Orators***), Kierkegaardian (as in ***New Year Letter***), or Jungian (as in the four-sided analysis of man in ***The Age of Anxiety***). Where there is ambiguity in Auden's poetry, it is not the symbolist's ambiguity, which reflects the artist's inability or unwillingness to define the nature of the unknown. Rather, it is the relatively flat ambiguity of a riddle. The reader grasps the sense of the poem by an act of intellect in identifying the abstract meaning that is signified by the images.[270]

The same can be said of Auden's drama. Keeping this in mind, Beach's analyses become much more useful and precise. Before he resumes direct discussion of the symbolic in ***Paid on Both Sides***, he outlines the stylistic devices Auden employs to achieve a general, universalist treatment of his subject:

> Most expressionistic and unrealistic of all is the very general use in the verse passages of a style taken directly from Anglo-Saxon poetry, with its energetic alliterative lines, its kennings, its lack of articles, its descriptive phrases following their nouns, its staccato succession of parallel statements, and even such peculiar rhetorical features as the statement of a positive fact in negative terms.
>
> Fighters lay Groaning on ground
> Gave up life Edward fell
> Shot through the chest First of our lot
> By no means refused fight

[270] Blair, ***Poetic***, 75.

> The use of Anglo-Saxon style also brings in much imagery from an earlier culture that serves as evocative symbolism for things in contemporary experience.[271]

And of ***Paid on Both Sides***' archetypal, universal symbolism, Beach finds a decidedly psychological foundation in one of its more evocative images--the Man-Woman character representing both eros and its unfortunate repression:

> This Man-Woman is clearly a symbolic personage intended to represent something in the personal life of any man related to his social behavior in the larger context. The terms of the social or moral problem as here given are those of the intimate love life. Perhaps the hyphenated Man-Woman character is meant to make it apply equally to persons of either sex in the heterosexual relation according to the other person involved. Some obstruction or perversion of the relation of the ego to the other seems to be in question in the symbolism itself; and it seems to center in the notion of "self-abuse."[272]

To what degree the Man-Woman character was designed to represent the internal tensions of the homosexual predicademt in a repressive society is unclear--Auden thought such interpretations "obscene"[273]--but the chracter does emerge as reflective of Lane's ideas regarding the dangers of repressed desires.

Beach continues his analysis by examining the "symbolical and didactic" ***The Dance of Death***, which he describes as "strongly influenced by German experimental drama of the twenties and thirties, and especially by the plays and operas of Bertold Brecht. There is perhaps some suggestion of Brechtian

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[271] Beach, ***Canon***, 144-145.

[272] Ibid. 147.

[273] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 19.

expressionism, but the play conforms more nearly to the types which Brecht labeled epic drama and epic opera."[274] As Beach explains:

> Thus we have, in obvious symbolism, the way in which nationalism is supported by self-indulgence, commercialism (the Jewish proprietor), and the old school tie (Alma Mater). Everybody is happy, the girls and boys with their anti-foreign prejudice, the Blackmailers and Coiners and Old Hacks and Trots who know how to make their profit out of the status quo.[275]

The "obvious symbolism" is indicative of Auden's attempts to translate very real contemorary events into the language of myth. But Beach argues that, in the end, Auden's interest in common myths undermined the play's intellectual pretensions:

> Auden was trying to get down to the popular level, to make use of the current "myths" that are the common heritage of everybody; to take advantage of the kind of song and dance that draws multitudes to the music hall. But that requires such a simplification of the terms of discourse that it makes a mockery of all serious thinking on matters social, political, or religious.[276]

Such criticism is certainly valid when placed in the context of Auden's expressed socio-political intentions at the time of the play's composition--intentions issuing from the civil tradition--but are rendered irrelevant when one considers Auden's ultimate belief in art's impotence in the face of very real historical crises.

Beach is more successful when he confines himself to descriptions of the

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[274] Beach, ***Canon***, 148

[275] Ibid. 153.

[276] Ibid. 154.

manner in which Auden transposes his various dramatic scenarios into mythic, universal terms. In his examination of ***Dog Beneath the Skin***, he invokes the spirit of the archetypal "quest" as the centerpiece of Auden's thematic design:

> In the parts of the chorus that were added in ***Dog Beneath the Skin*** we are reminded that these young men tossing on their beds are waiting for "the lot that decides their fate," and that the casting of the lot is in their own hands.
>
> Look in your heart and see:
> There lies the answer.
>
> This lot and this choice have, it is to be presumed, both a political and a moral character, and the two are not to be separated. If in the young man's heart he "chooses to depart" on this perilous quest, he must walk "the empty selfish journey"
>
> Between the needless risk
> And the endless safety.
>
> Calling this an "empty selfish journey" is certainly confusing, and can with difficulty be understood, unless we assume that it is a warning of the empiness and futility of the quest when not undertaken in a selfless spirit.[277]

And Beach is convincing when he evocatively describes Auden's invocations of the strange, undefinable, but palpable forces which seem to surround us:

> The main image of the mysterious Two perpetually watching, from left

[277] Ibid. 159-160.

> and right and over the garden wall, is the better of a number of related images that build up the shivery atmosphere of mysterious threatening powers, as when behind him the adventurer becomes aware that (as at Dunsinane)
>
> The woods have come up and are standing round
> In deadly crescent.
>
> Woods have a large place in Auden's imaginative realm of childish fears.[278]

The dark woods, which are featured prominently in the world mythology examined so closely by Jung and his acolytes, like Joseph Campbell, also figure in Auden's universally resonating images.

Perhaps the most purely conspicuous example of Auden's interest in Jungian models of universal psychology is the dramatic poem ***The Age of Anxiety***. While not written to be performed, the poem provides an effective illustration of the manner in which Auden personifies psychological abstractions without concerning himself with idiosyncratic character traits. As Auden himself declared, "the drama is not suited to the analysis of character, which is the province of the novel. Dramatic characters are simplified; easily recognizable, and over life-size...Dramatic speech should have the same compressed, significant, and undocumentary character, as dramatic movement," and, "Drama in fact deals with the general and universal, not with the particular and the local.[279]

Completed in 1946 and first published in the United States in 1947, ***The Age of Anxiety*** is set in a New York bar on the night of All Souls. Fuller recognizes an "atmospheric link with other wartime meditations of Auden's," but argues that the poem self-consciously transcends localized particularities and operates in a more

[278] Ibid. 160.

[279] Auden, ***Plays***, 497.

conspicuously universal realm:

> Here...[Auden] is not much concerned with rationalising the immediate predicament of the individual or the world, or of applying to it the terms of art, philosophy, or Christian revelation. It is a sign of the highest invention and genius that Auden should have produced so soon after 'For the Time Being' and 'The Sea and the Mirror' another major work which embodied his convictions in such radically different terms, those of Jungian psychology and the allegorised interior consciousness.[280]

George W. Bahlke has maintained that the "'Anxiety' in the title of Auden's poem, embraces not only Freudian *Angst* but also the Kierkegaardian anxiety which accompanies the paradoxical situation of freedom and finiteness in which man finds himself, his transcendence of and involvement in nature...the human condition which Auden has objectified in the figures and situations of his poem."[281] Fuller describes, in part, how Auden "has objectified" the characters:

> The four characters are Malin, a medical officer in the Canadian air Force who represents Thinking; Rosetta, a Jewish department-store buyer who represents Feeling (these according to Jung are the rational, evaluative faculties); Quant, an elderly Irish shipping clerk representing Intuition; and Emble, a teenaged naval recruit representing Sensation (these are the irrartional, perceptive faculties). At the allegorical level, these four closely follow in attitude and sensibility the various mental processes they represent, in which a commoner distinction is between Thinking and Sensation as objective and Feeling and Intuition as

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[280] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 369.

[281] George W. Bahlke, ***The Later Auden*** (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1970), 133.

subjective processes.[282]

Fuller discusses Auden's stratagem in the following terms:

> The principal idea of the work (that of representing the four faculties of the fragmented psyche by four different characters) was not a new one for Auden[283] ...What he seems to have done here is to elaborate a hint from "For the Time Being", where a morality-play personification of these four faculties allowed him to demonstrate how the Fall destroyed the wholeness of man's personality, and how the separate faculties allow him only glimpses of the redeemed life which his fallen nature denies him. In ***The Age of Anxiety***, this Christian application is not stressed. Auden is much more interested in the complex relationship between the four faculties indicated by Jung's *t'ai chi t'u*, a diagrammatic representation of the processes of the psyche...and in embodying this relationship in the thoughts of the four "real" characters who represent the faculties.[284]

The general psychological models Auden appropriates for his dramatic poem--equally applicable to all humans--reflect the stylized abstractions and universal conceits indicative of his entire body of stage works. As we shall see, he would continue to concentrate on the more prominent themes circulating throughout the world of archetypal myth.

The archetypal quest is, of course, the thematic centerpiece of ***The Ascent of F-6***. Michael Ransom's suspect journey toward perceived glory and ostensible self-fulfillment is couched in a mythical language and a series of archetypal images

[282] Ibid. 371.

[283] Fuller discusses a similar technique in his analysis of ***The Ascent of F-6***. See ***Commentary***, pp. 193-201.

[284] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 369.

reminiscent of a prodigious host of quest-inspired literature. Once again, we see the root of Auden's allegory in contemporaneous historical specificity--T.E. Lawrence served as the inspiration for Ransom, an apparently heroic man of action who wins the adulation of a large and adoring public, but whose real motivations are exposed (to Auden, anyway), as less than pure. Auden, however, finds ways of translating the particulars into the language of mythic archetype--one with poetically universal reverberations.

Ransom, of course, comes to his untimely end at the mountaintop, learning, too late, of the damage he's inflicted, both on others and on himself. Thinking the achievement of his goal (reaching the top of F-6) would bring him the kind of self-fulfillment and inner peace he had longed for, he instead finds a tragic demise which exposes his own moral impurities and corrupted motives. In his analysis of Robert Browning's ***Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came***, Harold Bloom explains "what William Butler Yeats was to call the Condition of Fire":

> After training a lifetime so as to recognize your ultimate place of trial, you fail utterly to see where you are until it is too late. What or who is the ogre whom Roland now confronts? This magnificent poem tells you that there is no ogre, there is only the Dark Tower: "What in the midst lay but the Dark Tower itself?" And the tower is a kind of Kafkan or Borgesian perlexity; it is windowless ("blind as the fool's heart") and is at once utterly commonplace, and yet unique.[285]

Whether or not Ransom's mountaintop is the thematic equivalent of Childe Roland's Dark Tower is debatable. But the idea of failing "to see where you are until it is too late" is certainly applicable to Ransom. Browning's protagonist, it might be argued, represents a noble man's inevitable quest for an unknown, undefinable, and unreachable prize, call it what you will. As Bloom continues:

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[285] Harold Bloom, ***How to Read and Why***, (New York: Scribner, 2000) 87.

> What rings Roland at the Tower are not ogres, but the shades of his forerunners, the band of brothers who set out upon the doomed quest. Roland was seeking, perhaps only half-knowingly, not just failure, but a direct confrontation with all the failed questers before him. In the dying sunset he hears what seems a great bell tolling, but magnificently he rallies his will and courage for what should be his final moment.[286]

It is arguable that no such heroism is attributable to Ransom's ambiguous demise; in Auden, we see the tragic result of Ransom's monumental hubris and stubborn self-absorption--we see the possibility of an alternate ending had Ransom only been able to check his immense egoism. But we might also see in ***The Ascent of F-6*** the archetypal pattern Bloom identifies in Browning: "not just a failure, but a direct confrontation with all the failed questers before him."

As with most of Auden's drama, ***On the Frontier***'s ambiguity and irony help resist the play's attempt to permanently fix itself to any particular set of socio-poltical circumstances. More universal, timeless truths inevitably surface, demonstrating how Auden's thematic predilections and dramaturgical instincts eclipse the ideological concerns from which the respective plays may have initially issued. Mendelson has described the result in the following terms:

> The play was also the victim of its authors' misunderstanding of their own purpose. Auden and Isherwood thought they were writing a topical drama suitable for the West End stage, but the play transformed the local material of politics and history into timeless lamentation and prayer. Against the conscious intent of its authors, ***On the Frontier*** aspired to the condition of opera.[287]

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[286] Ibid. 87.

[287] Mendelson, ***Plays***, xxviii.

The "condition of opera" to which Mendelson alludes is one which Auden would later describe as "the ideal medium for tragic myth"--Auden, it seems, understood that the particular tensions arising out of an increasingly fractious and violent Western Europe were similar--if not identical--to those associated with nationalistic conflicts across a wide variety of epochs and geographical regions. He located the pat, propagandistic cliches and jingoistic venom common to all such conflicts, and recreated that demagogic brand of speech through the mouths of his characters. The climactic duel of speeches between the Ostnian King and the Leader of Westland, quoted in its enirety in Chapter One, is only the most conspicuous example of the kind of simplistic, hackneyed slogans recognizable to both citizens of self-professed sovereign nations and to members of any jealously guarded community defined by cultural, tribal, and/or ethnic traditions. Throughout the play we hear the familiar strain of xenophobic agit-prop, all designed to combat the alleged threat of foreign aggression. Auden does, however, allow the Chorus of Prisoners to provide an ironic challenge to the pervading and growing sense of blind patriotism and forced submission illustrated in the play:

SECOND PRISONER

The idle, the rich, and the shabby genteel
And the clever who think that the world isn't real
Say: "The forces of order have triumphed! We're safe!"

ALL

But the world has its own views on how to behave!

THIRD PRISONER

The judge sits on high in a very fine wig,
He talks about Law and he talks very big,
And chaplains in church say: "Obedience is best."

ALL

We've heard that before and we're not much impressed![288]

The Prisoners continue their subservise analysis of the situation, by moving from the particulars of their current Leader's rallying cries, to more general descriptions of how his rants fit into the larger schemes of the cyclical, unchanging patterns of history:

FOURTH PRISONER

The Leader stands up on his platform and shouts:
"Follow me and you never need have any doubts!
Put on my uniform, wave my great flag!"

ALL

But when the wind blows he shall burst like a bag!

FIRST PRISONER

"If you're foolish enough," they declare, "to resist,
You shall feel the full weight of fieldboot and fist."
They beat us with truncheons, they cast us in jail,

ALL

But all their forms of persuasion shall fail!

SECOND PRISONER

They boast: "we shall last for a thousand long years,"
But History, it happens, has other ideas.
"We shall live on for ever!" they cry, but instead

[288] Auden, ***Plays***, 374.

ALL

They shall die soon defending the cause of the dead!

THIRD PRISONER

They talk of the mystical value of Blood,
Of War as a holy and purifying flood,
Of bullets and bombs as true works of art.

ALL

They'll change their opinion when shot through the heart![289]

As previously discussed, the union of Eric and Anna, even in death, is designed to represent the transformative and transcendent power of a love which remains stubbornly blind to the figurative and literal boundaries which separate them. Sadly, Auden's overtly maudlin language renders the concluding scene between the two dying lovers as hopelessy naive--an unfortunate sentimentality overtakes what is often a deftly executed satire:

ANNA

Will people never stop killing each other?
There is no place in the world
For those who love.[290]

At first, it seems Eric is allowed to counter Anna's naivete:

ERIC

Believing it was wrong to kill,
I went to prison, seeing myself

[289] Ibid. 374.

[290] Ibid. 416.

As the sane and innocent student
Aloof among practical and viloent madmen,
But I was wrong. We cannot choose our world,
Our time, our class. None are innocent, none.[291]

But the libretto's closing lyrics fall back upon the same kind of saccharine sentiments first expressed by Anna:

ERIC

But in the lucky guarded future
Others like us shall meet, the frontier gone,
And find the real world happy.[292]

Despite the weak and sappy conclusion, the play remains a sharp, well-crafted treatment of timeless, universally cyclical phenomena which conspicuously marks the circuitous movements of civilization.

The radio play ***The Dark Valley*** is another prime example of the manner in which Auden transposed contemporaneous specificity into the language of myth. As previously discussed, ***The Dark Valley*** is a complete revision of Auden's 1936 cabaret sketch, ***Alfred***. This retooled monologue appropriates a common fairy-tale ("The Goose that Laid the Golden Egg") in service of socio-political agit-prop. Consistent with readings of the play as a satire of contemporaneous political personages (the aforementioned Knut Hamsun in particular), Fuller argues that "to compare the old woman of the play to Hamsun is to lend some serious contemporary interest to a situation which is always in danger of lapsing into the archetypal."[293] Yet it is just those archetypal qualities which, ultimately, lend the play

[291] Ibid. 416.

[292] Ibid. 417.

[293] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 306.

its strange resonance--a point Fuller seems to unwittingly concede when he writes that what the play "suggests is, therefore, that but for our stupididty the world is redeemable, and bears infinite riches that we are bent on destroying."[294] Toward the end of the play, the woman sings a song replete with the kind of symbolic, archetypal imagery Fuller finds problematic, but which allows the play to escape the confines of its metaphoric roots:

Starless are the nights of travel
Bleak the winter wind
Run with terror all before you
And regret behind

Run until you hear the ocean's
Everlasting cry
Deep though it may be and bitter
You must drink it dry

Wear out patience in the lowest
Dungeons of the sea
Searching through the stranded shipwrecks
For the golden key

Push onto the world's end, pay the
Dread guard with a kiss
Cross the rotten bridge that totters
Over the abyss.

There stands the ruined castle
Ready to explore

[294] Ibid. 306.

Enter, climb the marble staircase
Open the locked door

Cross the silent empty ballroom
Doubt and danger past
Blow the cobwebs from the mirror
See yourself at last.[295]

Paul Bunyan also emerges as a vivid illustration of that "human pull toward myth" evocatively described by Robertson Davies. Conceived as both a metaphor for the evolution of American civilization and a response to the radical shifts in societal structures resulting from relentless technological advances, ***Paul Bunyan*** transcends the historical particulars which inspired it to become a timeless, universal treatment of the manner in which one burgeoning society eclipses and ultimately displaces another. While the ostensible advances might not be destructive in and of themsleves, they inevitably introduce new ways of ordering communities which upset established manners of human interaction; although new orders might be celebrated on one level or another, Auden, it seems, pines for what has been lost.

Of Auden and Britten's approach to the opera, Osborne writes:

> They explain that they conceive of Paul Bunyan, the giant hero of the lumberman, and one of many mythical figures who appeared in American folklore during the Pioneer period, as "...a projection of the collective state of mind of a people whose tasks were primarily the physical mastery of nature. This operetta presents in a compressed fairy-story form the development of the continent from a virgin forest before the birth of Paul Bunyan to settlement and cultivation when Paul Bunyan says goodbye because he is no longer needed, i.e. the

[295] Auden, ***Libretti***, 379-380.

human task is now a different one, of how to live well in a country that the pioneers have made it possible to live in."[296]

It has been argued that ***Paul Bunyan*** marks only the second time that a major English poet (Auden) has provided a libretto for a major English composer (Benjamin Britten)--the Dryden-Purcell collaboration on ***King Arthur*** in 1691 being the first. Indeed, Auden found in ***King Arthur*** an ideal model for his own thematic aims; the Dryden libretto is a theatrical, mythical fable about the consolidation of England. Auden had decided to employ the legend of Paul Bunyan to create a mythical libretto about the consolidation of America. But Auden had, in the interim, begun work on ***The Prolific and the Devourer***, which was, in part, a thoughtful summary of his interpretation of the historical process. The work was probably influenced, to no small degree, by the seminal work on the subject by Hegel, with which Auden seems to have been intimately familiar. Hegel was, in part, interested in systemitizing and codifying the general characteristics, or "spirit," of various historical phenomena. It was a certain "spirit," in the Hegelian sense, which Auden identified in America's evolution, mythically treated in the legend of Paul Bunyan. The particular circumstances of the consolodation of the Americas was, to Auden's mind, embematic of a more overarching historical process.

In the end, ***Paul Bunyan*** became much more than a mythical treatment of America and its origins, but also a broad, sweeping encapsulation of what Auden believed to be the machine-age's wholesale destruction of a social order based upon a sense of community; or what Auden called "the association of people to place, regulated by the disciplines of nature."[297] He believed that genuine human contact and interaction arising from both chance and necessity had been displaced by "only personal relations of choice united by the automobile and telephone."[298] A

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[296] Osborne, ***Life***, 208.

[297] Mendelson, ***Libretti***, xviii.

[298] Ibid. 47.

sense of inevitability is replaced with what Bunyan calls a "life of choice."[299] Just before the opera's premiere, Auden was quoted in the ***New York Times*** as saying "it may seem presumptuous for a foreigner to take an American folk-tale as his subject, but in fact the implications of the Bunyan legend are not only American but universal."[300]

Despite a Christian-inspired thematic foundation, ***The Rake's Progress*** employs a series of Classical, pagan allusions in support of Auden's universal conceit. The myriad references to Classical mythology (and the archetypal characters and patterns contained therein) expand the play's parameters in ways which exceed and ultimately subsume its Christian assumptions. Although religious allusions abound, they are coupled with self-conscious references to both mythic archetypes and the opera's own self-conscious artificiality--techniques not only influenced by Eliot and Brecht but in perfect alignment with Auden's own theory that "pure artifice renders opera the ideal medium for a tragic myth."[301] Even the characters' names evoke the general monikers of allegorized abstractions: Rakewell, Trulove, and Shadow.

Auden emphasizes the Classical modalities of the opera's general conception through an ongoing series of mythical references and thematic explorations of Classicism's more fundamental aesthetic principles. The opening scene in the Trulove garden, for example, has Tom and Anne singing of the Cyprian Queen and the age of Gold, and invoking festivals commemorating the cyclical patterns of nature:

ANNE

The woods are green and bird and beast at play
For all things keep this festival of May;

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[299] Auden, ***Plays***, 45.

[300] Osborne, ***Life***, 208.

[301] Auden, ***Essence***, 355.

With fragrant odors and with notes of cheer
The pious earth observes the solemn year.

RAKEWELL

Now is the season when the Cyprian Queen
With genial charm translates our mortal scene,
When swains their nymphs in fervent arms enfold
And with a kiss restore the Age of Gold[302]

It is both interesting and relevant that Auden chose to begin his Christian "morality play" with direct refences to pagan images and rites, all cast in a Classical set of allusions. Likewise, in Act Two, scene one, Tom's sinfulness is equated with an underming of Classical notions of order, nuance, and restraint:

Vary the song, O London, change!
Disband your notes and let them range;
Let rumor scream, let folly purr,
Let tone desert the flatterer.
Let Harmony no more obey
The strident choristers of prey;
Yet all your music cannot fill
The gap that in my heart--is still.[303]

And, of course, the opera ends with Tom casting himself and Anne as Adonis and Venus in the fields of Elysium:

Prepare yourselves, heroic shades. Wash you and make you clean.
Annoint your limbs with oil, put on your wedding garments and crown

[302] Auden, ***Libretti***, 49.

[303] Ibid. 60-61.

your heads with flowers. Let music strike. Venus, Queen of Love, will visit her unworthy Adonis.[304]

Anne, upon her arrival, gladly assumes the role. The closing lyrics and images recreate the pastoral ambiance of the archetypal Elysium, complete with the obliteration of temporal and corporeal restraints:

ANNE

Adonis.

RAKEWELL

Venus, my queen, my bride. At last. I have waited for thee so long, till I almost believed those madmen who blasphemed against thy honor. They are rebuked. Mount Venus, mount my throne. [*He leads her to the pallet on which she sits. He kneels at her feet.*] O merciful goddess, hear the confession of my sins.

DUET

In a foolish dream, in a gloomy labyrinth
I hunted shadows, disdaining thy true love;
Forgive thy servant, who repents his madness,
Forgive Adonis and he shall faithful prove.

ANNE [*rising and raising him by the hand*]

What should I forgive? Thy ravishing pentinence
Blesses me, dear heart, and brightens all the past.
Kiss me Adonis: the wild boar is vanquished.

[304] Ibid. 87.

RAKEWELL

Embrace me, Venus: I have come home at last.

RAKEWELL AND ANNE

Rejoice, beloved: in these fields of Elysium
Space cannot alter, nor time our love abate;
Here has no words for absence or estrangement
Nor Now a notion of Almost or Too Late.[305]

In Boccacio-like fashion, Auden found ways of reconciling fundamental Christian precepts with the more sweeping truths embedded in pagan mythology.

Stravinsky was so pleased with ***The Rake's Progress*** that he soon asked Auden and Kallman to supply him with another libretto. Stravinsky suggested a libretto reminiscent of seventeenth-century court masques, Jonsonian in style, and dealing with the Goddess of Wisdom. The one-act libretto that Auden and Kallman eventually wrote (which Stravinsky never set) dealt instead with the symbolic tensions, and ultimate marriage, of Art and Science, passion and reason, as overseen by the wise Goddess of Nature. By the time Auden and Kallman wrote ***Delia, or a Masque of Night***, Auden was consciously embracing and publically espousing a more mythically-inspired approach to dramatic composition--a sensibility to which the operatic form proved uniquely hospitable. As Mendelson reminds us, Auden had argued

> that "It has, I believe, always been the case that, to be operatic, the principle characters have a certain mythical significance which transcends their historical and social circumstances." Both the earlier and the later essays accurately describe the characters in Auden's libretti, but his emphasis has shifted from energy to archetype. His new interest in myth as an organizing principle in opera was partly the result

[305] Ibid. 89.

> of his recognition of the mythically dense operas of Strauss and Hofmannsthal as potential models for his own.[306]

Profoundly influenced by the Strauss-Hofmannsthal collaboration and the "mythically dense"[307] operas it produced, Auden began elaborating his emphasis on archetypal patterns. Inspired by the seventeenth-century court masques Stravinsky had suggested as models, and, according to the title page, "suggested by George Peele's play ***The Old Wive's Tale***," ***Delia*** uses both a fairy-tale structure and Skeltonic verse techniques to illustrate the kind of timeless, mythical-archetypal conflicts typical of court masques: Night vs. Day, Reason vs. Passion, etc.

Also prominent in ***Delia*** is a grand pageant featuring such universal abstractions as Time, Mutability, Toil, Age, Pain, and Death, all of whom proclaim their inescapable presence as integral to the human condition. The Chorus ends the pageant with a frank reminder of the timelessness and universality of their ominous proclamations:

> Till the trump ominous
> End our history,
> As it hath been with us,
> So is it to be.[308]

Delia was also profoundly influenced by ***The Magic Flute***; but instead of a benevolent sorcerer defeating the wild passions of the Queen of the Night, ***Delia*** features a sage Queen who, after allowing the knight Orlando to defeat the ostensibly evil sorcerer Sacrapant, ultimately reinvests him with his power. The Queen's gesture, however, is not necessarily to be regarded as an act of

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[306] Mendelson, ***Libretti***, xxv.

[307] Ibid. xxiv.

[308] Auden, ***Libretti***, 116.

generosity, but, rather, a natural imperative realized so that their neverending struggle might begin again. The dramatic treatment of such timeless, mythically resonant clashes was to be the primary feature in all of Auden's subsequent works for the stage--all of which would be original or adapted opera libretti.

In the Preface to their loose translation and adaptation of Mozart's ***The Magic Flute***, Auden and Kallman had expressed an interest in highlighting the "universal and profound human experiences"[309] which they apparently found lacking in Schikaneder and Giesecke's treatment. After boldly declaring that "no other opera calls more for translation than ***Die Zauberflote***, and for a translation that is also an interpretation," they go on to write:

> It is highly dangerous for a librettist, unless he knows exactly what he is doing, which Schikaneder and Giesecke certainly did not, to make use of fairy-story material, for such material almost always expresses universal and profound human experiences which will make a fool of anyone who ignores or trivializes them.[310]

Auden, it seems, believed Schikaneder and Giesecke unnecessarily complicated the simplicity and straighforwardness of the fairy-tale scheme, and thus robbed the story of its inherently universal profundities. Auden does concede, however, that the libretto's ambiguities lend it a strange resonance:

> Yet its very confusions, perhaps, give this libretto a fascination it might lack had the librettists stuck to what was, ostensibly, their original intention: to write a straight fairy-tale about the recue of a young girl from a wicked sorcerer.[311]

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[309] Auden, ***Libretti***, 129.

[310] Ibid.129.

[311] Ibid. 129.

But, in the end, the duo found the work of their German forebears lacking. Auden and Kallman explain their stratagem in rescuing the libretto from the alleged missteps of its original authors, and reveal their interest in more conventionally mythic, universal themes:

> To discover what, if anything, can be done to improve the libretto, one must begin by trying to detect the basic elements of the story. This story combines two themes, both of great interest. The first and most basic of these is the story of a change in relation between the Dionysian principle and the Apollonian, Night and Day, the instinctive and the rational, the unconscious and the conscious, here symbolized as female and male, respectively.[312]

Mendelson explains one way in which they applied those general principles to the reimagined libretto:

> In 1955, when the National Broacasting Company commissioned them to translate ***The Magic Flute*** for television, Auden and Kallman interpreted their brief freely enough to let them reshape Schikaneder's confused Masonic symbols into a clear archetypal pattern. They had used the triumph of the female principle of Nature at the end of ***Delia*** as an implicit correction to the treatment of the same principle in ***The Magic Flute***. Now, in their translation, they explicitly corrected the original by adding a soliloquy for Sarastro in which he ackowledges that his defeat of the Queen of the Night must bring about his own death as well.[313]

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[312] Ibid. 129-130.

[313] Mendelson, ***Libretti***, xxv.

The "clear archetypal pattern" Mendelson notes is indicative of Auden's unremitting desire to secure universal truths in more stable, codified, predictable ways. The ending now was similar, although inverse, to the ending they concocted for ***Della***; unlike ***Della's*** benign Queen, who restablishes the light/power of Sacrapant so they might continue, in cyclical fashion, their epic struggle, the heroic Sarastro of ***The Magic Flute*** must die along with the wicked Queen of the Night so "In one wedding Day and Night, / Light and Darkness shall unite."[314] As might be expected, "Traditionalists complained about the disruption of Mozart's key sequences, but the new version produced enough interest to stimulate plans (which later fell through) for a German production that would use a retranslation of Auden and Kallman's English version."[315]

The National Broadcasting Company Opera Theatre was pleased enough with Auden and Kallman's translation of ***The Magic Flute*** that they commissioned them to translate ***Don Giovanni***, which Auden and Kallman completed and copyrighted in November of 1957. Unlike their version of ***The Magic Flute***, the ***Don Giovanni*** translation was true to the original, forsaking any bold reimaginings of the original authors' intentions.

In 1958, the young German composer Hans Werner Henze approached Auden and Kallman with a request to supply him with a libretto for a small, chamber opera. ***Elegy for Young Lovers*** was completed two years later, and received its world premiere in 1961. Although it has been called one of Auden's most personal confessions, ***Elegy for Young Lovers*** "was seen by its librettists as embodying a crucially necessary myth. In this case, the myth is that of the artist-genius of the nineteenth and early twentieth century."[316]

The opera's central character is a brilliant, aging poet named Mitenhofer, an impossibly self-centered, egotistical artist-genius. According to Auden, Mittenhoffer

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[314] Auden, ***Libretti***, 170.

[315] Mendelson, ***Libretti***, xxv.

[316] Fuller, ***Commentary***, 481.

was based upon "a cross between W.B. Yeats and Stefean George."[317] Auden would write that "The Theme of ***Elegy for Young Lovers*** is summed up in two lines by Yeats: '*The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life or of the work.*'"[318] He would also tell Stephen Spender that Yeats became "a symbol of my own devil of unauthenticity, of everything which I must try to eliminate from my own poetry, false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonoroties."[319]

Throughout the course of the opera, Mittenhoffer is obsessively working on a poem--an elegy inspired by the young lovers Toni and Elizabeth, the titular heroes of the story. Because the poem is an elegy, Mittenhoffer cannot complete it properly until he facillitates the actual death of the young lovers--the price of the poem's ostensible sublimity is the very real destruction of Toni and Elizabeth. Mittenhoffer can justify his actions as the moral responsibility of a poet-genius who must necessarily place his art above any and all worldly concerns--even the lives of those around him. In a scene with Elizabeth, he explains the difficulties of the artist in the real world:

> You, dear, I know,
> Read with perception
> But you cannot know,
> Have any conception
> Of what it is like
> To be a poet,
> Of what it means
> Never, never
> To feel, to think, to see, to hear,
> Without reflecting: "Now,

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[317] Mendelson, ***Later***, 434.

[318] Auden, ***Libretti***, 246.

[319] Mendelson, ***Later***, 434-435.

Could I use that somehow?
Would it translate
Into number and rhyme?"
Until in time
One no longer knows
What is true and false
Or right and wrong.[320]

Auden explains Mittenhoffer's sensibility in more brutal, exploitative terms :

> Aesthetically speaking, the personal existence of the artist is accidental; the essential thing is his production. The artist-genius, as the nineteenth century conceived him, made this aesthetic presupposition an ethical absolute, that is to say, he claimed to represent the highest, most authentic, mode of human existence.
>
> Accept this claim, and it follows that the artist-genius is morally bound as a sacred duty to exploit others whenever such exploitation will benefit his work and to sacrifice them whenever their existence is a hindrance to his production.[321]

He must, in other words, choose perfection of the work over perfection of the life--it is his sacred duty as a poet.

Together, Auden and Kallman wrote "Genesis of a Libretto," a short essay which chronicles the conception and composition of ***Elegy for Young Lovers***. The essay offers fascinating insight into the ways in which the libretto was conceived in decidedly mythical terms. Of the manner in which they came to create Mittenhoffer, Auden and Kallman asked themselves "two crucial questions. 'What kind of person can dominate an opera both dramatically and vocally?' and 'What kind of mature man

[320] Auden, ***Libretti***, 218.

[321] Ibid. 246-247.

can be intimatey and simultaneously involved with a mad old lady, a young girl and a doctor?'"[322] Their answer was: "the artist-genius of the nineteenth and early twentieth century."[323] They elaborate by maintaing that the "artist-genius is not only a nineteenth and early twentieth century myth but also a European myth,"[324] and explain how this "artist-genius" fits into a timeless archetypal pattern: "This is a genuine myth because the lack of identity between Goodness and Beauty, between the character of man and the character of his creations, is a permanent aspect of the human condition."[325] They had already elucidated the inherently universalist character of opera in general, and the operatic protagonist in particular:

> It means that when we listen to a character in opera, he seems to be singing, not only on his own behalf as an individual in a particular situation at a particular time and place, but also on behalf of the whole human race, dead, living and unborn. That is why the most successful operatic characters, however individualised, are a local embodiment of some myth; both their persons and their situations express some aspect of the human condition which is the significant case at all times.[326]

In certain respects, these sentiments run parallel to what Auden had written eight years earlier in his essay "Some Reflections on Music and Opera," in which he elaborates on the idea of simplicity with regard to characterization:

> Opera...cannot present character in the novelist's sense of the word, namely, people who are potentially good *and* bad, active *and*

[322] Ibid. 246.

[323] Ibid. 246.

[324] Ibid. 247.

[325] Ibid. 246.

[326] Ibid. 246.

> passive, for music is immediate actuality and neither potentiality nor passivity can live in its presence. This is something a librettist must never forget. Mozart is a greater composer than Rossini but the Figaro of ***Marriage*** is less satisfying, to my mind, than the Figaro of the ***Barber***, and the fault is, I think, Da Ponte's. His Figaro is too interesting a character to be completely translatable into music, so that co-present with the Figaro who is singing one is conscious of a Figaro who is not singing but thinking to himself. The barber of Seville, on the other hand, who is not a person but a musical busybody, goes into song exactly, with nothing over.[327]

The simplicity Auden describes is in perfect alignment with his penchant for archetypal abstractions--the simplifications reflect the abstract, unchanging states of an archetypal world which is best represented by music: "In recompense for this lack of psychological complexity, however, music can do what words cannot, present the immediate and simultaneous relation of these states to each other."[328]

Auden and Kallman's next libretto, also set by Henze, came from a direct appropriation of Classical material. In 1961, Auden "suggested to Henze that he compose an explicitly mythical grand opera based on ***The Bacchae***."[329] By 1963, Auden and Kallman had completed ***The Bassarids***, a liberal adaptation of the Euripides tragedy. Euripides's ***The Bacchae*** has frequently and problematically been interpreted as a battle between Passion and Reason, Emotion and Intellect, Disorder and Civilization. Dionysus, so the argument goes, represents the unbridled, ecstatic currents of primal feeling while Pentheus symbolizes the restrictive, civilizing influence of the rational mind which both denies the god and attempts to maintain order. While any such interpreatation is too simplistic and

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[327] Auden, ***Essence***, 356.

[328] Ibid. 356-357.

[329] Mendelson, ***Libretti***, xxviii.

reductive to be wholly accurate, it contains the general thematic structure Auden located and highlighted in his own dramatization of the myth. In ***The Bassarids***, we see the dangers inherent in the Ego's wholesale suppression of the Id, the consequences of a self-conscious intellect's attempts to suffocate the passions; the struggle is dramatically illustrated through Pentheus's refusal to acknowledge the god Dionysus, and highlighted by the libretto's internal charade in which Pentheus's pent-up sexual fantasies are showcased. Dionysus's brutal victory is a grave reminder of the dangers involved in a refusal to accept and, in some way, acquiesce to the unstoppable currents of passion and instinct--he demands, and receives, a submission to his formidable, primal power:

DIONYSUS

I came to Thebes
To take vengeance;
Vengeance taken,
Now I go.
Down slaves,
Kneel and adore.

BASSARIDS

Hail, Dionysus,
Man smasher,
Tearer, devourer
Of raw flesh!
Our Lord, our God!
We kneel and adore.[330]

Because of Auden's professed Christianity, it is useful to note that many comparative scholars have remarked upon the more glaring similarities between

[330] Auden, ***Libretti***, 311-312.

Dionysus and Jesus Christ--both born from the union of God and mortal, both reborn, and both associated with omophagic rituals. But, interestingly, whatever implicit, thematic connection exists between Dinoysus and Christ remains ignored--even deemphasized--by Auden. He even referred to ***The Bacchae*** as "***The Magic Flute*** without Christianity."[331] It seems that he was more interested in ***The Bacchae***'s more overarching archetypal conflicts--the ageless battle and reconciliation between Instinct and Reason; the same themes he would later explore in ***Entertainment of the Senses***, his final work for the stage.

In 1973, the composer John Gardner commissioned Auden and Kallman to write a libretto for an anti-masque to be inserted into a revival of James Shirley's seventeenth-century court masque ***Cupid and Death***. Shirley's original anti-masque, which the ***Entertainment of the Senses*** would replace, called for two actual apes to be present on stage. Instead, Auden and Kallman had five singers, dressed as apes, representing the five senses. Each ape describes the myriad pleasures associated with his corresponding sense. The pleasures are celebrated, but placed in a harsh context as the audience is constantly reminded that they all come to an abrupt end at the moment of death. The First Ape, for example, representing our sense of Touch, insists:

> On Cupid's face there's a sensual grin
> Because foam baths have come in;
> No cake of soap
> Can ever hope
> To provide so soft a lave:
> It's a shame there'll be none in the grave.[332]

While the Third Ape, representing our sense of Smell, maintains:

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[331] Mendelson, ***Libretti***, xxviii.

[332] Auden, ***Libretti***, 362.

If you want power, affection and pelf,
Sweet, smell like anything
Except yourself.
But if you're mad to be natural and personal, save
Your money and be Mother Nature's unspoilable slave:
She'll see that you stink like us all in the grave.[333]

Entertainment of the Senses revisits the archetypal conflicts between Reason and Instinct, the manner in which self-restraint must ironically, but necessarily, give way, on some level, to the passions as pleasurably experienced through our five senses. Like Pentheus, one must finally, if sadly, concede that noble Reason is ultimately powerless in the face of Passion's undying urges. As Chamberlain, the anti-masque's narrator declares in the libretto's closing lyrics:

Dear listeners, you have heard tonight
What my five apes have had to say
About our senses five,
Through which we know we are alive:
Touch and Taste and Smell
As well as Hearing and Sight,
And the different roles they play
Now as compared with yesterday.
Cupid, the god, would certainly nod,
And you'll all agree, I'm sure, with me
That they are perfectly right.
The moral is, as they have said:
Be with-it, with-it, with-it till you're dead.[334]

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[333] Ibid. 365.

[334] Ibid. 368.

Auden sent the libretto to Gardner on September 26, 1973. Three days later, Auden died in a hotel in Vienna. He was sixty-six years old.

CONCLUSION

There is a remarkable photograph of Auden, Stephen Spender, and Cecil Day-Lewis, taken at a cafe in Venice in 1949. The image is emblematic of all that was most conspicuous in Auden and his art. There he is, in the midst of some good-natured polemical rant, his finger waving--in schoolmasterly fashion--as he instructs his obstinate pupils with passion and an unshakeable self-confidence. But look closely. There is a wry twinkle in his eye and a half-smile on his face which belie his feigned indignation. And look at Spender and Day-Lewis, his reluctant pupils. They laugh heartily, delighted by their instructor's lecture. At that instant, it seems, Auden the entertainer had eclipsed Auden the teacher, the moralist overshadowed by the showman. In that image we see Auden, both pedant and performer, and his joyful, appreciative audience.

What we find in Auden is a peculiar negotiation between Platonic and Aristotilean sensibilities. Plato, the moralist who would have banished poets from his ideal Republic for the well-being of the community, can be detected in Auden's early preoccupation with didacticism and Public Art, as well as in his lifelong devotion to moralism as the bedrock of his thematic explorations. Aristotle, the aesthete, interested in the close examination of the internal mechanics of poetic accomplishment, can be detected in Auden's ominpresent fascination with the formal components, generic requirements, and modal essences of poetic/dramatic construction. As Frederick Buell has explained the dual sensibility, "Auden was concerned with creating a new, more effectively public voice for his poetry and with exploring the ways in which imagination and social reality are intertwined."[335] The manner in which Auden interpreted and confronted his perceived "social reality" was fickle at best, inconsistent at its most extreme. What remained constant, however, was an unbridled desire to entertain--to artfully construct poems and plays which might engage audiences in delightful, unexpected ways: "Contained within Auden the poet was Auden the entertainer, the maker of aesthetically pleasing objects,

[335] Frederick Buell, ***W.H. Auden as Social Poet*** (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973) 118.

constructed from words."[336]

This formalistic approach to composition might seem to have much in common with the strict Formalism of the Prague Linguistic Circle and the unapologetic Aestheticism of Oscar Wilde. Rene Wellek represents the strictures of the former when he writes:

> We reject as poetry or label as mere rhetoric everything which persuades us to a definite outward action. Genuine poetry affects us more subtly. Art imposes some kind of framework which takes the statement of the work out of the world of reality. Into our semantic analysis we thus can introduce some of the common conceptions of aesthetics: "disinterested contemplation", "aesthetic distance", "framing". Again, however, we must realize that the distinction between art and non-art, between literature and the non-literary linguistic utterance, is fluid. The aesthetic function may extend to linguistic pronouncements of the most various sort. It would be a narrow conception of literature to exclude all propoganda art or didactic and satirical poetry...It seems, however, best to consider as literature only works in which the aesthetic function is dominant.[337]

And Wilde represents the latter when he insists, "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."[338] Osborne explains how Auden might be regarded as having much in common with those who emphasize formalistic considerations when creating and/or assessing a work of art:

> Auden realized that he frequently play-acted even when consciously

[336] Osborne, ***Poet***, 95.

[337] Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, ***Theory of Literature*** (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 24-25.

[338] Osacr Wilde, ***Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray*** in Dukore, ***Dramatic***, 629.

> he was quite serious, well before his audience became aware of the fact; and this was bound up with his understanding that the arts are, to a very large extent, sheer play. To accept this is in no sense to denigrate or undervalue the arts, for play is an essential aspect of life. Today, however, when the arts are seriously undervalued by being considered as vehicles for the transmission of ideas sociological, philosophical, political and educational, it may be difficult for the indoctrinated young to comprehend this. But it is an important tenet of Auden's faith, and is present in all his poetry from his student days, through his time of interest in politics to his later, quasi-Christian period after World War II.[339]

But does an emphasis on formalistic concerns necessarily displace or eclipse a given work of art's moralistic, humanistic character? In his discussion of Flaubert's relationship to a burgeoning naturalism, Arnold Hauser describes how a zealous devotion to aestheticism can transform itself into a life-denying nihilism:

> A doctrine like Flaubert's aestheticism is, however, no clear-cut, unequivocal, final solution, but a dialectical force, altering its direction and questioning its own validity. Flaubert looks in art for reassurance and protection from the romantic impetuosity of his youth; but in fulfilling this function, it assumes fantastic proportions and a demonic power, it not only becomes a substitute for everything else that can satisfy and content the soul, but the basic principle of life itself. Only in art does there seem to be any stability, any fixed point in the stream of evanescence, corruption and dissolution. The self-surrender of life to art here acquires a quasi-religious, mystical character; it is no longer a mere service and a mere sacrifice, but an ecstatic, spellbound gazing at the only real Being, a total, self-denying absorption in the Idea.

[339] Osborne, ***Poet***, 56.

> "L'art, la seule chose vraie et bonne de la vie", Flaubert writes at the beginning of his career, "l'homme n'est rien, l'oeuvre tout", at the end. The doctrine of "l'art pour l'art" as the glorification of technical mastery, in contrast to romantic dilettantism, was originally the expression of a desire to adapt oneself to a firm social order, but the aestheticism to which Flaubert comes in the end, represents an antisocial and life-negating nihilism, an escape from everything connected with the practical, materially conditioned existence of ordinary human beings.[340]

Whether or not Auden's aestheticism ultimately eclipsed his humanism is subject to dispute, but the fact remains that his fascination with the mechanics of composition did occupy a most prominent position in his poetic and dramaturgical designs throughout his entire career. Likewise, the "quasi-religious, mystical character" to which Hauser alludes is undeniable--as is a "self-denying absorption in the Idea," whether that Idea be aesthetic, political, or theological, and a nagging belief that "only in art does there seem to be any stability, any fixed point in the stream of evanescence, corruption and dissolution." But to relegate Auden to the Flaubert-like realms of the "anti-social" and, by extension, to some sort of nihilism is to reduce and, thus, distort the true character and import of his art. While it is true that Auden never entirely abandoned Kierkegaard's "aesthetic" stage of existence, he found ways of operating within its provinces while simultaneously embracing first the "ethical," and, subsequently, the "religious" stage, which are both incompatible with the nihilism Hauser derides.

It might be argued that Auden's mode of creation--and his understanding of the role and status of both art and the artist--has more in common with the theories of Immanuel Kant. The primacy of aesthetic beauty and formal design had been elaborated and championed by Kant in his groundbreaking treatise, ***Critique of Judgement*** (1790). To what degree Kant's theories can be applied to Auden's

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[340] Arnold Hauser, ***The Social History of Art: Naturalism, Impressionism, The Film Age*** (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951) 74.

dramaturgy is debatable, but there is an unmistakable similarity between Kant's insistence "on the autonomy of art and its freedom from all utilitarian ends"[341] and Auden's latent aestheticism. As Kant maintained:

> ...one who feels pleasure in simple reflection on the form of an object, without having any concept in mind, rightly lays claim to the agreement of everyone, although this judgement is empirical and a singular judgement. For the ground of this pleasure is found in the universal, though subjective, condition of reflective judgements, namely, the final harmony of an object...with the mutual relation of the faculties of cognition (imagination and understanding), which are requisite for every empirical cognition.[342]

It should be noted, however, that Kant, like Auden after him, did not exalt an object's aesthetic characteristics to the exclusion of any moral component. On the contrary, Kant believed that a moral foundation could be built through the application of reason, and subsequent adherence to a reasoned morality would naturally lead to devotion to a transcendental God. As Roger Scruton describes Kant's beliefs: "Aesthetic experience and practical reason are two aspects of the moral: and it is through morality that we sense both the transcendence and the immanence of God."[343] It is this kind of subtle negotiation which one senses in the work of Auden.

The other binding component of Auden's entire dramatic oeuvre is a prodigious familiarity with, and unbending respect for, his literary forebears. Auden's prowess for invention was built atop the scaffolding provided by a host of precursors, many of whom Auden was delighted to acknowledge. Toward the end of his life, Auden wrote the following *Ode to the Medieval Poets*:

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[341] Marvin Carlson, ***Theories of the Theatre*** (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984) 176.

[342] Roger Scruton, ***Kant*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 86.

[343] Ibid. 91.

Chaucer, Langland, Douglas, Dunbar, with all your
brother Anons, how on earth did you ever manage,
without anaesthetics or plumbing,
in daily peril from witches, warlocks,

lepers, The Holy Office, foreign mercenaries
burning as they came, to write so cheerfully,
with no grimaces of self-pathos?
Long-winded you could be but not vulgar,

bawdy but not grubby, your raucous flytings
sheer high-spirited fun, whereas our makers,
beset by every creature comfort,
immune, they belioeve, to all superstitions,

even at their best are so often morose or
kinky, petrified by their gorgon egos.
we all ask, but I doubt if anyone
can really say why all age-groups should find our

Age quite so repulsive. Without its heartless
engines, though, you could not tenant my book-shelves,
on hand to delect my ear and chuckle
my sad flesh: I would gladly just now be

turning out verses to applaud a thundery
jovial June when the judas-tree is in blossom,
but am forbidden by the knowledge
that you would have wrought them so much better.[344]

[344] Auden, ***Collected***, 863.

The poem is revealing. It offers not merely a deference to his beloved Medieval poets, but also a harsh criticism of the contemporary world. In this respect, he has much in common with the Modernists he had earlier eschewed--a nostalgic pining for the lost order and perceived unity of a bygone epoch, and a deep disgust with an increasingly fractured and dislocated modern civilization. The unifying potential of utopian political ideologies, all-encompassing theological doctrines, and timeless mythology, is where he sought solace; and poetic drama was, in part, his vehicle for the exploration and transmission of the themes contained therein.

Auden, it seems, failed to successfully revive the lost, great art of English poetic verse drama. As previously mentioned, he complained of the one defect in modern specimens of the form: "they won't go." Do Auden's dramas "go?" As Harold Hobson wrote in a 1935 review for the *Christian Science Monitor*:

> At the moment Mr. Auden belongs more to the pioneers than to the masters of drama. His achievement consists rather in pointing out a fresh road than in traveling down it very far himself.[345]

Despite sixty years worth of critical grumblings about the apparent fickleness of his political postures and the rationale behind his embracing of Christianity, Auden's plays and libretti do, in fact, reveal beautifully consistent sets of moral principles and aesthetic practices which govern his entire dramatic ouevre. In "Auden's Sacred Awe," Richard Ohmann wisely emphasizes the artfulness of Auden's constructions without denigrating the value or validity of his various themes:

> Before condemning Auden for shifts in allegiance, it is sensible to reconsider the relationship between art and belief, a matter which Auden himself is quite articulate. Poetry, he says, has in it a strong element of play--the formal characteristics emphasize pure

[345] Harold Hobson,"Christian Science Monitor," in Haffenden, ***Critical***, 155.

> disinterested sound, not message. It is ill-suted to controversey, therefore, and should have no ulterior purpose except, "by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate." It should simply dwell mnemonically on things as they are.[346]

Ohmann also notes the reverence Auden felt toward both art and the things it aimed to confront:

> Auden insists on the poet's feeling of "sacred awe" before some objects, beings, and events. There are parts of the world which inexplicably ignite his imagination, and before which he does homage in verse. The awe and reverence are there in Auden's own poetry. They are the force which mediates between detail and schema, particular and general, object and thought. It is sacred awe, a sense of power and meaning that permeates experience, which animates the abstractions of this highly intellectual poet, and which should preserve him, finally, from the charge of ideological fickleness. For he is a celebrant of things, not a partisan.[347]

Auden's drama still dwells, in sacred form, on things unchanging.

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[346] Richard Ohmann, "Auden's Sacred Awe," ***Auden: A Collection of Critical Essays***, ed. Monroe K. Spears (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964) 174.

[347] Ibid. 178.

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