Reading and Writing through Auden

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Speech, Voice and Parable

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PREFACE

This book is based upon a dissertation I wrote in 2016, in fulfilment of my PhD dissertation for the University of Essex. Of course, since then, I have made substantial revisions, completely rewriting several of the chapters while reducing the length of others, absorbing and building on new scholarship in the field, and speaking more directly and broadly to contemporary literary concerns. The book consists of three main components: firstly, close readings and critical analyses of four major poetical works by W.H. Auden—"The Watershed," *The Sea and the Mirror,* "New Year Letter," and "In Time of War"; secondly, ten semi-informal letters addressed to W.H. Auden; and thirdly, a serial poem consisting of short and long poems based on the speeches of the public figure, Barack Obama. The book proposes a creative writing discipline founded on the productive and intensive exchange between reading and writing poetry, and reflection through letter writing. The chapters of critical analysis argue the following: firstly, that through his idiosyncratic handling of syntax and voice in poems like "The Watershed," Auden introduced a new element of the uncanny into English poetry and rewrote poetic tradition; secondly, that in *The Sea and the Mirror*, Auden re-evaluated his poetics and altered his poetic voice in response to a new reading public; thirdly, that in the "New Year Letter," Auden uses tone to expand the range of his poetic voice; and fourthly, that in the sonnet sequence "In Time of War," Auden uses parable to combine lyric and narrative elements in order to universalise the Sino-Japanese War. Some of the issues raised in the chapters of critical analysis, such as poetic truth, poetic voice, the lyric subject, and parabolic writing, are elaborated on in the letters to W.H. Auden. Finally, the Serial Poem presents 74 short and long poems produced using appropriative writing procedures. The idea that runs through all parts of this book is that speech, voice, and parable are crucial elements in the poetic practice of W.H. Auden, and that close attention to these three elements through all stages of this book—critical reading and writing, letter writing, and creative writing—has contributed to the development of a rich and productive poetic writing practice.

INTRODUCTION

This book first began with a thesis proposal to produce a collection of 30-40 short and long poems based on a poetics that combined a regionalist and cosmopolitan rhetoric. For the research component of my thesis, I decided to examine the poetry and critical writings of W.H. Auden. At a fairly early stage, I had an intuitive sense that the example of Auden's trans-cultural and cosmopolitan rhetoric would give me a better understanding of the theoretical and practical components that would be needed for the successful completion of a creative writing project in poetry. I admired the poetry he had written throughout the 1930s during his English years, when he constructed a public profile as a poet of the left. But after his immigration to the United States, he somehow managed to re-invent himself and his poetics and maintain his role as a public poet. I wanted to understand how Auden had achieved this change and to what degree it was necessary for the continued development of his poetic identity. Of course, his move to America had attracted criticism; many critics accused him of abandoning his audience, as well as the native idiom and concerns he shared with that audience, by adopting a cosmopolitan rhetoric. In the early stages of this research project, I carefully considered the validity of these criticisms.

As I progressed with my close reading of and my writing about Auden, I got a better understanding of the direction I would be taking with the creative component of this thesis. Originally, I had wanted to find a poetic medium that would give me the scope to address personal themes of a confessional nature and broader social, historical, and cultural themes. I also wanted a medium that would reflect my experiences travelling and living in different parts of the world. From an early stage, I was committed to a writing process that involved a recursive discipline of intensive reading, reflection, and writing. About two years into my studies, I came across a book containing the lectures of the San Francisco poet, Jack Spicer. I was intrigued by his poetic practice of "dictation" and his metaphor of the poet as a wireless receiver receiving transmissions from "aliens" or outside presences. I was inspired by Spicer's example to envisage Auden as my mentor and begin writing a series of letters to him. Over a period of time, the letters formed an important part of my creative project. Additionally, I developed an interest in Conceptual Poetry writing procedures.

Writing about Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* and then writing a follow-up letter to Auden about the lyric voice gave me a better sense of the importance of voice and tone in Auden's poetics. These aspects of poetry also had a decisive influence on my conception of my creative writing project. Finding my own lyric voice, I discovered, would not solely be answered through the cultivation of my own unique voice expressing my own unique experiences. My lyric voice could also be achieved through liberating myself from the bottomless void of my own self (the "lyrical *moi,"* as Derek Walcott once called it).[1] I had been fascinated by the magniloquent, somewhat hollow rhetoric of the then U.S. President Barack Obama (and indeed of politicians in general). I now realised that I wanted to write about him, and that I could use his speeches and his very words as the media with which to address public issues while also projecting my own personal concerns, without the necessity to write confessional poetry. Both my research and critical writing about W.H. Auden and my own creative writing had now acquired much more focus. I knew which poems of Auden I needed to read and analyse, and I knew how I needed to go about writing the poems of my creative project. Eventually, I produced 74 poems for a poetry sequence which I titled "Barack Hussein Obama: A Serial Poem."

The basic conceptual assumption underlying this book is the notion of writing as an intensively reflective and recursive process. The organisation of this book's chapters is based on this principle. It demonstrates the emergence of my creative writing poetry project through a productive exchange between intensive reading, close critical analysis, letter writing, and poetry writing. In effect, the chapters depict a seven-year-long conversation—between W.H. Auden, other poets, and me—that has resulted in the production of "Barack Hussein Obama: A Serial Poem."

The book is divided into ten chapters. My first chapter—"Letters to a Dead, White Male Poet: Literary Correspondence and Poetic Self-Mentorship"—introduces the recursive reading and writing approach I have adopted, incited by the example of Jack Spicer. I present a close reading of Auden's poem "The Watershed."

The second chapter consists of Letters 1 and 2 to my mentor, W.H. Auden. In Letter 1, I discuss the ideas in his essay "The Poet and the City." I relate these ideas to my creative concerns, and I begin to outline the dictation poetic practice that I adapted and modified from Jack Spicer. In Letter 2, meanwhile, I take issue with Auden's ideas about poetic crea-

[1] "Derek Walcott with Glyn Maxwell," Lannan Foundation, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 20 Nov. 2002. Accessed online at http://www.lannan.org/events/derek-walcott-with-glyn-maxwell

tion and "truth" in his two essays titled "Writing." I argue that poetic truth is fundamentally different in kind from factual truth.

In my third chapter—"'The Only Subject that You Have': Poetic Voice, Audience, and Community in *The Sea and the Mirror*"—I argue that Auden's arrival in America seems to have provoked him into adopting multiple voices and a new, disenchanted poetics in order to create a new public of readers for himself.

My fourth chapter consists of Letters 3, 4, and 5 to Auden. In Letter 3, I discuss Auden's 1956 lecture "Making, Knowing and Judging," in which he presents an account of how a poet transforms himself into a poet. I disagree with his reading of Coleridge's concepts of the Primary and Secondary Imaginations, and I present the reasons why Coleridge's concept of imagination is relevant to poetry writing today. In Letter 4, I discuss Christopher Nealon's book *The Matter of Capital* and its description of Auden's camp tone, combining high and low rhetorical styles. I also introduce my plan to appropriate large parts of the life and career of Barack Obama. In Letter 5, I discuss some of the complexities surrounding the lyric subject in poetry, and I refute what I consider to be Sam Ladkin's restrictive ideas about the topic.

My fifth chapter—"'Upon Our Sense of Style:' 'New Year Letter' and Catastrophe"—argues that Auden's ostensibly neo-classical poem, "New Year Letter," through its camp, many-levelled tone as well as its many discontinuities, contradictions, and points of tension, forces his readers to take a much more active role in constructing a coherent reading of the poem.

My sixth chapter presents my Letters 6, 7, and 8 to Auden. In Letter 6, I argue that the "uncreative" writing methods of Conceptual poets present interesting new ways of bringing lyricism back to poetry. In Letter 7, I argue that although "uncreative writing" procedures have some practical benefits for contemporary poets they seem to reflect the rather disjointed aesthetic standards of the present times. In Letter 8, I briefly state the basic principles guiding the writing procedures I adopted to compose my serial poem.

In my seventh chapter—"'The Mountains of Our Choice:' *Journey to a War*"—I present a defence of Auden's sonnet sequence "In Time of War." I argue that it deserves recognition for its brilliant use of parable to combine lyric and narrative elements.

My eighth chapter presents Letters 9 and 10 to Auden. In Letter 9, I explain that "In Time of War" was the major poetic influence in the composition of my serial poem because of its use of parable. In Letter 10, I consider Auden's uprooted, trans-national identity and the problems such an identity seems to pose for the creation of a lyric subject. In contrast,

Derek Walcott's autobiographical poem *Another Life* presents a contemporary approach to the problem of the lyric subject and displays some of the advantages of home and poetic rootedness. I relate the issues of poetic rootedness and poetic *rootlessness* to my own poetic practice.

In my ninth chapter, I present my poetic sequence. In my tenth and final chapter, I present a commentary on my creative writing poetry project and my critical reading and writing project.

The ordering of the chapters in this book is not meant to be a chronological account of Auden's poetic work. It instead reflects the development of my own thematic concerns and my increasing understanding of my personal poetics and goals. The chapters are arranged in such a way as to highlight the gradual stages by which this creative writing project was brought to a successful completion.

CHAPTER ONE

LETTERS TO A DEAD, WHITE MALE POET: LITERARY CORRESPONDENCE AND POETIC SELF-MENTORSHIP

In the field of creative writing, mentorship can be defined as the learning and development partnership between a more experienced, knowledgeable, and accomplished writer—the mentor—and an aspirant to that mentor's knowledge —the protégé. Mentorship is a crucial aspect of a poet's formation of a writing identity and sense of writing mission. In his classic book on creative writing *The Triggering Town*, the poet and teacher Richard Hugo explains the indispensability of the mentor or creative-writing teacher for the developing poet: "Writing is hard and writers need help. Pound was a creative-writing teacher for Eliot, Williams, Hemingway, and Yeats. Yeats, by Pound's admission, was Pound's creative-writing teacher in return."[1]

A mentoring relationship can be a key component of the creative writing process, especially in terms of completing a creative project. But what if the creative writing degree is pursued via distance learning? If a creative writing student does not live in proximity to familiar centres of learning and literary production, how readily can he or she lay claim to the writing mentorship deemed essential to a poet's development? Is poetry mentorship even possible under distance learning conditions?

I completed my part-time PhD in Creative Writing and English at the University of Essex in Great Britain via distance learning while employed at a college in the Arabian Gulf. During my completion of that degree, I couldn't count on the guidance of a mentor, nor did I have access to the traditional peer support networks common in PhD programmes and seen as vital to student success.

However, my situation as a distance learning student may not have been quite as anomalous as it at first appears. The isolation of my circum-

[1] *The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing* (W. W. Norton, 1979), 53-54.

stances could be looked upon as merely a more extreme variation of the experience that is common for many emergent writers in the West today: the sense of being disconnected from a tradition of apprenticeship, from a literary culture which values a thorough grounding in the fundamentals of prosody, and from a vital connection to a coherent tradition of literary history and poetic forms. Additionally, we live in a Western culture which has been radically transformed by technology, and which—through the widespread adoption of sceptical postmodernist ideological stances—has increasingly questioned and undermined the legitimacy of its own historical and cultural traditions.

In his essay "The Poet and the City," Auden points out the lack of educational institutions for the systematic training of contemporary poets: "In our culture a would-be poet has to educate himself; he may be in the position to go to a first-class school and university, but such places can only contribute to his poetic education by accident, not by design."[2]

The development of what Auden describes as the "inner examiner,"[3] poetic conscience, or put more simply, "taste"—the poet's internal sense of when he has written a good poem or a bad one—comes about through his intensive exposure to poetry's variety of forms and moods. But as Auden suggests, the haphazard nature of the contemporary would-be poet's education is detrimental to the development of this critical aesthetic faculty: "a good deal of modern poetry; even some of the best, shows just that uncertainty of taste, crankiness and egoism which self-educated people so often exhibit."[4]

To address this *terra incognita* of my own poetic education and to provide myself with both the creative and critical scaffolding needed to generate a body of poems for the completion of my creative project, I adopted a deliberate strategy of self-mentorship. Auden had famously described Thomas Hardy as his "poetical father," and through close reading and imitation of the older poet had schooled himself in poetic craft and vision. In my strategy of self-mentorship, I sought to emulate Auden's example by adopting him as my own sort of "poetical father."

Crucially, however, I was inspired by the writings of the San Francisco poet Jack Spicer to envisage Auden as my mentor and write a series of letters to him. The imaginary relationship I developed with Auden through this correspondence allowed me to generate a highly productive exchange

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[2] *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, (1962; reis., Vintage International, 1989), 76.

[3] Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging," in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays,* (1956; reis., Vintage International, 1989), 33.

[4] "The Poet and the City," 76.

of critical and creative modes of thought as I explored complex questions of poetics and produced the poems of my creative project.

I discovered the poetry and ideas of the San Francisco poet Jack Spicer about two years into my studies. In his lectures, Spicer describes the act of poetry as "dictation," with the poet serving as a "medium" for outside presences, "Martians," or higher forces which dictate his best work.[5] Spicer claimed that the series of poems he wrote in his book *The Holy Grail* were all dictated to him, without him knowing their form, ideas or overall structure beforehand. He surrendered all control of the poems' composition. The poet, according to Spicer, is just the "receiver," relaying the message of an outside power.

He claimed that the imitations and translations in his 1957 book *After Lorca* had been dictated to him by Garcia Lorca or some mysterious outside force. I knew that Spicer's conceit had an ancient pedigree within the tradition of Western poetry, that the ancient Greeks called Spicer's poetic dictation "substitution"—displacing the poet as a stable subject with something beyond his own experience. I was aware that Spicer's method shared some slight similarities with the automatic writing experiments of W.B. Yeats. But the magical, cult-like elements of his practice did not interest me in the least. Instead, I focused on his evocation of an imaginary correspondence and collaboration with the dead poet Garcia Lorca and Spicer's metaphor of the poet as a wireless receiving transmissions from "aliens" or outside forces. I was inspired by these and the ancient Greek concept of substitution to envisage Auden as my mentor, and I began writing a series of letters to him. Over time, my letters to Auden, my imaginary mentor, formed an important and productive part of my creative writing project.

But how would it be possible, some might ask, to establish a learning and development partnership of mentorship with a long-dead poet? Can mentorship be conceived on such terms? In order to answer such questions, we need to explore what literary mentorship is. The idea of mentoring within business, education, and other fields has become so commonplace that it is now taken for granted. As Anthony W. Lee states, most people would agree that mentoring "refers to a relationship between an older and a younger person, in which the elder imparts to the younger one his or her greater experience, knowledge, and expertise."[6] Most of us can recognise the importance and value of such mentoring relationships. How-

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[5] *The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer,* (Wesleyan U P, 1998), 54.

[6] "Authority and Influence in Eighteenth-Century British Literary Mentoring," in *Mentoring in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture,* ed. Anthony W. Lee (Ashgate, 2010), 2.

ever, mentorship is a much more complicated process than it at first appears. As Lee points out, mentoring "can involve relationships in which the parties don't meet, as in symbolic mentoring."[7] Moreover, mentoring may even go far beyond merely personal exchanges: "it can involve wholly non personal relationships, as in intertextual relationships among books; it can involve exchanges between an entire culture and an individual, and vice versa."[8]

Viewed from this widened perspective, the mentorship which I imagined between myself and W.H. Auden is every bit as valid and tenable as more conventional forms of mentoring. Indeed, given the pervasiveness of mentoring and literary influence within every literary relationship and in every cultural period, my proposal of an imaginary mentoring correspondence is one that is perfectly legitimate.

The term "mentoring" is commonly understood to derive from the word "mentor" and its appellative use in the ancient Greek proper name Μέντωρ. Mentor, of course, was the name of the Ithacan noble in the *Odyssey* whose identity the goddess Athena adopted in order to serve as the guide and advisor of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus. The name Mentor, therefore, is synonymous with an experienced and trusted counsellor.

Interestingly, however, Lee points out that it was the 17th century French political and educational theorist and poet François Fénelon, not Homer, who was responsible for the adoption of the term "mentor" and its denotation into general English.[9] Fénelon's hugely popular and influential novel *Télémaque* presents the adventures of Telemachus in his search for his father while being guided by Mentor. The didactic novel was widely understood at the time to be a critique of the despotic misrule of Louis XIV. While centred on Telemachus' adventures, the book's true hero is Mentor, the personification of wise, humane, and trustworthy counsel.

According to Lee, all mentoring relationships, no matter what their variation—person-to-person, intertextual, or intercultural—"can be reduced to two definitive polarities: the presence of authority and the presence of influence."[10] The mentor figure is not merely an authority figure, they are *obedient* to authority; that is, they are possessed by the traditions and authority that they represent. The mentor figure's authority is derived from their depth of experience and the range of skills he or she has mastered within a specific tradition. This is the basis of the legacy they will pass on to the protégé. But the mentor acts from *within* that tradition and

[7] Lee, 2.
[8] Lee, 2.
[9] Lee, 6.
[10] Lee, 2.

ensures the continuance of the tradition by transferring the fruits of their knowledge and experience to their protégé. For example, if we put W.H. Auden within this mentorship framework, we can recognise the poet as both a highly skilled and knowledgeable individual literary talent *as well as* an instrument of the rich tradition of literature to which he belongs.

"We are lived by powers we pretend to understand," Auden declares in his 1939 elegy "In Memory of Ernst Toller," (*CP* 248). In this line, he places individual human life within the larger envelope of history, society, and ideas. He is acknowledging the powerful social, historical and ideological forces which help to circumscribe our lives and determine our characters. Yet from the perspective of mentoring, the line also serves to remind us of the author's relationship to the larger culture and the forces underpinning this culture.[11] As poet and mentor, Auden is an authority figure, but his authority is circumscribed and at the same time enabled by larger social, historical, cultural, and ideological forces contained within the tradition he embodies. Meanwhile, the protégé, as the reader of the mentor's texts and recipient of the mentor's authority, absorbs the forces which have both circumscribed and enabled his mentor.

As Lee puts it, influence operates "both at the interpersonal level—[in] an exchange between mentor and protégé—and also at the impersonal level of textual relationship."[12] Or, to put it another way, the essence of the mentoring relationship is the "progressive moderation of one mind by another."[13] In tracing the many forms that a mentor's influence on a protégé may take, we may witness layers of socio-cultural, psychological, as well as textual transformations within the recipient of the mentor's authority.

Lee reminds us of yet another kind of mentoring influence that exists at the level of pure language: this process of influence is intertextuality. Just like the psychological and ideological relationships within the culture and tradition, intertextuality is governed by a larger authority: "the impersonal structure of linguistic possibility and signification."[14] Auden's well-known "Poem III" in *Poems* of 1928 (the poem which he later titled "The Watershed") presents a good example of the workings of intertextuality, that is, the way in which the words, structure, and ideas of a text written by an earlier, literary master influence the texts written by writers who come later. The intertextual relationship between Auden's poem and the English poetic tradition serves to circumscribe the threshold for experimentation with poetic elements. The impersonal structure of linguistic possibility and

[11] Lee, 3.
[12] Lee, 4.
[13] Lee, 10.
[14] Lee, 4.

signification impose constraints upon the range of stylistic and linguistic variations as well as upon what can be thematically expressed by the poet. Yet this intertextual framework simultaneously opens up startling new thresholds of linguistic risk and thematic meanings.

The poem opens with our seeming invitation to witness a setting and situation made familiar to us from Romantic poetry: a speaker's relationship with nature. The poem begins with what seems like a question—"Who stands, the crux left of the watershed…"—and then continues with a detailed description in iambic pentameter of a decayed industrial landscape looked upon from on high:

> Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,
> On the wet road between the chafing grass
> Below him sees dismantled washing-floors,
> Snatches of tramline running to a wood,
> An industry already comatose,
> Yet sparsely living. A ramshackle engine
> At Cashwell raises water; for ten years
> It lay in flooded workings until this,
> Its latter office, grudgingly performed.
> And, further, here and there, though many dead
> Lie under the poor soil, some acts are chosen,
> Taken from recent winters; two there were
> Cleaned out a damaged shaft by hand, clutching
> The winch a gale would tear them from; one died
> During a storm, the fells impassable,
> Not at his village, but in wooden shape
> Through long abandoned levels nosed his way
> And in his final valley went to ground.
>
> Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,
> Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:
> This land, cut off, will not communicate,
> Be no accessory content to one
> Aimless for faces rather there than here.
> Beams from your car may cross a bedroom wall,
> They wake no sleeper; you may hear the wind
> Arriving driven from the ignorant sea
> To hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm
> Where sap unbaffled rises, being spring;
> But seldom this. Near you, taller than the grass,
> Ears poise before decision, scenting danger. (EA 22)

Interestingly, the description in the first five lines does not merely conjoin abstract and concrete words; it inserts the abstraction—*industry*—within a

concrete context and personifies it. Subsequently, the speaker animates the landscape further by launching into a sombre narrative: "for ten years/ It lay in flooded workings until this…" (*EA* 22). The speaker tells of a miner's death: "one died/ During a storm, the fells impassable,/ Not at his village, but in wooden shape/ Through long abandoned levels nosed his way/ And in his final valley went to ground" (*EA* 22). In this bleak and remote landscape, the miner dies a lonely death.

Afterwards, there is a break between the stanzas, and the poem seems to lurch into a more disturbing direction. Instead of an intimation of understanding or insight into this bleak landscape, the speaker seems to explicitly spurn his addressee and the possibility of understanding or communing with this natural scene: "Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,/ Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:/ This land, cut off, will not communicate…" (*EA* 22). As we read this passage, it seems only reasonable to identify the "Stranger" as the addressee. But then, why would the speaker tell the person being addressed to "Go home"? We know from the biographies of the young Auden's fascinated celebration of lead mines and the decaying relics of Britain's industrial North.[15] Up until the second stanza, the poem seems to be an interesting and skilful rendering of this preoccupation. Moreover, the poem echoes the landscapes of Hardy and the meditative contemplation of nature found in Wordsworth.

In his discussion of mentoring, Lee explains the powerful influence that certain Ur-texts or prototypical examples of certain poetic genres and themes can have on the writing of later texts. "Just as each protégé," Lee writes, "usually has a small number of key mentors—perhaps a single primary one—so too is each text sponsored by one or more crucially significant Ur-texts."[16] The texts of Auden's own mentors—Hardy and Wordsworth—seem to operate as "Poem III's" Ur-texts. "Poem III" can, in fact, be seen as a revisionary rewriting of the Hardy and Wordsworth texts.

The Auden poem has a trace of the eerie, speculation about nature found in Hardy's "Nature's Questioning" ("When I look forth at dawning, pool,/ Field, flock, and lonely tree,/ All seem to look at me…").[17] At the same time, much as in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," there is a sense of a retreat into and profound communion with nature:

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[15] See Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (George Allen and Unwin, 1981), 72; and Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (Heinemann, 1995), 17.
[16] Lee, 4.
[17] Thomas Hardy, "Nature's Questioning," *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, (Harper, 1898), 42.

> Five years have past; five summers, with the length
> Of five long winters! and again I hear
> These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
> With a soft inland murmur. Once again
> Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
> That on a wild secluded scene impress
> Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
> The landscape with the quiet of the sky.[18]

The second stanza of "Poem III" audaciously turns away from the temptation of following these stylistic directions of Hardy and Wordsworth, and allows us a glimpse into Auden's originality, also hinting at the risk he took in swerving away from expectation.

This bold move into the unknown makes possible further, more shocking risks. The second stanza continues the rejection of its addressee and all that this person seems to represent: "This land, cut off, will not communicate,/ Be no accessory content to one/ Aimless for faces rather there than here." There has been an earlier condemnation of the addressee—"proud of your young stock" (*EA* 22). It is all too easy to identify the addressee as a young bourgeois, a member of the stock holding, English, metropolitan privileged classes out for a jaunt in the countryside.[19]

From this initial close reading, we can already begin to recognise the extent to which the poem is incubated within the words, structure, figurative language, settings, narratives, and poetic personae of the Ur-texts of Auden's mentors, Hardy and Wordsworth. Yet as well as attempting to define and exemplify the intertextuality that Lee speaks of, it is also necessary to examine the nature of this poetic close reading. Such an examination will deepen our understanding of what the protégé gains from the pivotal encounter with the Ur-texts of the mentors.

As Auden makes clear in his 1950 lecture "Making, Knowing and Judging," close reading was an important part of the process by which he transformed himself from apprentice to full-fledged poet. While closely reading through the work of his poetic master and progressing in his apprenticeship, Auden made deliberate artistic choices. Based on the material evidence of his poetic style, we can reverse-engineer a partial understanding of the lessons he likely learned from his poetic mentors: clearly, he learned much about the possibilities of lyric narrative, the creation of sustained poetic tension through the detailing of specific objects and natu-

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[18] "Lines: Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," *Lyrical Ballads* (1798; Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 241.
[19] Carpenter, 73.

ral phenomena, the suggestion of the uncanny in nature, and the power of challenging readers' expectations.

But we can never really retrace the strange pathways by which Auden discovered his unique and independent voice. Any insights into his poetic methods or the technical challenges he would have had to overcome can only be garnered indirectly through Auden's disconnected commentary dispersed throughout his meandering account of his beginnings as a poet. My close reading of "Poem III" and the other works of Auden's that make up this book is merely an approximation of the kind of focused, careful, and attentive reading Auden would himself have had to practise when confronting the poetic sensibility of his first masters.

In the first of his *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke gently chides the young poet who had sent him some poems for critique. The older poet tells the young man, "your voices have no style of their own."[20] Although Rilke softens the blow by reassuring the young poet that his poems contain the "silent and hidden beginnings of something personal," his final judgement is clear and unambiguous: "the poems are not yet anything in themselves, nor yet anything independent."[21]

Auden's case as the young author of "Poem III," who would go on to compose many other accomplished poems, is clearly very different. Already in "Poem III" we can recognise some of the main elements of his ripened poetic style of the 1930s: a conceptual diction, a flat, unemotive syllable sound, the use of direct statements in place of figurative language, and ambiguous syntax derived partly from alliterative Anglo-Saxon verse. However, the alchemical process by which Auden's close reading and imitations allowed him to grow "through [his] development quietly and seriously,"[22] as Rilke would have put it, is unknown to us. That his manner of close reading was very different in aim from that practised by the literary critic or academic scholar Auden makes clear in "Making, Knowing and Judging":

> Speaking for myself, the questions which interest me most when reading a poem are two. The first is technical: 'Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work? The second is, in the broadest sense, moral: 'What kind of a guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or the good

[20] *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Reginald Snell, in *Rilke: Poems*, (1945; reis., Everymans Library, 1996), 216.
[21] Rilke, 216.
[22] Rilke, 216.

> place? His notion of the Evil One? What does he conceal from the reader? What does he conceal even from himself?[23]

The manner of reading that Auden is delineating here *is* a form of close reading. In literary criticism, close reading refers to the sustained and careful granular analysis and interpretation of literary texts, focusing on their structure, syntax, ordering of ideas, and the individual words which, alone or in combination, convey those ideas. Alan Jacobs describes close reading as "disciplined attentiveness" and a basic and necessary skill in the study of literature. It is a skill which is basic and necessary, Jacobs asserts, because "it teaches people that easy judgments made on the basis of superficial acquaintance with a text are worthless."[24]

Auden's method of close reading takes on board much of the attentive critical close reading that Jacobs describes, but unlike critical close reading its aim is *not* to elucidate. It has a much different goal, and it therefore follows a divergent path. After analysing the "verbal contraption" of the poem, it asks, "What type of guy inhabits this? What is his notion of the good place?" These are the questions of a consciousness and sensibility attuned to the world-making possibilities of poetry. This is a sensibility which wants to discover in a poem what works and what can be used or emulated. This is a searching, curious, and assimilative sensibility. And it wants to know who it is in relation to the poem's world. "Is this a world I can inhabit?" it asks. "Could I make a poem that complements the world of this poem, or conversely, a world that could oppose it?"

Each of these questions is implied by the nature of interest Auden ascribes to himself as a poet when reading a poem. They serve as models and guides to the kind of close reading I will be practising in my imaginary correspondence with Auden and my discussion of his poems. Of course, some people will inevitably ask, "How is the practice that you are advocating distinguishable from conventional critical close reading?"

"Surely," these doubters will persist, "your reading dialogue with Auden and his texts is merely a form of close reading that has been practised since the time of St. Augustine."

But as I noted of Auden's close reading, my goal is quite different from that of traditional close reading. The type of close reading he ascribes to poets and which I would like to emulate is far more proactive than reactive. My reading and correspondence seek an understanding of the kinds of stylistic choices Auden made, the world he proposes, and his very notion

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[23] "Making, Knowing and Judging," 50-51.

[24] "About close reading," *Text Patterns*, *The New Atlantis*, October 13, 2009 (https://www.thenewatlantis.com/text-patterns/about-close-reading).

of the "good place." Ultimately, I want to discover who I am in relation to Auden's poetic world and to what extent, if at all, this world can be made amenable to my needs.

And so, when we return to "Poem III," it becomes increasingly obvious to us that from its very beginning the poem is marked by indirection and ambiguity in its diction and in the structure of its syntax. These qualities make the identity of the poem's addressee highly uncertain, and they inform us of the enigmatic nature of Auden's poetic world. The poem's addressee presumably is the person "Who stands" in the first stanza. The verb "sees" in line three connecting to the predicate "dismantled washing-floors…" and completing the poem's initial thought-unit allows us to recognise the "Who stands" as a declarative phrase. However, the parenthetical information we get before the verb—"the crux left of the watershed,/ On the wet road between the chafing grass…"—permits the opening phrase to be misread as an interrogative (*EA* 22). In fact, the entire sentence which begins the poem (stretching across almost six lines) may be seen as an example of *periphrasis.* Auden's roundabout style means that he never directly spells out who this addressee is. Moreover, when we consider the apparent grammatical incoherence of having the first stanza address an indeterminate addressee—"Who stands" and then having the second stanza address a definite "stranger," we are forced to recognise that the addressee in the first stanza may not even be identical with the addressee in the second stanza.

The indirection in the poem's language suggests crisis and risk. Rainer Emig points out that the word "crux" in the first line suggests a crossroads and a dilemma, but it may also be a verb or a direction.[25] The anthropomorphised landscape undercuts any sense of realism in the description and also serves to connote uneasiness.[26] The doomed miner perishes alone "Not at his village, but in wooden shape/ Through long abandoned levels…" (*EA* 22). And the stranger mentioned in the second stanza seems equally isolated and under threat due to his "Aimless" condition. The speaker admonishes the stranger to "Go home," but, as Emig states, that "home" is never described in the poem. So, does this "home" really exist?[27]

Moreover, there are other features of Auden's writing style which seem strange and risky. I have already hinted at the tortured and unclear syntax in the first six lines of the poem. The entire poem is characterised by an almost *un-English* fragmentation of syntax. His use of pentameter is not

[25] *Towards a Postmodern Poetics* (Macmillan Press, 2000), 12.
[26] Emig, 12.
[27] Emig, 13.

the elaborate Latinate kind used by Milton and later by Romantics, which T. S. Eliot so much deplored, but, as several critics have pointed out, has much more in common with Anglo-Saxon. Randall Jarrell, most notably, has catalogued the various linguistic peculiarities of Auden's early poetic style, many of which can be seen in operation in this poem: they include Auden's omission of conjunctions and relative pronouns, his use of normally uncoordinated elements as coordinates, his substitution of verb forms for adjectives or adverbs, his use of dangling modifiers, his wide separation of modifiers from what they modify, his frequent jumps in logic, his ellipses, and his frequent placing of abstract words into concrete contexts.[28]

We move inside the strangeness of this growing poetic world uncertain of who the speaker and addressee are, unsettled from its very opening line, sharing the vantage point of the addressee looking down upon a blighted landscape, invited to engage imaginatively with the pathos of a miner's lonely death. And yet, just at that moment, at the end of the first stanza that seems to have unveiled to us the tragic essence of that landscape, the poem unsettles us more profoundly by hinting that all communication, all understanding is, in fact, impossible.

The word "Stranger" is repeated, as if to emphasise the addressee's estrangement from this landscape. The equivocation between declaration and interrogation at the poem's opening as well as the periphrasis in the evocation of the addressee make possible another reading in which the addressee is none other than the young, metropolitan poet himself, proud of his "stock" of words and images, yet still "frustrate and vexed" by the stubborn landscape of this poem.

However, as we continue our progress through the poem's dislocating syntactical structures, we gradually recognise our own position as "frustrate and vexed." Once more it is the ambiguity created by periphrasis which makes this identification or misidentification possible: "This land … will not communicate,/ Be no accessory content to one/ Aimless for faces rather there than here" (*EA* 22).

Moving inside Auden's growing poem, attuned to the disruptive and unsettling landscape of this poetic world, reminded that we are, in fact, cut off from what we have experienced, accused of not even being interested in this landscape, we are forced to realise that we are in border country, the frontier of the unknown. And it is Auden's shaping of this unfamiliar poetic landscape through the conscious stylistic choices he has made that allows us to reach the threshold of this frontier.

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[28] *The Third Book of Criticism* (Faber & Faber, 1975), 132-135.

The addressee may hear the wind driven across the "ignorant sea", but the speaker announces, "seldom this." Again, there is uncertainty: what does the word "this" refer to? The poem's tangled syntax makes it unclear. But the last two lines reveal suggestive fragments: "Ears poise before decision, scenting danger" (*EA* 22). The lines work as a synecdochic symbol— perhaps the ears standing for some kind of alert wild animal. But might this also be an evocation of a threat to the addressee and to the natural scene? At the same time, the image amounts to a further accusation of the addressee/reader whose world, consciousness, and efforts to understand the reality of the natural landscape, the last line hints, may also pose a mortal threat to it.

Throughout this poem about borderlines, Auden has used to potent effect the borderline between poetic line and sentence. In poetry, we know that sentences typically work against the poetic line. Some sentences in poetry take just one line to say; and a single line may, in fact, contain two sentences. However, there are many occasions when more than one line is needed to complete a thought. As the American poet and critic Mary Kinzie states, "When the line ends before the sentence does, we can say that the threshold of the line is in tension with that of the sentence. In cases of such tension, the line can provide a partial or temporary meaning or suggestion that is at odds with the meaning completed."[29] Kinzie calls these provisional meanings before moving off the line "half-meanings." She explains that the "half-meanings of lines that run on would be in tension with the whole meaning that emerges when the sentence has come to its end."[30] In "Poem III," Auden uses such half-meanings to create a compelling sense of ambiguity and unsettlement.

We have recognised some of the risks the young poet Auden has taken through his stylistic choices. They amount to his refusal to honour time-sanctioned codes and expectations in poetic form and content, the breaching of the decorum between poet and audience in the stern note of accusation he adopts, and a denial of the natural relations between self and reality. Auden has presented a revisionary rewriting of poetic tradition.

What we recognise here is the consolidation of a singular style—that is, an unusual way of patterning syntax and language—Auden's confident delineation of his new and uncharted border terrain, and his surprised discovery of the unique preoccupations and themes which inhabit it— the doomed Hero, homelessness, the Quest, alienation, and loneliness. Auden's early poetry, represented by "Poem III," has revised our understand-

[29] *A Poet's Guide to Poetry*, (University of Chicago P, 1999), 49.
[30] Kinzie, 49.

ing of poetic tradition and, by doing so, has expanded the scope of what is possible within the world of a poem and our sense of what a poem can do.

With its constant periphrasis, its jarring, dislocated syntax, the ambiguity surrounding its speaker, its unsettling landscape, and disavowal of relationship with that same landscape, "Poem III" seems to put in question notions of identity and belonging—to a place, history, and tradition. The poem's Anglo-Saxon syntax, its provocative questions, and ambiguous turns charismatically reshaped and refashioned my outlook on what was possible in poetry. For me, this intertextual encounter opened wide vistas of traditional rhetoric and associations, and it also unveiled an uncanny threshold to new possibilities and meanings. It felt like what Lee explains about mentoring, that at one level it is a "meeting of mind and spirit."[31]

For Lee, the essence of mentoring involves the "progressive moderation of one mind by another."[32] The mentor and protégé enter a long lasting, emotionally committed bond that steadily builds in intensity, becoming ever more intimate. Operating like some magnetic force, the mentor's influence draws in the young apprentice. The relationship may sometimes feel like an irresistible, almost intoxicating attraction. At first, it is the thirst for knowledge which pulls the aspirant into the mentor's powerful orbit. But then, the growing confidences, the heady sense of having been invited into the mentor's inner sanctum of secret knowledge, and then that sensation intensifying into the aspirant's sheer delight at discovering that they share an intimate relationship with someone of such high authority and status, all of these could easily result in the complete seduction of the protégé. They capitulate, surrendering their will to the sovereignty of the mentor. In adoration, the protégé feels as if the shaping of their tastes, indeed the moulding of their very mind by the mentor is the fulfilment of their deepest desire. Eventually, the protégé completely identifies with the mentor. Even long-distance intertextual mentoring relationships, in which the parties do not physically meet, may follow a similar trajectory, with the apprentice submerging himself within the identity of the mentor. The apprentice is often willing to suppress their own personality, subjecting themselves to extreme rigours and disciplines they believe match the values and beliefs of their distant mentor.

There is clearly something profoundly alarming about mentorship's "progressive moderation of one mind by another." The fact that the term "mentor" was derived from the goddess Athena taking on the guise of its

[31] Lee, 6.
[32] Lee, 10.

Ithacan namesake suggests that mentorship can be seen as a sacred partnership. However, there are also less savoury connotations—of domination and potential abuse—that could be linked to the partnership. Lee writes of the erotic dimension in mentorship, citing a letter from Philip Dormer Stanhope, Fourth Earl Chesterfield to his son, in which he urges the boy to "make a greedy use" of his mentor, "[exhausting] him… of all his knowledge."[33] Chesterfield's language almost seems to equate the desire for knowledge with sexual appetite. This erotic dimension overlaps with Thomas Simmons's discussion of the twelfth-century cleric and philosopher Pierre Abelard's exploitative mentoring relationship with Héloïse.[34] Abelard infamously took advantage of the intimacy he shared with Héloïse as her mentor to rape her and make her his mistress. Due to the weight of power that authority, knowledge, experience, and tradition give to the mentor over the protégé, there is clearly a potential for abuse or domination in a mentoring relationship.

If we put aside the power dynamics inherent within person-to-person mentorship and look at mentoring relationships in which the parties do not meet—such as symbolic mentoring, intertextual relationships involving protégé's mentorship by books, or exchanges between a protégé and entire cultures—that potential for domination and subjugation becomes more sinister. Some critics and political activists, for example, would question the viability of a black protégé's mentoring relationship with what they see as white, European traditions and standards. For these critics and activists, Western cultural institutions, traditions, and even knowledge itself is redolent with ideological domination and power.

However, the very absolutism of such a position and its resentful, ready-made identification of knowledge, cultural institutions, and tradition with white, Western power should tip us off to the reductive, overdetermined, and facile nature of this argument. If we are to accept such a position on its own terms, then any impulse on the part of the black protégé to gain knowledge, writing competence, or enter dialogue with the cultural traditions in which he lives would be tantamount to ceding all personal agency and intellectual autonomy. It is clearly an absurd position.

While there can be an unhealthy imbalance of power in certain mentoring relationships, and while the reciprocity between mentor and protégé does not, as Simmons puts it, "imply any liberating experience for the [protégé],[35] healthy interdependent relationships are clearly the norm in

[33] Lee, 6.
[34] *Erotic Reckonings: Mastery and Apprenticeship in the Work of Poets and Lovers*, (University of Chicago P, 1994).
[35] Simmons, 15.

most mentoring relationships. Most importantly, we should remember that, despite what Simmons seems to believe, "power" is *not* the most significant aspect of most mentoring relationships. The two parties in a mentoring relationship enter that relationship for mutual benefit. As Jean Miller Baker explains, "these relationships are *based in service* to the lesser party [the protégé]."[36]

Just as Athena in the guise of Mentor did in her relationship with Telemachus, the mentor performs the role of helping the protégé emerge into full and independent personhood. In fulfilling this role, the mentor shows their worthiness as the inheritor and embodiment of tradition by serving tradition and society. This characterises even those mentoring relationships in which the parties do not meet—symbolic mentoring, intertextual mentorship by books, or exchanges between an apprentice and an entire culture. Mentorship is fundamentally concerned with the identity formation and integration of the apprentice.

Finally, I think I need to address what some might see as a glaring contradiction or irony in this discussion of my singular mentoring relationship with the dead, white male poet W.H. Auden: in alluding to Spicer's "aliens" or outside forces and identifying these as the inspiration for the mentorship I imagine myself sharing with Auden, based on an imaginary correspondence with the author, do I not open myself up to the charge of indulging in the sort of magical thinking or magical poetics which Auden deplored in his criticism?

In his article "'The Power to Enchant that Comes from Disillusion': W.H. Auden's Criticism of Magical Poetics," Matthew Mutter discusses the relatively recent upsurge of scholarly interest in magic and occultism as an approach to understanding modernist literature.[37] Mutter examines Auden's trenchant and unequivocal criticism of this impulse towards magical thinking. While Mutter's study is focused on the magical-occultist trend in modernist scholarship, his discussion could be usefully extended to contemporary scholarship and literary practice. Notions of magical poetics as supposed forms of political resistance and historical revisionism continue to fascinate some Western scholars and writers about contemporary literature. Some see magical poetics as a force working to overthrow what they imagine to be the hegemonic power in Western literature and post-Enlightenment Western rationality or as a strategy of engagement with global, non-Western paradigms.[38] Magic or enchantment through

[36] *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, 2nd ed. (Beacon Press, 1986), 4.
[37] *Journal of Modern Literature, 34*, 1, Fall 2010, 58-85.
[38] See *Technicians of the Sacred, Third Edition: A Range of Poetries from Africa, America, Asia, Europe, and Oceania*, ed. Jerome Rothenberg, (University of Cali-

literature continues to be celebrated for what is deemed to be its subversive and revolutionary potential.

Mutter describes Auden as modernism's most sophisticated and systematic critic of magic. Following Auden's lead, Mutter describes magic as an "umbrella term for general ontological, psychological and poetic orientations of other analytic categories such as occultism, spiritualism, animism, alchemy, and enchantment or neo-paganism."[39] For Auden, the idea of magic is a very serious and very problematic tendency in modern thought. His critique of magical thinking is, according to Mutter, a "critique of a problem that is a distinctly modern problem" that was prevalent during Auden's time.[40] I would argue that it is a problem which has persisted up into the current times. As Mutter puts it, magic is "Auden's name for a strategy by which poets try to recuperate the perceived existential losses of secular modernity."[41]

At the core of Auden's critique of magical thinking, Mutter argues, are the issues of longing for an end to human alienation from the material world, desiring human speech to participate in the material world, and imagining a resistance to what are deemed "imperialist aspirations" of post-Enlightenment secular knowledge systems.[42] I might add to this a more recent phenomenon observable in contemporary literature and cultural discourse: a desire for a seamless connection with a pristine and coherent tradition that is "untainted" by imagined associations with Western political and economic power.

Mutter aptly breaks down the main components of Auden's incisive analysis of the modern attraction to magical ontologies. In Auden's diagnosis, six main motivations lie at the root of this attraction: a response to the alienation of the self from material life, including the self;

- an attempt to overcome ontological dualisms—for example speech/event and soul/body;
- a desire to absorb and deny the otherness of the world;

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fornia P., 2017); Katy Bohinc, "Poetry as Magic,"*Poetry Foundation*, September 16, 2019; Rebecca Tamas, "The Songs of Hecate: Poetry and the Language of the Occult," *The White Review*, *24*, March 2019; *Spells: 21st Century Occult Poetry*, eds. Sarah Shin and Rebecca Tamas (Spiral House Editions, 2024); and Kathryn Nuernberger, "The Poetics (and Politics) of Spells," *West Branch*, December 2019.

[39] Mutter, 59.

[40] Mutter, 59.

[41] Mutter, 60.

[42] Mutter, 58.

- the need to mitigate the ego's inability to handle infinitude and other egos; a desire to make language mystically efficacious in the material world;
- and finally, a desire to find a form of resistance to the instrumentalism of "secular imperialism."[43]

Auden draws together the various strands of his ideas about magical thinking in *The Sea and the Mirror*, his "Commentary" on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and prolonged reflection on poetic art, artistic illusion, and audience. I will discuss this major poetic work extensively in Chapter 3, but there is a point that Mutter makes about the main character, Prospero, that is relevant here. To Mutter, Prospero is a "magician-artist," and the enchanted world that Prospero has created on his island through his spells is an "imposition of [his] subjective desire onto the world and a continued domination of the world."[44] In fact, Prospero's actions mirror precisely what Auden believes magical thinkers are doing when they seek to bend nature, history, and the reality of the material world to their wishful thinking. It is fitting that Prospero, the magician-artist, wishes to impose a strict hierarchy of aristocratic domination over the island and its inhabitants. One of the familiar arguments made by the advocates of magical thinking is that magic subverts Western "hegemonic social structures and norms of modernity."[45] Yet as Mutter points out, this claim that magical thought is "progressive" or inclined towards egalitarianism and liberty is highly suspect. What the defenders of magic conveniently forget is that occult traditions are intrinsically elitist, existentially deterministic, and rigidly hierarchical.[46]

The fundamental issue that Auden has with modern celebrants of magical thinking (and that he would most likely have had with their contemporary kin) is that magical thinkers and writers believe that all hierarchies must be subverted by eliminating dualisms. Their position results in a "monism that collapses all binaries."[47] Auden, however, believes that certain dualisms—such as that between history and nature—are essential and productive. The dualism between history and nature, for instance, is essential to a sense of historical responsibility and historical critique.[48] There is also, for Auden, a necessary and affirmative distinction between the individual human— capable of historical agency, transformative imagination,

[43] Mutter, 59.
[44] Mutter, 61.
[45] Mutter, 64.
[46] Mutter, 64.
[47] Mutter, 66.
[48] Mutter, 66.