

W. H. Auden's Revisions and the Responsibility of the Poet

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Biography

Katharine Peddie is working towards a PhD at the University of Kent comparing Robert Lowell with his contemporaries in the American avant-garde through their inheritances from William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. She lectures in twentieth century American literature.

Abstract

The development of Auden's attitude towards his left-wing poetry of the 1930s is indicative of his change in perception of how poetry should operate in the public world, and whether it is the correct vehicle for expounding political opinion. These 1930s poems were explicitly engaged with issues of war: 'September 1, 1939' records Auden's reactions to the declaration of the war that was to become WWII, and 'Spain, 1937' is effectively a call to arms for the communist cause in the Spanish Civil War. These earlier poems display a conviction that the role of the poet is that of spokesperson, even shaper of political values, for his readership. In 'September 1, 1939', Auden wrote: 'All I have is a voice / To unfold the folded lie'. During the 1940s, 'September 1, 1939' was one of a number of poems that Auden attempted to expunge from his canon, no longer confident that his voice had been as easily equitable with truth as the line had suggested. In fact, he claimed to find the whole poem 'infected with an incurable dishonesty' (qtd. Fuller 1970, 260). This is symptomatic of Auden's *volte face* in the 1940s concerning the role of the poet. Auden had become suspicious of the power of his own voice: it was beautiful and persuasive, or 'rhetorically effective', as Auden himself put it. But, because he was no longer convinced of his own previous moral judgement, Auden now found the rhetorical effectiveness of his own voice a danger. He felt he had a responsibility to his readers not to compel them into believing sentiments that he now believed to be lies, particularly when these sentiments had, perhaps, impelled readers to involvement in war. This article will put Auden's change in attitude in the context of post-WWII disillusionment with the ability of speakers such as Hitler and Mussolini to compel their audiences through powerful rhetoric, and will investigate the means by which Auden attempted to retrospectively remould his poetic as an irenic one, both in terms of retracting his promotions of war, and by retreating from political involvement in his poetry.

Résumé

Le changement d'attitude d'Auden vis à vis de sa poésie de gauche des années 1930 est symptomatique de son changement de perception sur la manière avec laquelle la poésie devait interagir avec le public et de ses interrogations pour savoir si elle est un moyen adapté pour diffuser une opinion politique. Ces poèmes des années 1930 sont des prises de position explicites vis à vis de la guerre : « *September 1, 1939* » exprime la position d'Auden face à la déclaration d'entrée dans ce qui allait devenir la seconde guerre mondiale, et « *Spain, 1937* » est un appel pour un soutien armé de la cause communiste de la guerre civile espagnole. Ces poèmes de ses débuts font part d'une

conviction que le rôle du poète est d'être une porte parole, porteur des valeurs politiques envers son lectorat. Au cours des années 1940, Auden a essayé de faire disparaître « *September 1, 1939* » ainsi que d'autres de ses poèmes de sa bibliographie, n'étant plus certain que ce que les vers affirmaient était pleinement conforme à la vérité. Ceci manifeste la volte face d'Auden concernant le rôle que doit tenir le poète. Il estimait désormais que celui-ci a la responsabilité envers ses lecteurs de ne pas leur imposer des opinions qu'il savait désormais être des mensonges, en particulier lorsque ces opinions pourraient avoir pour effet de s'engager dans la guerre.

Keywords

W.H. Auden, Spanish Civil War, War Poetry, 1930s, 1940s, World War II, Vietnam War, Cold War, Marxism, War on Terror, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, W.B. Yeats, Denise Levertov, Joseph Brodsky, Robert Duncan, Robert Lowell, Adolph Hitler, Rhetoric, Lyndon Johnson, Stan Smith, 11 September 2011.

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From the 1940s onwards, Auden carried out a sustained policy of revision and expulsion designed to remove many of the poems written in the 1930s from his canon. He justified this policy with the claim that “some poems which I wrote and, unfortunately, published, I have thrown out because they were dishonest, or bad-mannered, or boring” (*Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* 15). Among these poems were two of his most popular, “Spain 1937” (*The English Auden* 210-2) and “September 1, 1939” (245-7), both of which were subsequently omitted from self-selected collections from 1966 onwards.

To retrospectively try to expunge two of your most popular poems is an unusual move, and even more unusual was Auden's explanation as to his motivation. Rather than giving an aesthetic reason for the alteration, he gave a moral one: dishonesty. The vehemence of his dislike for this dishonesty is displayed in a rather dramatic incident in which Auden allegedly crossed out the last two lines of Cyril Connolly's pamphlet of *Spain*, and wrote “This is a lie” in the margin (Smith “Missing Dates” 155). In *Poetry of the Thirties* (1964), Auden allowed five of his poems, including “September 1, 1939” (280-3) and “Spain 1937” (133-7) to be printed only on the proviso that they come with a disclaimer denouncing them as “trash”.¹ As is indicated by the fact that they had been selected for a retrospective anthology of thirties poetry, it was partially on the strength of these poems that Auden had become *the* poet of the thirties. As his editor, Edward Mendelson says, he was the “prophetic poet of the English Left” (“Preface” xiv), at a time of fervent left-wing intellectual activity.² To tell a readership in such plain terms that the poetry with which they had found themselves in sympathy was a “lie” would have been as shocking as it was unpopular.

In his preface to his 1966 edition of *Collected Shorter Poems*, Auden explains the omission of many of his most popular poems:

A dishonest poem is one which expresses, no matter how well, feelings or beliefs which its author never felt or entertained. [S]hamefully, I once wrote:

History to the defeated
May say alas but cannot help nor pardon.

To say this is to equate goodness with success. It would have been bad enough if I had ever held this wicked doctrine, but that I should have stated it simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective is quite inexcusable. (15)

The fact that the side Auden had supported in the Spanish Civil War, about which he had written these lines, was neither successful nor particularly good was undoubtedly an enormous factor in Auden finding these lines particularly shameful.³ In this preface, Auden asserts that the prime objective of poetry is honesty (provided it is also well mannered and exciting). Indeed, he appears to be attempting to extricate his art from some of the more dishonest connotations of the word, from artifice, cunning and craftiness. The words ‘rhetorically effective’ evoke Yeats’s “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (*Mythologies* 331), and suggest that the disgust that the author feels is caused by the fact that the intention of the poem was to influence others; to write rhetoric.

The lines are, undoubtedly, rhetorically effective. They are among those lines of Auden’s that have become embedded in the psyches of many readers, as evidenced by their appearance in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (2006). They are, and in a similarly emphatic yet ambiguous way, as resounding as another famous closing statement, this time Keats’s, from “Ode to a Grecian Urn”: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (*The Complete Poems* 346).

Auden appears to be grappling with a simplistic interpretation of this equation, although he holds back from the word “beauty”, using the uglier phrase “rhetorically effective”. Auden’s “rhetorically effective” is a lesser thing than Keats’s “beauty”. Nonetheless, there is a point at which they touch. One of the things Auden is saying with “rhetorically effective” is “I said this because it sounded aesthetically pleasing”: the desire to make the lines aesthetically pleasing took precedent over the desire to make them an honest expression of the poet’s beliefs. Poetry, says Auden here, should be truthful, but it is not necessarily so because of the aesthetically impelling effects that one might call beauty.⁴

Writing about “September 1, 1939” in 1964, Auden recalled:

Rereading a poem of mine, 1st September, 1939, after it had been published, I came to the line “We must love one another or die” and said to myself: “That’s a damned lie! We must die anyway”. So, in the next edition, I altered it to “We must love one another and die”. This didn’t seem to do either, so I cut the stanza. Still no good. The whole poem, I realized, was infected with an incurable dishonesty – and must be scrapped. (“Foreword” viii)

As John Fuller points out, this account is itself rather dishonest, as it is not biographically accurate (260). It is, however, important, in that it allows us to

understand the way that Auden intends to portray himself and his poetry: poetry is not a privileged discourse that has automatic access to higher truth. As Mendelson says of Auden's attitude, "poetry could not be exempted from ethical standards of truth or falsehood: a poem could be a lie" ("Preface" xix). A poem can be a lie, even when the poet is intending, and attempting, to be honest. It is therefore the responsibility of the poet to be vigilant about his own work, even his published work. The poet must attempt to recognise his own dishonesty, and to expel this dishonesty wherever he finds it. This is a trickier concept than Auden is making it appear. There is a difference between what he says about "September 1, 1939" and what he says about "Spain 1937". "Spain 1937", he says, was always dishonest because he never equated success with goodness. On the other hand, the realisation that "September 1, 1939" was dishonest was retrospective, occurring during a reading at a much later date. A rather difficult problem emerges from this—how far can one ever be in a position to say with as much certainty as Auden does, in different ways, about both poems, that, at an earlier point in time, one was dishonest? Particularly if, at the time, you didn't think you were being dishonest. This inconsistency merits interrogation. What is implied is that honesty is not a stable virtue, but is historically contingent. What may be true at a certain point in time may be untrue at another time. Poetry is not immune to its contexts, even in the age of New Criticism.⁵

Joseph Brodsky argues this case persuasively, suggesting that the events of World War II altered, for Auden, the veracity of the sentiment "we must love one another or die" (*The English Auden* 246):

After the carnage of WWII, either version would sound macabre. If this line seemed to him untrue, it was through no fault of his own. [T]he actual meaning of the line at the time was, of course, "We must love one another or kill". Or "we'll be killing one another in no time." Since—after all, all he had was a voice and this wasn't heard or heeded. What followed was exactly what he predicted: killing. But again, given World War II's volume of carnage, one could hardly enjoy proving oneself a prophet. So the poet chooses to treat this "or die" literally. Presumably because he felt he was responsible for failing to avert what had happened, since the whole point of writing this poem was to influence public opinion. (353-4)

Brodsky's reading of "we must love one another or die" does, indeed, seem to be a good one, in keeping with the sentiments of "September 1, 1939"—Auden is right in saying that "we must love one another or die" makes no sense when read literally. Brodsky's interpretation of Auden's revision, and his post-World War II disgust with his role of prophet and the writing of rhetoric lies in seeing the concept of poetry making nothing happen as a cause of distress: Auden saw that the sort of political poetry that he was writing had had no effect and subsequently came to reformulate the role of poetry within society. As he wrote after World War II, "I know that all the verse I wrote, all the positions I took in the thirties, didn't save a single Jew" (Epstein 70). The way of happening of poetry does not include directly influencing world affairs. The case for the revision of "September 1, 1939" again, is rather different to that of "Spain, 1937", even if Auden expresses his dislike for them both in similar terms.

The sentiments about honesty expressed by Auden about both poems issues a direct challenge to the Shelleyian concept of the poet, as articulated in *A Defence of Poetry*:

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, [...] the trumpet which sings to battle, and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World. (297)

This casts the poet as prophet, a claim that has affected how future generations of poets and readers have viewed the role of the poet. In the role of prophet, the poet has heightened insight into some form of divine truth. As a hierophant, a priest to this truth, it is the poet's moral obligation to teach this truth to his readership. Auden claims the exact opposite. The poet does not have any greater access to truth than any other citizen and it is therefore his moral duty to refrain from being an influence that directly "moves" the reader into any form of belief. This moral duty is especially important for a poet. Auden's massive following in the thirties (in contrast to Shelley's tiny one at the point of writing his *Defence*) had made him aware that readers could cast poets into prophetic roles, and had already done so in his case. Thus, as Mendelson says, "a poetic lie could be more persuasive in the public realm than lies less eloquently expressed. Words had the potential to do good or evil" ("Preface" xix).

This may explain why Auden deleted lines and poems that, as Mendelson says, were his "most compelling" ("Revision and Power" 105). The reader must not be tricked by a "rhetorically effective" line and compelled to follow the personal beliefs of the poet. It may also explain why he expunged the stanza from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats":

Time that with this strange excuse
Pardoned Kipling and his views,
And will pardon Paul Claudel,
Pardons him for writing well. (*The English Auden* 242)

These writers had expressed particularly right wing views, which Auden found reprehensible. Nevertheless, the sense of this stanza is that time esteems good writing over moral values. Auden's expulsion of the stanza acknowledges that it is precisely because they wrote well that their views should be scrutinized. Literary reputations are made by readers and critics, not by the mythical process of a conception of Time that sounds rather too close to fate. The sentiment of the passage is false to Auden's interest in what John Lucas terms "the complex engagement of individual with, in the loosest sense of the word, history" (152).

His famous line from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", "Poetry makes nothing happen" (*Collected Poems* 248) could perhaps more "honestly" be explained as a belief that poetry should not directly make anything happen. That, as he claimed as early as 1935, in his introduction to *The Poet's Tongue*:

Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with expanding our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to a point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice. (ix)

"Poetry makes nothing happen" may suggest that poetry *cannot* make anything happen, but Auden's scrupulous policing of his poetry on moral grounds suggests

more power for poetry than this phrase, taken at face value, seems to allow. Perhaps we should emphasise the word ‘makes’.⁶ It is indicative of Auden’s belief that poetry works through a relationship between the words of the poem and the critical mind of the reader. Despite Auden’s awareness of the social forces that mould the individual (the interest which formed the backbone of his Marxist phase), the individual can, and must, choose for themselves. Considering that it was written after the call to arms that was “Spain 1937”, “Poetry makes nothing happen” could also be seen as a slightly self-serving get-out clause—Auden’s version of Yeats’s expression of doubt over the effects of the literature which he believed could make something happen: “Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?” (*Collected Poems* 393). The elegy for Yeats is also an argument with Yeats, an influence towards whom Auden had incredibly ambivalent feelings.

However, some of Auden’s 1930s works step beyond his dictum of what poetry should do. *Spain* is the most obvious example, written as a political pamphlet that “sold for a shilling, with all proceeds to go to Medical Aid for Spain” (Smith “Missing Dates” 115).⁷ Merely to acquire this poem when it was first published, let alone read it, was to show tacit support for the Spanish Republicans. Moreover, the lines to which Auden most objected: “History to the defeated / May say alas but cannot help nor pardon” (*The English Auden* 212), is a call to arms, a Shelleyian trumpet which sings to an actual, real, battle. It implores the reader to join, or at least support, the fight in Spain, for they will otherwise be responsible for defeat, which history “cannot help nor pardon”. These sentiments show the influence of the contemporary literary and political environment on Auden’s poetry in the 1930s. Much of Europe was polarising into extreme Left and Right wing governments, and a showdown between these two ideologies seemed imminent, and was realised in the Spanish Civil War of 1937. As John Lucas says, “the 1930s was a decade which uniquely seemed to require writers to speak out” (156).

Not only had the Spanish Civil War destroyed Auden’s Marxist convictions, but the atrocities of the Second World War changed the cultural climate, and certainly modified Auden’s attitude as to appropriate subject matter for poetry, or at least his poetry. In 1947 he said in an interview: “In the war years, a poet had to be other-worldly. At any rate, I did” (Cranston 50). Auden’s seemingly increasingly depoliticised poetics, and his decision to not publish poetry directly about the war, stemmed from an increasing conviction that literature is fundamentally unsuited to writing about war and atrocity. This is partially due to its pleasure-inducing functions: he wrote in 1968’s *Secondary Worlds* that to write or attend a play about Auschwitz would be “wicked”, for “author and audience may try to pretend that they are morally horrified, but in fact they are passing an entertaining evening together, in the aesthetic enjoyment of horrors” (84). As Stan Smith says (“Introduction” 4), this is an about-turn for an author who could write in 1938:

And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now.
Nanking. Dachau. (*The English Auden* 257)

And, again, there is Auden’s horror of insincerity in the face of atrocity, which led him to attacks on those who did publish verses condemning such atrocities as the massacre of much of the population of the Czech village of Lidice by Nazi forces. These poems he called “versified trash”, saying “what was really bothering the versifiers” was not the horror of atrocity itself, but “a feeling of guilt at not feeling horror stricken enough” (Davenport-Hines *Auden* 205). The limits of empathy

expressed in “Musée des Beaux Arts” (*The English Auden* 237), written in 1938, gives an indication of how he thought the witness of the suffering of others might be more honestly expressed. At the heart of Auden’s relative silence on the subject of World War II is not in a solipsistic turning inward, but an acute sensitivity to the problems of writing poetry, particularly, perhaps, civilian poetry, about its horrors. This feeds into much larger debates about whether and how poets should, or should feel obliged to, respond to contemporary conflict in their poetry. This debate would raise its head again during the Vietnam war, most particularly in the cases of very public falling out of the previously close relationship of the poets Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov over their respective depictions of the atrocities of Vietnam in their poetry. Robert Lowell’s strangely oblique anti-Vietnam poem, if it can even be called that, “Waking Early Sunday Morning” (383-6), he recited at a protest march, becoming the figurehead of a protest movement he confessed to feeling strangely outside (See “The March” 545). It is also something, of course, to consider in our time.

In 1950, Auden directly attacked the poet-prophet figure:

We live in a new age [...] in which the heroic image is not the nomad wanderer through the desert or over the ocean, but the less exciting figure of the builder, who renews the ruined walls of the city. (*The Enchafed Flood* 153)

The builder, though ‘less exciting’ than a nomad-prophet, is a figure who must work with, and as an equal part of, the rest of society: he rebuilds rather than commands the rebuilding. The importance of renewing “the ruined walls of the city” is indicative of a post-war mentality: it is not only the city, but also society, which has been laid waste, and to renew society required a change in the poet’s relationship to it. The implicit spectre of World War II looms over this citation, and is perhaps the reason why this “new age” must not have a prophet poet. In the political atmosphere of the 1930s, where crisis was looming, it may have been tempting to act as the voice of prophesy, but the crisis being over, the agenda changed to communal rebuilding.⁸

In addition, World War II seriously debunked the romanticism of the prophet figure. This war appeared to have a major catalyst in the egos of national leaders, Hitler, Mussolini and Franco and their ability to control the masses under their personal power. Hitler, in particular, captured his nation’s support through his idiosyncratic brand of eloquence and dramatic performance—his speeches. Hitler was the dictator as prophet (and, courtesy of *Mein Kampf*, also the author as prophet), using his “strange power of speech” (Coleridge 145) to enthral an economically depressed and susceptible nation into believing his despotic and disastrous prophetic vision. This demonstrated, terribly, the power that “rhetorically effective” words could have in imposing personal beliefs upon people who were exposed to those words, and the consequences to which this could lead. As Auden said, “bad men are often good orators” (Davenport-Hines *Auden* 82). Auden was always aware of this, it informs much of his work in the 1930s, but World War II marks a turning point in his response.

The example may seem extreme, but this analogy of the poet as dictator is close to the message of one of Auden’s own revisions. Mendelson points out that, in the draft of “For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio” (*Collected Poems* 347-400), the central character, Simeon, a prophetic biblical figure, is portrayed as a poet whose experiences are analogous to those of Auden’s (“Revision and Power” 106). However, by the final version, Simeon is no longer a poet, and elements of his original speech are transferred to Herod’s contemplation of the Massacre of the

Innocents. The poet-prophet's "most suitable allegory", says Mendelson, is the tyrant and dictator (107).

As evidenced by the fact that "September 1" and "Spain 1937" are still two of Auden's most popular poems, the words of the poet, having been published, are in some ways the property of a readership – "the words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living" (*Collected Poems* 247). In one sense, this legitimises the public ownership of his words, the gut; in this context being akin to a "gut feeling" – the "essential part", or "heart" of the living (*SOED*). Thus his words become internalised, if modified by, the reader. Nevertheless, one cannot escape the biological sense of the word. What goes into the guts as fine food may come out as excrement. Fittingly, Auden's poetry has been subject to some spectacularly dreadful misreadings and misuses. Lyndon Johnson's 1964 presidential campaign infamously used a misquoted Auden line "We must either love each other, or we must die" in a television advertisement that aimed to secure voters by insinuating that the opposition candidate would start a nuclear war. Auden's lines, made to run parallel to, and mean the same as, "vote for Lyndon Johnson or suffer death by nuclear war," become obviously false and dishonest.⁹ Auden was partially wrong in these lines from "In Memory of W. B. Yeats":

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper [.] (*Collected Poems* 248)

In an age of advertising, executives love to tamper with poetry. Particularly poetry of the rhetorically effective kind.¹⁰ Richard Davenport-Hines actually suggests that Auden's horror at this use of his words for a morally dubious and pivotal political campaign was the reason that "September 1, 1939" was dropped from the 1966 *Collected Poems*. ("Auden's Life and Character" 23).

Auden also developed what Cicero Bruce calls a "habit of taking individual pieces from their original contexts and publishing them separately so as to change the sense in which they were originally conceived" (9). By changing the position of poems within his *oeuvre*, Auden could reinvent the meaning of the poem: irony, for example, could take on the tone of genuine sentiment. Joseph Warren Beach decries the fact that, in his opinion, the relocating of "Depravity: A Sermon" from *The Dog Beneath the Skin* to a stand-alone piece in *The Collected Poetry*, transforms "satirical parody" into "a sober religious document" (11). However, perhaps there is another less obvious message located somewhere on the cutting board between the two manifestations of the poem. Auden highlights how easily words can be manipulated to support different, even opposing, positions and ideologies. The irritation Beach shows may be a reaction that Auden intends the reader to have. Perhaps Auden signposts to readers that they are being manipulated so that they can question more subtle forms of manipulation and approach Auden's other poetry (or any discourse) with their investigative faculties sharpened.

Mendelson points out another related development in Auden's work, that "in the later part of his career, [Auden] called attention in his essays to the technical aspects of verse, the details of metrical and stanzaic construction" ("Preface" xviii). Having highlighted the artifice and "dishonesty" of some of his previous poems, this seems to be an attempt to acknowledge that all of his poems were, in fact, highly artificial constructs. This aims to help readers understand how a "rhetorically effective" phrase came to be so, in order that they would not be dazzled by its effects into belief in its sentiment.

The act of revising popular poems reconfigures the author's relationship with his readers. As Mendelson attests:

Auden was aware that one of the ways in which writers and their audiences enter into a relationship of mutual congratulation and comfort is the implied contract in which [...] readers flatter themselves with the feeling that they have found a guiding intelligence which corresponds to their own. ("Revision and Power" 109)

This contract is evidenced in the closing passages of "September 1, 1939". Readers whose sympathies are analogous to the narrative voice can easily cast themselves and Auden as the creators of the "Ironic points of light" which "Flash out wherever the Just / Exchange their messages" (*The English Auden* 247). Retrospectively, Auden recognised this danger in his political poetry: "These attitudes, these writings, only help oneself. They merely make people who think like one, admire and like one—which is rather embarrassing" (Epstein 70). In this view, this sort of political poetry not only cannot make anything happen, it also encourages political and intellectual complacency. As Mendelson says, Auden came to distrust his "power to convince his readers that he and they were on the same side in the great struggles of the age, that they were 'the Just'" ("Revision and Power" 110). In revising and expunging these and other similar lines, Auden breaks the "implied contract" between himself and his readership. By calling the lines "dishonest" he forces the reader to question the authority of the author, and to reinterpret their understanding of the text, to engage more complexly with poetry that previously they may have thought themselves in accordance with. It asks you to ask more urgently what it is that you believe in.

However, since his death, readers and editors of Auden have increasingly reverted to his original texts. In the aftermath of 9/11, "September 1, 1939", with its sense of foreboding doom played out in another September, seemed eerily prescient. Stan Smith notes:

The Times Literary Supplement's "Letter from New York" after those events reported that Auden's words were now everywhere, reprinted in many major newspapers, read on National Public Radio and featured in hundreds of web chat-rooms. Students at Stuyvesant High, four blocks from Ground Zero, included the poem in a special issue of their newspaper distributed free by the *New York Times*, stressing its closing admonition: "We must love one another or die". Only rarely, however, did a country reeling from this assault on its security acknowledge the moral at the poem's heart: "those to whom evil is done / do evil in return". Indeed, a nation in denial as well as in shock slapped down as un-American the few voices that dared to draw the lesson which, the poem insists, all schoolchildren learn. ("Introduction" 1)

Again, the line "We must love one another or die" (*The English Auden* 246) became politically charged. The lines resonated with an exclusive group, New Yorkers, perhaps extending to Americans, perhaps as far as the Western world, and articulated the bond that such an atrocity had forged between them. This is not to suggest that this line should not have felt like an appropriate and resounding expression of the many acts of self-sacrifice that were performed for the love of

fellow, and unknown, human beings in rescue operations. But whether this love stretched to suicide bombers, or even, given the continuing debates surrounding the building of a mosque near Ground Zero, Muslim New Yorkers, in the minds of many who found consolation in this line, is debatable. The poem was, after all, being read as consolation, which is perhaps not the best mind-set with which to perform balanced readings, and many of these readings seem to recapitulate the sort of complacent readings that caused Auden to dislike “September 1, 1939”). That human impulse to turn to higher authority in times of terror and confusion, as articulated by Auden in “Spain 1937” (“Intervene. O descend as a dove or / A furious papa or a mild engineer: but descend,” *The English Auden* 211), is palpable. Of course, there are worse things to do than turn to Auden. At its worst excesses, this human impulse allows such things as States of Emergency to be called. I would suggest it is also partially this attitude that led many to allow the leaders of such Western countries as Britain and America to take us into the wars we now find ourselves in.

Under the pressures of these highly emotive, politicised readings, Auden became his admirers, or what his admirers wanted him to be, and was recast as prophetic figure and the voice of a new war. This evidences just how deeply the modes of reading and of viewing the figure of the poet—modes that Auden was attempting to resist—are embedded within the psyches of readers of poetry. However, awareness of Auden’s opinions and revisions of these poems should help the reader to approach the texts from a heightened critical and analytical perspective, allowing them to test their own sense of what is true or honest against the words of the poem.

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¹ The other three were "A Communist to Others" (54-9), "Sir, No Man's Enemy" (201) and "To a Writer on his Birthday" (167-70).

² Auden's position as defining poet of the thirties has remained stable in later constructions of the era. In 1976 Samuel Hynes dubbed the era the Auden Generation; a moniker that continues to seem relevant. The latest edition of *Poetry of the Thirties* carries Auden's photograph on its front cover, and he, along with Louis MacNeice, was the most represented poet in the collection. Stephen Spender runs in a close third, testament to the dominance of Auden and his group. The inclusion of William Empson's "Just a Smack at Auden" and Gavin Ewart's "Audenesque for an Imitation" show that the Audenesque was such a pervasive and recognized mode in thirties poetry to provide a target for parody and satire.

³ As he said in 1955, "[n]obody I know who went to Spain during the Civil War who was not a dyed-in-the-wool stalinist [sic] came back with his illusions intact" (Davenport-Hines *Auden* 164). Auden's recantation of his 1930s Marxism probably the major factor in his subsequent dislike of "Spain 1937", which urged action for a cause that he no longer believed in.

⁴ This, of course, is less an argument with Keats so much as with a debased version of Keats's lines, which, like so many of Auden's, have implanted themselves in our collective consciousness. As Auden said in his "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", "the words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living" (*Collected Poems* 247). Even "he became his admirers" (247) – the beauty of Keats's lines being more powerful than the meaning or meanings that Keats might have intended with them.

⁵ It is worth pointing out at this point that Auden's claim about the dishonesty of "Spain 1937" is not an attempt to deny his previously-held Marxist beliefs and whitewash his past political involvement – it is specific to his equation of "goodness with success", although his disillusionment with Marxism undoubtedly plays a part in his finding this particular poem particularly discomfiting.

⁶ John Lyon discusses how each word of this elusive line could be stressed, and also compares it to Keats's lines on beauty and truth, which he calls a "comparably gnomic utterance" (280). He also highlights how Keats's lines are uttered in response to an object that has already been said to "tease us out of thought", and reformulates Auden's concept of poetry as "memorable speech" ("Introduction" *The Poet's Tongue* vi) as "memorable opacity" (Lyon 280). Both the mnemonic quality and the opacity of the lines are integral to their power.

⁷ Throughout this paper, the pamphlet is referred to as *Spain*, the poem itself "Spain 1937".

⁸ For an interesting discussion of how this passage summarized what Joshua Esty calls 'the thematic shift from discovery to rebuilding in late modernism' see Esty 262.

⁹ The video clip can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63h_v6ufoAo.

¹⁰ Brighton-based estate agents Bonett's recently sent their employees on a poetry writing course “to learn how to reinvent space” (Wroe).