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W. H. Auden at Swarthmore

He brought glamor to the community and contributed much amusement and entertainment. He brought intellectual stimulation and provocation, and even inspiration. He strengthened the tradition of nonconformity.

W. H. Auden at Swarthmore

"Never forget you're a heel; read the New Yorker; *don't wash too much."*

Auden is perhaps the most distinguished exotic ever to be associated with Swarthmore, and certainly the most picturesque. His stay here was much longer (from autumn, 1942, to spring, 1945), and his participation in the academic community apparently much fuller than at any other of the numerous colleges and universities at which he has taught. Both his impact on Swarthmore and the impact of Swarthmore on him should therefore be worth discussion.

It is not always easy to establish the facts about Auden: he is a colorful personality about whom myths spring up immediately, and he seems to be remarkably indifferent to what is published about him, not correcting even gross errors. For instance, Richard Hoggart in his book on Auden, published in London, 1951, stated that Auden was in 1950 appointed Assistant Professor of English in Ann Arbor University, Michigan. This mythical appointment is the only part of Auden's American academic history that seems to have found its way across the Atlantic, and it has been solemnly repeated in British reference works for ten years. Some of these have in time promoted him to Associate Professor and have Anglicized the name of the nonexistent university to "Ann Arbour." The latest British *Who's Who* has it, and some American reference works have picked it up, including the authoritative Supplement (1955) to Haycraft and Kunitz's *Twentieth Century Authors*. The fact is that Auden taught at the University of Michigan for one year before coming to Swarthmore and has had no connection whatever with Michigan since 1942.

Although college newspapers are not always the most reliable of sources of information, the *Phoenix* during this period seems to have been remarkably competent as well as lively, and I have taken much of my material from its files. One or two faculty members who knew Auden have also been kind enough to give me the benefit of some of their recollections. There is, however, a body of oral tradition that I have not attempted to use, feeling that it would be as inappropriate to trespass into the territory of folklore as into that of serious personal relations.

During his stay at Swarthmore, Auden seems to have been affable, accessible, and willing to take part in a wide range of activities. He wrote frequently for the *Phoenix*, lectured at various functions, reviewed the College plays, spoke at Collection, served on committees for the judgment of student poetry, and so on. The one thing he does not seem to have done is to give any public readings of his own poetry or mention it except in reply to specific questions. Auden was not here as Poet in Residence or holder of any special chair or fellowship in Creative Writing; he was a regular teacher in the normal academic establishment, and fully qualified for such duties, first by his Oxford education and by some years' experience teaching in English schools, and more importantly by the quality of his mind and the range and depth of his awareness. As some of his critics have complained, Auden is didactic by nature, and he had been teaching in one form or another from his earliest years.

The *Phoenix* headline in October, 1942, was "Rumors, Awe Surround Auden's Arrival Here." Auden came as Lecturer in English, teaching only part time because he held a Guggenheim concurrently. He taught a course in Elizabethan Literature in the first semester, and in the second a seminar in Romantic Literature from Rousseau to Hitler. In his second year his status was regularized to Associate Professor of English, and he seems to have taught mainly English Composition to the American and Chinese Naval Units. He lived at first in a house called Sunnybank on the far side of the Ville; later he moved to 16 Oberlin Avenue.

Auden's appearance and habits were, even for Swarthmore, individualistic. One student observed that he looked "so English, like a thatched cottage" (Auden is said to have got a haircut promptly when this remark was reported to him); another, that he looked like the village idiot. He is reported to have worn no socks, except occasionally on his head in bad weather, and no underwear; to have used a rope for a belt, worn bedroom slippers on the street, and often

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entertained in bathrobe and slippers. He was teaching at Bryn Mawr also during part of his residence here, and customarily made his trips back and forth with a suitcase full of bottles, bringing in supplies to dry Swarthmore and returning empties. His house was furnished chiefly with piles of phonograph records, books, and miscellaneous objects such as bottles and cigarette packs; there were no rugs. There was, however, a large dining room table which Auden used for writing on—he ate all his meals out—and some impressive wax flowers. The bed had once belonged to Ehrlich, the discoverer of magic bullets for syphilis. Auden told the *Phoenix*, "I'm very disorderly myself, but that doesn't mean I like being disorderly. I don't. I would just prefer servants of my own."

THROUGH DOCTINE as well as example, Auden tried to strengthen the impulse to nonconformity and individualism among the students. His most famous article for the *Phoenix* was one called "Student Government —or Bombs?" in which the thesis was that student government is a trap to be avoided by all healthy-minded undergraduates. All power corrupts, Auden began, but anarchism is unfortunately too simple; government is a necessary evil. Still, it is better to be governed than to govern, and this is why colleges try to get students to govern themselves; but Auden warned: don't be taken in. Student government works all right, as the English school system shows, but it works all too well. The college years are not the time to be sensible or nice or co-operative. Most people who are lovable and admirable in maturity, according to Auden, were in college either shy nonentities or conspicuous little toads, whereas the former Big Man on Campus is now bald and has a wife with a face like the backside of a bus, and the ex-Big Woman on Campus is now reading the latest Book of the Month or concocting for her tame little husband some salad she read about in the *Ladies' Home Journal.* Auden's peroration was, "Fellow Irresponsibles, follow me; when I'm Dean of Men, I'll make you sorry you were ever born; in the meantime, let's go underground and make bombs."

In February, 1945, Auden was chosen by the graduating class to speak at its last Collection. His topic was "The World of Flesh and the Devil," and he described three psychological types, all found in varying proportions in everyone. James, the conformer, is a successful, diligent worker, makes a careful marriage to a wife whom he doesn't really love, and dies—perhaps of ulcers—without having really lived. John, the brilliant rebel, idolizes his own feelings; women try to reform him, but he is incapable of love because his only motive is the pleasure he gets from his own feeling of loving. After a life of heavy drinking, he dies a suicide or a convicted murderer. George, the nonconformist, idolizes only freedom; he refuses to conform for the love of not conforming. Saints come from this type, Auden said, and the colleges should try to produce more of it. Auden's parting advice to the students was, "Never forget you're a heel; read the *New Yorker;* don't wash too much." A year or so later, in 1946, Auden read a poetic version of this gospel as Phi Beta Kappa Poem at Harvard, called "Under Which Lyre: A Reactionary Tract for the Times." After describing the postwar academic scene, he turns to "that other war" between the followers of "precocious Hermes" 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.

Apollo is not satisfied to govern, but wants to rule the heart; hence official art. And when he occupies a college, "Truth is replaced by Useful Knowledge." But the followers of Hermes defy him, in spite of his success, and to strengthen their morale Auden formulates a Hermetic Decalogue, beginning, "Thou shalt not do as the dean pleases" and ending:

Thou shalt not be on friendly terms
With guys in advertising firms,
Nor speak with such

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"Auden was not here as Poet in Residence . . . he was a regular teacher in the normal academic establishment and fully qualified for such duties . . ."

W. H. Auden at Swarthmore

As read the Bible for its prose,
Nor, above all, make love to those
Who wash too much.

Thou shalt not live within thy means
Nor on plain water and raw greens.
If thou must choose
Between the chances, choose the odd;
Read The New Yorker, *trust in God;*
And take short views.[1]

On the other hand, during his stay at Swarthmore Auden conscientiously gave public lectures on such topics as "Vocation and Society," "Education in a Democratic Society," "Rimbaud's Influence on English Poetry," and even "Ritual," managing to treat each of them with wit and originality and to avoid the expected platitude. (He is reported to have been always impeccably dressed for such occasions.) He had made late in 1940 a decisive religious commitment: ecclesiastically, he was an Episcopalian of High or Anglo-Catholic tendency, and doctrinally he had been strongly influenced by Existentialists like Kierkegaard and neo-orthodox theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr. According to the *Phoenix*, Auden attended church punctiliously in Swarthmore, but confessed that he always went to the early service to avoid the sermon. When a Canterbury Club for Episcopal students was founded in 1944, Auden gave the first address. And he wrote his most extended and ambitious religious poem, the Christmas oratorio *For the Time Being*, during his residence here. He had, in short, his responsible side.

As teacher, Auden seems to have displayed a marked originality in dealing with ideas and a flair for the unexpected approach. In an examination in Elizabethan Literature, he asked "Explain why the devil is (a) sad and (b) honest"; he required his V-12 class in Composition to write the events of the day backwards. The *Phoenix* observed that he preferred the ungodly but intelligent to triumph in his classes. His emphasis was, however, to a degree that surprised some people, thoroughly traditional and conservative: his examinations ran mostly to spot quotations and specific factual questions. He seems to have been, in short, both conscientious and imaginative as a teacher, and it is testimony of his effectiveness that, on a campus that must have been alert for juicy tidbits, remarkably few are recorded. Occasionally there are reports of shockingly frank remarks, like the one in his lecture at Harvard on *Don Quixote*, which he began by commenting that, like everyone in the audience, he had never read to the end of the book.

Apparently one of the most amusing episodes of Auden's time here was the burlesque Collection program that he and other faculty members put on. This was in December, 1944; Mr. Sorber, Mr. van de Kamp, and others joined with Auden in presenting bad music, bad recitation, and bad poetry, in various combinations. There were musical biographies, sentimental effusions like "The Soul of the Violin," a piece of program music for four-hand piano called "The Burning of Rome," with contrived effects such as a child riding around the stage on a tricycle and falling off to represent the collapse of the city. There is no use trying to convey the humor by verbal description; but it was clearly a great success and lives on in legend. Auden's special contribution was to make bad introductory and critical comments in various languages; and although one would think this kind of multilingual humor would be highly specialized, all accounts indicate that it was effective.

Auden took a great interest in the College dramatic activities, and reviewed several of the plays for the *Phoenix*. He was careful to give extended and kindly critiques of the performance of virtually the whole cast; but these comments, though undoubtedly of primary interest to most readers of the *Phoenix* at the time, are pointless now. What Auden said about some of the plays themselves is, however, still of interest. Reviewing *The Taming of the Shrew*, he opined that the play is Shakespeare's worst, not only lacking in poetry and wit, but unpleasant. Shakespeare probably meant, according to Auden, in representing the play as performed for Christopher Sly, something like this: "Well, here it is; this is the daydream of

[1] *Nones*, p. 70. Copyright © 1952 by Random House Inc. Reprinted by permission.

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every resentful, ineffectual, not-so-male loafer—to have absolute and irresponsible power over a woman who is vital, beautiful, and very very rich." Auden praised a performance of *Night Must Fall,* but made the sensible observation that the play is not art, but good theater, or an "excuse for carrying on charmingly in public." A college theater, he suggested gently, really ought to spend its time on noncommercial plays like Jonson's *Alchemist* or Cocteau's *Orphée.*

Possibly convinced by this argument, the Little Theatre Club in the spring of 1945 produced Auden's own play *The Ascent of F6.* Auden co-operated fully; he helped with the interpretation, and took a minor part—that of a Monk—in the performance. Christopher Isherwood, Auden's collaborator in this and all his plays, planned a visit here to see the performance. (After coming to the U. S. with Auden, he had settled in California with the earlier British expatriates Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, with whom he had explored Vedanta.) The *Phoenix* reported, however, that it had turned out to be impossible for him to come because he had left his monastery to plunge into a script-writing job for Warner Bros. The production, which was the second one in the U. S. (only Yale having preceded Swarthmore), was a triumph; the American Academy of Arts and Letters even carried on negotiations—though without success—to sponsor it in New York. The 20th Swarthmore performance was reviewed for the *Phoenix* by Philippe Soupault, another distinguished exotic who was teaching here at the time. (Soupault's most famous novel is *Bubu de Montparnasse,* which may be found in paperback with a lurid cover because it is the story of a Parisian prostitute; but it is also a fine and serious novel, as T. S. Eliot makes clear in the introduction that one finds beneath the spicy cover—perhaps the only such cover Mr. Eliot has appeared beneath.) Soupault thought the performance great and the occasion historic. The choral recitations and the incidental music by Benjamin Britten gave the play an atmosphere of solemnity and elevation, he said, and the total effect was that of a dialogue between anxiety and irony, a summation and testament of the period between the wars.

This was Auden's farewell to Swarthmore; immediately thereafter he was sent abroad by the Air Force on the Strategic Bombing Survey. Although since then he has taught at several other institutions, he has never settled down nor, apparently, participated in academic life again to this extent—not even during his term as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, 1956-61, for his duties there required his presence only a few weeks out of each academic year. He returned to Swarthmore in March, 1950, to give a Cooper Foundation lecture (remarking on this occasion that he still kept his money in the Swarthmore bank), and his play *The Dog Beneath the Skin* was given a joint student-faculty performance a few years later. As far

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Auden relaxes with the son of his friend Professor Maurice Mandelbaum, who taught philosophy at Swarthmore 1934-1947.

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as I know, there has been no connection between Auden and Swarthmore since that time.

TO SUM UP, in a word, Auden's effect on Swarthmore: he brought glamor to the community, and contributed much amusement and entertainment. More importantly, he brought intellectual stimulation and provocation, and probably—though he would disapprove of the term—a good deal of inspiration. As we have seen, he probably strengthened the tradition of nonconformity and eccentricity. He also made some friends who still speak of him with warmth and affection.

The effect of Swarthmore on Auden is much more difficult to define; there are so many imponderables that any conclusions must be speculative. For instance, it appears that the period of Auden's residence in Swarthmore was more productive than any equivalent period of his whole career, before or since; but how can one disentangle the influence of Swarthmore from all the other factors that had a part in producing this result? One would be justified, however, in presuming at least that he found Swarthmore a congenial and stimulating environment. His two longest non-dramatic works—*The Sea and the Mirror,* a poetic commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the fullest expression of Auden's aesthetic, and the Christmas oratorio *For the Time Being,* in my opinion his most successful religious poem—were both written here and published in the fall of 1944. By this time he was already at work on *The Age of Anxiety,* his baroque eclogue set in a 3rd Avenue bar (published in 1947), which gave a name to an era.

While at Swarthmore he also chose and revised the poems to go into his volume of *Collected Poetry,* published in the spring of 1945. The Treasure Room of the College library now has the copy of his earlier volume, *On This Island,* that Auden most improperly but fortunately took from the stacks and marked up to use as printer's copy for the *Collected Poetry.* The book is of unusual interest as showing Auden in the process of judging and rewriting his own poetry: there are extensive revisions and deletions, and by one poem, after the direction to omit, the heartfelt comment, "O God, what rubbish!" At Swarthmore Auden also wrote a number of poems first collected in the volume of *Collected Poetry.* One of these, "The Model," was first published in the College literary magazine, then called the *Dodo.* Another is plausibly reported by local tradition to have been directly inspired by Auden's impressions of his neighbors in the Ville:

A HEALTHY SPOT

They're nice—one would never dream of going over
Any contract of theirs with a magnifying
Glass, or of locking up one's letters—also
Kind and efficient—one gets what one asks for.
Just what is wrong, then, that, living among them,
One is constantly struck by the number of
Happy marriages and unhappy people?
They attend all the lectures on Post-War Problems,
For they do mind, they honestly want to help; yet
As they notice the earth in their morning papers,
What sense do they make of its folly and horror
Who have never, one is convinced, felt a sudden
Desire to torture the cat or do a strip-tease
In a public place? . . .[2]

What general conclusions can we reach on the basis of this history? None, I am afraid, of much profundity or detachability. Since Auden was not a Poet in Residence or a teacher of Creative Writing, the experience has no bearing on the desirability of such arrangements. (Auden himself has always maintained conservatively that there should not even be courses in modern literature.) We might conclude, cautiously, that it is a good thing for a college to have a major poet on the faculty, provided he is also academically qualified, congenial, articulate, and fond of teaching. But there is still only one poet who fits this description, and obviously he would not want this kind of academic experience again, even at Swarthmore. All we can say, then, is that the episode was a unique and unrecapturable one, most fortunate for both participants.

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[2] *Collected Poetry,* p. 134. Copyright © 1945 by Random House, Inc. Reprinted by permission.