

INTRODUCTION

THE POEM

The Age of Anxiety begins in fear and doubt, but the four protagonists find some comfort in sharing their distress. In even this accidental and temporary community there arises the possibility of what Auden once called “local understanding.” Certain anxieties may be overcome not by the altering of geopolitical conditions but by the cultivation of mutual sympathy—perhaps mutual love, even among those who hours before had been strangers.

The Age of Anxiety is W. H. Auden’s last book-length poem, his longest poem, and almost certainly the least-read of his major works. (“It’s frightfully long,” he told his friend Alan Ansen.) It would be interesting to know what fraction of those who begin reading it persist to the end. The poem is strange and oblique; it pursues in a highly concentrated form many of Auden’s long-term fascinations. Its meter imitates medieval alliterative verse, which Auden had been drawn to as an undergraduate when he attended J.R.R. Tolkien’s lectures in Anglo-Saxon philology, and which clearly influences the poems of his early twenties. *The Age of Anxiety* is largely a psychological, or psycho-historical, poem, and these were the categories in which Auden preferred to think in his early adulthood (including his undergraduate years at Oxford, when he enjoyed the role of confidential amateur analyst for his friends).

The poem also embraces Auden’s interest in, among other things, the archetypal theories of Carl Gustav Jung, Jewish mysticism, English murder mysteries, and the linguistic and cultural differences between England and America. Woven through it is his nearly lifelong obsession with the poetic and mythological “green world” Auden variously calls Arcadia or Eden or simply the Good Place. Auden’s previous long poem had been called “The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*,” and Shakespeare haunts this poem

too. (In the latter stages of writing *The Age of Anxiety* Auden was teaching a course on Shakespeare at the New School in Manhattan.)

But it should also be noted that this last long poem ended an era for Auden; his thought and verse pursued new directions after he completed it.

Many cultural critics over the decades—starting with Jacques Barzun in one of the earliest reviews—have lauded Auden for his acuity in naming the era in which we live. But given the poem’s difficulty, few of them have managed to figure out precisely *why* he thinks our age is characterized primarily by anxiety—or even whether he is really saying that at all. *The Age of Anxiety*, then, is extraordinarily famous for a book so little read; or, extraordinarily little read for a book so famous. The purpose of the current edition is to aid those who would like to read the poem rather than sagely cite its title.

AUDEN, WITH his friend Christopher Isherwood, had come to America in January of 1939. In April of that year he wrote to an American acquaintance, “I shall, I hope, be in the States for a year or so,” but his estimate was quite mistaken. He spent more than two years in New York, during which he met a young man named Chester Kallman, soon to become his lover, and returned to the Anglican Christianity of his childhood. For a year he taught at the University of Michigan, then made his way to Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, where he taught from 1942 to 1945. In July of 1944, while staying in the Manhattan apartment of his friends James and Tania Stern, he began writing this poem.

At the end of the next academic year, in April of 1945, Auden joined the Morale Division of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey. He had been recommended for this job by a fellow faculty member at Swarthmore, and then was actively recruited by a leading officer of the Survey. The purpose of the Survey was to understand what the Allied bombing campaigns had done to Germany; the Morale Division was

especially concerned with psychological impact. Auden's public support of the war effort and his fluency in German made him an ideal candidate for this work. He was assigned the equivalent rank of Major and told to buy himself a uniform. In a surviving photograph he looks quite trim and neat in it, a significant departure from his habitual slovenliness. "I should have got along quite well in the Army," he told Alan Ansen.

The condition of Germany shocked and grieved Auden. In the ruined town of Darmstadt he wrote to his friend Elizabeth Mayer, herself German-born: "I keep wishing you were with us to help and then I think, perhaps not, for as I write this sentence I find myself crying." But it seems likely that during his work for the Survey he also came to understand more clearly the extent of the Nazis' devastation of German Jewry: *The Age of Anxiety* is among the first poems in English, perhaps the very first, to register the fact of the Nazis' genocidal murder of millions of Jews.

When Auden returned from Europe, he found the first of several apartments in Manhattan in which he lived almost until the end of his life. But this was an unsettled time for him. He taught the Shakespeare class without especially enjoying it: to a friend he wrote, "The Shakespeare course makes me despair. I have 500 students and so can do nothing but boom away." He worked, off and on, with Bertolt Brecht on an adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi*. He taught for a term at Bennington College in Vermont, read prodigiously in many fields, and wrote dozens of reviews and essays for a wide range of American periodicals. A lifelong homosexual, he decided that he should have an affair with a woman, and did so. (It was in some respects a successful experiment, though not one that he chose to repeat, and he and Rhoda Jaffe remained on friendly terms afterward.) A decade later he would write, "At the age of thirty-seven"—his age when he began *The Age of Anxiety*—"I was still too young to have any sure sense of the direction in which I was moving." The poem testifies to Auden's

confusions. But it also formulates an intellectually powerful response to them.

THE POEM begins with a man named Quant contemplating his reflection in a mirror. The mirror of “The Sea and the Mirror” had been the one that Hamlet says “playing” (acting) holds up to nature. That was fitting, for one of Auden’s purposes in that poem was to describe what it is that poetry represents, or can represent, and what the purpose of such representation might be. But *The Age of Anxiety* is particularly concerned with a kind of mirroring indicated elsewhere in *Hamlet*, at the moment when the prince tells his mother, “You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you.” Can we see ourselves in any given mirror? Do reflections yield reliable knowledge, especially given that mirrors invert? “My deuce, my double, my dear image,” the man muses, “Is it lively there” in “that land of glass”? “Does your self like mine / Taste of untruth? Tell me, what are you / Hiding in your heart”? (When I call what I see in the mirror my image or reflection, I am saying that it’s not *me*.) A few lines after these meditations, we hear the thoughts of another character, Malin: “Man has no mean; his mirrors distort.”

Auden thought often about mirrors in those days. He began a 1942 essay for the Roman Catholic weekly *Commonweal* with these words:

Every child, as he wakes into life, finds a mirror underneath his pillow. Look in it he will and must, else he cannot know who he is, a creature fallen from grace, and this knowledge is a necessary preliminary to salvation. Yet at the moment he looks into his mirror, he falls into mortal danger, tempted by guilt into a despair which tells him that his isolation and abandonment is [*sic*] irrevocable. It is impossible to face such abandonment and live, but as long as he gazes into the mirror he need not face it; he has at least his mirror as an illusory companion. . . .

And in “For the Time Being,” the long poem that preceded “The Sea and the Mirror,” Auden writes of an ultimate existential dislocation in this way:

It’s as if

We had left our house for five minutes to mail a letter,
And during that time the living room had changed places
With the room behind the mirror over the fireplace . . .

So as Quant observes his deuce, his double, his dear image, he is endangered by the “deariness”; but at least he recognizes that it is not his self; he is healthily distanced, at least to some degree, from it. He knows that the room in the mirror differs from the one he inhabits.

Much later in the poem Malin—who often, though not always, speaks for Auden—will designate “The police, / The dress-designers, etc.” as those “who manage the mirrors.” That is, the images of ourselves that we typically see are controlled by political and commercial forces. One might say that ideology is the construction and presentation of mirrors to meet certain predetermined purposes, none of which is the valid self-understanding of the viewer.

Though the events of the poem take place during the war, the writing of it continued once the war was over, and Auden is at considerable pains to show that the anxieties exacerbated by wartime do not evaporate when war ends. Indeed, often just the opposite happens: in her book *Between Past and Future* (1954) Hannah Arendt—who knew Auden well late in life, though she first met him when he was writing this poem—describes the sense of emptiness, the loss of meaning, experienced by those who had resisted the Nazis once the Nazis were defeated. The enemy vanquished, the anxieties remain, and are thereby revealed to have their source in something other than the immediacy of wartime fears.

Auden explores this point comically in “Under Which Lyre: A Reactionary Tract for the Times,” the only other poem he completed while

he was working on *The Age of Anxiety*. Now that “Ares has quit the field” a new conflict emerges:

Let Ares doze, that other war
Is instantly declared once more
’Twixt those who follow
Precocious Hermes all the way
And those who without qualms obey
Pompous Apollo. . . .

The sons of Hermes love to play
And only do their best when they
Are told they oughtn’t;
Apollo’s children never shrink
From boring jobs but have to think
Their work important.

The followers of Hermes pursue art and culture for their own sakes, or for pleasure; the followers of Apollo wish to rationalize culture, to systematize it and render it productive and efficient. Auden and his fellow Hermetics do not wish to rule—“The earth would soon, did Hermes run it, / Be like the Balkans”—but rather to be left alone. However, the deep Apollonian suspicion of unconstrained and unjustified activities may not allow that to happen.

The same concerns are presented in a much more serious way in *The Age of Anxiety*. Malin again:

But the new barbarian is no uncouth
Desert-dweller; he does not emerge
From fir forests; factories bred him;
Corporate companies, college towns
Mothered his mind, and many journals
Backed his beliefs.

The “new barbarian” is also the manager of our mirrors; which means that though “Ares has left the field” we cannot take our ease, because

we cannot be confident that we know ourselves sufficiently well to discern the managers' manipulations. As a third character in *The Age of Anxiety*, Rosetta, says, "Lies and lethargies police the world / In its periods of peace." Moreover, she laments,

... life after life lapses out of
 Its essential self and sinks into
 One press-applauded public untruth
 And, massed to its music, all march in step
 Led by that liar, the lukewarm Spirit
 Of the Escalator

—the Spirit of of the Escalator being that Apollonian demi-deity who personifies irresistible Progress, the move ever upward. Our cultural world is increasingly dominated by Apollo: his voice emerges even from the jukebox that we hear often in this poem. That same voice is evoked in "Under Which Lyre":

His [Apollo's] radio Homers all day long
 In over-Whitmanated song
 That does not scan,
 With adjectives laid end to end,
 Extol the doughnut and commend
 The Common Man.

(The moment in the poem when Quant points a finger at the radio and thereby silences it was surely, for Auden, a wish-fulfillment dream.) In such an environment—with our mirrors distorted by internal and external forces alike—how can we hope to find what Hamlet proposed to show Gertrude, a glass in which we can see the inmost part of ourselves?

The models of psychoanalysis devised by Freud and his successors promise such a mirror. Early in his career Auden was deeply Freudian in his thinking, and when Freud died in 1939 Auden wrote a memorial poem that is largely an encomium, with reservations emerging

only near the poem's end: "If often he was wrong and, at times, absurd," nevertheless he has become "a whole climate of opinion." But soon thereafter Auden's skepticism would become more overt: in his 1942 *Commonweal* essay he wrote,

Psychoanalysis, like all pagan *scientia*, says, "Come, my good man, no wonder you feel guilty. You have a distorting mirror, and that is indeed a very wicked thing to have. But cheer up. For a trifling consideration I shall be delighted to straighten it out for you. There. Look. A perfect image. The evil of distortion is exorcised. Now you have nothing to repent of any longer. Now you are one of the illumined and elect. That will be ten thousand dollars, please.

And immediately come seven devils, and the last state of that man is worse than the first.

This is a severe critique, coming from someone for whom Freud had been so central a figure. And it is strange to see Auden treating psychoanalysis so skeptically, since at the very time he wrote those words he was drawing regularly—especially in his verse—on the work of Carl Gustav Jung.

But while Auden made use of what he found in Jung he was never devoted to him, as he had been devoted to Freud. Freud was for the young Auden primarily, supremely, a healer—in the elegy he is first referred to as "this doctor"—and then a teacher: he taught the present self "how rich life had been and how silly," and thereby enabled that self to become "life-forgiven and more humble." When Auden came to question Freud's stature as healer and teacher alike, he never granted Jung the honor he had granted Freud. Instead, he discovered in Jung a rich conceptual vocabulary that could be applied to many of Auden's own key concerns. Jung's account of myth and archetype would provide a way for Auden to talk about the power of poetry and story for the rest of his life. Throughout the decade of the forties, Auden would draw heavily on Jung's model of psychological types;

and this would be Jung's primary contribution—and that of modern psychology—to *The Age of Anxiety*.

In 1921 Jung published *Psychologische Typen* (Psychological Types), in which he created a series of binary categories. He opposed the *extravert*, for whom social interaction is a source of energy, to the *introvert*, who loses energy through social interaction. He claimed that some of us perceive the world primarily through *sensation*, others through *intuition*; and that some of us make our ethical judgments primarily through *thinking*, others through *feeling*. (These distinctions became widely known when they were adapted for the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator tests administered in many workplaces.) Auden, an inveterate maker of charts and diagrams, was powerfully drawn to such schematic categories. The introvert/extravert dichotomy doesn't show up often in his work, but the rest of Jung's typology makes its first appearance in "For the Time Being" in the section called "The Four Faculties." There the faculties introduce themselves in this way:

INTUITION As a dwarf in the dark of
 His belly I rest;
 FEELING A nymph, I inhabit
 The heart in his breast;
 SENSATION A giant, at the gates of
 His body I stand;
 THOUGHT His dreaming brain is
 My fairyland.

So Intuition abides in the belly—whence we get our "gut instinct"—while Feeling's traditional home is the heart; Sensation depends on the five senses, while Thought trusts the workings of the brain. (In Jung's account, each of these can be experienced in an introverted or extraverted mode. Auden leaves out that complication.)

The Four Faculties really have nothing to do with what happens in "For the Time Being": it appears that Auden was simply fascinated by this schema and was determined to shoehorn it in. (Later in life he

questioned his own judgment: in 1963 he wrote in the margin of this passage in a copy of “For the Time Being,” “Bosh, straight from Jung.”) But *The Age of Anxiety* contains a much more serious and thoroughgoing attempt to appropriate the Jungian types and set them in meaningful interrelation.

That each of the poem’s characters represents one of the Faculties is clear. Quant is Intuition; Malin, Thought; Rosetta, Feeling; Emble, Sensation. Their names indicate the connections more or less clearly. Malin is the most straightforward: *malin*, in familiar French usage, means “shrewd” or “knowing.” Quant suggests a *quantum*—an indivisible unit—and thus the Intuitive’s tendency to grasp ideas and situations as wholes. Emble calls forth “emblem,” and in the seventeenth century especially “emblem books” presented complex ideas in a single picture—that is, they made understanding possible through sight, one of the senses. Rosetta may refer to the rose and its association with love and therefore the heart, the site of feeling. (In “The Four Faculties” Feeling is a “nymph,” the only specifically female figure; that difference is made explicit in *The Age of Anxiety*.)

In “For the Time Being” the Four Faculties say,

We who are four
Were once but one,
Before his act of
Rebellion . . .

That is, the biblical Adam in the Garden of Eden, before the Fall, perceived and judged with all his faculties equally: each of them functioned perfectly, and each worked harmoniously with the others—they formed a single apparatus of understanding.

But “his act of / Rebellion” changed all that: the faculties separated and became competitive with one another. In one person Thought hypertrophies while Intuition atrophies; in another the opposite is true. Since, as the old *New England Primer* encapsulated the theology that Auden held at this time, “In Adam’s Fall / We sinned all,” no one

lives in whom the faculties are integrated and balanced. Or, to put the point in Malin's terms, "Man has no mean; his mirrors distort." If Freudian analysis is a sham, and Jung offers merely heuristic descriptions of our condition, is there any way, then, to undo the consequences of the Fall—to reintegrate the Faculties, to perfect our mirrors—and thereby to assuage our anxiety?

FOR AUDEN, this is, as he wrote in 1941 in an elegy for Henry James, "our predicament":

That catastrophic situation which neither
Victory nor defeat can annul; to be
Deaf yet determined to sing,
To be lame and blind yet burning for the Great Good Place,
To be radically corrupt yet mournfully attracted
By the Real Distinguished Thing.

One way to confront this predicament is to seek a return to an innocent past; another is to press forward to a perfected future. Auden called these opposing inclinations Arcadian and Utopian, and discerned in them a strict temperamental divide. (That divide plays a role as fundamental to his thought as is Jung's distinction between introverts and extraverts to the latter's beliefs, which may explain why Auden doesn't seem particularly interested in that aspect of Jung's typology.)

Auden consistently identified himself with the Arcadians, and he could be withering about Utopianism. His critique of the followers of Apollo in "Under Which Lyre"—again, the only other poem he completed while writing *The Age of Anxiety*—is largely a critique of Utopianism written with a sense of the occasion on which Auden would first read it aloud, at a Harvard Phi Beta Kappa ceremony during the 1946 commencement ceremonies. One of the dominant figures of American culture at that time was James Bryant Conant, Harvard's president, who was striving to modernize the university and transform it

into a research powerhouse focused on science and technology. In the process he emphasized the humanities, especially the classics, far less than Harvard had done through much of its history. Auden told Alan Ansen, “When I was delivering my Phi Beta Kappa poem in Cambridge, I met Conant for about five minutes. ‘This is the real enemy,’ I thought to myself. And I’m sure he had the same impression about me.” To Auden Conant was the “new barbarian”—bred from “factories . . . Corporate companies, college towns”—whom Malin fears.

Given Auden’s position on the Arcadian/Utopian axis, then, it is perhaps surprising that *The Age of Anxiety* is less concerned with the social dangers produced by the Utopian than with the personal temptations facing the Arcadian. But this had been true in “The Sea and the Mirror” too: Arcadianism may have contributed much to Auden’s mirror, but he knew that it had its own way of warping reflections. Rosetta is the chief Arcadian of *The Age of Anxiety*: her memory constantly draws her back to her English upbringing—or, rather, to an idealized and therefore distorted image of that upbringing. Indeed, nostalgic reminiscence for a lost English landscape (“From Seager’s Folly / We beheld what was ours”) is the burden of her first speech, and of several others. But by the end of the poem she has come to realize the falseness of those memories: she is aware that her God

. . . won’t pretend to
 Forget how I began, nor grant belief
 In the mythical scenes I make up
 Of a home like theirs, the Innocent Place where
 His Law can’t look, the leaves are so thick.

Rosetta is Jewish; her God is the God of Israel; and her last great speech repeatedly refers to Israel’s history of exile, captivity, and wilderness wandering—of homelessness, of being unable to return to the scene of past comfort and security. (And of course this history had just reached its terrifying nadir in the Nazis’ destruction of Europe’s Jews, to which Rosetta refers quite directly, in one of the most moving

passages in the whole poem.) That the gates of Eden are guarded by angels with flaming swords; that there is really no place to hide from God what we have done; that “the Innocent Place” is forever lost—these are her realizations as her part in the poem draws to a close.

In the prose prologue to the poem Auden tells us that Rosetta’s “favorite day-dream” was one in which she “conjured up, detail by detail, one of those landscapes familiar to all readers of English detective stories, those lovely innocent countrysides inhabited by charming eccentrics with independent means and amusing hobbies to whom, until the sudden intrusion of a horrid corpse onto the tennis court or into the greenhouse, work and law and guilt are just literary words.” Auden was a great lover of detective stories—“if I have any work to do, I must be careful not to get hold of a detective story, for once I begin one, I cannot work or sleep till I have finished it”—and considered that he and his fellow addicts shared a distinctive trait: “I suspect that the typical reader of detective stories is, like myself, a person who suffers from a sense of sin.” For Auden the classic detective story is a parable of the Fall and of our hopes for being restored to a state of innocence. The phrase “state of grace” recurs in Auden’s treatment of the subject: the primary conceit of the detective story is that the whole society in which it takes place is innocent until an act of murder “precipitates a crisis” by destroying that innocence. This brings law into play, “and for a time all must live in its shadow, till the fallen one is identified. With his arrest, innocence is restored, and the law retires forever.” (After listening to a radio report on the progress of the war, Malin’s first thought is: “A crime has occurred, accusing all.”)

One can see from this description—quoted from an essay Auden wrote during the composition of *The Age of Anxiety*, and which interprets Rosetta’s daydream—that the detective story is a distinctively Arcadian form of wish-fulfillment dream. The Arcadian wants to see his or her ideal society as having been perfect and innocent; and (still more) wants to believe that that original state can be perfectly restored, can become again just what it was. In some of the earliest drafts of the poem (the ones in which the characters are identified

simply as Civilian, Doctor, Girl, and Merchant Seaman) the poem's narrative was conceived of as a detective story. A brief outline reads,

The murder
 The stories of the suspects
 The exposure of their lies (contradiction and fresh evidence)
 The discovery of the murderer.

The notion was abandoned but still echoes in the poem in various ways—not just in Rosetta's fantasy, but also in the great lament or "Dirge" of Part Four in which the characters dream of a great father figure—"some Gilgamesh or Napoleon, some Solon or Sherlock Holmes"—who can embody the Law, enforce its strictures, and thereby restore the society to its primal innocence.

These are, for the poet and his characters alike, enormously tempting fantasies. Their centrality to the poem accounts for its dedication to John Betjeman, a poet deeply sensitive to the Arcadian appeal of certain English places and landscapes, and, for one known as a "light" poet, capable of deceptively powerful presentations of his ideal worlds and the emotions they prompted in him. (Betjeman was a master of "topophilia," love of place, Auden believed, which requires a degree of "visual imagination" that Auden felt he lacked. "It is one of my constant regrets that I am too shortsighted, too much of a Thinking Type, to attempt this sort of poetry." Yet there is much topophilic verse in *The Age of Anxiety*.)

Equally important, the times and places dear to Betjeman were dear to Auden too: they shared a love of Victoriana when that period of English history was scorned by almost all their peers. "Betjeman is really the only person who really understands many of the things that are important to me. . . . That's really my world—bicycles and harmoniums." And, he added, "That's why he got" the dedication of *The Age of Anxiety*.

Primarily through Rosetta's reminiscences, Auden clearly and powerfully presents the appeal of this Victorian Eden—but equally clearly

and powerfully identifies it as a fantasy: not truly historical, and not a legitimate way of resolving “our predicament.” (“Betjeman is really a minor poet, of course,” he told Ansen, and that judgment is rooted in Auden’s perception that Betjeman failed to see that the world he so vividly imagined in his verse was, if partly real, also partly a nostalgic fantasy.) This is clear even in the characters’ own descriptions of what they want, as in Rosetta’s self-mocking wish: “may our luck find the / Regressive road to Grandmother’s House.” The Arcadian temptation is in the end just as deceptive as the Utopian one of the “new barbarians.”

AUDEN HAD largely traditional views about women, so it is not surprising that he would associate the woman of this party with Feeling, with the heart. But it is surprising that he associates Rosetta so closely with himself. A few years before writing this poem he had told Stephen Spender that he was a pronounced “Thinking-Intuitive type,” which should relegate Feeling to a clearly subordinate place; and yet the connections between Auden and Rosetta are obvious, and go well beyond their shared Arcadian passion for detective stories. She seems to have grown up in Birmingham, as did Auden; the landscapes she idealizes are largely associated with the Pennine range of northern England, which Auden often identified as his Eden. Moreover, partly as a result of his experimental heterosexual affair with Rhoda Jaffe—who was Jewish and who in other respects likely served as a model for Rosetta—Auden was reading deeply in Jewish thought in this period and told friends that he was contemplating converting to Judaism.

But Auden remained a Christian, and if some of his interests and traits are refracted through Rosetta, others are manifest in Malin. Though Malin’s outer life seems to have been based on that of John Thompson, a Canadian medical intelligence officer whom Auden met during the war and with whom he became friends, Auden himself was also interested in science and medicine—his father was a physician, and his early interests were almost wholly scientific and technical. He

had even gone up to Oxford planning to read in the sciences. Malin is also the one Christian among the four characters of the poem, and near the end Auden gives him a long meditative reflection on the God of Jesus Christ that echoes Rosetta's preceding, still longer, and distinctively Jewish meditation; the two soliloquies are the clearly matching bookends of the poem's concluding pages.

(In his long poems of the forties Auden becomes less and less straightforward about expressing his Christian beliefs. "For the Time Being" is openly biblical and deeply theological; "The Sea and the Mirror," though its prime subject is the relationship between Christianity and Art, never directly mentions God; and *The Age of Anxiety* is virtually without religious reference until its closing pages. In later life he would often say, "Orthodoxy is reticence," but even as he was working on *The Age of Anxiety* he wrote in an introduction to a collection of Betjeman's poems that in "this season, the man of good will will wear his heart up his sleeve, not on it.")

As for Quant and Emble, Auden suggests that their innermost lives are largely closed to him. The poem leaves Emble passed out on Rosetta's bed, the first of the four to fall silent. Given the small role that Sensation played in Auden's psychological makeup, this cannot be surprising; but Quant, as Auden's fellow Intuitive, might be expected to play a significant role at the end. Yet with a brief comment on his stumble at the door of his house, in a "camp" idiom Auden enjoyed—"Why, Miss *ME*, what's the matter?"—"he opened his front door and disappeared." Thus Auden gives over the substance of the closing sections to Thinking and Feeling.

So two speak at length; one disappears with a joke; one is unconscious. The Four Faculties do not become, again, One; they remain separate and disproportionate. It might not be immediately obvious why the poem brings them together at all.

IN FACT, though, the four have embarked on a joint quest—more than one quest, perhaps. It would be helpful at this point to have an overview of the structure of the poem. It has six parts:

Part One: Prologue

Part Two: The Seven Ages

Part Three: The Seven Stages

Part Four: The Dirge

Part Five: The Masque

Part Six: Epilogue

The Prologue introduces us to the characters and introduces them to each other. At Rosetta's suggestion, they move from the bar to a booth so that they might "Consider . . . the incessant Now of / The traveler through time." What does it mean to be a human being living temporally? This question leads to Part Two, The Seven Ages.

The reference, of course, is to the famous speech by Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Malin, the clear leader here, introduces each Age in language that echoes and revises that of Jaques: "At first, the infant, / Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms" becomes "Behold the infant, helpless in cradle and / Righteous still"; at the end, Jaques's "second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" is revised thus:

His last chapter has little to say.
He grows backward with gradual loss of
Muscular tone and mental quickness . . .

But while Jaques delivers his picture of human development and decline as a monologue, Malin's introductions of the Ages—most of which are longer than Jaques's whole speech—generate responses from each of the other characters, who find in Malin's word-pictures opportunities for disagreement or alteration or addition, in registers of fear or excitement or despair. Auden's version of the Seven Ages is thoroughly polyphonic and is the means by which these characters first begin to emerge as distinct types. (The means of characterization here, and throughout much of the poem, are not those of the novelist but rather those of the taxonomic psychologist, and this is an ancient tradition: more than two thousand years before Jung, Theophrastus

wrote *On Moral Characters*, the first extant set of “character sketches”: the Faultfinder, the Talkative Man, the Slanderer. Similar modes of characterization are common in medieval poetry and drama, from Prudentius’s *Psychomachia* to *Everyman*. Auden’s practice here is far closer to Theophrastus or *Everyman* than to Tolstoy.)

As they meditate on their tour of each human being’s personal history, the four realize that they have further exploration to do together. It is Quant who, after another glimpse of his image in the bar’s mirror, decrees that Rosetta (“peregrine nymph”) must be the one to lead them in this quest for understanding:

O show us the route
 Into hope and health; give each the required
 Pass to appease the superior archons;
 Be our good guide.

And so they enter, together, a kind of dream vision. This is Part Three, the Seven Stages, which Auden introduces in this way: “So it was now as they sought that state of prehistoric happiness which, by human beings, can only be imagined in terms of a landscape bearing a symbolic resemblance to the human body.”

Already there are difficulties. Is it really true that a “state of prehistoric happiness”—that Arcadian vision once more—“can *only* be imagined in terms of a landscape bearing a symbolic resemblance to the human body”? If so, why? No explanations are forthcoming. And as the reader joins the characters in moving through this landscape, it is often impossible to understand how what they see relates to the features of any human body we are familiar with. No wonder, as Edward Mendelson has commented, “the shape of the Edenic quest in ‘The Seven Stages’ has baffled even Auden’s most sympathetic readers.”

When Alan Ansen shared his own bafflement soon after the poem’s publication, Auden professed surprise. He thought that by adding the linking passages in prose that are dotted throughout the poem, he had done his readers a considerable favor. The symbolic structure of

“The Seven Stages,” he said, is “really quite straightforward. . . . It’s all done in the Zohar.” It is hard not to suspect that Auden was pulling Ansen’s leg, for surely he understood as well as anyone that little in the Zohar is straightforward.

The Zohar (or *The Book of Splendor*) is perhaps the greatest Jewish mystical text. It was written in the thirteenth century in Spain by Moses de León, who attributed the work to a second-century Palestinian rabbi, Shimon bar Yohai. Only a few concepts from this immensely variegated work are relevant to Auden’s poem. The Zohar inherits from earlier Kabbalistic writings the notion of the ten *sefirot* or “lights”—attributes of God, emanations of his power and thought. But it goes further by associating each of the *sefirot* with some part of the human body: *Hesed* (Mercy) is linked with the right arm, *Hod* (Majesty) with the left leg, *Tiferet* (Beauty) with the torso, and so on.

In “The Seven Stages” Auden is not borrowing this structure so much as riffing on it. His *sefirot*, if we may call them that, are seven in number rather than ten, and seem to be not attributes of God but rather forms of human desire for the ideal and the innocent. By associating his scheme with the Zohar, Auden may be suggesting that all such quests are, ultimately, quests for God; but if so, this notion is but vaguely indicated. The poet seems to be working more generally in the painterly tradition of the *paysage moralisé* or “moralized landscape”—a conceit he knew very well. By superimposing this symbolic framework upon the Kabbalistic one of the body’s *sefirot*, and then portraying the encounter with this imagined world as a kind of quest-narrative, Auden layers genre upon genre with extraordinarily rococo flourishes. “Really quite straightforward” indeed.

The development of “The Seven Stages” certainly follows the model of the quest-narrative but transforms that genre radically. In an essay he wrote while working on *The Age of Anxiety*, Auden offers an interesting overview of the various kinds of quest-narrative—fairy tale, Grail quest, and so forth—from which it seems clear that the proper variety for “The Seven Stages” is the “Dream Quest”: “The purpose of the

journey is no object but spiritual knowledge, a vision of the reality behind appearances, [by which] the dreamer when he wakes can henceforth live his life on earth.” The other kinds of quest may have some role to play in the poem, but this seems to be the chief model. Yet this dream constantly verges on nightmare. The landscapes here are as unsettling and ambiguous as those confronted by Browning’s protagonist in “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came” (a poem Auden surely had in mind as he wrote), but this is not a solitary quest. The four friends—we may now call them that—are able to converse with one another, to share impressions of their temporary world. And yet they do not experience a common vision. In the Zohar the rabbis and their conversational partners tend to be of one mind and one heart; again and again Moses de León’s characters are overwhelmed by a sense of gratitude for being able to participate in such enlightening conversation. Not so Quant and Malin and Rosetta and Emble. One by one they describe what confronts them, and it is often difficult to know whether they are experiencing the same thing: is the “tacit tarn” Rosetta sees identical with the “salt lake lapping” Quant hears? Do Malin’s “kettle moraines” surround the same body of water, or does he perceive a different landscape? Emble’s vague statement that “The earth looks woeful and wet” offers little help.

As they proceed through their landscape, they twice split into pairs: first Rosetta and Emble separate from Quant and Malin; then, later, Quant goes with Rosetta and Malin with Emble. It is noteworthy that Malin and Rosetta never go together. The four travel, at various times, on foot and by car, by rail and through air, on a trolley car, on bicycles and a boat; near the end they run a race. In all this they have, the narrator says, “a common goal”; Rosetta calls it “our common hope” even as she decrees a temporary parting.

In this quest led by the “peregrine nymph,” while none of the characters understand the full meaning of anything they encounter—any more than the reader does—their *feelings* come into harmony and

perhaps even unison. This occurs even though their general inclinations do not fundamentally alter: in the race they run during the Seventh Stage, Auden writes that “as they run, their rival natures, by art comparing and compared, reveal themselves.” But their shared experience, at this low point in their quest, is a vague awareness of being accused, of falling under some dire judgment—a judgment whose rightness they all acknowledge. (The point of the epigraph of the whole poem, from the *Dies Irae*, becomes sharper here.) Each confesses sins that, collectively, amount to a brief anatomy of pride. In a 1941 review of Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Auden had written of “the temptation to sin, [which] is what the psychologist calls anxiety, and the Christian calls lack of faith.” At this point the characters experience a reinterpretation of their own condition: what had been named psychologically as “anxiety” comes home as a moral and spiritual predicament, “the temptation to sin.”

This is bad news, but not as bad as it sounds. These events take place—as Auden decided, or decided to inform his readers, just before sending the poem to the publisher—on “the night of All Souls.” Auden had learned from the maverick historian Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy that the great significance of that date on the Church’s calendar is that it acknowledges and celebrates the “universal democracy of sinners under judgment”: Quant, Malin, Rosetta, and Emble have, more or less consciously, joined that democracy.

Each, having seen his or her innermost self with disturbing clarity, has the same impulse: to flee into the nearby forest to hide and reflect. (Similarly, Adam and Eve, after “their eyes were opened,” “hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.”) They “vanish down solitary paths, with no guide but their sorrows, no companion but their own voices. Their ways cross and recross yet never once do they meet.” And when they are finally reunited, it is only in order to confront their utter failure—and, still more important, the illusory nature of their whole quest. “Their journey has

been one long flight” from the real world, and that world confronts them now. At this moment of sad recognition they awake and find themselves back in the bar.

Their cab ride from the bar to Rosetta’s apartment—this is the action of Part Four, “The Dirge”—is therefore somber. They have learned that they cannot save themselves, that they have no resources by which they might be healed of their anxiety; but they also discern that they will not be saved by “some semi-divine stranger with superhuman powers, some Gilgamesh or Napoleon, some Solon or Sherlock Holmes.” (It may well be that the war they are living through, which had been promoted in large part by the German cult of the *Führer*, has ended such dreams for them.) For the loss of that hope they utter a collective lamentation.

In light of these dismal events it is perhaps surprising that the action of Part Five, “The Masque,” is an improvised and symbolic wedding ceremony. But, as the narrator tells us, “In times of war even the crudest kind of positive affection between persons seems extraordinarily beautiful, a noble symbol of the peace and forgiveness of which the whole world stands so desperately in need.” So even the “quite casual attraction” that has arisen between Emble and Rosetta “seemed and was of immense importance.” The “and was” indicates that the narrator has no wish to dismiss this refuge: when there is meaning in nothing else there can be meaning in love. And all four desperately hope for this meaning to be real and strong, and to be the foundation—somehow—for the restoration of social order and the achievement of “the millennial Earthly Paradise.” Having abandoned, in light of the catastrophic failure of their quest for “that state of prehistoric happiness,” the Arcadian return, they now become Utopians of the heart, seeking through love the positive energies necessary to achieve some future perfection. (Even, or especially, when those energies are deflected they have great creative potential: Auden was thinking of the power of sublimation when, in his elegy on Freud, he wrote of “Eros, builder of cities.”)

But there is a reason Auden calls this part a masque: it is a piece of self-consciously artificial play-acting. Surely Quant knows this and laughs at it when he builds “a little altar of sandwiches” and “invoke[s] the Queen of love.” Yet all four seem utterly committed to the ritual as it unfolds, and when Quant and Malin depart, their well-wishing is both sincere and superficial. It is a sign, perhaps, of how little progress they have made except in mutual affection. But that is, by Auden’s lights, significant progress indeed.

That they are indeed “play-acting” in this scene lies near the heart of the matter. Auden told Theodore Spencer that one of his goals in this poem was “to devise a rhetoric which would reveal the great vice of our age which is that we are all not only ‘actors’ but know that we are (reduplicated Hamlets) and that it is only at moments, in spite of ourselves, and when we least expect it, that our real feelings break through.” Thus the importance of what was at that stage in composition the epigraph to the entire poem, from the highly mannered comic novelist Ronald Firbank (1886–1926): “‘Oh, Heaven help me,’ she prayed, to be decorative and to do right.” It could be said that the great challenge for the “reduplicated Hamlets” of this poem is to learn how to be decorative and do right.

Auden believed that certain vital spiritual truths could be expressed, indirectly, through comedy, in ways that would be impossible through more straightforward means. Thus he wrote of P. G. Wodehouse’s character Jeeves, “So speaks comically—and in what other mode than the comic could it on earth truthfully speak?—the voice of Agape, of Holy Love.” But this is an unusual notion; it is understandable that Theodore Spencer, reading a draft of the poem, objected to the quotation from Firbank as frivolous. To this protest Auden replied: “Reluctantly, I agree with you. The Firbank epigraph must go. I think it very serious but no one else will unless I write an essay to explain why.” In the end he simply moved the epigraph to “The Masque,” where, despite its apparent lack of fit with a section that ends with a meditation on the genocide of Europe’s Jews, it properly belongs. (Only with

this move did the quotation from the *Dies Irae* take its place at the head of the work.)

And Auden eventually wrote that essay: in 1961 he gave a radio talk on “Ronald Firbank and an Amateur World,” in which he strove to explain the virtue of treating, as Firbank does, both religion and sex as *games*, as having a distinctive human value when played by amateurs. Games are characterized, in Auden’s view, by their arbitrariness, their freedom from the constraints of necessity. “The Masque” is both a religious and a sexual game, exhilarating for the participants as long as it lasts. But when it ends, it leaves them in a mood of reflective self-assessment.

So, paradoxically, it is in the artificiality of game playing that we are most likely to be surprised by “our real feelings”: we find them when we are patently not looking for them. But this “breaking through” of truth is an unpredictable experience, and the anxieties and illusions of daily life can quickly reclaim their sovereignty over us. Whether this meeting on “the night of All Souls” will make a significant difference to the lives of the four temporary friends cannot be known, but there is no reason to think that any of them will meet again. In the Epilogue we are told, “QUANT and MALIN, after expressing their mutual pleasure at having met, after exchanging addresses and promising to look each other up some time, had parted and immediately forgotten each other’s existence.”

Have they been altered by their shared visionary experience? Certainly by the poem’s end they are less the Theophrastian types they seemed to be at the start and more individual—but in a distinctive sense of that word. In yet another essay written during the composition of *The Age of Anxiety*, Auden claimed that “The term ‘individual’ has two senses, and one must be careful in discussion to find out in which sense it is being used. In the realm of nature, ‘individual’ means to be something others are not, to have uniqueness: in the realm of spirit, it means to become what one wills, to have a self-determined history.” It is not clear whether all of the characters in this poem have

achieved *full* individuality, “in the realm of spirit,” during the course of their evening, and there is no guarantee that anything they do achieve will last; but no careful reader of the poem will be content to see any of them as simply a Jungian type.

As noted earlier, in their last appearances in the poem, Emble sleeps on Rosetta’s bed, and Quant disappears behind his door. But Rosetta and Malin—the first at the end of Part Five, and the second in the brief Epilogue—are left to face, with a frightened nakedness, their God. One and the same God, Auden would say, though worshipped under two Covenants: the characters’ meditations rhyme closely. They are sinners in the hands of a God who may, or may not, be angry—whose love is often indistinguishable from anger—but who in any case cannot be evaded or deceived.

In 1942 Auden had written,

The difference between a genuine Judaism and a genuine Christianity is like the difference between a young girl who has been promised a husband in a dream and a married woman who believes that she loves and is loved.

The young girl knows that the decisively important thing has not yet happened to her, that her present life is therefore a period of anticipation, important not in itself but in its relation to the future. . . .

To the married woman, on the other hand, the decisively important thing has already happened, and because of this everything in the present is significant. . . .

Few traces of this view—which depends on the belief that the coming of the Messiah is “the decisively important thing,” a belief more central to Judaism as a religion with biblical roots than to Judaism as a modern cultural practice—remain in *The Age of Anxiety*. Rosetta’s great speech is built around the idea that something utterly decisive happened long ago: a covenant made by the Lord God with the people of Israel. And what has happened since is the complex and painful working-out

of a covenantal bond that seems to cause pain on both sides. (It is probably important that this meditation is the conclusion of “The Masque,” which as we have seen focuses largely on the contrastingly trivial and ephemeral connection between Rosetta and Emble.) Rosetta’s knowledge that the God of Israel never wavers in his commitment is as disturbing as it is reassuring: modifying one of Israel’s great songs of consolation, Psalm 139, she thinks,

Though I fly to Wall Street
Or Publisher’s Row, or pass out, or
Submerge in music, or marry well,
Marooned on riches, He’ll be right there
With His Eye upon me. Should I hide away
My secret sins in consulting rooms,
My fears are before Him; He’ll find all,
Ignore nothing.

Rosetta’s soliloquy is full of biblical references, almost all of them to episodes of exile and captivity; and she acknowledges the most recent and horrific captivity under Nazi Germany. Wondering “who’ll be left” at the end of a history of persecutions and pogroms, she can only sigh and repeat the ancient *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one God.”

Rosetta’s speech is saturated by the details of history—her own and that of her people—but Malin’s meditation is more philosophical. He is concerned with God’s great abstractions: “His Good,” “His Question,” “His Truth.” (As Auden wrote in a letter to a friend, Quant’s “defence against the contemporary scene is to make it frivolous where Malin tries to see it *sub specie aeternitatis*”—from the perspective of eternity.) Yet in substance his thoughts are identical to Rosetta’s:

In our anguish we struggle
To elude Him, to lie to Him, yet His love observes
His appalling promise; His predilection

As we wander and weep is with us to the end,
Minding our meanings, our least matter dear to Him . . .

These believers, then, share a discomfort and a consolation: discomfort that all the dark things they have just learned about themselves in their dream-quest are known, and known perfectly, by their God; and consolation that none of that diminishes the divine love. Having experienced with their two companions the transmutation of “anxiety” into “the temptation to sin,” they take the further step their nonreligious companions could not: they recognize their own lack of faith and repent of it.

Near the end of “The Sea and the Mirror” Caliban conjures up a vision of “the greatest grandest opera rendered by a very provincial touring company indeed.” The members of this company fail in every possible way, and do so spectacularly, but, Caliban says, it is at that moment that “we are blessed with that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf. . . . It is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected Work that is not ours.” Something similar happens to Malin and Rosetta: in the emphatic failure of their Arcadian quest; in the recognition that no great “semi-divine stranger with superhuman powers” will arrive to rescue them; in the acknowledgment that their wedding masque, with its Utopian vision of love conquering all, was but a brief if pleasant fiction, they come to the end of themselves and the beginning of the knowledge of God. For the moment at least, they experience something deeper and stranger than anxiety. It is too resigned to be happiness; but it is a kind of peace.

AUDEN UNDERSTOOD, profoundly, that literary forms are ways of discerning the world: each of them reveals some aspect of experience while concealing others. (Things can be said in the epic that cannot be said in satire, and comedy discerns truths to which tragedy is blind.) It is for this reason that his longer poems display an almost

encyclopedia variety of poetic forms and genres, none more so than *The Age of Anxiety*. We get a warning of what is to come in the poem's subtitle: "A Baroque Eclogue." The eclogue is a classical form, associated since Virgil with the meditations of shepherds—usually in groups. (The Zohar is actually an odd kind of eclogue, with rabbis rather than shepherds: the characters drift through Israel, pausing to rest under trees so they can converse about matters divine, in almost exactly the way that Arcadian shepherds lie about on hillsides contemplating the beauty of local shepherdesses.) This setting means that the eclogue is also a bucolic form, which makes it odd that it should be attached to a poem that begins and ends in New York City; but given the unpopulated visionary landscapes the characters move through, we cannot think the description merely ironic.

Auden calls the poem a *baroque* eclogue, and that is still more curious, given the elaborate ornamentation we associate with that tradition: it offers anything but the simplicity and cleanness of line we associate with the "classical." Yet the description is apt: the verse of *The Age of Anxiety* is nothing if not ornamented, and the poet seems to take joy in the ornamenting. (Auden once wrote that one of his tests of a critic's good taste was a genuine liking for "conscious theatrical exaggeration, pieces of Baroque flattery like Dryden's welcome to the Duchess of Ormond.")

But this is just the beginning of complications. The primary verse form of the poem is a four-beat line, with three alliterations per line. *Beowulf* is often mentioned in descriptions of this verse, but the form preceded *Beowulf* in Anglo-Saxon verse and would last hundreds of years afterward. (Its last great master was the anonymous author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and other poems, who was probably a contemporary of Chaucer. Indeed, *Sir Gawain*, with its passage through symbolic landscapes and its scenes of temptation, is one of the works that most powerfully underlies *The Age of Anxiety*. Auden himself associated the versification with another great medieval poem, *Piers Plowman*.) The poem contains several lyrics that draw on other medieval

forms, including some from Old Norse, a language in which he was deeply interested. But the reader is just as likely to come across parodies or pastiches of the novelty songs that the jukeboxes and radios of the 1940s offered in large doses. (Auden complained to Alan Ansen about the impossibility of escaping them, in the diners of Swarthmore as much as in the dives of Manhattan.)

So, just as we find a rich thematic layering in this poem—concepts from the Zohar overlapping with the *paysage moralisé* tradition, and all bonded to a dream-quest—we see a similar layering of technical elements from the ancient world, the Middle Ages, the early modern, and the utterly contemporary. To some extent these multiple variations are simply a function of Auden's technical brilliance and the delight he took in exhibiting it; but there are more important reasons for such overwhelming complexity. Chief among them is Auden's conviction, already noted, that "the great vice of our age . . . is that we are all not only 'actors' but know that we are." We are "reduplicated Hamlets" in that we are eternally and pathologically self-conscious—we are always, like Quant at the outset of the poem, peering into our mirrors. In the introduction to John Betjeman's verse mentioned earlier, Auden writes, "For better or worse, we who live in this age not only feel but are critically conscious of our emotions—there is no difference in this respect between the highest of highbrows and the most farouche of soda jerkers—and, in consequence, again for better or worse, a naïve rhetoric, one that is not confessedly 'theatrical,' is now impossible in poetry. The honest manly style is today only suited to Iago." With this point in mind, one understands better why Auden dedicated this poem to Betjeman.

In *The Age of Anxiety*, therefore, Auden forcibly explores the manifold varieties of artifice; he multiplies forms and genres dizzyingly. If "reduplicated Hamlets" prefer to discreetly observe themselves in an elegant pier glass, Auden offers instead a funhouse hall of mirrors. The counterpart to Quant's opening look at himself in the bar is this dark thought from Malin's concluding soliloquy: "one / Staggers to

the bathroom and stares in the glass / To meet one's madness." (Hamlet again: "You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you.") Images are repeatedly and variously warped; the characters grow disoriented, dizzy, and faint. In the midst of this constant change Rosetta and Malin find only one still point.

THE STRATEGY that Auden pursues here has its risks, and it is tempting simply to say that it didn't work. *The Age of Anxiety* is not widely read and has never been fully understood. A book with such complexly intertwining themes probably should not feature such complexly intertwining techniques—even (or especially) if one of its chief concerns is the danger of artificiality. One can sympathize with the reader who says to the poet, "Physician, heal thyself."

Moreover—and this is clearly a related point—the experiences of the characters here are abstract and intellectual to the highest degree. Less than a decade after writing this poem, Auden would write of Kierkegaard that "a planetary visitor might read through the whole of his voluminous works without discovering that human beings are not ghosts but have bodies of flesh and blood"—but one could almost say the same of the four characters of *The Age of Anxiety*. The body that has the greatest role in the poem is the symbolic one he borrowed from the Zohar and made more obscure. As Edward Mendelson has commented, "Auden's efforts to write a poetry of the body were frustrated by his insistence on writing about symbols of the body rather than the body itself."

This defect he would soon remedy: the poems he would produce in the next decade are constantly absorbed in contemplation of human embodiment. But *The Age of Anxiety* remains a vitally important poem—in some ways a great one. It is surely his most ambitious work: formidably complex as his previous two long poems are, their themes are more bounded. "For the Time Being" meditates on the entry of the Divine into history; "The Sea and the Mirror" on the relationship between art and religious belief. These are large concerns, to be sure,

but delimited. The question of what makes for an age of anxiety, on the other hand, is vaster and more amorphous: the condition itself must be described, and its etiology traced. A common anxiety manifests itself differently in those with and without religion; and for both groups alike it is fed by political, social, familial, and personal disorders. In *The Age of Anxiety* Auden tries to account for all of these, and if he falls short, that is a necessary result of such comprehensive ambition.

The poem quickly captured the imagination of its cultural moment, and not just because its title provided a terse and widely applicable diagnostic phrase. Thanks in part to some glowing early reviews—the most notable of them being Jacques Barzun’s commendation in *Harper’s*—and a profile of the poet that appeared in *Time* magazine the week of the poem’s publication, it was reprinted four times within two years of its first appearance. *The Age of Anxiety* received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1948, and inspired Leonard Bernstein’s Symphony no. 2 for Piano and Orchestra, *The Age of Anxiety* (1949)—an attempt to render the plot and tone of the poem in musical terms, without words. Jerome Robbins choreographed a ballet set to Bernstein’s symphony (1950); Auden, who never cared for ballet, reportedly especially disliked this one.

A stage version of the poem was presented in New York by the Living Theater Studio in 1954, but Auden seems to have had no involvement in it. However, in 1960 an undergraduate group at Princeton, Theatre Intime, staged an abridged version of the poem, with narration played through a television on stage, and Auden was sufficiently pleased by this adaptation that he agreed to serve as one of those televised narrators. (In the printed program he is identified as “Communicator.”) So the poem has proven capable of vivid re-presentation, in multiple forms and genres.

In 1953 Auden would write of the moment when, each morning, we emerge from our private worlds: “Now each of us / Prays to an image of his image of himself.” *The Age of Anxiety* is an extraordinarily acute anatomy of our self-images, and a diagnosis of those images’

power not just to shape but to create our ideas. And it contains some of Auden's most powerful and beautiful verse: the compressed lyric "Hushed is the lake of hawks," the great Dirge of Part Four, the twin final speeches of Rosetta and Malin. This poem, for all its strangeness and extravagant elaboration of theme and technique, deserves a central place in the canon of twentieth-century poetry.

THE TEXT

Several of Auden's surviving holograph notebooks contain drafts of *The Age of Anxiety*. A notebook in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library contains drafts of just a few speeches, but far more extensive notebooks are held at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas and Yale's Beinecke Library. Almost all of the material in these two notebooks comes from a very late stage in the compositional process: the speeches tend to be close to their published forms, in many cases identical. The first forty pages of the Ransom notebook have been torn out, which suggests that Auden may have destroyed earlier sketches and outlines; but in any case little earlier material survives.

Though the verse itself in these notebooks is highly polished, there are few indications of the structure that the poem would ultimately assume. The order of the speeches only occasionally anticipates that of the published poem—the very first entry in the Beinecke notebook is a version of Malin's concluding speech, which is followed by speeches from various parts of the poem—and only rarely are the speakers indicated. Moreover, when speakers are noted, usually initials only are provided, and variable ones at that: A, B, J, M. At one point in the Beinecke notebook a series of stanzas are labeled A B C D A B C D A, and in the margin A is identified as "Civ" (presumably Quant), B as "Doc" (Malin), C as "girl" (Rosetta), and D as "M.S." ("Merchant Seaman" Emble). The initials of the names Auden eventually settled on appear only toward the end of the Ransom notebook—the

one clear suggestion that it was used later than the one in the Beinecke. The only sign of the prose narration that would eventually provide interpretative context for the verse comes on the inside back cover of the Beinecke notebook: a small passage from what would become Part Four, though, interestingly, in verse: “some Gilgamesh or Napoleon, / Some Solon or Sherlock Holmes.”

During the years that Auden worked on this poem, a young American poet named Alan Ansen (1922–2006) was his unofficial secretary, amanuensis, and would-be Boswell. Ansen—who after his time with Auden would become the model for Rollo Greb in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*—kept careful track of Auden’s opinions in a notebook, which he published years later as *The Table Talk of W. H. Auden*, often cited in the notes below; he likewise attended Auden’s lectures on Shakespeare at the New School and transcribed them as carefully and completely as he could. And, most important for our purposes here, he assisted Auden in several ways during and after the publication of *The Age of Anxiety*.

Ansen’s most important service was to type for Auden the whole poem. (The manuscript he worked from has not been found.) The typescript, now in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library along with Ansen’s other literary remains, is quite close to the version that would be published by Random House in July 1947.

Ansen referred to the typescript as the “Isherwood text,” because in December of 1946 it was sent to Auden’s friend Christopher Isherwood. It is not clear when or how Isherwood returned the typescript, though the presence in the Berg of the original envelope (addressed to Isherwood at his home in Santa Monica, California) suggests that Isherwood simply brought it with him when he came to New York in early 1947, or when he returned some months later. It does not appear that he made any comments on the typescript, and he may never have read the poem. However, the pages bear a number of corrections and annotations by Auden and Ansen, who evidently used it to prepare the text for the publisher. Auden’s marks usually correct

spelling errors that Ansen made as a result of misreading the poet's handwriting ("lovelies" for "lonelies," for instance, and "Abyssinia" for "Abyssus"); significant changes (described in the notes at the back of this edition) in Ansen's hand, though clearly made at Auden's direction, occur frequently.

Ansen was useful to Auden not just as a typist, but also as a polyglot whose linguistic knowledge the poet could draw upon, and—most important of all—as someone attentive to prosody. "I'm never going to be able to let you go," Ansen records Auden saying to him. "I've never met anyone outside yourself who makes any effort to count—to see what one's doing." And Ansen counted indeed: probably during the typing of Auden's manuscript he came to notice a number of lines that failed to follow the metrical rules Auden had set for himself, and began to keep track of them in a handful of typed documents with such titles as "The Age Of Anxiety: Prolegomena To An Apparatus Criticus" and "Syllabifications To Be Reconsidered For The English Edition Of The Age Of Anxiety" and "Some Further Notes On The Syllabification Of The Age Of Anxiety" and "Further Notes On Syllabification." He was extraordinarily thorough and spurred Auden on to his own corrections: these, handwritten on two pages, accompany Ansen's notes in the Berg Collection.

Ansen's comment that these notes are "To Be Reconsidered For The English Edition Of The Age Of Anxiety" suggests that they had been made too late for Random House's first American printing, on 11 July 1947, but as it turned out, the poem had a second impression in August, so the changes were made for that printing. (However, they were, inexplicably, not incorporated into Faber and Faber's first English edition when it finally appeared, more than a year later.)

The most frequent changes for the second impression involve the shifting of words from the beginning of one line to the end of the previous one: in the first edition he had generally avoided feminine endings and as a result had made the verse overly iambic. I have

incorporated all those changes in the text of this edition and, except in the case of the tiniest adjustments of punctuation, have indicated the first impression's reading in the notes. (More about Auden's technical ambitions for the poem may be discerned in the two letters reprinted in the Appendix.)

The text presented here is nearly identical to the one that Edward Mendelson has provided in the *Collected Poems*. The chief differences occur in three speeches from Part Three that Auden later extracted from the poem and published as "Three Dreams," and even these variations are quite minor.

Ansen had another role in the preparation of this manuscript: Auden asked him to write a blurb for the dust jacket. This Ansen tried to do, but Auden was not satisfied with the result and wrote his own. The version that ultimately appeared was heavily edited—brief and almost cursory, but not without interest:

Mr. Auden's latest poem, *The Age of Anxiety*, is an eclogue; that is to say, it adopts the pastoral convention in which a natural setting is contrasted with an artificial style of diction. The setting, in this case, is a bar on Third Avenue, New York City, later an apartment on the West Side, the time an All-Souls' Night during the late war. The characters, a woman and three men, two in uniform, speak in alliterative verse.

The version that Ansen typed up for Auden was far too long to be used—but far more interesting to the reader of the poem. Included here are phrases struck through on the typescript:

BLURB FOR THE AGE OF ANXIETY

W. H. Auden's latest poem opens in a Third Avenue bar, where ~~four people~~ a few stray customers have come to seek relief from the tensions of wartime New York. It is the evening of All Souls'

Day, ~~the day of prayer for spirits not yet worthy of the Beatific Vision~~ and the faithful are concluding their prayers for the spirits still engaged in the ambiguities of purgation.

Malin, the medical intelligence officer with his pride of intellect and forbidden affections, Emble, the young sailor who is too handsome for his own good, Rosetta, the shrewd department store buyer trying to build a factitious repose out of day-dreams and sexual adventures, and Quant, the middle-aged shipping clerk harassed by the monotony of his occupation and the indiscriminateness of his diversions—all four patently stand in need of like intercession.

The radio squawks its depressing news, and they draw together to consider first their immediate historical plight and then, under the guidance of Malin, the seven ages of man. Stimulated by liquor and dissatisfied with their analysis, they dream of a state of unhistorical happiness which, as it turns out, involves only continual temptation and perpetual disappointment.

FINAL PARAGRAPH A

At Rosetta's suggestion they adjourn to her apartment. There the crucial decisions of the evening are taken. ~~How the characters are helped to renounce what they obviously ought not to have, how lovers' meetings end in journeys~~ Help in arriving at correct ones is available, but its effect on the journeys in which lovers' meetings end the reader must find out for himself.

FINAL PARAGRAPH B

At Rosetta's suggestion they adjourn to her apartment. There the characters are helped to the crucial renunciations of the evening. The last two sections of the poem end with two great monologues, indices to that grasp of historical reality and in-

sight into the human condition which make *The Age of Anxiety* a major contribution to American culture.

POSSIBLE ADDITIONAL PARAGRAPHS TO
FOLLOW FINAL PARAGRAPH A

The poet has rejected the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming in favor of a return to Germanic alliterative metres, the metres of *Piers Ploughman* and the Skalds. He has tightened up Langland's line and indulged in bold experiments which will be of interest to all amateurs of the art.

In the course of the poem may be found definitive laments over the sufferings imposed by the late war on land, on the sea, in the air, and on the home front, the torch song to end all torch songs, and an elaborate dirge for a wartime leader. And the two great monologues which end the last two sections of the poem only epitomize that grasp of historical reality and insight into the human condition which make *The Age of Anxiety* a major contribution to American culture.

It might be appropriate here to cite the blurb written for the English edition—based on the final American version, but more praiseful in some ways while in others betraying some uncertainty about the poem's overall success—by Auden's editor at Faber, T. S. Eliot:

Mr. Auden's new long poem takes the form of a dialogue between a woman and three men: the place, first a bar on Third Avenue, second, an apartment on the West Side of New York; the time an All Souls' Night during the War. The content of the poem, like that of Mr. Auden's previous two volumes, will arouse endless discussion and argument; the form is one more illustration of the author's inexhaustible resourcefulness and mastery of versification, which become more astonishing with every work he puts forth.

FINALLY, SOMETHING needs to be said about the appearance of this edition. In January of 1947 Auden told Alan Ansen, “In my contract for *The Age of Anxiety*, I specified that I wanted to have control over the details of printing. . . . The book is going to be very small, the poetry is set in very small type and the prose still smaller.” The current volume is not as small as the first American edition, and most later ones—they were only 4.75 by 7.5 inches—and the type is larger.

In other respects, the appearance of this edition differs from Auden’s expressed wishes. He frequently quarreled with his American publisher, Random House, about the appearance of his books. “It isn’t that I don’t realise that, as such things go, the fount [font] is well designed,” he wrote to Bennett Cerf in 1944. “It’s a matter of principle. You would never think of using such a fount for, say, ‘The Embryology of the Elasmobranch Liver’, so why use it for poetry? I feel very strongly that ‘aesthetic’ books should not be put in a special class.” And then, in 1951, he told *Publishers Weekly*, “I have a violent prejudice against arty paper and printing which is too often considered fitting for unsalable prestige books, and by inverted snobbery I favor the shiny white paper and format of the textbook. Further, perhaps because I am near-sighted and hold the page nearer my nose than is normal, I have a strong preference for small type.”

During the preparations for the publication of *The Age of Anxiety*, Auden made sure that Random House understood his position. As Nicholas Jenkins explains,

In 1946, when he told Random House what he wanted for *The Age of Anxiety*, he loaned them his copy of *A Treatise on a Section of the Strata from Newcastle-upon-Tyne to Cross Fell, with Remarks on Mineral Veins*, by Westgarth Forster, a book originally published in 1821 but that he seems to have owned in the third edition of 1883, and instructed them to copy its appearance. They did. *A Treatise on a Section of the Strata* had been set in Scotch, an extremely popular 19th century typeface, and the Kingsport Press

in Tennessee used the Linotype version of Scotch for Auden's book.

Though modern digital versions of Scotch exist, this volume uses the same basic typographic design used in earlier volumes in the W.H. Auden Critical Editions series and does not attempt to follow Auden's specifications for the 1947 edition. The sharp, consistent digital fonts used in the early twenty-first century cannot accurately reproduce the irregular, rough-edged, hot-metal typography produced by a Linotype machine in 1947, and any attempt to do so would produce an unpleasant example of typographic kitsch. A representative page of the original is reproduced on the facing page and may give some sense of the typographic flavor that Auden wanted.

Now
ROSETTA The ground's aggression is growing less.
says: The clouds are clearing.

EMBLE My cape is dry.
says: I can reckon correctly.

MALIN My real intentions
says: Are nicer now.

And I'm nearing the top.
QUANT says: When I hear what I'm up to, how I shall laugh.

And so, on a treeless watershed, at the tumbledown Mariners
Tavern (which is miles inland) the four assemble, having
completed the first stage of their journey. They look about
them, and everything seems somehow familiar. Emble says:

The railroads like the rivers run for the most
part

East and west, and from here
On a clear day both coasts are visible
And the long piers of their ports.
To the south one sees the sawtooth range
Our nickel and copper come from,
And beyond it the Barrens used for Army
Manœuvres; while to the north