

## Hearing Is Believing: W.H. Auden and the Criterion of the Ear

In his lecture 'Sounding Auden' (1986), Seamus Heaney argued that Auden's early poetry had introduced an unprecedented new note, by which it 'brought native English poetry as near as it has ever been to the imaginative verge of the dreadful and offered an example of how insular experience and the universal shock suffered by mankind in the twentieth century could be sounded forth in the English language'.<sup>1</sup> This effect was achieved when, in the best of *Poems* (1930), 'the stress of Anglo-Saxon metre and the gnomic clunk of Anglo-Saxon phrasing were pulled like a harrow against the natural slope of social speech and iambic lyric' (Heaney, p. 197). Auden, however, discarded this aggressively de-familiarising tactic, on his journey toward the 'magnificently sane' post-war work, which in Heaney's view involved 'a weakening of his original refusal of the conventional musics' (Heaney, pp. 199, 195). Although Auden would have agreed with Heaney about the importance of 'sounding' poetry, he might well have taken issue with any disparagement of its 'conventional musics'. In what follows, I want to consider the significances of sound in Auden's work, which is in my view more consistently concerned with hearing something other than 'the dreadful'.

Throughout his career Auden composed brief poems, generically identified as 'Shorts'. To one late group he gave the title 'Profile', signifying their autobiographical function, for which in the final year of his life he composed some 'Addenda', ending with this:

He has never seen God,  
but, once or twice, he believes  
he has heard Him.<sup>2</sup> (CP p. 777)

While this haiku is not without light humour, its implications involve not only Auden's theology but also his ideas about poetry. We might, perhaps, draw from it the inference that intimations of divine presence have more characteristically been manifest for him in music, rather than in the visible beauties of creation: Auden valued music highly, and was sometimes scathing about the charms of nature – for examples, dismissing the value of landscape as 'but a background to a torso' ('Letter to Lord Byron', *EA* p. 185), or in 'Heavy Date' endorsing Goethe's view that 'No one cares to watch the/ Loveliest sunset after/ Quarter of an hour' (*CP* p. 258). 'A Walk after Dark' finds the 'clockwork

spectacle' of the starry heavens to be 'slightly boring' (*CP* p. 344). Moreover, in not seeing God Auden shares the biblically-attested norm, since even Moses only viewed his back: 'Thou canst not see my face: for man shall not see me and live' (*Exodus* 33.20). But it does not seem, either, that Auden, hearing God, had the kind of experience that would have merited the response, 'Speak, Lord, for Thy servant heareth' (*I Samuel* 3.9): the hesitancy of the claim made – 'once or twice, he believes' – seems indicative of a much more uncertain aural witness, rather than of any divine interlocution.

Are we, then, talking about the kind of transfiguring effect evoked near the beginning of 'New Year Letter'?

Where BUXTEHUDE as we played  
One of his *passacaglias* made  
Our minds a *civitas* of sound  
Where nothing but assent was found,  
For art had set in order sense  
And feeling and intelligence,  
And from its ideal order grew  
Our local understanding too.        (*CP* p. 198)

Possibly we are, but probably not; for 'New Year Letter' places this 'local understanding' in the context of those violent global misunderstandings which had led, simultaneously, to the outbreak of war in Europe. This is, then, no epiphany, and later, in 'Music Is International', Auden deflatingly contrasted music's 'halcyon structures' with 'really important' concerns, 'Like feeding strays' (*CP* p. 340). Its writ, therefore, doesn't run very far beyond the boundaries of its own '*civitas* of sound': music's setting-in-order resembles that established by a poetry which 'makes nothing happen'. Yet, such ineffectiveness is not the end of the story, for his Yeats elegy goes on to declare that poetry 'survives,/ A way of happening, a mouth' (*EA* p. 242, both); this foregrounds an embodied voice as its true medium, and by extension emphasises the importance of *hearing* poetry – as when, in *The Dyer's Hand*, he recalled how his enthusiasm for those Anglo-Saxon sources noted by Heaney had been kindled by hearing J.R.R. Tolkien recite from *Beowulf*.

Auden was short-sighted, but despite this the stance of seeing contributed importantly to the air of authority in his earlier poetry, in a confident diagnostic surveillance which reached its apogee in what Valentine Cunningham has called his ‘panoptic’ effects. The first poem in which he heard his own voice, in 1927, began with the assertion, ‘Who stands (...)/Below him sees’ (*EA* p. 22), and injunctions to observe – ‘Look there!’, ‘look there’, ‘Watch any day’ or ‘Look, stranger’ (*EA* pp. 56, 46, 31, 157) – were a notable feature of his verse. The elevated perspective, ‘As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman’ (*EA* p. 46), whether that of ‘The leader looking over/ Into the happy valley’ (*EA* p. 28), or of ‘Here on the cropped grass of the narrow ridge I stand’ (*EA* p. 141), or the implied spaceman’s view looking down on Spain or observing the onward sweep of nightfall in ‘Commentary’ (‘Night falls on China...’, *EA* p. 269), was a characteristic position. All this might undermine any case for the importance, in his work, of what is heard rather than seen. It is interesting, however, to remark that in Auden visual pre-eminence is often augmented or corrected by subsequent aural emphasis: ‘The Watershed’ (as subsequently titled) closes on ‘Ears poise before decision’; the later ‘stranger’ is instructed to listen as well as to look (‘That through the channels of the ear/ May wander...’); the outer-space perspective ends on earth, contrasting ‘the owl’s developed ear’ with ‘the anxious sentry’s’ (*EA* p. 269). In some ways, then, Auden suggests that hearing, as the more intimate sense, may rectify the potential for grandiose self-deception lurking in acts of visionary possession. Hearing God, as opposed to seeing him, implies a relationship both more discreet and possibly less absolute; when, at the end of ‘In Praise of Limestone’, Auden evokes transcendent possibility, he does so in terms that inherently deny transcendence, through an analogy that prioritises hearing: ‘when I try to imagine a faultless love/ Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur/ Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape’ (*SP* p. 187).<sup>3</sup> His first example seems specific (‘the murmur’), the second generic (‘a...landscape’); any ‘faultless’ love is repudiated as a possibility by the poem’s geological awareness, its knowledge that faults inhere in the rocky substrata and have in fact made his limestone landscape what it is (Auden had previously used this geological pun on the meanings of ‘fault’ in ‘New Year Letter’).

The criterion of the ear was consistently asserted by Auden, most forcefully when introducing his 1935 schools anthology *The Poet’s Tongue*: ‘No poetry ... which when mastered is not better

heard than read is good poetry'.<sup>4</sup> The voice, therefore, is vital; but despite this, not all voices heard or evoked in his poetry are good or admirable, for if the panoptic view encourages a specious self-confidence, the pleasures of hearing one's own voice may overpower doubts modesty might urge, about one's right to utterance or the rectitude of what one says. To some degree this is the consequence of the voice's corruption by public context, that in Auden's view led to the vice of oratory, evidenced in the Old Boy's address, the political speech or the sermon (or even poem) in which is heard 'The preacher's loose immodest tone' (*CP* p. 202). Such individual sonic self-deception can also occur collectively, as when from that 'narrow' Malvern ridge is overheard, emanating from jazz-bands in gardens, from cinemas and from cathedrals, 'The high thin rare continuous worship/ Of the self-absorbed' (*EA* p. 142); this offers another example of ear succeeding eye, although in this case providing a 'pan-auditory' supplement to panopticality. The 'public men' with 'voices treble with hate' and the 'booming old bore', both encountered in earlier 'Shorts' (*CP* pp. 296, 295), are examples of people whose voices betray a fundamental loss of self in the very act of speaking; Auden came to feel a similar antipathy toward the poet who had publicly declared 'All I have is a voice' (*EA* p. 246).

But the private voice can also be untrustworthy ('The voice is nearer/ But no clearer', *EA* p. 27). 'The voice of love saying lightly, brightly – / Be Lubbe, be Hitler' (*EA* p. 154) is perhaps not one that should command too much attention, associated as it is with the demagogue whom Auden had heard 'shouting' over the radio in a German café (*P* 1 p. 73), on his European trip to which this poem alludes. 'In the policed unlucky city/ Lucky his bed' (*EA* p. 152); this acknowledgement of the narcissistic gulf instated by poet-lover, between his personal erotic success and the 'sombre' political landscape of Germany's Nazification that was its backdrop, leads to a closing emphasis on quieter, un-despotic utterance, which 'the heart repeats though we would not hearken': 'Yours is the choice' (*EA* p. 154). But unlike noisy Hitler's, this voice can be ignored, and the separation it suggests between 'The language of learning and the language of love' (*EA* p. 154) is later reproduced in the poem 'Oxford' (*EA* pp. 229-30), which opposes the worlds of learning and of 'nature'. Ideally, these could be aligned by an instructive love ('Eros Paidagogos') but, in Oxford's 'talkative city', are more likely to find their potential for union neglected, as the culture drives toward death: 'And the natural

heart refuses/ The low unflattering voice/ That rests not till it find a hearing'. Edward Mendelson has shown how closely this paraphrases Freud's description, in *The Future of an Illusion*, of the 'voice of the intellect';<sup>5</sup> and the Freud who, as Auden's elegy for him would declare, 'wasn't clever at all' (*SP* p. 92) is suitable antagonist, both for Oxford's self-honouring wisdom and for loud-mouthed Hitler, who drove Freud into an exile where his 'rational voice' (*SP* p. 95) is silenced by death.

There are some indications that early Auden was willing to let nature be his teacher; but if a juvenile poem, 'Nightfall', waxed lyrical over the 'Sweet unforgettable ecstasy of sound/ Of leaves drinking the young dew',<sup>6</sup> mature Auden was more precise. The third poem of '1929' (as later titled) recalls the poet from abstruser musings to a present environment that asserts itself through sound: 'Startled by the violent laugh of a jay/ I went from wood, from crunch underfoot' (*EA* p. 31). A poem written later the same year (and subsequently rejected) rather wordily celebrates the life-affirming potential of dawn and endorses reconnection with 'earth the mother of all life': 'Yes, she is always with him and will sustain him;/ Often he knows it – caught in a storm on fells/ And sheltering with horses behind a dripping wall' (*EA* p. 41). Both the admonitory jay and humans' welcoming the gift of a new day anticipate 'Lauds' (*CP* pp. 639-40), which closes his sequence 'Horae Canonicae' and in which 'this green world temporal' announces its renewal through sound: 'Among the leaves the small birds sing;/ The crow of the cock commands awaking'. But – as 'Prime', the first poem in the sequence, has made clear – 'awaking' is only a momentarily innocent state that is quickly succeeded by resumption of 'my historical share of care' (*CP* p. 626). For 'Man is a history-making creature'<sup>7</sup> and is, by this inclination, separated from the animals, for which he may have fellow-feeling but which do not inhabit the same ethical universe. The horses sharing his moment of shelter, above, might have seemed companionable, but are akin to the innocently indifferent 'torturer's horse' of 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (*EA* p. 237), or the animals that 'will not look' in the final stanza of 'Spain' (*SP* p. 55); the cock of 'Lauds' is, after all, of the same species as one heard in 'Homage to Clio':

Woken at sun-up to hear

A cock pronounce himself himself

Though all his sons had been castrated and eaten,

I was glad I could be unhappy

As the same poem notes, ‘to chirp like a tearless bird,/ As though no one dies in particular’ (*CP* p. 609, both) is literally and metaphorically inhuman, as, in a different register, is the behaviour of those stockbrokers ‘roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse’ (*EA* p. 242), as if Yeats had not died ‘in particular’. We may imagine, hearing a burdened donkey bray, that its is ‘a choking wail/ of utter protest at what is the case’ (*CP* p. 542), or, by contrast, that birds’ dawn chorus expresses our own gladness at greeting a new day; but there is a difference, defined in ‘The Cave of Nakedness’ (about Auden’s Austrian bedroom):

in the half-dark, members of an avian orchestra  
are already softly noodling, limbering up for  
an overture at sunrise, their effort to express  
in the old convention they inherit that joy in beginning  
for which our species was created, and declare it  
good. (*CP* p. 711)

We have in common with most of the animal kingdom five senses in our bodily existence whose teleology, as implied above, is that we ‘*Bless what there is for being*’: the poem in which that injunction occurs, ‘Precious Five’, adding the rhetorical question, ‘What else am I made for?’ (*CP* p. 589). This very purpose, theologically derived, discriminates us from animals, and endows the noises that we make with added import. ‘Their Lonely Betters’ considers the garden noises and the wordlessness of animals – the robin reciting ‘The Robin-Anthem which was all it knew’ – and the fact that none ‘could have with a rhythm or a rhyme/ Assumed responsibility for time’. Language makes us better, but more responsible and also more ‘lonely’ than they are: ‘We, too, make noises when we laugh or weep:/ Words are for those with promises to keep’ (*CP* p. 581, all). This Frostian ending enforces the ethical inherency of language; and although a sonnet such as ‘Objects’ does its best to praise the extra-linguisticity of material being, ‘Those wordless creatures who are there as well’ whose ‘bestial substance’ we share, the ‘soul’ we have, with its moral and linguistic consequences, is ours alone (*CP* p. 622). The world of ‘love’ that we evoke may, biologically, be much less necessary than the presence of water, as the final line of ‘First Things First’ acknowledges; yet that poem’s construal of a message of love out of a storm’s ‘interjectory uproar’, and the emotional and

imaginative contours of its personal mythology, deciphering ‘a Proper Name’ from the noise of ‘storminess’ (*CP* p. 581), are not entirely disavowed. (There seems to be an allusion here to *The Tempest* III iii 100: ‘The winds did sing it to me, and the thunder,/ That deep and dreadful organ pipe, pronounced/ The name of Prosper’.)

There is, for Auden, an implied sonic hierarchy, upward from noise to sound (which is noise shaped either expressively or receptively), to speech (which is sound shaped by meaning), to song (which is speech shaped by music). This partially overlaps with his geographical hierarchy, whereby North is the ‘good’ direction and the southern Mezzogiorno (although he briefly approved its fireworks on Saints’ days) practises ‘noise/ As a countermagic’ (*CP* p. 642); thus, when visiting a site of northernmost longing, in ‘Hammerfest’, it is the purity of sound that strikes him (‘something odd was happening/ Sound-wise’):

A listening terrain

Seized on them all and never gave one back in echo,

As if to land as desolate, as far up,

Whatever noise our species cared to make still mattered.

Here was a place we had yet to disappoint. (*CP* p. 725)

Its unsullied note has survived even the depredations of an occupying German army, and although disappointment must inevitably occur, the association of holiness with a quality of sound so rarefied as to suggest silence implies a still higher point of the hierarchy I have proposed. In ‘First Things First’ the storm’s noise paradoxically recalls, from his 1936 trip to Iceland with Michael Yates, ‘a day of peculiar silence/ When a sneeze could be heard a mile off’ (*CP* p. 581); in ‘The Cave of Making’ he confides to MacNeice how ‘Speech can at best, a shadow echoing/ the silent light, bear witness/ to the Truth it is not’ (*CP* p. 692). A similar line of thought is expressed in another poem from the sequence ‘Thanksgiving for a Habitat’, where ‘To-Night at Seven-Thirty’ evokes and complicatedly celebrates the dinner-party’s sociabilities, but ends asserting the signified of which these are the signifiers, seeing ‘in swallowing/ a sign-act of reverence,/ in speech a work of re-presenting/ the true olamic silence’ (*CP* p. 709).<sup>8</sup>

As Diarmaid MacCulloch has set forth in *Silence: A Christian History*, there is a long, if semi-occluded, tradition of silence as the highest end of religious contemplation, in ‘that apophatic approach to divinity which portrays what God is not, rather than what he is. (...) Apophatic Christianity or negative theology is a religion of spirit, of looking inwards’.<sup>9</sup> As opposed to the Scriptural attention which, by the act of reading, emphasises sight, ‘paying attention to silence involves a different sense, hearing’ (MacCulloch p. 235). When, in his introduction, MacCulloch notes that ‘for Paul and for those who follow the Christian way, the crucified one is more powerful in his silent suffering than any power of this world or even of the next’ (MacCulloch p. 8), such an observation leads almost directly, it might seem, to Auden’s poem ‘Friday’s Child’, and its closing evocation of ‘a silence on the cross,/ As dead as we shall ever be’ which, paradoxically, ‘Speaks of some total gain or loss’. ‘Friday’s Child’, however, lacks that assurance of power that MacCulloch ascribes to the Pauline position, as the poem contrasts its own uncertainty with ‘conscious unbelievers’ who are ‘sure of Judgement Day’ (*CP* p. 674, all). While Auden was aware, as these examples show, of claims of the ultimate superiority of silence, and while his poem echoes ‘that greatest Christian silence of all, the Resurrection, (...) the silence at the heart of Christian literature’ (MacCulloch p. 40), he ultimately identified himself with the views of St Augustine, whom MacCulloch defines as one relatively indifferent to the ‘theme of silence’, by contrast with ‘his fascination with language and human psychology as revelations of the nature of God’ (MacCulloch p. 89). This seems to me equally applicable to Auden, and his sense that the poet’s obligation is to work within speech and language, attempting through a fallen medium to counteract destructive tendencies highlighted by one of the short poems appended to his MacNeice elegy: ‘Speechless Evil/ Borrowed the language of Good/ And reduced it to noise’ (*CP* p. 694). What poetry does, in its survival as ‘a way of happening, a mouth’, is to preserve speech as ‘language’ rather than as ‘noise’; and to do this ascribes a value to the voice that speaks and the ear that hears, located in the fleshly human medium and not in any extra-sensory transcendent state. To ‘hear’ God is to be within earshot of God, to receive an actual vibration: it is not a ‘religion of spirit, looking inwards’, working on absence, but an implicitly positive theology, relating to presence.

This becomes clearer as Auden moves away from a Kierkegaardian theology, which was a means by which he re-embraced Christianity but which, as he later noted, paid insufficient regard to the body. It was appropriate that he took the pen-name 'Didymus' when publishing a series of wartime 'lecture notes' in the Swarthmore student magazine: for 'doubting Thomas', as he is more popularly known, insisted on bodily evidence before believing in Christ's resurrection. As Mendelson has shown,<sup>10</sup> the body became increasingly important to Auden (despite his unharmonious relation to his own), as the means by which we are and by which we do good and evil. It is the enabling site of all our experience, including the varieties of religious experience, and if on one hand through corporeality we are connected with the animal kingdom that, in all its varieties, is similarly embodied, on the other, through Incarnation and the historical actuality of Jesus the body links us to God, according to Christian theology (as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it: 'I am all at once what Christ is since he was what I am').<sup>11</sup> 'Our bodies cannot love:/ But, without one,/ What works of Love could we do?' asks Auden (*CP* p. 712): the 'love' here is both general and specific, simultaneously of the flesh and of the spirit. The sense of hearing is more corporeally located than that of sight, one might argue, because the latter more readily colludes with fantasies of incorporeality (as in Emerson's 'transparent eye-ball' rapture,<sup>12</sup> for example, suggestive of an 'out-of-body experience'); to 'hear' God may therefore be to appreciate that 'God' is fundamentally inseparable from the creation which also includes ourselves. As Julian of Norwich put it (in words Auden used as epigraph for his poem 'Memorial for the City'): 'In the self-same point that our soul is made sensual, in the self-same point is the City of God ordained to him from without beginning' (quoted, *CP* p. 589). Auden himself would express a similar thought in a piece about Kierkegaard, when asserting that 'as a creature composed of matter, as a biological organism, every man, in common with everything else in the universe, is related by necessity to the God who created that universe and saw that it was good' (*P* 3 p. 579).

This is not to suggest, however, that human hearing may not involve its own deceptions. What an earlier poem described as 'the limits and the lack' (*EA* p. 151) of purely creaturely existence are – in 'At the Party', written thirty years later – audible at a human occasion which, despite its seeming hospitality, amounts to no more than a depressing cacophony of self-assertiveness:

A howl for recognition, shrill with fear,  
Shakes the jam-packed apartment, but each ear  
Is listening to its hearing, so none hear. (CP p. 737)

Hearing can be turned inward, and the egotistical meanings of the conversations fragmentarily overheard represent speech degenerating to the condition of noise. To Auden-as-Jeremiah, these Manhattan sophisticates, bandying ‘names in fashion’ back and forth, most resemble the robin reiterating its territorially-aggressive (and significantly capitalised) ‘Robin-Anthem’; for this is the world described in ‘City Without Walls’ as ‘idiorhythmic’ (CP p. 748), following behavioural patterns its own appetites dictate. Auden would not have dissented from the Lawrentian view that animals have their own integrity, in being animals, but suggests that we humans lose ours in resembling them.

‘Needing above all/ silence and warmth, we produce/ brutal cold and noise’ (CP p. 787). Although the history that we make may also be at times cacophonous (‘The Common Life’ refers to ‘History’s criminal noise’ (CP p. 714): that is, history as megaphoned by Hitler or Stalin), our shaping tendencies are what redeem us, our willingness to ‘take responsibility for time’. ‘Rhythm’ and ‘rhyme’ are the poetic signs of such responsibility; Auden described the egotistical ‘chatter’ of ‘At the Party’ as ‘Unrhymed, unrhythmical’ (CP p. 737), partly implying that its toxicity derives from failure to attend to anything exterior to the self’s priorities; there is a disciplinary externalising structure to language which, neglected, darkens the mind, in ‘Ode to Terminus’: ‘discarding, rhythm, punctuation, metaphor,/ it sinks into a drivelling monologue’ (CP p. 810). No wonder, then, that he emphasised the beneficial effect of formal obligations, in a late ‘Short’: ‘Blessed be all metrical rules that forbid automatic responses,/ force us to have second thoughts, free from the fetters of Self’ (CP p. 857). In conforming to such pre-established patterns, a poet acknowledges the voices other than his or her own which have established usage and, enabling the reader to hear these effects, opens the poem as a site of confluence rather than of simple self-enunciation. The self is not obliterated in such collaborations: ‘In Praise of Limestone’ notes how its ‘band of rivals’ walk ‘sometimes/ Arm in arm but never, thank God, in step’ (SP p. 185), and another ‘Short’ insists that when men are ‘truly brothers’ they ‘don’t sing in unison/ but in harmony’ (CP p. 887).

But if such audible responsibility toward time thwarts any impulse to automatically sing the song of ‘Self’, like a cock or a robin, there is, Auden equally recognised, a wrong kind of resonance, a wrong kind of deference to an audience, a wrong estimation of the claim of the external world upon your poem. He believed this the more keenly, for feeling he had himself infringed in these respects, as one of those who ‘round about 1931 began to take up politics as an exciting new subject to write about’ (*EA* p. 403); what is at issue here is less the suitability of politics as potential subject, than the insincerity of its opportunistic adoption as *materia poetica*. This can lead to crowd-pleasing, of the kind noted in passing by ‘In Praise of Limestone’ when it instances one who ‘ruin[s] a fine tenor voice/ For effects that bring the house down’ (*SP* p. 185) or, worse, to the making of untrue statements, such as Auden came to feel he detected at the close of ‘Spain’: ‘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’ (*CP* p. xxx). He also concluded that seductions of sound and the blandishments of rhetoric had underlain his thralldom to Yeats, telling Stephen Spender in 1965 that ‘through no fault of his own he has become for me a symbol of my own devil of unauthenticity, of everything which I must try to eliminate from my own poetry, false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonorities’ (quoted *Early A*, p. 206). ‘Ode to Terminus’ ends declaring that ‘abhorred in the Heav’ns are all/ self-proclaimed poets who, to wow an/ audience, utter some resonant lie’ (*CP* p. 811).

‘Empty sonorities’ and ‘effects that bring the house down’ imply the speciousness of sound in the making of false music. What, then, would be characteristic of a true music and the right kind of resonance? Auden’s ‘Notes on Music and Opera’, in *The Dyer’s Hand*, takes as one of its epigraphs Hugo von Hoffmannsthal’s assertion that ‘Singing is near miraculous because it is the mastering of what is otherwise a pure instrument of egotism: the human voice’ (quoted *DH* p. 465). In part, the technical application necessary to becoming a good singer and consequent submission to the rules of harmony ensure a tempering of the ego, which resembles that effected by the poet in obeying ‘metrical rules’; such tempering is amplified by the fact that it is unusual for the voice that sings to be that of either composer or librettist. The vocalist to this extent sacrifices individual identity, becomes personally disinterested in order to achieve the aesthetic goal of delivering someone else’s words and

music, however personally coloured in the performing. This resembles the effect, of creating a ‘*civitas* of sound’ in a duet where selves collaborate rather than compete, that Auden wrote about in ‘New Year Letter’; but there is, for him, a dimension added by the singing voice that exceeds the scope of purely instrumental performance:

To me, vocal music plays the part in music that the human nude plays in painting. In both there is an essential erotic element which is always in danger of being corrupted for sexual ends but need not be and, without this element of the erotic which the human voice and the nude have contributed, both arts would be a little lifeless. (DH pp. 505-6)

Both the nude and the voice install the unadorned or unassisted human body at the centre of their respective arts, and in doing so bring into alignment the world of nature and the world of artifice. There is a celebration of the knowingness of art, in this, that Auden caught in one of the shorts in ‘Symmetries and Asymmetries’: ‘The brook’s impromptu babble/ Suggested to Orpheus/ A cunning song’ (CP p. 730). The brook is spontaneous and unreflective, so the ‘cunning’ of poetic response to natural phenomena simultaneously registers a potential estrangement, through sophistication – therefore an asymmetry. The song can never be as artless as the brook, but, as the brook cannot, at greatest moments the singing voice has power to suggest a world magnificently arranged: ‘Every high C accurately struck demolishes the theory that we are the irresponsible puppets of fate or chance’ (DH p. 474).

Yet the very resonance of that assertion begins to overstrain, hinting at some transcendent state in which we triumph ‘over Death, and Chance, and thee O Time’,<sup>13</sup> when Auden’s deeper conviction was that the basic musical responsibility to keep in time was both a minor practical and a major philosophical injunction. To Clio, ‘Muse of Time’, he suggested how ‘Lives that obey you move like music,/ Becoming now what they only can be once,/ Making of silence decisive sound’ (CP p. 611). That high C, which cannot be sustained beyond a physical limit, derives its power and glory from the relationship with antithetical states of silence and failure which it implies, and of which the listening ear is aware, knowing the note must end and that it might lose pitch. To ‘move like music’ is to move in sequence through time, with each note constituting a ‘now’ that is its own immediacy; such a ‘way of happening’ implies submission to, rather than any triumph over time. Auden could

concede that silence may well be the superior state – for example, believing it better not to write a love-poem, but instead to explain in prose the reasons why ('Dichtung und Wahrheit'). Nor was it his conviction that God would necessarily prefer an operatic high C to the sweaty but devout acrobatics performed in 'The Ballad of Barnaby' (a 'commissioned work' intended for guitar accompaniment, *CP* p. 824); he saw that aesthetic criteria, by which poets and musicians set such store, are irrelevant to the effectiveness or otherwise of a devotional rite such as the celebration of Eucharist, and he professed some unease whether indeed poetry was of any particular significance to Christianity: 'A poet who calls himself a Christian cannot but feel uncomfortable when he realizes that the New Testament contains no verse (except in the apocryphal, and gnostic, *Acts of John*), only prose' (*DH* p. 459). This is of a piece with his doubting, at the end of 'Homage to Clio', that she ever reads poetry, of his repeated assertion that poetry was 'small beer', and of his conviction, stated in *Secondary Worlds*, that 'since the Word was made Flesh, it is impossible to imagine God as speaking in anything but the most sober prose'.<sup>14</sup>

This laconic austerity of divine utterance perpetually wrong-foots the garrulous poet, giving added force to Kierkegaard's perception that 'Before God we are always in the wrong' (quoted by Auden in a 1940 letter to Spender);<sup>15</sup> for what can be done to atone for a continuing commitment to patterned language, once one has reached Prospero's perception: 'I never suspected the way of truth/ Was a way of silence' (*CP* p. 409)?<sup>16</sup> Auden's increasing adoption of syllabics, which is a metric declaring itself to the abacus rather than the ear, may, as Edward Mendelson has suggested, have been a move away from the 'assertive power' of his earlier bravura poems;<sup>17</sup> but, as Mendelson goes on to argue, it is a means by which rhythms inherent in the language itself become the principal auditory element. It is a less ostentatious poetic performance, that requires less evident skill to manage than forms like the villanelle or sestina, and removes much stilted resonance; like the 'Shorts' Auden copiously composed, there is no effort to impress or overwhelm. Yet, if we might argue that this suggests a more democratically-inclined and conversational Auden, the increasing appearance in his later poetry of inhorn terms culled from deep inside the unabridged *OED* seems to pull in a contrary direction: both, however, different as their registers appear, can be seen as celebrations of language and all its possibilities.

Auden wrote of Yeats that he would be pardoned ‘for writing well’ (*EA* p. 243), and although this does not necessarily imply that one should be damned for writing badly (‘Tear him for his bad verses!’ as the mob urges in *Julius Caesar*), on three occasions – in ‘Letter to Lord Byron’, in ‘New Year Letter’ and, most heartfelt, in the final poem appended to his elegy for MacNeice – he conflated the Last Judgment with literary judgment. In the two earlier poems he had imagined a jury of illustrious precursors adjudicating his own case, but in the shorter poem God himself nullifies Auden’s defence that a bad life nevertheless produced good poetry, by demonstrating how a good life could have made it better still:

God may reduce you  
on Judgement Day  
to tears of shame,  
reciting by heart  
the poems you would  
have written, had  
your life been good.      (*CP* p. 695)

‘Always in the wrong’, indeed: to hear God doing this, while again it emphasises the spoken poem, would be ultimately chastening; but common to these courtroom scenes is the inference that poetry is as much a matter of Heaney’s ‘rational voice’ and ‘conventional musics’ as of Romantic inspiration or subconscious intuition. Just as Auden’s daily regimen of sitting down to write and the regularity of his composition differentiated him from Eliot, so his emphasis on the writing of poetry as a regulated activity – not for nothing did he cite Pope as an important influence – meant that the sounds he heard in poetry and the metrical rules that governed it were matters of lucid calculation (literally, in syllabics), unlike that Jungian mysticism Eliot defined as ‘the auditory imagination’ (a formulation which Heaney found useful): ‘the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back’.<sup>18</sup>

Eliot placed some emphasis on the involuntary sources of poetry: ‘Why, for all of us, out of all that we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather

than others?'; his answer was that 'they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer' (*UPUC* p. 148). The absence, in Auden's poetry, of anything apparently corresponding to Eliot's deep element of the unknowable, has led some fellow-poets to question the voice that he developed after the poems of his earliest maturity. In Heaney's view:

Auden arrived at a mode that was stricken with premonitions of an awful thing and was adequate to give expression to those premonitions by strictly poetic means. But this unified sensibility fissured when Auden was inevitably driven to extend himself beyond the transmission of intuited knowledge, beyond poetic indirection and implication, and began spelling out those intuitions in a more explicit, analytic and morally ratified rhetoric.

(Heaney p. 199)

Auden might, then, be condemned, rather than pardoned, for 'writing well', in too consciously-controlled an exercise. Philip Larkin implied that Auden's abandonment of the 'common dialect' of English as it is actually spoken meant that the later poetry was insufficiently informed by plausibility of voice and, more recently, Sean O'Brien has written of Auden's 'anxiety about the irrational element in the appeal of poetry itself', and of his consequent deployment of 'a myth of Reason in which no poet, Auden included, can finally believe'; O'Brien sees this as a 'flight from the daemonic' (*WHAContext* pp. 334, 335). In 'New Year Letter', when Auden remembers his boyhood self's having stirred 'the reservoir of darkness' (*CP* p. 226) by dropping pebbles down a flooded mineshaft, the upshot is a consciousness of 'guilt', a turning-away from the dark Mother, and a continuation of the poem's tetrameter couplets on its self-defined mission 'To set in order' (*CP* p. 198). Craig Raine has judged that Auden's re-adoption of Christianity was 'inimical to his poetic gifts';<sup>19</sup> it is almost as if, having taken Kierkegaard's wholly irrational 'leap of faith' as a means of establishing through Christianity an absolute moral standpoint (as Auden explained it in his contribution to *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims*), there was no need for further acts of unreason. The voice that becomes audible in Auden is one that tries, in unillusioned manner, to 'Find the mortal world enough' (*EA* p. 207) without resorting to coercive rhetorical strategies; a sense of responsibility to time predominates. The sound whose absence from Auden's verse Heaney regrets might be inseparable from those 'empty sonorities' Auden himself came to reject.

A poem can only stand as sign toward the ‘true olamic silence’ beyond itself; Kierkegaard’s perception of inevitable wrongness before God becomes, seen in a more forgiving light, less a condemnation than a permission to work, as fallen creatures, with the materials to hand, which include our bodies and our language. This informs Auden’s poem ‘Whitsunday in Kirchstetten’, which even as it contemplates the Christian celebration of language mended, in the rectification of Babel at Pentecost – ‘we who were born/ congenitally deaf are able/ to listen now to rank outsiders’ (CP p. 743) – also accurately observes the world that is the case, measuring the difference between a vision of mutually-comprehending amity and the fractured actualities of both the local and geo-political situations beyond the church’s walls, where threats of mutually assured destruction resound. It is a world much in need of the visitation of the Holy Spirit solicited, in German, in its opening line: ‘*Komm Schöpfer Geist* I bellow’ (CP p. 742). I have written about this poem elsewhere, but will note here that its taking an epigraph from the only poetry in (or near) the New Testament is potentially a sign of poetic admission, in keeping with the inclusiveness that is theme of this celebration, affirming that ‘The Holy Ghost/ does not abhor a golfer’s jargon,/ a Lower-Austrian accent, the cadences even/ of my own little anglo-american/ musico-literary set’ (CP p. 743). Yet, offering such definitions, the language reinstalls a world stubbornly untransfigured while, at the same time, accepting it as the unperfected ‘Middle-Earth’ (CP p. 569) appropriate to humankind, which another poem calls ‘a creature/ Who comes in median size’ (CP p. 740). The poem is full of noises, from that opening bellow to the tower-bells which ‘clash’ or the altar-bell which ‘makes a noise’ (CP pp. 743, 744), or the different languages deployed amid its English (German, Italian, Latin, French); all are accepted in a similar spirit to that which asks Clio to ‘forgive our noises’ (CP p. 611). The bellowed hymn and the improbable closing image of Auden dancing alike emphasise that element he saw as intrinsic to public worship, in which ‘we bring our bodies to God’,<sup>20</sup> with all our imperfections on our heads. Perfection, after all, is a divine attribute, and when aspired to by humans brings forth monsters like Auden’s ‘Tyrant’ (‘Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after’, EA p. 239), who is also related to the ‘Ogre’ Auden later saw manifested in the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, likewise representing the sleep of reason in his failure to inhabit language: ‘The Ogre cannot master speech’ (CP pp. 804).

Early and late, Auden knew that the noisiness of the world was one of its defining modern characteristics, whether as the ‘noonday roar,/ Guttural, the personal cry of a great city’ (*EA* p. 41) or the increasingly intrusive mass media – ‘louder today the wireless roars/ Its warnings and its lies’ (*EA* p. 156); ‘His radio Homers all day long/ In over-Whitmanated song/ That does not scan’ (*CP* p. 336) – or the ‘witless noise’ used as a prophylactic against ‘the basilisking/ glare of Nothing’ (*CP* p. 748). But poetry’s task is, by making shaped sound out of noise, to work toward a consecration of language which, being spoken and heard, is of the body, and being understood, is of the mind: when Auden celebrated the medieval poets, he emphasised the physicality of a relationship in which they are ‘on hand to delect my ear and chuckle/ my sad flesh’ (*CP* p. 864). This attitude necessarily involves acknowledging ‘the primary phenomenal world as it is, (...) in which the sun moves across the sky from east to west, the stars are hung like lamps in the vault of heaven, the measure of magnitude is the human body’; as Auden’s imagery makes clear, such recognition permits a certain poetic licence, and he went on to hope that acceptance of limits would encourage in artists modesty and ‘a sense of humour’, and even ‘a return, in a more sophisticated form, to a belief in the phenomenal world as a realm of sacred analogies’ (*SW* p. 144, all). This attitude, in the last stanza of ‘Prologue at Sixty’, is enacted by the unanticipated enjambment which opens the closed circuit of human interlocution toward just such an analogy:

To speak is human because human to listen,  
beyond hope, for an Eighth Day,  
when the created Image shall become the Likeness. (*CP* p. 832)

But, until such reconciliation, the primary phenomenal world remains the analogical source of sacredness, as limestone suggests a possible paradise and the bellowing, clumsily dancing body indicates perfection it cannot achieve, while being nonetheless ‘the measure of magnitude’. In ‘No, Plato, No’, Auden asserts that he ‘can’t imagine anything / that I would less like to be/ than a discarnate Spirit’; but if Platonism represents an extreme of the spirit, an extreme of the flesh is embodied in its final decomposition, when it becomes ‘irresponsible Matter’. Between those extremes, ‘exactly/ where I’d have chosen to be’ (*CP* p. 891, all), Auden inhabits the mid-realm of responsible matter.

Thus placed, his poetic compositions are acts of responsible language. ‘There is only one thing’, Auden declared at the end of his inaugural lecture at Oxford, ‘that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being and for happening’ (*DH* p. 60). Although this resembles Hopkins’s celebration of profusion and his final injunction in ‘Pied Beauty’ (‘He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:/ Praise him’; Hopkins, p. 31), rather than God himself, the object of Auden’s praise is the material universe which offers our only evidence for God. As he argued, Incarnation means that ‘matter, the natural order is real and redeemable, not a shadowy appearance or the cause of evil, and historical time is real and significant, not meaningless or an endless series of cycles’ (*P* 3, p. 577). But love of ‘the natural order’ and ‘historical time’ could not be naively unknowing; as he told MacNeice’s ‘dear Shade’:

More than ever  
 life-out-there is goodly, miraculous, loveable,  
 but we shan’t, not since Stalin and Hitler,  
 trust ourselves ever again: we know that, subjectively,  
 all is possible. (*CP* p. 691)

‘Here silence/ is turned into objects’, was how Auden described his poetic work-room’s function to its imagined visitant, where fashioning a made thing out of the subjective silence was a way of counteracting subjectivity’s darker possibilities. This room is ‘designed to/ discourage day-dreams (...)/ and to sharpen hearing’ (*CP* p. 690, all), for there is indeed an objective world to be listened to. Coleridge paid Charles Lamb the compliment of being one ‘to whom/ No sound is dissonant which tells of Life’;<sup>21</sup> while we cannot know exactly what Auden intended by his haiku, it is unlikely he believed he heard God face to face: but it may be that, ‘once or twice’, when attending to our phenomenal world, he heard that it was good.

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<sup>1</sup> Reprinted in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 200. Henceforth referenced as ‘Heaney’.

<sup>2</sup> Auden’s poems will be cited from the following volumes, all edited by Edward Mendelson and published by Faber and Faber: *Collected Poems*, revised edition (London: 2007); *The English Auden* (London and Boston: 1977); *Selected Poems* (first edition, London and Boston: 1979). References to these will be given, respectively, as *CP*; *EA*; *SP*.

<sup>3</sup> I cite *SP* because the *CP* version differs from that as first collected. This rationale applies to all further citations from *SP*.

<sup>4</sup> W.H. Auden, *Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse, Vol. I: 1926-1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 105. Henceforth cited as *P 1*; subsequent volumes in this series will be referenced as *P 2, 3, et seq.*

<sup>5</sup> Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 295. Henceforth referenced as *Early A*.

<sup>6</sup> *W.H. Auden Juvenilia: Poems 1922-1928*, ed. Katherine Bucknell, (‘expanded paperback edition’, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> ‘D. H. Lawrence’, in *The Dyer’s Hand* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 278. Henceforth referenced as *DH*.

<sup>8</sup> John Fuller explains ‘the Hebrew “olam” as the unity of the cosmos in time’, in *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 493.

<sup>9</sup> Diarmaid McCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), pp. 234, 235. Henceforth referenced as MacCulloch.

<sup>10</sup> See his essay ‘The Body’, in *W.H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 195-204. Henceforth cited as *WHAContext*.

<sup>11</sup> ‘That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection’, in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and prose*, ed. W.H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), p. 66. Henceforth referenced as ‘Hopkins’.

<sup>12</sup> See *Nature* (Chapter I), in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> John Milton, ‘On Time’, in *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, ed. E.H. Visiak (London: Nonesuch Press, 1969), p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Secondary Worlds* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 136. Henceforth referenced as *SW*.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *Auden Studies*, ed. Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins, vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 72.

<sup>16</sup> In *Auden’s O: The Loss of One’s Sovereignty in the Making of Nothing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), Andrew Hass explores Auden’s recourse to *The Tempest* in the context of ideas about nothingness and silence.

<sup>17</sup> *Later Auden* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp. 118-19. Henceforth referenced as *UPUC*.

<sup>19</sup> *Haydn and the Valve Trumpet* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 355.

<sup>20</sup> *A Certain World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 175.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’, in *Select Poetry and Prose*, ed. Stephen Potter (London: Nonesuch Press, n.d.), p. 17.