

W.H. Auden: Undoing the Folded Lie

I.

*God never makes knots,
but is expert, if asked to,
at untying them.*

(W.H. Auden, "Shorts II")

On September 1, war broke out. It was not a surprise to many; the threat of war had been hanging over Europe for some time now, and Neville Chamberlain's noble attempts at appeasing Hitler had proven thoroughly, and unsurprisingly, unsuccessful. Seated in a "dive" on Fifty-Second Street in New York, a thirty-two-year-old English poet, recently emigrated, sat surveying the street "as the clever hopes expire[d]/Of a low dishonest decade". Moving in his mind from the outbreak of war, as "the unmentionable odour of death/Offend[ed] the September night", Wystan Hugh Auden also reached into history to "unearth the whole offence"; what was it, he asked himself and his readers, which had "driven a culture mad" to the point that now a "psychopathic god" was on the loose in Germany? For Auden, the problem had not only "occurred at Linz", the childhood home of Hitler, but in fact lay deeper in the "normal human heart" and had done so for time immemorial. The problem, he argued, was actually self-evident, if only we had eyes to see:

*I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.*

Was this a simple tit-for-tat mentality? Was Auden merely arguing, as many had done before and after him, that Germany's poor treatment in the Treaty of Versailles – what T.S. Eliot termed one of the "many cunning passages" and "contrived corridors" of history – had led to them demanding the nations' blood? No, the problem was more integral to humanity than that; the doing of evil, it seemed, was endemic within us:

*The windiest militant trash
Important Persons shout
Is not so crude as our wish...
For the error bred in the bone*

*Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.*

This desire – not to love and be loved as part of a universal humanity, but to be loved as though the only human alive – was a tension that lay at the heart of much of Auden’s poetry. He would swing wildly in his thoughts about it; at times he seemed to demand love as an individual, while at others he would denounce such love with the kind of prophetic clarity we see in “September 1, 1939”. He would even retract “September 1” because of its declaration that “we must love one another or die”, only conceding to having it published in later anthologies on the condition that the line be altered to “we must love one another *and* die”. Towards the end of his life he would declare that, “if equal affection cannot be”, then “let the more loving one be me”. Whatever the perspective he took, this quintessentially human craving for love and our equally quintessential inability to love properly would pervade his work, coupled with his fascination over the reasons behind this failure. His quest to find the reasons would take him far and wide in his exploration of Christian faith.

It was often not an orthodox exploration, and many Christians today would be unwilling to own him as “one of us”. Yet there is no denying that Auden was drawn deeply into the Christian story in a way that made it far more than simply an intriguing way of viewing the world; it was intricately and inextricably linked to what Auden knew of the failures within his own heart.

II.

...I, made in God’s Image but already warped...
(W.H. Auden, “Talking to Myself”)

Including Auden in any study of Christian poets is in many ways a controversial act. Having returned to the faith of his childhood in late 1939, much of Auden’s poetry is concerned with God and with matters of faith. A number of his major works are explicitly religious, based around liturgy (“*Horae Canonicae*”) and scripture (*For the Time Being*). Images of resurrection, creation and confrontations with sin pervade poems as diverse as “The Shield of Achilles”, “Under Sirius”, “In Praise of Limestone” and “Friday’s Child”, and peppered throughout his “marginalia” – collages of poetic aphorisms, often expressed in three-line stanzas – are wry, almost Pascal-like, observations on faith and the human soul.

Yet Auden was also openly homosexual for most of his adult life. A large number of his poems are addressed to, or focused on, male lovers: "This Lunar Beauty", "Lay your sleeping head, my love", "Funeral Blues" (better known as "Stop all the clocks"), "First Things First" and numerous others. Granted, many of these take as their subject a romantic love which is arguably as applicable to heterosexual relationships. Yet Auden could alternate between guilt and celebration in how he discussed his sexuality. Sometimes he embarrassed himself: "In Praise of Limestone", with its passing reference to the "nude young male who lounges/Against a rock displaying his dildo", was later changed to just a "flirtatious male who lounges/Against a rock in the sunlight". Likewise, some argue that one of the reasons Auden later retracted "September 1, 1939" was the fact that the "dive" from which the poem was written was a gay bar.

There is also a crudeness to some of Auden's poetry which many Christian readers will be uncomfortable with. He was perfectly happy to insert the f-word into a poem when he felt that it was appropriate; he even once read his poem, "Song of the Devil", with its declaration at its end that "I'm so bored with whole fucking crowd of you/I could *scream!*", inside a church building. Sex and bodily functions were as much the stuff of poetry for Auden as anything else was. Although not necessarily an autobiographical statement, there seems something fitting in the stanza of "Marginalia" that runs:

*His thoughts pottered
from verses to sex to God
without punctuation.*

All this is reason to make most Christian readers awkward, and perhaps justifiably so. For all his awareness of human sinfulness, Auden's life did not demonstrate a strong sense of the redemption and transformation made possible by the faith he professed.

Nevertheless, it seems impossible to survey Christian poetry, especially in the twentieth century, and bypass Auden. Arguably more than his precursor Eliot, more perhaps even than the much more orthodox Marianne Moore, Auden took the language of Christianity as a means of making sense of a broken and decaying reality. Like Eliot, Auden returned to a highly liturgical approach to Christianity, though for him this was perhaps less of an escape from Modernity than it was for Eliot. Nevertheless, Auden also went further than Eliot in restoring both the faith and the forms of the past; he ranks alongside Elizabeth Bishop as one of the first great twentieth-century "formalists", often looking to fixed poetic forms in a way which took

steps to restore some order to reality, the loss of which had driven Eliot, Pound and others to break with form in the first place. Auden was as comfortable with free verse as he was with a villanelle ("But I Can't"), a rondeau ("The Hidden Law") or a sestina ("Paysage Moralisé"), his versatility being both one of his greatest gifts and one of the most important features of his work. At his best, there is a beauty and an order to his poetry which is unusual in his century and which expresses something of the reordering which Christian faith brought about in his view of reality.

He was also able to give Christian ideas a profound poetic resonance, whether working with scripture or with the many theological and philosophical questions that occupied his mind. His essays on Kierkegaard show a complex understanding of a complex thinker whose theology and philosophy was grounded, like Auden's, in a deep recognition of human sinfulness and of the psychological reorientation that faith offered. Like Kierkegaard, Auden could expose the hypocrisy of his age with startling clarity. Think, for instance, of the closing section of *For the Time Being* and its picture of tokenistic Christmas celebrations:

*Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes –
Some have got broken – and carrying them up to the attic...
Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away...*

Likewise, in "Under Sirius", when Auden addresses the medieval poet Fortunatus as a means of exploring the role of judgment in the present and in the future, he presents a picture of humanity happily living out their lives of ignorance, denying God and enjoying doing so:

*For when in a carol under the apple-trees
The reborn featly dance,
There will also, Fortunatus,
Be those who refused their chance,
Now pottering shades, querulous beside the salt-pits,
And mawkish in their wits,
To whom these dull dog-days
Between event seemed crowned with olive*

And golden with self-praise.

The praise and worship of self is found frequently throughout Auden's poetry, alongside the Pharisees, lawyers, statisticians, faceless workers, stock-brokers and bureaucrats who either destroy humanity or altogether ignore it. Some, as he put it in "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", are trapped "each in the cell of himself", some simply wandering through life without a thought for others. Some are complicit through silence, while others actively make evil flourish. Those in the final category are rarely given names or faces. In "The Shield of Achilles", one of Auden's finest works, we have only this stark, lifeless image of a politician behind a war:

*Out of the air a voice without a face
Proved by statistics that some cause was just
In tones as dry and level as the place:
No one was cheered and nothing was discussed;
Column by column in a cloud of dust
They marched away enduring a belief
Whose logic brought them, somewhere else, to grief.*

The people who are victims to the war are as faceless as the one who caused it, a fitting image in a vision in which the greatest crime of war is that it robs humanity of its very humanity. This same system, however, is not confined for Auden to war itself; it pervades all of life. This is why, perhaps, he turns amidst scenes of warfare to "a ragged urchin" who, "aimless and alone", is a representation arguably of all people who grow up divorced from hope:

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

Alan Jacobs, in a wonderful essay on Auden, observes that "in the Christian understanding, we indeed live in a world where such events occur", yet we also perceive the alternative: "that one of those three bound figures may be different than the other two; that somewhere promises are kept; and that people weep with their brothers and sisters who weep". For Jacobs,

Auden's "Christian interpretation of history is evoked all the more powerfully by its absence"; it is evoked as a possibility, an echo amidst the despair of war and depravity.¹

People can indeed keep promises, and it is this very fact which simultaneously gives hope and despair when we do not. Like Moore, whom Auden much admired, Auden could recognise at once how animals were arguably happier than humans yet also lacked the potential for majesty and glory that humans possessed. In "Their Lonely Betters", the "robin with no Christian name" seems content to sing its "Robin-Anthem which was all it knew", and is not concerned with anything much more than "which pairs, if any, should get mated". Nor is any "one of [the robins] capable of lying" and none are concerned with the threat of death. Humanity, by contrast, brings anxiety which such creatures are free from, expressed in the difference between the "Robin-Anthem" and human speech:

*Let them leave language to their lonely betters
Who count some days and long for certain letters;
We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:
Words are for those with promises to keep.*

We are "better" than robins, granted, yet more "lonely". We also have the capacity to keep "promises" yet seldom do. Auden captures the tension with stark power in "Marginalia" when he writes:

*Fate succumbs
many a species; one alone
jeopardises itself.*

If humans were not created in God's image, it seems, there would be little need for a category for sin. If we were not capable of such goodness and such glory, our persistent failure to do anything good or glorious would be excusable; as it is, Auden cannot escape its tragedy.

This is why, for all its crudeness, the "nude young male" of "In Praise of Limestone" is not really an inappropriate image, symbolising as he does just what is wrong with self-love for Auden, "never doubting/That for all his faults he is loved". This is not a positive image of one held firmly in the knowledge of unconditional love, but of one whose feeling of possessing this love

¹ Alan Jacobs, "Auden and the Limits of Poetry", in *First Things*, August/September 2001, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/auden-and-the-limits-of-poetry-10>.

as his due only enhances his self-indulgence. He seems connected, either implicitly or directly, to the “child’s wish/To receive more attention than his brothers”, a statement which again echoes the “crude...wish” which “Craves what it cannot have/Not universal love/But to be loved alone”. To love universally, we have to forget ourselves; we have to accept that we are part of humanity, that “no-one exists alone”. We also have to recognise our failure to love one another, and to realise that this failure is more than a few moments of indiscretion but an “error bred in the bone”.

Perhaps one of the flaws in Auden’s theology lies in his apparent belief that the failure to love is the most grievous of human sins. Yet it seems to point to deeper problems than simply whether or not we love. If we are unable to love others, it demonstrates our selfishness, our greed; many other sins follow from there. Auden seems reluctant at times to confront God Himself and to consider man’s relationship to Him. God is more implied than present in “The Shield of Achilles” and, in “Friday’s Child”, doubt hangs unresolved in a suitably Kierkegaardian manner:

*All proofs or disproofs that we tender
Of His existence are returned
Unopened to the sender.*

Yet at other times he offers wonderful calls to encounter a God who gives us the only life that is truly life. The closing stanza of *For the Time Being* is perhaps the best example of this:

*He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.*

Humanity, it seems, forever skirts around the fringes of the God who is truly “Life”. This failure to confront Him equates also to a failure to be truly ourselves. Humans are not humans unless they know what it is to be the image-bearers of this perfect God.

III.

*In so far as we look forward
To death as a fact, no doubt we are right: But if
Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead,
These modifications of matter into
Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains,*

*Made solely for pleasure, make a further point:
The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,
Having nothing to hide.*
(W.H. Auden, "In Praise of Limestone")

When I used to teach Auden to my Year 12s in my first few years as a Literature teacher, I would do my best to express the Christian ideas at the heart of much of his work to my Government-school students who, generally, had little or no idea what he was talking about. One of the ideas which we found appearing in a number of the poems was of the resurrection of the dead, an idea which I had tried once to explain to them through John Donne's sonnet, "Death be not proud". I had failed miserably then, and it was with a degree of trepidation that, later in my second year as a teacher, I confronted human sin and the resurrection as they appeared in "Under Sirius" and "In Praise of Limestone".

The task was made all the harder by the fact that each poem is highly complex, with or without a knowledge of Christian doctrine. Readers of "Under Sirius" are invariably stumped by its opening line, "Yes, these are the dog-days, Fortunatus", which is largely incomprehensible to anyone but the initiated. Likewise, "In Praise of Limestone", one of the most complex modern examples of a metaphysical conceit, freely associates limestone with anything ranging from human inconstancy and selfishness, a human body or eternity running silently and constantly beneath the present. Extending to three pages of particularly dense verse, "In Praise of Limestone" begins with an examination of the types of people who are drawn to limestone landscapes like Ischia in Italy where Auden lived at the time, moving through caverns and rock-pools to find images which suggest anything from a self-absorbed son to a dictator, a pimp, a fraudulent jeweler or even an athlete. Beautiful though the poem undoubtedly is, it is only at its end that it begins to make some degree of sense: limestone, Auden suggests, is such a versatile metaphor because it is in its very self versatile. It "dissolves in water" and can be reshaped into any number of objects or formations.

For this reason, limestone seems also to be something of a metaphor for resurrection; our present reality is changeable, impermanent, and false, where the reality yet to be revealed runs permanently beneath it all. Unable to see the life to come, we can only imagine it based upon what we see, and what we see is often broken and corrupt. We remember the "ragged urchin" of "The Shield of Achilles" when we read what Auden offers as a tentative possibility: "*if*/Sins can be forgiven, *if* bodies rise from the dead..." Where "The Shield of Achilles" only showed the sin and the death, "In Praise of Limestone" uses the impermanence of the physical world to signal

something deeper: that there is the potential in all of this for a purer alternative, one hinted at in the “murmur[ing]/Of underground streams” and the shifting nature of “a limestone landscape”. That it is only hinted at makes it, again, all the more powerful. The reader has been drawn all along into the limestone landscape Auden describes; now the reader is drawn too into a longing for eternity.

When, as a young writer driven back to Christianity by the horrors of war, Auden confronted the reasons behind these horrors, he declared something of his project as a poet – a project which was seemed simultaneously powerless to change evil yet drew its hope from the mere act of confronting it: “All I have is a voice/To undo the folded lie.” What was the folded lie? For Auden it enfolded many things, in particular the “lie of Authority/Whose buildings grope the sky” and the craving for individual attention, the love of self. That same lie seems to be found in the brains of those in “Under Sirius” for “whom these dull dog days/Between event seem crowned with olive/And golden with self-praise”: that is to say, that many people can see divine judgment all around them and not notice it at all, being so trapped by the “folded lie” that they are altogether unaware of the reality of themselves.

Perhaps Auden was not himself as aware of the “folded lie” as he thought he was; perhaps he needed to depend more upon God’s transforming grace than upon his own “voice” and its capacity to “undo” that lie. Yet he exposed the lie more pointedly than many other poets of his generation, and his work echoes still because of that.