

# SILENCE, GUILT AND INSIDIOUS TRAUMA IN AUDEN'S EARLIEST POEMS

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THE TITLE of the book of poems published in 1941, *The Double Man*, defines much of W. H. Auden's life, constantly driven as it was by a sense of duality and paradox. The double functions as a complex, subtle phenomenon in Auden's case: it highlights an unresolvable tension between his private and public personae that is reflected in a characteristic doubleness, or "duplicity."<sup>1</sup> The search for a compromise between personal wishes and social duties is a recurring theme in Auden's later works but appears with particular intensity in the poems of his youth, resulting in a complex entanglement in which the poet's identity is often (traumatically) negotiated. Richard Davenport-Hines describes these existential border-crossings as typically "Audenesque" (275): the poet's attitude to his literary production, like his attitude to his private life, reveals an ambivalent interplay of repression and desire.<sup>2</sup>

Since Auden's life extended throughout most of the twentieth century—he was born in 1907, in York, and died in Vienna in 1973—his work provides a useful lens through which to examine some of the events and ideas that would change the world in unprecedented ways: the worldwide economic depression, the Spanish Civil War, the rise of fascisms, the beginning of the Second World War, the emerging science of psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup> Precisely because of the turbulent times in which he lived, Auden was also confronted with major life changes and had to adjust to new situations and contexts that required being positioned or positioning himself in terms of identity: his father's long absence during the First World War (he was only seven when Dr George Auden enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps and was posted overseas); the poet's homosexual and artistic awakening at the age of fifteen and his subsequent struggle with family and social opposition; his trip to Spain during the country's civil war; his controversial decision to move to the US with Christopher Isherwood in the late 1930s;<sup>4</sup> and his embracing and discarding political and religious beliefs, among others. Speaking of the poet's life in context, Tony Sharpe claims that Auden "himself was very aware of the power of contexts to shape or distort thought and action and

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aware, too, of a certain ambiguity in their nature: there were contexts one could choose and others which claimed you for themselves" (2). When being compelled to meet certain expectations or to define himself in terms of binary oppositions, the poet always struggled to overcome or reconcile these oppositions.

Living in a time in which homosexuality was both legally forbidden and considered despicable by most people, Auden's options were severely limited. For much of his career, he was worried about the impact his homosexuality would have on his attempt to fashion himself as a public poet, as the risk of public scandal and even imprisonment was high in Britain and the US until the late 1960s. Looming over his sexual life was the fate of Oscar Wilde in 1895 and the anti-sodomy laws, which had remained in force and sent a distressing word of warning to all those who did not conform to strict gender roles.<sup>5</sup> Despite Auden's initial attempts to "cure" himself—he was psychoanalyzed in 1928 "to improve" his "inferiority complex and to develop heterosexual traits" (Bucknell, "Freud's" 140)<sup>6</sup>—the issue of his homosexuality remains one of the most significant contexts for the study of Auden and of the ways he imagined himself. The impossibility of coming out in the 1920s, when he was an adolescent, placed a heavy burden on him and determined to a great extent his future identity and thus his way of life as a whole.

Nevertheless, Auden's homosexuality, as Richard R. Bozorth suggests, "has historically had a peculiar status" in the existing biographies of the poet: "obvious to some, invisible to others, and with some notable exceptions, consciously or unconsciously treated by critics as a matter of little or no importance" (4).<sup>7</sup> Among the "notable exceptions" that deserve mentioning, there is a praising chapter on the poet's work in James Southworth's *Sowing the Spring* (1940) that acknowledges "the prominence of an unconventional (the homosexual) theme" (135). In the second of the several lectures Randall Jarrell wrote on Auden's poetry in the 1940s, he lists a few "individual interests and dislikes" from which the poet built "the materials for his new order" and argues that, unlike "the ordinary sexual values," which were "rejected as negative and bourgeois," homosexuality was for Auden "a source of positive revolutionary values" (qtd. in Burt 33–34). Likewise, when speaking of Auden's literary achievements in 1973, Clive James identifies sexuality as one of the most influential elements in the poet's writing, arguing that in "an epoch when homosexuality was still a crime," Auden's "talent was the very one which could not be used unguarded to speak of love" and that "for that, he was forced from the concrete to the abstract, and so moved from the easy (for him) to the difficult" ("Auden's Achievement").

More recently, especially since the advent of queer theory in the early 1990s, literary critics have increasingly sought to "queer" Auden, exploring the significance of homosexuality in his poetic output. The term "closeted" (which literally alludes to being deliberately hidden away in a dark, closed-in space) is now an unavoidable concern in Auden's work and in Auden criticism. The term is central to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's pioneering study, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), where she describes the

closet as “a defining structure for gay oppression in this [the twentieth] century” (71) and an image that has been euphemised (or stigmatised) in literature as representing silence. In his analysis of Auden’s poems from 1927 onwards, Bozorth argues that the poet’s career was tied to “a process of homosexual self-interrogation” (3) unparalleled in modern poetry: “his ongoing grapplings with these fraught binaries [the relation between public and private, the personal and the political] reflect in large measure his negotiation of the constraints of speakability traditionally faced by gay, lesbian and queer writers” (3–4). Until now, however, the question of how Auden’s earlier poetic output, that is the 1922–27 poems, has been “marked and structured and indeed necessitated and propelled by the historical shapes of homophobia, for instance, by the contingencies and geographies of the highly permeable closet” (Sedgwick 165), has remained largely overlooked, and much uncertainty still exists about the extent to which the poet’s “coming out” experience circulated in the vicinity of trauma and was marked by it.

To approach this important issue in Auden’s juvenilia I draw in part on Ann Cvetkovich’s queer approach to trauma studies. She argues for the necessity of recognising forms of trauma that, apart from relying on experiences of war and catastrophe, belong to the domain of the everyday. By rejecting rigid distinctions between private and public trauma, Cvetkovich identifies a category of “insidious trauma” that, while neglected by psychiatry and psychoanalytic studies, operates nonetheless—and mainly—on sexual minorities (21). In this essay, therefore, I examine the extent to which Auden’s embattled and necessarily secretive approach to sexuality was learned in childhood and adolescence when the vulnerability of his body and psyche was traumatically negotiated against what Adrienne Rich calls “compulsory heterosexuality”<sup>8</sup> and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner regard as “heteronormativity.”<sup>9</sup> I rely on both Sedgwick’s and Bozorth’s explorations of certain key binaries—secrecy/revelation, speakability/unspeakability—that, I argue, provide shape to the implicit doubleness that characterises the formation of Auden’s identity. Cvetkovich’s notion of “insidious trauma” provides the basis for interpreting this doubleness as the subtle and unusual vestige of trauma, trauma that helped to forge Auden’s early poetic representation of sexuality and intimacy and had an impact on his sense of self.<sup>10</sup>

Based on the analysis of some of the poems contained in Katherine Bucknell’s second edition of Auden’s *Juvenilia: Poems 1922–1928 (JV)*, in this paper I explore an important period of Auden’s creative development—the age of fifteen up to the age of twenty-one—to study the traumatic impact that his religious upbringing, his father’s long absence during the First World War, his consequent exposure to the influence of his mother, and his reading of Freud’s theories on sexual repression all had on his sexual awakening and on the development of his sexuality. My contention is that the poet’s guilt and silence, and hence his invisibility and privacy—both chosen and enforced—were a decisive influence on his use of gay subtext and the language of the closet to address homosexuality in his poetic output in this period. Although

it is in the late 1920s and 1930s that Auden started using the coterie language of “Mortmere” to articulate, as Bozorth claims, “the psychic dynamics of closeted desire and the social dynamics of writing for readers knowing and unknowing, known and unknown” (20), his juvenile poems constituted the appropriate space to initiate this “self-conscious coding” (19) and develop challenging ideas about his self-understanding (Bennet and Royle 130).<sup>11</sup> In a Ricoeurian sense, Auden’s juvenilia functioned as a laboratory in which the poet experimented with judgements of approval and condemnation (Ricoeur 115), negotiated life choices, and struggled over circumstances of traumatic anxiety surrounding the shaping of his gay identity, circumstances that seemed to be closely connected to those surrounding the impact of the Great War on British consciousness. By acknowledging the trauma of coming out, Auden’s personal story also embraced a collective story. My contention is that his implicit disclosure of the dilemmas of post-war national identity was, moreover, significantly inflected by his attention to gender and to his disturbing sexual awakening.

From 1922 to 1928, Auden wrote about two hundred poems—most of them published in Bucknell’s *Juvenilia*. Throughout those six years, he was a dedicated apprentice, reading, learning, and mainly imitating other poets: “He looked for examples everywhere [including the teachings of Marx and Freud] and imitated everything he liked” (Bucknell, Introduction xix). Yet his own emotional experiences also weighed heavily in his early work. Most of these poems, as Roger Kimball suggests, “betray false or incomplete starts, uncertain development and various failures of taste and tone.” Like most juvenilia, they are a “curious blend of the childish and the mature ... adding the freshness of childhood perceptions to an awareness, often unconscious, of adult realities on the fringes of the childhood world” (Tanner).<sup>12</sup>

These “false starts” and “failures” may be understood in part by considering the fact that Auden’s poetic initiation as a fifteen-year-old adolescent coincided with his sexual awakening. When Robert Medley—the boy who inspired his earliest love poems—asked Auden during a school trip in 1922 if he wrote poetry, he realised that that was his true vocation:

Kicking a little stone, he turned to me  
And said, “Tell me, do you write poetry?”  
I never had, and said so, but I knew  
That very moment what I wished to do. (Auden, “Letter” 208)

Of particular significance at this early stage is the simultaneous construction of the intellectual/textual and the real: Auden’s personal life, as this poem suggests, was deeply entangled with his literary life from the very beginning.

More specifically, Auden’s writing vocation and sexual identity—together with guilt and a possible (associated) loss of faith—seem to have been equally important

concerns to him at that time.<sup>13</sup> Humphrey Carpenter, one of Auden's biographers, suggests that—like most children who grow up to be gay—the young poet felt guilty about his homoerotic desires during his school days. Although “mild homosexual intrigues and scandals were part of daily life” in most public schools, Auden's particular school, Gresham's, made “boys feel profoundly uncomfortable about sex” (Carpenter 27). Through sermons in the school chapel and an honour code system that inculcated feelings of male loyalty but warned about the dangers of masturbation and demanded boys act as informers on each other, Gresham's embodied the main traits of the public-school ethos—an ethos that Auden remembers as damaging. “I believe no more potent engine for turning [boys] into neurotic innocents, for perpetuating those very faults of character which it was intended to cure, was ever devised,” Auden writes in “The Liberal Fascist,” his contribution to Graham Greene's 1934 collection *The Old School* (qtd. in Carpenter 24). Indeed, one of the significant aspects of public-school life was the exaltation of what Peter Parker calls “the Romantic friendship”: the “passionate but sexless liaisons between boys,” which often led to “sexual confusion ... compounded of suspicion, ignorance and repression” (105–06). In the same 1934 essay, Auden compares his public-school education to living in a fascist state: “The whole of our moral life was based on fear, on fear of the community, not to mention the temptation it offered to the natural informer, and fear is not a healthy basis. It makes one furtive and dishonest and unadventurous. The best reason I have for opposing Fascism is that at school I lived in a Fascist state” (qtd. in Carpenter 25). Like many other former public-school boys, Auden drifted into manhood with a strong resentment at the erosion of individuality and subjection to the institution involved in his public-school upbringing.

Trauma made itself felt in Auden's everyday life and nowhere more insidiously than in converting sexual pleasure into guilt and in preventing him from acknowledging such pleasure. Some of the poems he wrote in 1922 while at Gresham's, for instance “To a Toadstool,” betray an atmosphere of homoerotic desire and associated fear, with an overall effect of paralysis and painful silencing. Using the language of fairy tales and fables, which reveals, according to Bucknell, the influence of de la Mare and Keats (*JV* 14), the poem takes the reader into a world of sensual feelings: “O Scarlet Beauty with thy milk-white eyes / See, I have plucked thee up thou lovely thing.” The toadstool will give the speaker the visionary powers or the power of love he longs to have: “For he, I know, who eats thee shall be wise / And see the fairies dancing in a ring” (*JV* 14). Yet these feelings are disregarded because of the fear of how people might react to them: “But I have heard too oft men's tales and lies / So now with hand pressed close to lip I quail” (*JV* 14). Based on this last line, Bucknell suggests that Auden's love for Medley was a secret too sacred to be disclosed even to the nearest and the dearest. But if sacred, it was also frightening. He did not dare declare it to Medley himself, not even when he visited the Audens in Harborne over New Year's (1923–24). Nevertheless, the poem does communicate, in ways that reflect the traumatic anxiety of Auden's coming-out

experience as well as the strategies he was discovering to deal not only with certain feelings and desires that take on a queer resonance but also with the necessity to keep them secret—"hand pressed close to lip." Auden accepts this secrecy less out of sympathy for Medley than out of a desire to avoid the crisis of exposure. As a young boy who was just beginning to lay claim to his gay identity, he was also beginning to learn how to rely on coded poetry as the format for acting on that claim and for communicating his newly discovered identity to other individuals who shared (or at least did not disregard) it.

The fact that many of Auden's early poems are arranged without the introduction of a title, almost in a secretive manner, suggests that his writing involved both disclosure and silence and was, as William Leap argues when discussing the convergence of language, identity construction, and gay socialisation, "highly dependent on situated (rather than pre-discursive meanings), on negotiation and inference" ("Language" 259) and "in some instances on conditions of risk" (*Words Out* 72–73). The necessity to disguise and, at the same time, personalise the content of his poems became a habit that persisted into his young adulthood and beyond. In the late 1920s, Auden scribbled the initials of the young men he fell in love with and to whom his verses were addressed in the copies he handed to his Oxford gay friends (among them, Christopher Isherwood and Stephen Spender).<sup>14</sup> Later, the poet would adopt other ways of challenging social censorship. Probably as a result of the year he spent in Germany after graduation from Oxford in 1928, and of his admiration for Germany as "a forward-looking sexual utopia," Auden used the German language to write "his most sexually explicit poems." These poems "were shown only to a few friends" and were not published until the 1990s (Bozorth 22–23).

The juvenilia, however, were not always this cryptic. For instance, Bucknell considers it likely that Mrs Auden found a "revealing" poem "about the swimming pool at Gresham's" while Robert Medley was visiting the family over New Year's 1923–24. It seems she detected the homoerotic subtext in it, and the boys were summoned to Dr Auden's study to confirm that their friendship was purely "platonic." (In fact it was; they did not have sex until they met again in Oxford.)<sup>15</sup> In these earlier poems, language is often placed in the intersection between the heteronormative and the marginal. Consider, for instance, the poem beginning "Whenever I see for the first time" that Auden wrote the week he spent with Medley and his family in August 1923 in Appletreewick, in the Yorkshire dales:

That summer flies back to me at once  
A week of it  
At least, we two spent up on the moors,  
Happiness-lit. (*JV* 75)

Although, as Bozorth notes, it was not until the late 1920s that Auden fully assimilated "Mortmere, the coterie mythology invented by Christopher Isherwood and Edward

Upward as Cambridge undergraduates,” and “adapted its discursive obliquities for a coded poetic about homosexual desire and identity” (11–12), here the poet attempts to find the language to describe the agonies of unfulfilled love and of his male-centred sexual identity through “poetic self-conscious coding” (19). His repressed sexuality and emotional isolation are projected onto the creation of a private, secret world, “up on the moors.”

These agonies, and their rupturing effect on the poet’s identity, reveal Auden’s gradual breaking away from the influence of Wordsworth’s tone and style. As in many other early landscape poems, in “Whenever I see for the first time,” Auden explores the conventions of the sincere and self-revelatory greater Romantic lyric, yet there are hints of the duplicity of Mortmere that make the Romantic fusion of self with Nature impossible. Instead, the speaker is introduced as a spy, a wanderer, an exile who looks “from road or train” at the northern limestone landscape of his childhood—“the sundown on the cliff, / ... the wheel [tossing] at the mill” (JV 76)—and dreams of a world of happiness and joy that is, for him, unattainable.<sup>16</sup> Although the benign nature of the landscape is not yet challenged by any palpable obstacle—there are “No hedges along the field”—there seems to be a frontier, a spatial (or maybe psychological?) barrier between the land and the stranger—the “grey / Stone walls again” (JV 75). In language of physical crippling of the senses, he asks:

Who deafened our ears during those days,  
Who dulled our eyes,  
That life’s great doxology we failed  
To recognize?” (JV 76)

The failure of “ears” and “eyes,” rendered incapable of functioning, might represent the painful sense of sexual failure that separates the poet from any possibility of satisfaction and from developing an institutionalised or stable form of sexual identity.

Auden’s sexual frustration is revealed in his juvenilia through a complex interplay between expression and withdrawal, the language of repression and impossibility being used to vividly render the pain of unexpressed feeling. The young poet’s love for Robert Medley (and later for another classmate, John Pudney) remained celibate during his school days, though, in Medley’s case, not unrequited. The stern implementation of anti-homosexual attitudes at Gresham’s School (homophobia, heterosexism, and moral condemnations of homosexuality) contributed directly to Auden’s self-protective reticence to reveal a homosexual identity. Auden’s platonic infatuations would radically turn into sexual promiscuity in 1925 when he went up to Christ Church, Oxford. Auden seemed then determined to liberate himself from “shame,” as Silvan Tomkins understands it, that is to say, as “inevitable for any human being insofar as desire outruns fulfilment sufficiently to attenuate interest without destroying it” (406). In Tomkins’s view, “the most general sources of shame are the varieties of barriers to the varieties of objects of excitement and enjoyment, which

reduce positive affect sufficiently to activate shame, but not so completely that the original object is renounced: “I want, but—” (406). That is how Auden appears to have experienced homosexuality, which at this time was implicitly accepted—if not fashionable—in Oxford. His repressed sexual energy was channelled through clandestine encounters that gave him sexual gratification but did not grant him much hope of living his sexuality more freely and openly. Although the poet would never become an “aesthete,” like some of his Oxonian predecessors, he did become sexually active and was relatively open about it. His sense of urgency to experience sex at the expense of self-preservation was clear; however, as Bucknell points out, “he [also] associated reciprocal love with despair,” and “guilt about his homosexuality drove him continually in search of new partners” (Introduction xli). Promiscuity would not eradicate the lingering effects of sexual repression and heteronormativity in the poet’s early years. On the contrary, it would lead to a continuous struggle to articulate a fully recognised subjectivity and public agency in his later works.

However, awareness of his emotional vulnerability was Auden’s most powerful tool as a young poet. Spender, in his autobiography, *World within World*, claims that “self-knowledge, complete lack of inhibition and sense of guilt, were essential to the fulfilment of his [Auden’s] aims” (53). But in fact, “inhibition and sense of guilt” were also essential to his writing. There is an effort of containment underpinning his poems—a hesitancy, procrastination, and delay—that marks not only the frustration of sexual desire bent away from expression but also the anonymity, promiscuity, and clandestinity of his sexual encounters. The poems Auden writes while at Oxford describe, in the words of his literary executor, Edward Mendelson, “variations on a single theme: life is a constant state of isolation and stagnated desire—interrupted by moments of sexual satisfaction or disappointment—which the young poet unprotestingly accepts” (*Early* 139). In “This peace can last no longer than the storm / Which started it” (1925), Auden recollects not only the abandonment of any restraint on his sexuality but the peace—or is it the sadness?—that follows after fleeting lust is satisfied:

As surely as the wind  
Will bring a lark song from the cloud, not rain,  
Shall I know the meaning of lust again;  
Nor sunshine on the weir’s unconscious roar  
can change whatever I might be before.  
I know it, yet for this brief hour or so  
I am content, unthinking and aglow .... (*JV* 206)

The speaker gives the impression of being emotionally prone, “content, unthinking”; he also relishes the intensity of the lustful feelings he is still “aglow” with, the joy and pleasure of the passing encounter, and the liberating feeling that there is no commitment attached, that strangers can be lovers and yet remain strangers. He is



filled with forward-looking assertiveness, predicting what he will “know” and what he will “be.” He alternates rapidly between present satisfaction and future “lust” because he knows that these emotions will recur endlessly in the future.<sup>17</sup> And so will this state of doubleness, which involves both the need to escape the normalizing and criminalizing logic of heteronormativity and at the same time the attraction to that which is unnameable and clandestine.

The poetic expression of doubleness, though, requires the subversion of language and a subtle dialectical dexterity, dexterity with which Auden was fortunately endowed. This quest for subversion led to the poet’s gradual abandonment of Romantic subjectivity and to his engagement with T. S. Eliot’s alienation and fragmentary modernism. Although it would not be fair to reduce Auden’s early concerns solely to resistance to social censorship and to the closet (he was also absorbed in his reading of Marxism, modern psychology, sciences, and a host of other interests), his embrace of high modernist techniques while he was in Oxford in 1926 might be understood not just as an aesthetic choice but, as Bozorth suggests, as his “intricate response” to the painful difficulty of writing “public poetry out of the closet” (19). “The Letter,” which Auden writes from his parents’ home during the Easter vacation of 1926, and which begins “He reads and finds the meaning plain,” revolves around an actual letter the speaker has received from a university friend/sexual partner breaking off an affair. Much as we saw in “This peace can last no longer than the storm,” the speaker moves between ironic resignation and promiscuous uncertainty: “It leaves no problem for the mind, / Though love he is surprised to find / So economically slain” (*JV* 132). The end of this relationship proves to be traumatic, but it also teaches him that life goes on, and that one can still live with the nonsense of its trauma. For a moment, the world seems to collapse. Yet life and nature continue, unmoved by the speaker’s sorrows:

At first he looks around and hears  
Huge castles toppling to the ground  
As if the earth ceased spinning round,  
The sudden panic of the years.  
But trees and singing birds renew  
The established sequence of the laws;  
Creation shows no vital flaws  
For God to pay attention to. (*JV* 132–33)

The poet’s “compulsive allegorising of the pervading theme of love,” as Fuller calls it (253), and its connection to nature, is evident in the lines, “But trees and singing birds renew / The established sequence of the laws.” This allegorising, combined with the poet’s secrecy, might serve not only to reinforce the coterie’s privileged knowledge and to avoid censorship but also to start questioning the benign nature of the landscape and of its endless cycles: “Creation shows no vital flaws / For God to

pay attention to.” Thus Auden constructs nature as an image of frustrated desire and divided self.

A year later, and probably as a result of having another love interest in mind, Auden discarded “The Letter” and re-wrote it to begin, “From the very first coming down,” which is how the poem is known today. The speaker’s coming “into a new valley” might allude to T. S. Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi” and “The Hollow Men,” both in its sense of dislocation between appearance and reality, intent and outcome, and in its sense of liberation from social constraints (the opposite to the idea of the entrapping closet), probably through the beginning of a new relationship, a sunny day, or the arrival of spring. The speaker’s “frown” may be due to “the sun and a lost way” (*JV* 231); or perhaps, as Bozorth suggests, it is “the addressee” who “may be finding himself ‘lost’ in more than a spatial sense” (40). Here it seems that “the healing power of Nature is deconstructed, rather than sentimentally played out” (Bozorth 39). The epistolary poem addresses a “you” that seems to be the speaker’s lover (or is it the unknowing reader?)—“you certainly remain: to-day” (*JV* 231).<sup>18</sup> Yet there is a physical and spatial distance between the two, precisely because of the passage of time and of natural cycles and the accumulation of love’s disappointments: “The year’s arc a completed round / And love’s worn circuit re-begun” (*JV* 231). The content of the letter and the promises made are veiled: “Your letter comes, speaking as you, / Speaking of much but not to come” (*JV* 231). The syntax is condensed and twisted and requires putting the words together as in a puzzle to find the missing parts: “Nor speech is close nor fingers numb, / If love not seldom has received / An unjust answer, was deceived” (*JV* 321). Nonetheless, there is a sense of intimacy that the speaker establishes with his addressee through language that suggests some shared knowledge that the poem nonetheless does not openly declare. The image of “the stone smile of this country god / That never was more reticent” allows different interpretations: Bozorth suggests an “analogy between Nature and the beloved,” although “nature is very much in the closet, and its sinister ‘stone smile’ recalls Mortmerean duplicity” (40–41). However, I would argue that the reticence of this country god also signifies the poet’s wish to master his intentions as a speaker, as well as his self-restraint, his effort to say no more than what he means. In fact, the decision to rewrite the original poem might have rested on Auden’s efforts to go beyond his coterie readership and to reach the uninitiated general reader. Yet the reader’s uncertainty is undoubtedly Mortmerean, not only because meaning is being intentionally withheld but also because the reader’s lack of knowledge comes from their condition of outsiders.

Auden’s deliberate intention to both test and gratify his coterie readership through the veiled treatment of homosexual guilt and shame is evident in “Suppose they met, the inevitable procedure” (1927). Probably one of the most cryptic poems in what Roger Kimball calls “the mature period of Auden’s poetical immaturity,” the poet unveils another source of insidious friction in his life: his moral struggle as a product of his religious upbringing. As two would-be lovers are compelled to sleep

apart, “though doors are never locked” (JV 220), homosexual love is seen as “this new heroism” against the Christian notion of sexual sin based on the norm of (moral and legitimate) heterosexuality. Religious dogma is described as so outdated as to be nearly dead—“That doddering Jehovah whom they mocked” (JV 220). Rich in meaning and allusion, the poem also relies on secret—protective—codes to discuss the feelings of guilt that emerge from the tension between sexual fantasies and the claims and obligations imposed by the Christian law: “Of Hand to nape would drown the staling cry / Of cuckoos, filter off the day’s detritus, / And breach in their continual history” (JV 220). The speaker acknowledges that disobedience of the norm leads to regret and punishment: “Of those shut altogether from salvation / Down they fell. Sorrow they had after that” (JV 220). Raised in a Christian household, Auden was taught to believe that homosexuality was a sin and subject to divine punishment, but here he seems to be ironic about his religious beliefs, mocking the patriarchal sexual ethics as preached and practised in Christian churches, even at his own expense.<sup>19</sup> However, irony unveils the hidden contradictions between Auden’s aesthetic and ethical experience. After being deceived throughout his Christian upbringing, he seems to be going through a traumatic transition in which the flesh and the spirit are in perpetual tension.

Auden’s recurring and tortured unhappiness in love made him return to this idea of moral duplicity in later poems. This sense of conflict would mark his work throughout his life as he kept searching for a balance between his personal wishes and his religious duties, particularly after he moved to the US and returned to the Anglican faith he had abandoned as an adolescent.<sup>20</sup> The poet’s struggle with leaving religion reveals the identity trauma of breaking away from a controlling environment, from a normative lifestyle. Discussing identity and its subversion in Auden’s poems, Emig claims the following:

When identity is present in speakers and others, loved ones or enemies, it is undermined by a setting that is constantly on the verge of collapse into surrealism. When it is absent, the ordered and realistic imagery not only demands it, but virtually creates it in implicit representations. In both cases, the poems suffer from their contradictions: either their logic and coherence is distorted or their intelligibility threatened. The real absence of identity would indeed be the collapse of poetic discourse, its sliding into a discourse of madness. (117)

Auden’s poems provide their own answer to this dilemma: the poet’s continuous attempt to come to terms with his homosexuality is abandoned in a quest for a new poetic reality that always threatens to collapse, to slide into madness. The power of the heterosexual majority is at best intimidating, if not discouraging, when it comes to discussing alternative gender identities, yet what Auden struggles to achieve in his

verses is escaping from this “pervasive cluster of forces” (Rich 640), without being affiliated or alienated, complicit or subverted by them.

It seems that much of the suffering Auden had to endure as a closeted young boy was the inward pain he bore—out of love for his mother—in having to conceal who he really was. The imprint on the poet's identity left by the strict discipline at Gresham's, by his religious upbringing, and by the period of sexual promiscuity at Oxford, was further reinforced by the anti-homosexual attitudes of his own family. Auden's sexual orientation was a matter of concern to them, particularly to Constance Auden, who is usually described not only as religious but as over-controlling. If ever a mother embodied what Sedgwick has cleverly acknowledged as the “topos of the omnipotent, unknowing mother . . . in twentieth-century gay male high culture” (248–49), then that was Auden's mother. Bucknell claims that Constance distrusted Auden's gay friends and refused to accept his son's growing independence; in fact, she was so concerned about her son's sexuality, that she personally wrote to one of his unrequited suitors, Michael Davidson, an older journalist, to forbid him to see her son (Introduction xxx).

Both what was experienced as maternal possessiveness and his own sense of emotional splitting are amusingly voiced in the following unpublished lines:

Tommy did as mother told him  
Till his soul had split;  
One half thought of angels  
And the other half of shit. (qtd. in Fuller 29)

The poet blames the troubled relationship with the mother for the insecurities he experienced as an adolescent, believing “what mother told him” to be responsible for his psychological make-up, including his feminine interests and intellectual precocity. The emotional complexity of Auden's feelings is matched by the passionate ambivalence he feels for his mother, the expression of which reflects the cultural and historical convenience of blaming the mother instead of focusing on other forms of attribution and responsibility.

Insofar as he blames his mother, then, Auden's representation of the mother-son relationship as a trauma bond should be read as serving homophobic rather than queer affirmative ends. Sedgwick reminds us of “the homophobic insistence, popularised from Freudian sources with astonishing effect by Irving Bieber and others in the fifties and sixties, that mothers are to be ‘blamed’ for-always unknowingly-causing their sons' homosexuality” (249). While it is true that mothers have been historically questioned and subjected to a level of scrutiny concerning their children's—especially boys'—sexuality (Du Plessis 146), it is also true that in the 1920s, homosexuality, and broader expressions of non-heteronormativity, were arguably an impossibility everywhere except in the aesthete-homosexual circle at Oxford, and mothers like Constance Auden had no choice but to reproduce

heterosexuality, mainly because, as transmitters of dominant cultural norms, they were constituted by the very heteronormative context that they reconstructed for their children.

By age thirty, Auden is evidently finding ways to resolve the traumas of his childhood, but he never does stop writing about them. In 1937, in a review of a translation of Margery Kempe, Auden writes: “I think that we shall find that all intelligent people ... are the products of psychological conflict in childhood, and generally share some neurotic traits” (qtd. in Mendelson 163). He adds, in another essay, that intellectual accomplishments—especially artistic and scientific achievements—can only be possible for those children who manage to “understand the mechanism of the trap” in which they find themselves (qtd. in Mendelson 103). Yet although he seems to have drawn from his childhood experiences to reflect on their contribution to his mature understanding, some of the child’s vulnerability emerges behind a mask of irony in Auden’s 1936 “Letter to Lord Byron”: “let each child have that’s in our care/as much neurosis as the child can bear” (Auden, “Letter” 206). The fact that, as an adult, he kept nurturing some kind of enduring, partly contradictory, affection for any kind of social alienation or neurosis that his upbringing might have caused him gives an insight into the traumatic origins of Auden’s ideologically complex beliefs and his lifelong preoccupation with some of them. What we see in the aesthetic of doubleness or duplicity that characterizes his mature poetry, in other words, are the effects of lifelong self-repression that both expresses and reinforces a self-divided subjectivity, rooted in the trauma of such unreconcilable feelings as guilt, resentment, and longing.

It is not surprising, then, that in many of Auden’s early landscape poems duplicity is linked with guilt. Guilt in fact appears as a central theme, pointing at the poet’s attempts to find a place in an unfriendly and even hostile world. In the introduction to her edition of Auden’s juvenilia, Bucknell comments upon the poet’s repeated sense of exclusion from the natural landscapes he describes. While the idea of emotional isolation has been discussed earlier in connection to sexual frustration through the trope of the border/barrier,<sup>21</sup> Bucknell refers to several early poems—“To a Field-Mouse” (1922–23); “The Old Lead-Mine”(1924); “The Road’s Your Place” (1925), and “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed”(1927)—to argue that, in the juvenilia, “Auden’s repeated failure to gain access to the natural world is self-imposed” and that “his curiosity or desire regarding nature is frustrated by his own guilty fear that he is unworthy of it or that he might harm it” (xxvi–xxvii). Discussing “The Road’s Your Place,” Michael O’Neil similarly acknowledges young Auden’s recreation of the emotions of guilt and fear:

all at once  
Three crags rose up and overshadowed me  
“What are you doing here, the road’s your place”  
—Between their bodies I could see my tarn— (*JV* 95)

In O'Neal's view, "the script is one of frustrated 'seeing,' and a post-Freudian feeling of being 'overshadowed' by the rebuking parent" (84). In effect, as Bucknell suggests, "there are clear parallels between the attitude towards Mother Nature expressed in the poems and Auden's attitude towards his own mother" (xxvii), parallels that may remind us of Freud's forewarning about the unresolved Oedipal complex of the "mother's boy" who could not free himself from her clutches.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Auden's body of works suggests that he never truly managed (or wanted) to escape from his mother's influence: "As an adult he loved to invoke her imaginary judgement on his own or other people's behaviour: his usual phrase of criticism of any conduct that earned his disapproval was 'mother wouldn't like it'" (Carpenter 11). It is precisely by placing trauma alongside moments of everyday emotional distress, usually confined to the domestic or private sphere, that Auden's poems demand an understanding that moves beyond the medicalized constructions of trauma into its more insidious forms.

Although Dr George Auden, the poet's father, might have been expected to provide the security, both physical and emotional, and the self-confidence that Auden felt his mother had never given him, his long absence from the household during the Great War and what his son perceived as a weak temperament—Auden would claim that "as a husband he [his father] was often henpecked" ("As It Seemed" 501)<sup>23</sup>—led to his developing a confident persona at an early age but at the same time strongly reinforced the poet's feelings of misunderstanding and loss. As the poet later confesses, during his father's absence he exercised more independence than he was willing at the time to admit, when he taught himself about sex from the anatomy manuals in his father's library but kept this fact secret from his mother:

Father at the wars,  
 Mother, tongue-tied with shyness,  
 struggling to tell him the Facts of Life he dared not  
 tell her he knew already. (1969: 66–67)

At other points as well, as an adult looking back on his childhood, Auden suggests that he became self-assured and self-sufficient at an early age, sometimes to the extent of appearing abrasive to his classmates (Carpenter 21). What is more, in "Letter to Lord Byron," he ironically plays down his father's return from war five years later, treating it as an unimportant occurrence: "Men had stopped throwing stones at one another / Butter and Father had come back again" (207). Yet he also represents the father's long absence, and the poet's subsequent exposure to the authority of the mother, as decisive factors in his development: "I did not lose ... my father physically by death, but to some degree I lost him psychologically. I was seven—the age at which ... a son begins to take serious notice of his father and needs him most" ("As It Seemed" 500).<sup>24</sup>

A frightening and deeply disturbing experience that Auden describes having when he was about twelve years old, immediately after his father's return from war in 1919, suggests that the goal of constructing himself as a knowing, rational child was not completely successful.<sup>25</sup> In a visit to the northwestern part of the Pennine range, which had once been a major centre for the lead-mining industry, he climbed the hill near the village of Rookhope and dropped a stone into an empty mineshaft. The feeling of awe he experienced when he heard it splash in the distant bottom of the shaft was a ground-breaking moment that marked him throughout his life, as he writes in "New Year Letter" (1941):<sup>26</sup>

In Rookhope I was first aware  
Of Self and Not-self, Death and Dread:  
Down to the Outlawed, to the Others,  
The Terrible, the Merciful, the Mothers;  
Alone in the hot day I knelt  
Upon the edge of shafts and felt  
The deep *Urmutterfurcht* that drives  
Us into knowledge all our lives,<sup>27</sup>  
The Far interior of our fate  
To civilise and to create. (*JV* 30)

This rather impersonal event is set into a deeply referential context as the quintessential traumatic experience in Freudian terms. Auden wrote about it in 1924, 1925, and 1930. Both "The Old Lead-mine" (1924) (re-written a year or two later as "The Old Mine") and "Like other men when I go past" (1925) describe the same experience, which the poet used again in "Get there if you can see the land you were once proud to own" (1930). Although in the early poems the abandoned mines, the rusting machinery suggest the decline of the lead-mining industry resulting from what Auden perceived as an imperialist war, here the mine alludes to a childhood psychological experience (probably, in Freudian terms, to the surfacing of the "superego" as the guide to conduct). In all three poems, Auden suggests that the psychological wound that results from this childhood event allegorically stands for all the traumatic experiences in his life.

The validity of this interpretation is confirmed by the very frequency with which Auden retold the story, as does the fact that the story was shortened and simplified as the poet grew older. As Cathy Caruth explains, the traumatic experience is typically displaced and compulsively repeated because it cannot be fully mastered or located in time. For this reason, trauma cannot be fully determined by a given traumatic event:

The pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself—which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatize everyone equally—nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event,

achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significances attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. (4-5)

According to Caruth's formulation, in other words, it is because of the *belatedness*, or *latency*, of the traumatic event that trauma holds the present captive to an unrepresentable past, as the one traumatised moves from the trauma itself to survival and then to the an endless procession of different forms of imperfect representation. In a review of three translations by Kafka, Auden similarly suggests that trauma, with its haunting power, might be a source of artistic achievement, and not its effect, as Freud implies: "The so-called traumatic experience," he writes, "is not an accident but the opportunity for which the child has been patiently waiting—had it not occurred, it would have found another, equally trivial in order to find a necessity and direction for its existence, in order that its life may become a serious matter" (186). As Kelly McKinney states, trauma creates "A memory that by definition disrupts the continuity of identity or self (the trauma as discontinuity) but can also ground the survivor's identity or self (part of who I am is the trauma I remember and the trauma story I may tell) (270). Traumatic events cannot be dispelled by being once spoken aloud; this is why trauma became a primary formative and motive force in Auden's ongoing existence as a poet.

The symbolic elements around the mineshaft poem, particularly the drives on which they certainly draw, reveal Sigmund Freud's influence on Auden's poetic output but also Auden's objections to many of Freud's theories later in life. Auden first discovered Freud in his father's library and got well versed in his theories, which he read to understand his own psychological make-up. Yet Auden remained conflicted regarding his sexuality and continued to be so throughout his life. The often pathologising language of Freudian psychoanalysis, like that of his religious upbringing and of his public-school education, told Auden his homosexuality was an abnormality but failed to provide him with an understanding of the oppression of growing up in a heteronormative culture. This led to contradictions, in life and at a theoretical level, that Auden never managed to resolve: both the Freudian ideas of homosexuality as a disease and of the self-conscious mind as an evolutionary development are ambiguously and conflictingly reflected in his poems.<sup>28</sup>

One particular aspect of Freud's theory of homosexuality that was very popular in Auden's youth and had an insidiously traumatic effect on Auden's life and work is his identification of homosexuality with narcissism. Consider, for instance, the poem "Narcissus" (1927), which Auden wrote in Oxford to purge his love for William McElwee. This work anticipates some of the reflections on desire and identity, and on the relation between mind and body, that the poet would record in his journal



during his stay in Berlin from October 1928 to July 1929, among them the idea that “the theoretical gaze is only a step away from the erotic gaze” (Bozorth 55). The pool itself emerges as a barrier, a limit; “We meet at last, this film between us.” Yet for Narcissus it is difficult to choose “Between the perception and the noun, / The desire, and the assurance, I and AM” (*JV* 187), and this seems to imply, as Bucknell suggests, that “romance, for him [Auden], was more exciting before it was consummated than afterwards” (Introduction xl). More fundamentally, perhaps, the speaker in “Narcissus” also identifies his love object with his own image in the pool: “It was you or I, Narcissus / ... Leave me alone / with you, my sterilised left-handed lover” (*JV* 186). As Tim Dean observes in *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis* (2001), the fact that “Freud conceives” of homosexuality “as self-love rather than love of another ... explains why homosexuality can be so readily pathologized” (122). We may see evidence of this theory’s traumatic effect on Auden in “Narcissus,” where the speaker struggles to remain celibate and achieve spiritual regeneration through physical purity:

Distant sawing  
Rumours an old touch. I touch the pool,  
Engine of your becoming—Distortion? Grief? Disgust?  
The stone gleams white again behind the eyes. (*JV* 187)

He struggles because the “touch” elicits “Disgust.”

Traumatizing as they were, however, Freud’s theories, which purported to treat homosexuality scientifically, did represent a key break from earlier models of homoerotic desire and therefore allowed the poet to engage in a complex dialogue with modern theories of sexuality, self-consciousness, and identity. As Bozorth argues, the poet’s “very effort to use poetry as a deliberate mode of both cultural diagnosis and self-diagnosis testifies to the historical importance of the aesthetic as a mode of homosexual self-contemplation” (56). What is more, in Auden’s constant search for father figures he turned Freud into one of his poetic fathers. In fact, “the search” for a father figure “became part of the pattern of his [Auden’s] general intellectual development and a theme of many of his poems” (Bucknell, Introduction xxxiv). Even though Freud was not a poet, he remained a source of literary inspiration to Auden. Even as his work caused Auden insidious trauma, it provided him with tools to reflect on personal experience that enormously influenced his work and that helped him to find his own poetic voice.

One might say almost the same of Auden’s biological father. A few days after his return from a father-son trip to Yugoslavia in 1927, Auden wrote “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,” later titled “The Watershed.” Although the poem apparently resembles his earlier recollections of lead mines, the earlier symbols of dilapidated mines and machinery here depict something much more complex and poignant:

On the wet road between the chafing grass  
 Below him sees dismantled washing-floors,  
 Snatches of tramline running to the wood,  
 An industry already comatose,  
 Yet sparsely living. A ramshackle engine  
 At Cashwell raises water; for ten years  
 It lay in flooded workings until this. (*JV* 218)

Mendelson regards the poem as “a divide between his [Auden’s] juvenilia and the work of his maturity” (*Early* 40) and Bucknell claims that, either because the trip satisfied “Auden’s need for contact with this father or renewed his sense of their shared inadequacies, it certainly made him all the more determined to reinvent himself as a poet” (Introduction i). Probably both assertions are true; likely it is also true that the ambiguity of the opening line—Is “Who stands, the crux left of the watershed” a question or a statement?—is deliberate and constitutes a great part of the poem’s disturbing appeal, with its close associations to “borders, separations, finality, cruxes” (Mendelson, *Early* 40). The poem relies on a suffocating combination of complicated syntax and symbols which tend to mirror the dense, gloomy atmosphere of the mine. Words have double meanings and acquire a Mortmerian duplicity that reinforces the sense of (self-) deception that predominates in Auden’s early poems: “the crux” might stand as a symbol of a crossroads or of a dilemma; the “watershed” might refer to the high ground from which water flows down to a river or the lower ground where rain collects; the “who” is a ghostly character who might or might not be the speaker, and the word “left” might refer to something that remains or that is located to the left side.

Here, as well, Auden goes back to Thomas Hardy’s hawk’s vision from a distance, relying on the trope of the spy, the stranger, the foreigner that we saw in the earlier “Whenever I see for the first time,” discussed above.<sup>29</sup> However, unlike the feelings of exclusion arising from nature in such earlier poems,<sup>30</sup> the watershed here marks a tangible and unquestionable frontier as the speaker, who is alien to the scene, finally has to turn away. Puzzled and frustrated, he feels that his country is hostile to him: “Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock, / Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed: / This land, cut off, will not communicate” (*JV* 218). In Mendelson’s words, it is the speaker’s “estranged condition, not the landscape of mines,” that “is the true Auden country” (*Early* 42). By the end of the poem, the “Stranger”—“taller than grass, / Ears poise[d] before decision”—must “turn back” from the watershed, as if “scenting danger” (*JV* 218). By this time the watershed has also turned into a temporal barrier, and the speaker is not even allowed to indulge in nostalgia or decide on a likely future. He stands, but he is utterly lost and unable to move in any direction.

This inability to connect with the landscape on a spiritual and physical level may reflect more than one kind of trauma. Throughout this essay I have argued that such

moments convey Auden's pervasive sense of guilt for his homosexual identity, a sense of guilt that, as said above, would trouble him all throughout his life. However, his trauma might also stem from pain he suffered because of the Great War coupled with the guilt experienced by not being directly involved in the actual fighting. Janis Stout's *Coming out of War* (2016) challenges the pervasive idea that only soldiers can understand the realities of warfare to argue that "anyone who has lived through any of its effects—loss of loved ones, a feeling for others' losses, economic disruption, political repression, horror and moral revulsion at the spectacle of cruelty—has experienced some aspect of the total experience of war" (64). In that sense, being a child during the conflict and, therefore, rendered non-participant in its actuality—but culturally seen as part of the cause for which the soldiers were fighting—young Auden might have been just as affected by the war as those at the front, and his voice might deserve to be heard as a response to the pervasive spectre of the war in British consciousness.

Through my exploration of Auden's early poetic output arising from the traumatic circumstances surrounding his coming-out experience, I have attempted to make evident how trauma made itself felt into the poet's everyday life, and nowhere more insidiously or insistently than into his grappling with sexual identity as he was leaving childhood, affecting it through forms of heteronormative oppression and homophobia. Through the use of gay subtext, which progressively evolved into the coterie discourse of Mortmere, Auden's early poems set out to trace, as Colm Tóibín suggests in *Love in a Dark Time*, the "tension between the fearless imagination and the fearful self" (8), a tension that denotes "the explicit drama of being" oneself (6) and the necessity to both question heteronormative dominance and expiate the feelings of guilt emerging from the duality involved in being in and coming out. In drawing attention to the insidious forms of trauma permeating Auden's self-contained and secretive approach to sexuality in his juvenilia I hope to have thrown some light into the reading of Auden's later texts and allowed a wider conceptualisation of homosexuality in his works.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The idea of "duplicity" or "doubleness" has been frequently discussed in the study of Victorian masculinities and refers to the belief that "individuals can have an inner and private existence that conceals the subject's desires from public scrutiny" (Danahay 136). Auden came across the word "double" in Charles Williams's *The Descent of the Dove*, in a passage that quoted Montaigne's "De la Gloire": "We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn" (Auden, qtd in Mendelson 450). This sentence became the epigraph to *The Double Man*. The title of the UK edition, also published in 1941, was *New Year Letter* (the poem "New Year Letter," published within this book, is mentioned elsewhere in this paper).

- <sup>2</sup> Although Auden's poetry rejects being pigeonholed as either modern or postmodern, his exploration and problematisation of the self anticipates a postmodern conundrum, that which denies the existence of a unified self and reveals marked feelings of dislocation, alienation, cultural displacement, and a fragmented sense of identity. For more on Auden's shift from modernism to postmodernism see Rainer Emig's *W. H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics*, especially the first chapter, "Taming the Monster."
- <sup>3</sup> Edward Mendelson, Auden's literary executor and editor, does not hesitate to claim that "Auden was the first poet writing in English who felt at home in the twentieth century. He welcomed into his poetry all the disordered conditions of his time, all its variety of language and event" (Preface ix).
- <sup>4</sup> Driven by personal and professional reasons, Auden's immigration to the US, and the public significance his decision had at the time, led to a tendency to study his literary career and reception as divided into two phases: the early British and the late American Auden.
- <sup>5</sup> Although female homosexuality was never explicitly targeted by any legislation, male homosexuality had been illegal for centuries in Britain. With the passing of the Offences Against the Person Act in 1861, the death penalty was abolished for acts of sodomy—instead, they were made punishable by a minimum of ten years imprisonment. Until the Sexual Offences Act of 1967—which legalised homosexuality on the condition that it was consensual, in private, and between two men over the age of twenty-one—male homosexual acts were regarded as "gross indecency," and the penalty was to be imprisonment for up to two years, "with or without hard labour." The situation in the US, where Auden lived from 1939 onwards, was somewhat different because of the judicial variation between the states. Sexual acts between persons of the same sex have been legal nationwide in the US since 2003, pursuant to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Lawrence v. Texas*. For more on homosexuality in Auden's times, see Gregory Woods and Bozorth ("American").
- <sup>6</sup> In her introduction to Auden's 1971 lecture, "Phantasy and Reality in Poetry," Katherine Bucknell refers to Auden's plans to visit the psychoanalyst in a letter the poet wrote to his brother John in July 1927: "I am probably going to be psycho-analysed next vac; by a lady (the lady may have been Margaret Marshall, who had previously analysed Cecil Day Lewis) who analysed a friend of mine with the most astonishingly good results" (qtd. in Bucknell, "Freud's" 140).
- <sup>7</sup> While some of the poet's biographers (Charles Osborne, 1980; George Bahlke, 1970) tend to omit references to his homosexuality, others—Stephen Spender (1975); Richard Davenport-Hines (1995); Humphrey Carpenter (1981); Dorothy Farnan (1985)—primarily focus on the impact of Auden's sexuality on his personal and professional decisions and on his understanding of the human condition.
- <sup>8</sup> Adrienne Rich's essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," was published in 1980 and later in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (1986). Rich argues that heterosexuality is not natural, but an institution imposed on women to keep them subordinate: "The institutions by which women have traditionally been controlled—patriarchal motherhood, economic exploitation, the nuclear family, compulsory heterosexuality—are being strengthened by legislation, religious fiat, media imagery, and efforts at censorship" (41). Though Rich's concept applies to female (not male) sexuality, the dominant discourse condemning lesbian sex to silence is applicable to sexual contact between men as well.

- <sup>9</sup> In Berlant and Warner's view, "heteronormativity" refers to "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged" (548).
- <sup>10</sup> A study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) and Boston Children's Hospital researchers has found that there is a higher prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in young adult gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and "mostly heterosexuals" compared with completely heterosexuals at considerably younger ages than previously identified. The researchers found higher symptoms of PTSD in sexual minorities compared with heterosexuals in individuals in their early twenties (Roberts *et al.*, 2012).
- <sup>11</sup> When Auden entered Oxford, a homosexual subculture was emerging among politicised students: "it was the Auden group [a group of British and Irish writers that included W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, Cecil Day-Lewis, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, and sometimes Edward Upward and Rex Warner] that most visibly exemplified this cultural tendency; and as the supposed leader of the group, and its most authoritatively vocal member, he was himself his embodiment" (Woods 94). The group was deeply concerned with the worldwide economic depression, the rise of Fascisms, the Spanish Civil War, and the beginning of WWII. Many of them wrote of love and homosexual desire and did it through coded language.
- <sup>12</sup> By 1930, when he was only twenty-three years of age, Auden had already had a book of poetry published by Faber and Faber. This was part of T. S. Eliot's endeavour to bring younger poets onto the Faber list. Yet, technically, Auden's first book of poems was published in 1928; it was hand-printed by Stephen Spender (in collaboration with an Oxford printer) in an edition of about thirty copies which were distributed to friends.
- <sup>13</sup> Until 1922 Auden had expected to pursue a career as a mining engineer: the derelict lead mines of northern England were a "sacred landscape" for him and a source of poetic inspiration. As the son of a doctor, he always remained interested in scientific ways of thinking and knowing. Science was always a tool and a point of view to Auden, exemplified importantly in the works of Sigmund Freud, which he found in his father's library and read copiously. One of his friends at Gresham's, John Pudney, recalls that once Auden threw his poems into the school pond, declaring that he was done with poetry and that "the human race would be saved by science" (Bucknell, Introduction xlv).
- <sup>14</sup> One of the unrequited love poems Auden wrote in November 1927 while in Oxford, "Because sap fell away," bears the note "For G.C." and refers to Gabriel Carritt, a "strikingly attractive" boy who rejected Auden's sexual advances (Carpenter 75–76).
- <sup>15</sup> Another poem of about the same time and laden with homoerotic associations and sexual frustration has survived, "Early Morning Bathing," and was published in Bucknell's anthology: "This world is far too good sometimes / For foolish folk like you and me" (JV 19).
- <sup>16</sup> This is characteristic of later poems. See, for instance, Auden's version of the Old English poem "The Wanderer," written in 1930, after his own wanderings in pre-Hitler Germany, where homosexuality was still tolerated.
- <sup>17</sup> "Taller to-day, we remember similar evenings," written two years later, also explores the sense of calm after a passionate sexual encounter: "Again in the room with the sofa hiding the grate, / Look down to the river when the rain is over . . ." The speaker seems to have found tranquillity, yet he still feels emotionally distant—"happy now, though no nearer each other" (Auden, qtd. in Mendelson 91).

- <sup>18</sup> In Chester Kallman's copy of the 1934 Random House Poems, Auden wrote the initials "W.M." indicating it referred to William McElwee, a fellow undergraduate with whom Auden was apparently in love.
- <sup>19</sup> About Auden's religious upbringing, Carpenter writes: "Both his parents were the children of Church of England vicars, but while his father had a rather detached and intellectual attitude towards religion, his mother was a deeply believing Christian. She saw to it that family prayers were held daily, and she took the children to morning and evening services at Solihull parish church every Sunday .... At the age of six, Wystan acted as a 'boat boy' at these services" (6) But when he was about fifteen years old, he put his religious beliefs aside for his enthusiasm for poetry, which came simultaneously with family turbulence after their acknowledgement of his homosexuality. Nevertheless, the poet's attachment to the Christian faith remained strong even during his years of acknowledged atheism and became unequivocal after his official return to the church in 1940.
- <sup>20</sup> While acknowledging social institutions and limits, the poet's struggle with indeterminacy and uncertainty denotes a desire to both question the purpose of religion and expiate the feelings of guilt attested precisely by the irremediable split in his character. For more on the poet's sense of duplicity, see note 1.
- <sup>21</sup> See the discussion around "Whenever I see for the first time" (1923), above.
- <sup>22</sup> Auden himself recognised the parallel between Mother Nature and his own mother in the prologue to *The Orators*: "By landscape reminded once of his mother's figure" (which he later included under the title "Adolescence" (qtd. in Bucknell, Introduction xxvii).
- <sup>23</sup> The essay "As It Seemed to Us" (*Forewords and Afterwords*, 1974) is crowded with interesting recollections of Auden's childhood.
- <sup>24</sup> In her introduction to the juvenilia, Bucknell acknowledges two early poems written almost at the end of a father-son trip to Yugoslavia, in which Auden sees the father as "the source of what he regarded as inherited weakness in himself" (xlix): "Truly our fathers had the gout" (1927) and "We, knowing the family history" (1927).
- <sup>25</sup> Bucknell claims that although "Rookhope (Weardale, Summer 1922)" dates the poet's traumatic experience in the summer of 1922, in Auden's lecture on Freud, "Phantasy and Reality in Poetry" (1971), he states that the Rookhope passage in "New Year Letter" refers to himself as a twelve-year-old.
- <sup>26</sup> See note 1.
- <sup>27</sup> The notion of "Urmutterfurcht" (primitive mother fear) was borrowed from Wagner's *Siegfried* and can be connected, in Bucknell's words, to "a conflict he felt between desire for independence and fear of losing his mother's love; it can also be understood on a more primal (or until he had read Freud, unconscious) level as the representation of a conflict between incestuous sexual desire for his mother and fear of gratifying that desire" (Introduction xxvii).
- <sup>28</sup> For more on Auden's conflicted relationship with Freud's theories, see Bozorth's "The Question Is What Do We Mean by Sex?": Diagnosis and Disorder" in *Auden's Games of Knowledge*, pp. 53–89.
- <sup>29</sup> See the discussion of "Whenever I see for the first time" (1923), above.
- <sup>30</sup> See the discussion of "The Road's Your Place" (1925), above.

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