RHYS, Jean. 1927. *The Left Bank*. London: Jonathan Cape.
---. (1966) 1968. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
---. (1934) 1969a. *Voyage in the Dark*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
---. (1939) 1969b. *Good Morning, Midnight*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
---. (1931) 1971. *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
---. (1968) 1972. *Tigers are Better-Looking*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
---. (1929) 1973. *Quartet*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
---. (1976) 1979. *Sleep It Off Lady*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
---. (1979) 1981. *Smile Please*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
---. 1984. *Letters, 1931-1966*. London: André Deutsch.
ROBINSON, Christopher. 1995. *Scandal in the Ink: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-century French Literature*. London: Cassell.
SAGE, Lorna. 1992. *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-War Women Novelists*. London: Macmillan.
SCOTT, Bonnie Kime. (ed.). 1990. *The Gender of Modernism: a Critical Anthology*. Bloomington: Indiana U. P.
SPAULL, Sue. 1989. "Gynocriticism". In Mills, S., L. Pearce, S. Spaull and E. Millard. (eds.). *Feminist Readings, Feminists Reading*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf: 83-121.
ZOLA, Émile. 1880. *Nana*. Paris: Librairie Charpentier.

# CRYING FIRE IN A THEATRE: AUDEN'S HARLEQUINADES

TERESA BRUS
UNIVERSITY OF WROCLAW

> It so happened in a theatre that there was a fire behind the curtain. A harlequin stepped out in front of the curtain to inform the audience about what was going on. The news was received as a joke and applauded. The harlequin repeated it again only to greater enjoyment of the audience. This is how I think the end of the world will happen —to the laughter and clapping of wits who will think it a joke.
>
> Kierkegaard

In the chapter on "The Humorous Element in Modernist Poetry" in their *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, first published in 1927, Laura Riding and Robert Graves argued that modernist writing, for all its high intellectual seriousness, had a propensity for the comic mode and was distinguished by a sort of "wilful cheerfulness". The modernist poet, they argued, oscillates between "formal clownishness" and "unrestrained burlesque". He is original in that he is able to "make fun of himself when he is at his most serious" (1969: 226-229). Such playfulness was not however just there for its own sake. Frivolity is one of the strategies embraced by modernist writers to come to terms with the very condition of modernity:

> [M]odernist poetry retains the clown's privilege of having irrational prejudices in favour of a few things as well as against a few things. It assumes, indeed, the humorous championship of things that the last centuries have either hated, neglected or mishandled (1969: 242-243).

The presence of a frivolous theme, always a dynamic subversion, can be personified by Dionysus, who presides over the theoretical assumptions of

*Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 20 (1999): 295-302

the godfathers of modernism: Nietzsche, who restored Dionysus to central significance, Freud, who realized fully the power of the dark chthonic forces, Frazer, who connected the mythic imagination to the collective unconscious, and who reminded us of the many masks under which Dionysus manifests his presence. Marx's revolutionary carnival, too, voiced the need for alternatives to Apollonian logic.

According to Monroe K. Spears, the transgressive character of W. H. Auden's writing derives from a specifically modernist impulse toward the Dionysian, which more than any other symbol suggests the "dynamic energy and profound disruptive force of revolution" (Spears 1970: 40). Dionysus, Spears suggests, "represents the claims of the collective, the irrational, the emotional and abnormal; of the feminine or androgynous or perverse" (Spears 1970: 40-44). Auden, like his precursor T. S. Eliot, dared to be childish, lyrical, and frivolous in a destitute time. Before his leap into Christian commitment, Auden experimented with the idea of the Dionysian man, who, like the Nietzschean musician, shared the "morbid traits of the century", and who, nevertheless, was ready to "balance them by means of overflowing, plastic, and rejuvenating power" (Nietzsche 1964: 1014). Sharing in "this wordly frivolity", he is also tempted to the "wrong kind of seriousness" (Auden 1973: 14), which again he is ready to subvert by "fixing a little tail of jokes even to the most holy thing" (Nietzsche 1964: 1039). Overtly playful or only profoundly frivolous, the Dionysian attitude is largely a life-enhancing principle "which declares even the most terrible and questionable qualities of existence good, and sanctifies them" (Nietzsche 1964: 1050).

In his Inaugural Lecture as a Professor of Poetry at Oxford, "Making, Knowing and Judging", Auden asserted that poetry "must praise all it can for being and for happening" (1989: 60). Unlike the ancient Greeks who were in a position to attain the happy and joyful affirmation of life, as Nietzsche reminds us, modern man's predicament is such that he cannot possibly cherish it. Nietzsche's prescription, to rediscover the South inside oneself, to "stretch a clear, glittering, and mysterious southern sky above one, to reconquer the southern healthiness and concealed power of the soul once more for oneself, to increase the compass of one's soul step by step" (Nietzsche 1964: 1051), is an imperative which returns to the origins of European consciousness, and explains, perhaps, Auden's mysterious reference to "southern gestures", modified by the "intricate ways of guilt", in the 1930s poem "Our hunting fathers".

Auden's early poem, "Sir, no man's enemy", which ends with a call for "new styles of architecture, a change of heart" for modern man, observes



Anthony Hecht, develops the metaphor of "a rebirth of the spirit, which will of necessity express itself in all of mankind's arts" (1993: 29). This is Nietzsche's rebirth of the Dionysian through the instinct of play which, as Gilles Deleuze says in his remarks on Nietzsche, affirms the primacy of becoming over being, and, through the "power of transmutation, transvaluation, reflection, development", seeks not to bear, carry, to harness oneself to that which exists, but on the contrary, to unburden, unharness, and set free that which lives. It is not to burden life with the weight of higher or even heroic values, but to create new values that would be those of life, values that make life light or affirmative (1997: 100).

Dionysus is thus not a destructive but a liberating force. Ubiquitous, he is the perfect cosmopolitan who achieves lightness through transmutation, passing over to territories "where the structures collapse, where the ethoses get mixed up" (1997: 104). As Robin Skelton suggests in his Introduction to *The Poetry of the Thirties*, Auden was one of those who operated amongst "blurred borderlands between real and unreal, boyhood and manhood, game and ritual, vision and fantasy, fable and history" (1964: 33), his generic transgressions linking the world of popular culture with the realm of the private association, in the spirit of Dionysian play.

Such playfulness involves an exploration of the subjunctive and conditional, the realm of "as-if". Michai Spariosu, in his *Literature, Mimesis and Play*, links this to a Greek tradition represented by Hesiod's utopian model of playful gods and Plato's reluctant concession to the utility of poetic play, which can propagate a "useful lie", by way of pleasure making the truth more accessible. The "as-if" of play, Spariosu argues, thus "becomes good mimesis and good mimesis becomes play and the two concepts will become inextricably bound together" (1982: 19). Transgressive play involves a transition from the everyday, commonsensical world to a ludic one which can transform, in perception at least, established hierarchies of power and authority.

For the Mediterranean-loving *Sonnenkinder* of the interwar years described in Martin Green's *Children of the Sun,* such ludic transvaluations became a whole way of life. The oppositional character of their "decadent narrative", Green argues, challenged the high seriousness of the British literary tradition. Green characterizes this post-Baudelairean life-style, whether as dandy, rogue or naïf, as one in which "ornament and brilliancy, playfulness and youthfulness" took precedence over power, authority and seriousness (1976: 14). Perhaps the most significant element the Auden group derived from the playful narcissism and "self-stylization" (1976: 283) of these "children of the sun" is the parodic rejection of the burdensome

seriousness of the fathers' generation, the heroes of war and men of power. Auden's 1930 charade, *Paid on Both Sides,* with its pantomime figures, and the musical comedy and harlequinade motifs of *The Dance of Death* (1933), brought the mocking spirit of the *commedia dell'arte* into the more sombre ethos of the 1930s.

Against the Leavisian canons of high seriousness, the Auden group privileged the discourse of the Baudelairean dandy, what Auden in a letter to Stephen Spender wrote of as assuming the "drunken prophetic" mode (Bucknell and Jenkins 1992, 1: 60). "Le dandy," said Cocteau, "est tête froide et main froide" (1957: 96), attributes which a supreme joker uses as a "refus à s'exposer en quoi que ce soit" (Cocteau 1957: 92). In a late poem, Auden made the analogy directly between his generation and the make-believe of the *commedia*, observing in "To Professor Neville Coghill Upon His Retirement" (in Green 1976: 281), that

> For a columbine season
> we were free to play
> swains of a pasture
> where neither love nor money
> nor clocks are cogent
> a time to wear odd clothing
> behave with panache
> and talk nonsense, as I did.

According to Malcolm Bradbury, Baudelaire's dandyism is a symptom of the presence of a "necessary ethic of control and exercise of the will" rather than an arrogant or refined predilection (Bradbury 1991: 214). The dandy's essential self is concealed by the gesture and the pose of artifice, mask and costume, an Eliotic "wardrobe of excuses". When, however, the pose is stripped away, Auden suggests, we suspect the sinister duplicity of "someone who likes to play God behind the scenes" (Auden 1989: 156), whose detachment is a form of manipulative superiority.

Auden's ludic humour operates on the borderline between the aesthetic and ethical, with a rationale he found in Søren Kierkegaard. Humour for Kierkegaard was a crucial stage of existential awareness preceding faith, "the last *terminus a quo* in relation to the Christian type of the religious" (Ziolkowski 1992: 113). The ironic individual comprehends the extremity of his situation but does not find it worth attempting a justification. The "great translucency" of his existential humour differs from "the loud laughter of indeterminacy and sensuous irritability" which arises from misplaced seriousness or reckless frivolity (Kierkegaard 1976: 89). For the ethical



individual the comic offers a protective barrier between self and world, a distancing which for Kierkegaard is devoid of superiority or pride. Yet the move towards the ethical may subsume the aesthetic. The Kierkegaardian ethical voice can criticize the aesthete for the excessive use of sarcasm and mockery, but he does not deny their "intellectual intoxication".

Julia Kristeva can help elucidate what Kierkegaard signifies for Auden here, when she writes of laughter as a pursuit in which an artist is "called upon to pursue the doubling process in which he (as subject) posits himself as sovereign at the very moment he shatters within the process encompassing this position" (1984: 222). The ludic is characterised by a duality in which power and its subversion coexist, for, as Spariosu says, "power can be experienced both as ecstatic, exuberant, and violent play and as a pleasurable welling up and gushing forth of strong emotion" (1982: 12). Play as the irrational principle of being, as *paidia, ein Spiel ohne Spieler*, "the spontaneous ecstatic movement of the world itself" (Spariosu 1982: 28), subordinates reason and defines true being, just as a game expresses nothing but itself and abides simply by the rules of its own performance. Dandyism in this light can be viewed as a style without message, or, more precisely, as a style which constitutes its own message.

Writing in 1938 in *Modern Poetry*, Louis MacNeice drew attention to the proliferation of light verse in a decade supposedly characterised by sombreness and sonority. Whether offering merely "a grain of salt" to these more serious preoccupations, or fostering an "urge to nonsense", light verse assumed a new aspect in Auden's work, he argued. Auden went beyond what Eliot called "intense levity" to explore the comic possibilities of popular verse and dramatic forms, contemporary jazz, dance and music hall, and the language of gossip and contemporary slang. Auden's "sympathy with the popular world" thus opened up the realm of buffoonery for modernist poetry.

A variety of "light" literary forms deployed by Auden in the 1930s privilege carnivalesque play over the ethical, breaking down the boundaries between faith and pretence, seriousness and frivolity. While their purpose is to amuse, their inversion of established hierarchies also disrupts. Auden's interest in light, trivial or frivolous forms arises from a wish to recreate the poet's long defunct intimacy with his linguistic and cultural community, without which his work "dwindles in quantity and importance", so that, "instead of regarding himself an entertainer", he assumes the mantle of the outcast prophet, "the unacknowledged legislator of the world", or of the dandy who sits in the cafe, "proud that he is less base than the passers-by, saying to himself as he contemplates the smoke of his cigar: What does it matter to me what becomes of my perceptions?" (Auden 1980: 434).

The ludic and the frivolous constitute a zone where intimacy is still possible, where the gap may be bridged. In the 1930s, Auden situated his verse deliberately at the intersection of high and low linguistic registers. Lucy McDiarmid has pointed out, for example, that in his 1935 anthology *The Poet's Tongue*, "the alphabetical, anonymous order of its poems creates a community rather than a hierarchy or a tyranny of the old over the new, the famous over the unknown, the "literary" over the "folk " or "naive"" (1990: 66). In this, Auden was reproducing, in a practical pedagogic context, the kind of verbal community Eliot envisaged as a utopian ideal in his 1933 Harvard Lectures, speaking of the wish "to be something of a popular entertainer, to convey the pleasures of poetry [...] to larger groups collectively" (in McDiarmid 1990: 84).

The modernist poet, according to Riding and Graves, offers a "border-sense, a well-poised mental hysteria, a direct exposure to time: there is [...] the far driven boundary line of humour [...] the callous haughtiness of indifference to danger" (1969: 255). The imagery of the border would have had an immediate appeal to Auden. The bourgeois society mocked in *The Dance of Death* (1933) stands on a border between its own impending death and the new life of a communism (represented at the end by a buffoonish Karl Marx) it refuses to embrace. Like a Renaissance masque (one of the many forms the play burlesques, along with the *commedia dell'arte* and contemporary musical comedy) it exposes in its very triviality the "sources and conditions of power" (*Princeton Encyclopedia* 1993: 739). The action unfolds through the uninterrupted gyrations of a male dancer personifying successively the Sun-God, the Demagogue, the Pilot, and so on, all manifestations of a historical patriarchal power revealed gradually to be powerless either to stop his purposeless dancing or to dance to a real conclusion. This dance diverts the (internal and actual) audiences in their unsuccessful quest for a fulfilling Ideal. Variously designated as master, leader, instructor, the unspeaking dancer communicates through the kinetic language of the body. He is idolized for his "splendid physique", "Grecian figure", and physical charm. He is the embodiment of what the bankrupt middle classes would wish to identify with ("We who are weak want a splendid physique"). Their desire for such bodily perfection conceals a death wish. The dancer is dancing the dance of death. The internal audience expect the dancer as Pilot to discover for them "the very heart of Reality". Instead he finally sinks into a "falling fit", dying from exhaustion, but still wishing everyone a jolly good time. At the end Marx enters to announce the dissolution of the means of production. The dancer as Demagogue represents, in fact, the latest manifestation of the *Führerprinzip*, at once entertainer,



leader and seducer, "our gallant captain for ever/ Our dandy, our dancer, our deep sea diver", like the clownish demagogue Hitler whose clones Auden expected shortly to see springing up throughout the western world.

Auden's masque, which he was later to disown as "rubbish", remains an important experiment with the use of the ludic to explore issues of serious contemporary concern. Deploying dance and the pastiche of popular songs, it sustains its theatricality by means of a play-within-the-play device, frequent and flamboyant changes of costume, the comic caricatures of Box and Cox, and direct Brechtian invitations to the audience to join in the fun (while at the same time ironically distancing itself from the increasingly desperate whirl), while a small jazz orchestra adds the lightness of European cabaret to the proceedings. The play both articulates and dispels contemporary anxieties by the very flimsiness of its forms and allusions, almost as if through dancing it out, the musical comedy devices could dissolve the uncertainty and anxiety of a low dishonest decade. Yet as the play openly admits, the wilful cheerfulness of this ludic indulgence is, in the end, a self-defeating intoxication, from which one will wake disenchanted: "Tasting, I place myself once more within the circle of Another, and there enchanted, perish". Acting the clown, according to Isherwood, Auden wore variously a panama hat, an opera hat, workman's cap, and a schoolmaster's mortar-board (Green 1976: 287). MacNeice similarly writes of "Maisie" looking almost ridiculous in her bright yellow sou'wester, black oil skin coat and huge gumboots (Auden and MacNeice 1985: 171). Seriously to cry fire in a crowded theatre, Harlequin would need to don a fireman's helmet.

## WORKS CITED


AUDEN, W. H. 1973. "The Greeks and Us". In *Forewords and Afterwords.* New York: Random House: 14.

---. 1980. *The Oxford Book of Light Verse.* Oxford: Oxford U. P.

---. 1988. "The Dance of Death." In *Plays and Other Dramatic Writings by W. H. Auden.* Ed. E. Mendelson. Princeton: Princeton U. P: 83-107.

---. 1989. *The Dyer's Hand.* New York: Vintage International.

AUDEN, W. H. and Louis MACNEICE. (1937) 1985. *Letters from Iceland.* London: Faber and Faber.

BRADBURY, M. (ed.). 1991. *Modernism. A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930.* London: Penguin Books.

BUCKNELL, Katherine and Nicholas JENKINS. (eds.). 1992. *Auden Studies.* Vol. 1. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

COCTEAU, Jean. 1957. *La difficulté d'être.* Monaco: Editions du Rocher.
DELEUZE, Gilles. 1997. *Essays Critical and Clinical.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
ELIOT, T. S. 1971. *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950.* London: Faber and Faber.
GREEN, Martin. 1976. *Children of the Sun.* New York: Basic Books, Inc.
HECHT, Anthony. 1993. *The Hidden Law. The Poetry of W. H. Auden.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U. P.
KIERKEGAARD, Søren. 1976. *Albo-albo. Euter-Eller.* Warszawa: PWN.
KRISTEVA, Julia. 1984. "Maldoror and Poems: Laughter as Practice". In *Revolution in Poetic Language.* New York: Columbia U. P: 218-225.
MCDIARMID, Lucy. 1990. "The Finest Tumbler of His Day." In *Auden's Apologies for Poetry.* Princeton: Princeton U. P: 84.
MACNEICE, Louis. 1938. "Lighter Poetry and Drama". In *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay.* Oxford: Oxford U. P: 138.
NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. 1964. *The Will to Power.* New York: Russell & Russell Inc.
THE PRINCETON ENCYCLOPEDIA. 1993. Princeton: Princeton U. P: 738-739.
RIDING, Laura and Robert GRAVES. (1927) 1969. "The Humorous Element in Modernist Poetry". In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry.* New York: Haskell House Publishing: 223-257.
SKELTON, Robin. 1964. "Introduction". In *The Poetry of the Thirties.* London: Penguin Books: 33.
SPARIOSU, Michai. 1982. *Literature, Mimesis and Play. Essays in Literary Theory.* Narr: Gunter Narrverlag.
SPEARS, Monroe K. 1970. *Dionysus and the City.* New York: Oxford U. P.
ZIOLKOWSKI, Eric. 1992. ""The Laughter of Despair": Irony, Humour, and Laughter in Kierkegaard and Carlyle". In *Play, Literature, Religion.* New York: State University of New York Press.

# AUDEN'S JEREMIAD: *ANOTHER TIME* AND EXILE FROM THE JUST CITY.

MICHAEL MURPHY
THE NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY

## 1

> "An old ghost's thoughts are lightning,
> To follow is to die".
> "The Spirit Medium", W. B. Yeats.

That there were points of contact between Auden and Yeats was not unrecognised by contemporary writers. In November 1937, a double-issue of *New Verse* was published dedicated to a discussion of the work and influence of the then thirty-year-old Auden. Among the shorter contributions were those from Dylan Thomas and Graham Greene. In their enthusiasm for Auden they both make comparisons with Yeats, though the purpose is markedly different. While Greene is eager to show how highly he rates Auden's achievements —"[W]ith the exception of *The Tower*, no volume of poetry has given me more excitement than *Look, Stranger*" (*New Verse* 1937: 30)— Thomas means to condemn Yeats, whose poetry is, he says, in comparison to Auden's, "guilty as a trance" (*New Verse* 1937: 25). Thomas elides two aspects of Yeats's personality: his interest in spiritualism, and his flirtation with fascism and political isolationism. While the former marks him out as a poet of the 1890s, the latter echoes the deep sense of disappointment poets of Thomas's generation must have felt with a number of artistic father-figures, amongst them Yeats, Eliot and Pound, whose right-wing sympathies were becoming every day more apparent.[1]

Yet even while Thomas is drawing these distinctions, his mischievous "P.S. Congratulations on Auden's seventieth birthday" blurs and complicates the perceived differences between the two poets. At the time of its

*Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 20 (1999): 303-328

COCTEAU, Jean. 1957. *La difficulté d'être.* Monaco: Editions du Rocher.
DELEUZE, Gilles. 1997. *Essays Critical and Clinical.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
ELIOT, T. S. 1971. *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950.* London: Faber and Faber.
GREEN, Martin. 1976. *Children of the Sun.* New York: Basic Books, Inc.
HECHT, Anthony. 1993. *The Hidden Law. The Poetry of W. H. Auden.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U. P.
KIERKEGAARD, Søren. 1976. *Albo-albo. Euter-Eller.* Warszawa: PWN.
KRISTEVA, Julia. 1984. "Maldoror and Poems: Laughter as Practice". In *Revolution in Poetic Language.* New York: Columbia U. P: 218-225.
MCDIARMID, Lucy. 1990. "The Finest Tumbler of His Day." In *Auden's Apologies for Poetry.* Princeton: Princeton U. P: 84.
MACNEICE, Louis. 1938. "Lighter Poetry and Drama". In *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay.* Oxford: Oxford U. P: 138.
NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. 1964. *The Will to Power.* New York: Russell & Russell Inc.
THE PRINCETON ENCYCLOPEDIA. 1993. Princeton: Princeton U. P: 738-739.
RIDING, Laura and Robert GRAVES. (1927) 1969. "The Humorous Element in Modernist Poetry". In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry.* New York: Haskell House Publishing: 223-257.
SKELTON, Robin. 1964. "Introduction". In *The Poetry of the Thirties.* London: Penguin Books: 33.
SPARIOSU, Michai. 1982. *Literature, Mimesis and Play. Essays in Literary Theory.* Narr: Gunter Narrverlag.
SPEARS, Monroe K. 1970. *Dionysus and the City.* New York: Oxford U. P.
ZIOLKOWSKI, Eric. 1992. ""The Laughter of Despair": Irony, Humour, and Laughter in Kierkegaard and Carlyle". In *Play, Literature, Religion.* New York: State University of New York Press.

# AUDEN'S JEREMIAD: *ANOTHER TIME* AND EXILE FROM THE JUST CITY.

MICHAEL MURPHY
THE NOTTINGHAM TRENT UNIVERSITY

## I

> "An old ghost's thoughts are lightning,
> To follow is to die".
> "The Spirit Medium", W. B. Yeats.

That there were points of contact between Auden and Yeats was not unrecognised by contemporary writers. In November 1937, a double-issue of *New Verse* was published dedicated to a discussion of the work and influence of the then thirty-year-old Auden. Among the shorter contributions were those from Dylan Thomas and Graham Greene. In their enthusiasm for Auden they both make comparisons with Yeats, though the purpose is markedly different. While Greene is eager to show how highly he rates Auden's achievements —"[W]ith the exception of *The Tower*, no volume of poetry has given me more excitement than *Look, Stranger*" (*New Verse* 1937: 30)— Thomas means to condemn Yeats, whose poetry is, he says, in comparison to Auden's, "guilty as a trance" (*New Verse* 1937: 25). Thomas elides two aspects of Yeats's personality: his interest in spiritualism, and his flirtation with fascism and political isolationism. While the former marks him out as a poet of the 1890s, the latter echoes the deep sense of disappointment poets of Thomas's generation must have felt with a number of artistic father-figures, amongst them Yeats, Eliot and Pound, whose right-wing sympathies were becoming every day more apparent.[1]

Yet even while Thomas is drawing these distinctions, his mischievous "P.S. Congratulations on Auden's seventieth birthday" blurs and complicates the perceived differences between the two poets. At the time of its

*Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 20 (1999): 303-328

publication, Yeats was seventy-two years old. Perhaps Thomas, seven years Auden's junior, is firing a warning shot from a still younger generation of poets across Auden's bows, suggesting that, given the accolades now being heaped upon him, his three-score years and ten must be drawing to a close, with the gathered acolytes come not to praise but to bury him.

Central to an understanding of Auden's poetic relationship with Yeats are the intertextual borrowings from, and references to, Yeats's work which sustain the structure and argument of Auden's great elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats". Written in the immediate weeks after Auden's arrival in the United States, the poem is an implicit response to Yeats's doubts and self-questioning in "[The] Man and the Echo": "Did that play of mine send out/ Certain men the English shot?" (Yeats 1992: 392). Yeats is referring, of course, to events in Ireland during Easter 1916, and the possibility that his nationalistic drama, *Cathleen ni Houlihan,* had played some part in determining the actions and subsequent deaths of the leaders of the uprising. But Auden's poem can only have been read in the context of more immediate political upheavals and the imminent threat of another European conflagration.

Like Yeats, Auden was a public figure. His poems and plays were read by his contemporaries as voicing their own thoughts and experience, while the Establishment showed its recognition of his importance by awarding him the King's Gold Medal in 1937. Auden was, therefore, in a unique position to understand the anxieties Yeats voiced about the tensions between a poet's duty to speak out and the possible repercussions and responsibilities of his or her so doing.

Stan Smith has provided arguably the clearest and most detailed account of the nature of these textual exchanges (Smith 1994), charting their advent with the publication of Yeats's "[The] Man and the Echo" in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The London Mercury* in January 1939, the month of Yeats's death, through to Auden's elegy written the following month and first published, without what we now know as the middle section of the poem's triptych, in the *New Republic* on 8 March (with the revised version appearing in *The London Mercury* in April), and culminating in Auden's prose obituary "The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats", which appeared in the Spring edition of *Partisan Review*. Smith begins his essay by quoting an extract of a letter Auden wrote to Stephen Spender in 1964, a letter which clearly shows Auden's acknowledgement of Yeats as a poetic father-figure while at the same time demonising him, in Smith's words, as the "devil of rhetoric and political propaganda":



> I am incapable of saying a word about W. B. Yeats because through no fault of his, he has become for me a symbol of my own devil of unauthenticity, of everything which I must try to eliminate from my own poetry, false emotions, inflated rhetoric, empty sonorities[...] (Smith 1994)

What Smith does not comment on, however, is the significance of the word "symbol" in this paragraph. Not only is Auden admitting the fact that he still feels it necessary to struggle with aspects of Yeats's influence, but the very terms in which this struggle is described are, to all intents and purposes, themselves an implicit acknowledgment of the importance he attached to aspects of Yeats's art. Consciously or not, Auden is admitting that he has used the figure of Yeats as a symbolic foil for his own *daemons*, just as Yeats used figures such as Maud Gonne, Lady Gregory and James Connolly in the symbolic drama of his poetry. This is clearly the case in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", where Auden uses the occasion of Yeats's death to voice those anxieties which so powerfully animated his own poetry at this time.

The elegy is not an isolated example of this process. While it clearly integrates themes and images from Yeats's poetry, it also points the reader back in the direction of Auden's "Spain", written in early 1937, to the group of poems Auden wrote prior to arriving in the United States in January 1939, and to those written in the immediate months after his arrival. If, as Stan Smith suggests, the relationship between Auden and Yeats is oedipal, with Auden playing the role of Oedipus to Yeats's Laius, then Spain and fascism is the crossroads at which they meet, with "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" functioning as a signpost. Published in 1940, *Another Time* can therefore be read as Auden's cohesive and imaginative response to the political crisis in Europe, the artistic crisis prompted by Yeats's death, and the crisis of his own exile to the United States. Central to all three concerns was Auden's developing fascination with how human beings determine the ways in which they live in relation to one another. And his symbol for this, as it was for Sophocles, is that of the "Just City".

## II

"He'd done his share of weeping for Jerusalem".

"Voltaire at Ferney", W. H. Auden.

The only new poem of Auden's to be included in the double-issue *New Verse* was "Dover". Written in August 1937, the town becomes in the poem a locus for ambivalent feelings, a watery crossroads of arrivals and departures, of idealistic hopes and the onset of harsher realities. The town also serves to remind us of historical intersections between England and continental Europe as evidenced by "the dominant Norman castle" and "Georgian houses". In one sense Dover is only the latest incarnation of those troubled and troubling landscapes that haunted Auden's poetic imagination a decade earlier. What is different is that these earlier locations —mine shafts and dams, "washing-floors" and tramlines— though they might be man-made, were either abandoned or uninhabitable. Auden is now more specifically focused on the urban and how we construct an environment in which to live moral and ethical lives. He has come down from the valleys and entered the *polis*. Or almost.

The opening stanzas of "Dover" provide a view of the town not as it would be experienced from the ground but as it would be seen from the air. The eye of the poet moves at a tremendous pace, first showing us the approaches to the town —"Steep roads, a tunnel through the downs"— before hurrying on to a "ruined pharos", a "constructed bay" and an "almost elegant" seafront. The tone of voice —cool, detached, descriptive— might have come from one of the documentary films Auden had worked on during the thirties, as might the camera-like movement of the poet's eye. Like most documentaries of the time it works hard to build up an illusion of objectivity, an objectivity that convinces us of the authority of the speaker not just because of the tone of voice but the fact that s/he seems to be speaking at a clear remove from the events described. Countering this realism, however, are details alerting us to the fact that Auden is concerned with exposing a reality which, like the town itself, has "a vague and dirty root".

Throughout the poetry Auden wrote in the 1930s he provides insights into the economic realities of a contemporary England in steep economic decline and about to become the world's first post-industrial nation. Dover, though a "constructed bay", now manufactures nothing. It is a place of faded elegance and diminishing economic importance. Any short-term use it may have is to help shore-up a British empire already in retreat:



> Here live the experts on what the soldiers want
> And who the travellers are,
>
> Whom the ships carry in and out between the lighthouses
> That guard forever the made privacy of this bay
> Like twin stone dogs opposed on a gentleman's gate:
> Within these breakwaters English is spoken; without
> Is the immense improbable Atlas. (Auden 1986: 222)

The vision of England granted to Auden is, like Gloucester's in *King Lear*, one of preparedness for war, of spies and civilian informers, of disputed inherited wealth, and fear and ignorance of the world "without". Only at the beginning of the fifth stanza does the poet show us the view from ground level:

> The eyes of the departing migrants are fixed on the sea,
> To conjure their special fates from the impersonal water;
> . . . . . .
> And filled with the tears of the beaten or calm with fame,
> The eyes of the returning thank the historical cliffs:
> "The heart has at last ceased to lie, and the clock to accuse[."]

The images and the point of view are significant. The roll-call of foreign countries Auden visited between 1934 and 1939 provides us with a list of the world's political hot-spots: Belgium and Czechoslovakia in 1934, Spain and France in 1937, and, in 1938, Hong Kong and China. A pattern emerges in Auden's travels, one that sees him gravitating to places where the political map was being redrawn by the re-emergence of repressed historical grievances, and this at a time when he was looking to redefine the boundaries between his personal and public self, and to negotiate for himself as a poet a course between the two. "Dover" can therefore be read as charting the decline of England as a world power, figured in the image of the aeroplane superseding the ship ("Above them, expensive and lovely as a rich child's toy,/ The aeroplanes fly in the new European air,/ On the edge of that air that makes England of minor importance"), an image which I will return to later. The poem also functions as a symbolic arena for the struggle between Auden's idealism and his awareness of pragmatic reality: between, as Auden portrays it, the migrant convinced that his or her fate will be special, and the wiser tears or thanks of the returning traveller, only grateful that "The heart has at last ceased to lie, and the clock to accuse".

Auden's personal experience of these two contrary states was a recent and a painful one. Other than a brief visit to Paris in April 1937, his previous journey abroad had been to Spain to join the International Movement against right-wing opposition to the democratically-elected government. What exactly Auden did while in Spain is subject to conjecture. Throughout his life he himself remained reluctant to discuss the experience,[2] but the effect it had upon his poetry was to become more and more clearly defined.

In a letter to E. R. Dodds on 8 December 1936, Auden wrote: "I so dislike everyday political activities that I won't do them, but here is something I can do as a citizen and now as a writer, and as I have no dependants, I feel I ought to go". "Please", he added, "don't tell anyone about this". Dodds wrote back asking for further explanation, to which Auden replied:

> I am not one of those who believe that poetry need or even should be directly political, but in a critical period such as ours, I do believe that the poet must have direct knowledge of the major political events. It is possible that in some periods, the poet can absorb and feel all in the ordinary everyday life, perhaps the supreme masters always can, but for the second order and particularly today, what he can write about is what he has experienced in his own person. Academic knowledge is not enough. (Carpenter 1983: 206-207)

Auden's reply can have left Dodds in little doubt that the primary reasons for his going to Spain were less to do with supporting the Republic than with his needing an opportunity to test himself against the "supreme masters" and to discover a social justification for his role as a writer.

Yeats's response to the deepening European crisis was, to say the least, capricious. In his infamous introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936, as well as dismissing the poets of the First World War ("[P]assive suffering is not a theme for poetry"), he made slighting reference to the politics, and by extension the poetry, of Auden and his followers: "communism is their *Deus ex Machina*, their Santa Claus, their happy ending, but speaking as a poet I prefer tragedy to tragi-comedy" (Coote 1998: 548). The anthology did little to endear Yeats to those looking for reasons to marginalise him and his poetry, amongst them writers whose primary influences were the First World War poets and a political situation in which any criticism of communism could be read as tacit support for fascism. Yeats's stewardship of the anthology would seem, therefore, a critical point in marking him out as the antithesis of everything the Auden Generation stood for. However, Louis MacNeice in his important 1941 study of Yeats's poetry, while prepared to acknowledge these differences, argues that there were deep affinities between writers of the younger generation and the Yeats of this period:



> The earlier Yeats had been too remote from [the younger English poets of the Thirties], subsisting on *fin de siècle* fantasies. But now he had broken into the twentieth century; *he had been through the fire*.
>
> It must be admitted that there was a certain snobbery in our new admiration, a snobbery paralleled in Yeats's own remark: "I too have tried to be modern." The word "modern" is always relative. What did Yeats's modernity —a quality which in his youth he had violently repudiated— consist in? As far as content goes [...] Yeats was "modern" in the following respects. He had widened his range [...], was now dealing fairly directly with contemporary experience, some of it historical, some of it casual and personal. As well as admitting contemporary matter into his poetry, he was also admitting moral or philosophical problems. And he was expressing many more moods, not only the "poetic" ones. He was writing at one moment as a cynic, at another as an orator, at another as a sensualist, at another as a speculative thinker. [...] But on the whole it was Yeats's *dryness* and *hardness* that excited us. T. E. Hulme, in an essay on Romanticism and Classicism written some time before the Great War, prophesied an era of dry hard verse in reaction against the Romantic habit of "flying up into the eternal gases." Yeats, who had flown up there himself, had managed —on occasions, at least— to come down again. Therefore, we admired him. (MacNeice 1967: 156)

"Dryness and Hardness": the mixing of poetic registers and modes of discourse, the admittance of the personal and the political, the contemporary and the historical, and a willingness to try to keep his poetic feet on the ground. Interestingly, MacNeice's summary of Yeats "the Modern" also serves as a description of Auden's techniques in a poem like "Dover". Where the two men fundamentally differ, however, is in their reading of and response to historical events. According to Yeats's apocalyptic vision, war in Europe could only bring about "Heaven blazing into the head:/ Tragedy wrought to its uppermost", with history a stage on which all "perform their tragic play" (Yeats 1992: 341). It is the artist's role, Yeats believed, to pick up the pieces and begin again from scratch, and to do so joyfully: "Out of Cavern comes a voice/ And all it knows is that one word "Rejoice"" (Yeats

1992: 340). Though not without its ambiguities, Auden's response was much less "lofty". Along with the tens of thousands of other men and women who made the journey, Spain offered him the opportunity to intervene personally, and to do something not only as a writer but as a citizen.

## III

> "He seeks the hostile unfamiliar place,
> It is the strangeness that he tries to see".
> "The Traveller", W. H. Auden.

"FAMOUS POET TO DRIVE AMBULANCE IN SPAIN". Readers might have been forgiven for wondering whether the editor of the *Daily Worker* had not decided to move the situations vacant column onto the front page, so ambiguous was the morning headline of 12 January 1937. What it now alerts us to, however, is the banality of Auden's first-hand experience of the "Theatre of War". Perhaps the nearest he came to describing these banalities in verse is contained in "Musée des Beaux Arts", where Yeats's tragic vision of human suffering becomes tragi-comic in "the dreadful martyrdom must run its course/ Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot/ Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse/ Scratches its innocent behind on a tree" (Auden 1986: 237). Not only are human actions not endowed with the redemptive power of Yeats's "tragic joy",[3] but they are removed from the scene completely. This technique is similar to Tolstoy's in his short story "Kholstomer",[4] where the narrator is a horse, from whose point of view events such as the senseless and cruel whipping of a serf are described and (mis-)understood. MacNeice's insistence that poetry be willing to take its head out of the clouds is fully realised in "Musée des Beaux Arts", literally so when we remember that the painting which is the subject of the second stanza is Brueghel's "The Fall of Icarus".

If "Musée des Beaux Arts", written in Paris and Brussels during the winter of 1938/39, can be read as Auden's considered reflections on the realities of war, his more immediate response was "Spain". Begun almost immediately after returning to England in March 1937, the poem was first published in pamphlet form by Faber on 20 May, with its royalties donated to the work of Medical Aid in Spain.

There are some interesting parallels to be drawn between the response to Auden's poem and those which met Picasso's painting of the bombing of Guernica when it was exhibited in England at the New Burlington Gallery in



October 1938. Both poem and painting divided their critics and caused some who had previously admired both artists to question these latest developments in their work. One of the acutest of those who responded positively was Stephen Spender. Replying to André Gide's criticisms of Picasso, Spender picked up on the fact that Gide saw the failure of "Guernica" in terms of its having become "*excentric,* it breaks away from its centre, or has no centre" (Cunningham 1986: 220). Spender had isolated a similar eccentricity in Auden's work a year earlier when, in "Oxford to Communism", his contribution to the Auden issue of *New Verse*, he offered a quizzical reading of Auden's work based, as the essay's title suggests, on the tensions between Auden's middle-class, High-Church Anglican background and his intellectual and political convictions. The energy of Auden's poetry, Spender claims, is fuelled by these opposing tensions, with his great gift being the ability to find a vantage point that allows him to see and judge both clearly:

> The subject of his poetry is the struggle, but the struggle seen, as it were, by someone who whilst living in one camp, sympathises with the other; a struggle in fact which while existing externally is also taking place within the mind of the poet himself[.] (*New Verse* 1937: 10)

The one poem above all others which most clearly articulates this position, says Spender, is "Spain".

Like Spender's description of "Guernica", the poem is "certainly not realistic [and] is in no sense reportage". It begins, as Humphrey Carpenter notes, with one of Auden's "hawk-like" views, the subject being not a place, as it was to be in "Dover", but time or, more properly, history. Carpenter also states that one stimulus to Auden's writing the poem was his having read *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* by the young critic Christopher Caudwell, killed in Madrid in February 1937. Caudwell discusses in the book the radical changes affecting the modern world as a result of economic forces. "These changes", he wrote, "do not happen "automatically", for history is made by men's actions, although their actions by no means always have the effect they are intended to have. The results of history are by no means willed by any men" (Carpenter 1983: 217). Caudwell clearly pre-empts the central concern of Auden's elegy for Yeats, that "poetry makes nothing happen", but in March 1937 Auden, like Yeats, was still concerned with the belief that poetry could and should effect change. There were, however, hard choices to be made —"The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder", as Auden bluntly put it in "Spain". Though this line was later changed to "The conscious acceptance of guilt in

the *fact* of murder" (my italics) and, in 1965, the poem was omitted altogether from *Collected Poems*, the fact remains that on his return to England Auden saw the war in Spain as a decisive point in Western history, one which would determine how the past could be read and the future shaped, and saw too that the decisive influence in this "struggle" would not be the appearance of some *Deus ex Machina* but active human involvement:

> The stars are dead; the animals will not look:
> We are left alone with our day, and the time is short and
> History to the defeated
> May say Alas but cannot help or pardon. (Auden 1986: 212)

The problem lay in determining what exactly was being fought for. The ideals of the young were easily manipulated, and reports of events in Spain were not exempt from being economical with the truth. Indeed, as Valentine Cunningham says in relation to Auden's poem, Spain became "all things to all men (and women), it respond[ed] to whatever subjective needs the observer [brought] to bear on it [becoming] very like Hamlet's cloud formations, in fact, very like a whale" (Cunningham 1986: xxxi).

> To you I'm the
>
> Yes-man, the bar-companion, the easily-duped:
> I am whatever you do; I am your vow to be
> Good, your humorous story;
> I am your business voice; I am your marriage.
>
> "What's your proposal? To build the Just City? I will.
> I agree. Or is it the suicide pact, the romantic
> Death? Very well, I accept, for
> I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain".

As these lines unfold, one motivating force predominates. Just as "Dover" shows a town that is the focus for all manner of repressed emotions ("the trains that fume", "the vows, the tears, the slight emotional signals", and the "Soldiers [...] in their pretty clothes,/ As fresh and silly as girls"), so Spain becomes a focus of frustrated sexuality.[5] The image Auden uses to gather these disparate emotional threads together is that of the "Just City". Cunninghan writes:



> [I]f Spain's necessities, tested thirties writers in their lives, it also provided tests for their writing. Bluntly put, thirties writing's preoccupation with questions of war, action, pacifism and the possibility of heroism [...] came suddenly very sharply and nastily to life in Spain. [...] Auden, for example, found it difficult to go on praising bombing planes and helmeted airman after his Spanish experiences. (Cunningham 1986: xxv)

There is every chance that as a "FAMOUS POET", Auden was protected from seeing much real front-line action. His experiences in Spain, therefore, might not have been such to cause the change in his poetry Cunningham suggests. What must undoubtedly have shaken him, and made him re-evaluate his use of the kind of imagery mentioned by Cunningham, was the aerial bombing of Guernica on 20 April 1937 by German Junker 52s and Heinkel 111s. Used, as Goering admitted in 1946, as a "testing ground" (Thomas 1964: 419), Guernica proclaimed the future of modern warfare: the systematic terrorisation and destruction of civilian populations. If the "Just City" remained an ideal, Guernica, a small market town with a population of some 7,000 people swelled by upwards of 3,000 refugees, demonstrated the latest threat to its fragile existence.

Auden's poetry continued to show a fascination for towns and cities. Between finishing "Spain" and writing "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", he was to write poems about Dover, Oxford, Hong Kong, and Brussels. Images of the city also appear in other poems, and always associated with the figure of the artist. Rimbaud is located in a landscape of "railway-arches", A. E. Housman linked to both Cambridge and North London, and Voltaire with Ferney. In "Matthew Arnold", it is the poetic "gift" itself that is "a dark disordered city". This relationship between the poet and the community in which he or she lives, works and writes, was analysed by Auden in "The Poet and The City". Some of his conclusions are amongst the most iconoclastic he ever wrote:

> A society which was really like a good poem, embodying the aesthetic virtues of beauty, order, economy and subordination of detail to the whole, would be a nightmare of horror for, given the historical reality of actual men, such a society could only come into being through selective breeding, extermination of the physically and mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in the cellars. (Auden 1975: 85)

In the light of what we know about his interest in eugenics, it is difficult not to read this passage as an implicit reference to Yeats, for whom aesthetic considerations were wont to become confused with procreational. An example of this is found in his foreword to *Essays and Introductions* (1961). "A poet", Yeats claims, "is justified not by the expression of himself, but by the public he finds or creates". He goes on to apply this rather Frankenstein's-monsterish argument to G. F. Watts and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and their choice of unconventional female models: "Two painters created their public; two types of beauty decided what strains of blood would most prevail" (Yeats 1961: 4). Yeats's thinking may have been influenced by Darwin's discussion in *Descent of Man* of the role played by aesthetics during the mating season for animals and birds. But as the thirties progressed and he further developed his conception of tragic joy, one aspect of which was physical perfection and the full exercise of all one's faculties, his continued interest in and active support of eugenics, most fully articulated in *On The Boiler* (1939), played into the hands of the Fascists. That he also associated eugenics with the need for a world war only further problematises the relationship between Yeats's ideal of the "Just City" (or "Just Ireland") and Auden's.

Auden's distrust of artists and their Utopian dreams also occurs in one of the aphoristic paragraphs that make up *The Prolific and the Devourer*, written in the spring or summer of 1939, and which marks Auden's first attempt at working out the ideas that were to be later developed in "New Year Letter" and, to some extent, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats". The book, unfinished, is another example of what Spender meant by Auden's ability to live in one camp while simultaneously sympathising with the other.

The title, taken from Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, is used by Auden to explore the relationship between artist and politician in the modern world, and the contribution both make to the building of a "Just City". Rather than resolving the conflict between the two, Auden, like Blake, sees the necessity of their opposing views existing in a kind of creative tension or friction. The proper function of both the artist and the politician, he proposes, is to "seek to extend their experience beyond the immediately given". (Auden 1986: 396). Later that year, Auden was to do this in a literal way by emigrating from England to the United States. He arrived in New York, via Paris and Brussels, on 26 January 1939 and was greeted by heavy snow and ice blocks floating on the Hudson. The afternoon of his arrival brought the news that Barcelona had fallen to Franco. Two days later, Yeats died in the South of France.



## IV

> "Tears fall in all the rivers. Again the driver
> Pulls on his gloves and in a blinding
> snowstorm starts
> Upon his deadly journey; and again the writer
> Runs howling to his art".
> "Journey to Iceland", W. H. Auden.

With its stark vision of a city in the grip of winter, the opening section of Auden's elegy for Yeats immediately alerts the reader to the fact that, like "Spain", the poem means to be neither realistic nor simple reportage. What is striking about the opening stanzas, as with "Spain", "Dover" and, to a lesser extent, "Musée des Beaux Arts", is the poet's physical detachment from what is being described. Where exactly is the poet speaking from, we might ask, able to command this sweeping view of brooks and airports, public statues and evergreen forests, rivers and "fashionable quays"? This aloofness can in part be seen as dramatising an objectivity on Auden's part, one that withdraws from an emotional response to Yeats's death and therefore allows him to consider the event in the light of its wider significance.

The effect of these opening stanzas is remarkably similar to the experience described by Auden in his essay "American Poetry", where, analysing the differences between European and American writers, he focuses on the changed relationship between the individual and landscape, a change, he suggests, which can best be judged from the air:

> It is an unforgettable experience for anyone born on the other side of the Atlantic to take a plane journey by night across the United States. Looking down he will see the lights of some town like a last outpost in a darkness stretching for hours ahead, and realize that, even if there is no longer an actual frontier, this is still a continent [...] where human activity seems a tiny thing in comparison to the magnitude of the earth[.] (Auden 1975: 358)

The city with its surrounding countryside described in the opening section of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is a strange amalgam of primeval forests and the contemporary world of airports and suburbs. Like the figure encountered by the poet in Eliot's "Little Gidding", Auden's vision of the city and its surroundings is "a familiar compound ghost/ Both intimate and unidentifiable" (Eliot 1969: 193). The city has become a necropolis, and the poem, in its movements through, over and around that city/ body, assumes the clinical air of an autopsy. The disinterestedness of the poet is also similar

to the poise of the airman in Yeats's elegy for Robert Gregory, who, "Somewhere among the clouds above", looks down and declares: "Those that I fight I do not hate,/ Those that I guard I do not love" (Yeats 1992: 184). It is not difficult to imagine Auden sympathising with the airman's stated reason for taking part in the war: "A lonely impulse of delight/ Drove me to this tumult in the clouds", and that this image from Yeats may have prompted the images of helmeted airman that occur in his own poetry.

News of Yeats's death and the fall of Barcelona seem to have fused in Auden's imagination. The vision of the dying man's stricken body as a city beset by rumours, by the failure of electrical supplies, by emptying squares and silent suburbs, had a very real correlative in the experience of Barcelona, Guernica and other Spanish towns and cities. While what is most often remembered about the elegy is the phrase "poetry makes nothing happen", the significance of this is only fully understandable if we recognise the fact that many of the writers who fought in Spain believed the exact opposite, that their being in Spain would indeed make something happen by helping secure the elected power of the left-wing government. Though Auden's political ideals may have been irrevocably shaken by his experience, Spain remained, as he had written in his letter to Dodds, an opportunity for him to do something as a citizen and a poet. The Fascist victory may have confirmed Auden's growing doubts of ever successfully resolving the tensions between the two, in which case "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" becomes a record of his determination to continue writing but also to be free of the illusion that the activity of itself could make any significant political or social changes. Spain had also shown that the youthful dream of "poets exploding like bombs" could happen all too literally and still fail to make the desired thing happen; while Lorca's murder in July 1936, only two days after the outbreak of the Civil War, was a brutal warning that the poet could no longer take it for granted that he or she had any part to play in the constitution of the "Just City".

Three times within the ten-lined second section of the elegy, the word "survive" appears in connection not with Yeats, who has yet to be mentioned by name, but with poetry in general. Threatened by "physical decay", "hurt", "madness", "isolation" and "grief", poetry retreats "to the valley of its saying" and becomes "A way of happening, a mouth". While Auden offers us the example of a poet alienated within a landscape that contains the possibility of tragic suffering, it is also one he firmly locates within an economic, and therefore political, climate. The poet's experience of "the parish of rich women" is balanced by the wider world of the first section of the elegy, where "the poor have the suffering to which they are fairly



accustomed,/ And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom".

In his biography of Auden, Richard Davenport-Hines describes the poet's mood during the early months after his arrival in the States as "a mixture of apprehension and zest" (Davenport-Hines 1996: 182). The elegy for Yeats would seem to confirm this. Balanced between affirmation and disavowal of the poet's role, Auden knows he has escaped the stifling, negative influences England had come to represent for him but, like the free man at the close of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", he is still at the stage of needing to learn "how to praise".

It is possible that Federico García Lorca's "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías", his elegy for the death of a bullfighter friend, may also have played a part in influencing Auden's elegy. It seems highly likely that Auden was familiar with Lorca's work by early 1939. Both poets had been published in *New Writing*,[6] and Stephen Spender had translated several of Lorca's lyrics, amongst them "Adam" from *Poet in New York*. We can imagine Auden being interested not only in Lorca's treatment of homosexuality in this poem but in hearing of the formative influence New York played in shaping his political and artistic sympathies. Auden may also have borne in mind the deep sense of unease and alienation that pervades *Poet in New York* while he was himself deciding to leave England.

This is a matter for conjecture. If we compare the two elegies, however, some interesting parallels do emerge. "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" begins with specific mention of the time of Yeats's death —"the dead of winter", where "dead" might also mean "dead-centre", the exact middle— while Lorca's opening stanza insists that the reader be aware of the exact time of the bullfighter's death:

> At five in the afternoon.
> Exactly five in the afternoon.
> A boy fetched the white sheet
> *at five in the afternoon.*
> A basket of lime made ready
> *at five in the afternoon.*
> The rest was death and death alone
> *at five in the afternoon.* (García Lorca 1992: 189)

"At five in the afternoon" continues as a refrain throughout the opening section of the poem, just as "O all the instruments agree/ The day of his death was a dark cold day" is repeated at the end of Auden's first and last stanzas. There are other incidental similarities between the opening sections,

specifically the images both poets use to build up a picture of a city: Auden's suburbs invaded by silence become, in Lorca's elegy, "Silent groups on corners"; and Auden's "the importance and noise of tomorrow/ When the brokers are roaring like beasts" has its possible equivalent in Lorca's "the crowd was breaking windows".

Admittedly, Auden's poem is in three sections and Lorca's in four. Both, however, are governed by a structure which moves from the urban to the rural, a movement which signals a return to the classical topos of elegy with its traditional setting of a pastoral landscape. What is also striking is that both poems end with the poet contemplating the absence of the dead person or, more properly, the nature of what it is about them that is now missing. For Lorca's devout Catholicism, the answer is simple: it is the soul that is absent. For Auden, it is more complicated: Yeats is no longer even regarded as a body, becoming instead a vessel "Emptied of its poetry".

The ambiguous nature of the "vessel" Yeats's body has, in death, become, suggests ritual funerary rites and the burying of amphora stocked with grain and wine, or a ship to help the departed on their journey across to the New Life on the Other Side. Read in this context, the emptied vessel can be seen as referring to the painted sarcophagi in which Yeats admitted a youthful interest, while the poet's grave becomes the Cavern out of which "Old Rocky Face" speaks in "The Gyres":

> For painted forms or boxes of make-up
> In ancient tombs I sighed, but not again;
> What matter? Out of Cavern comes a voice
> And all it knows is that one word "Rejoice".

Auden's imaginative sympathy with the dead poet is now such that he echoes Yeats's use of the "voice/ rejoice" rhyme used in both "[The] Man and the Echo" and "The Gyres":

> Follow, poet, follow right
> To the bottom of the night,
> With your unconstraining voice
> Still persuade us to rejoice.

The significant difference in the two poems in which Yeats uses this particular rhyme is that while "The Gyres" shows the poet greeting the destruction of civilisation with shouts of encouragement, "[The] Man and the Echo" is full of doubts and hesitations which show the poet, as Daniel Albright has commented, in a mood of "dismal self-interrogation" (Yeats



1992: 838). In his use of this rhyme and its implicit acknowledgement of both of Yeats's poems, Auden is highlighting the thin line separating exuberance and despair. Though the poet's voice has the capacity to free us, doubts remain and we are in constant need of being persuaded to rejoice. Just such ambiguities are acknowledged by Lorca in his essay on the *duende*. Great art, Lorca forcibly argues, is only possible when the artist is acutely aware of the presence of death:

> The *duende* does not come at all unless he sees that death is possible. The *duende* must know beforehand that he can serenade death's house and rock those branches we all wear, branches that do not have, will never have, any consolation. [...] With idea, sound, or gesture, the *duende* enjoys fighting the creator on the very rim of the well. Angel and muse escape with violin and compass; the *duende* wounds. In the healing of that wound, which never closes, lie the invented, strangest qualities of a man's work. (García Lorca 1980: 49-50)

These parallels should not lead us to conclude that Auden was in any way simply rewriting Lorca's masterpiece. He may well have used it as a model; he may well have recognised similarities between his own present situation in New York and Lorca's a decade earlier; he may even have begun the process of reassessing Lorca's brutal assassination in the light of subsequent events in Spain, culminating in the fall of Barcelona, and Yeats's refusal to engage in any significant defence of the Spanish government or rebuttal of fascism. What is indisputable is that for almost two decades Yeats's poetry had provided, in Rilke's words, a "practised distance, as the other"[7] for Auden in a way that parallels Lorca's association of himself, the poet, and his friend, the bullfighter.[8] By physically removing himself from the Old World to the New, Auden may have hoped to discover a distance which would enable him to slough off Yeats's influence. But to do so meant immersion in Yeats's poetic personality to such an extent that, as Joseph Brodsky has commented, the elegy's very structure became "designed to pay tribute to the dead poet [by] imitating in reverse order the great Irishman's own modes of stylistic development" (Brodsky 1986: 361-362).

As Brodsky says, the intertextual references that litter the elegy are not limited to individual lines alone. With its structure like a time-lapse film run backwards, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" can be seen as a reconstruction of Yeats's *corpus* through the re-integration of isolated examples of his poetic style. Having become his admirers and been "scattered", like the pieces of Orpheus's dismembered body, "among a hundred cities", Yeats's poetry is

reassembled by Auden to create a modified form of meaning, one which allows the poet, again like Orpheus, to continue singing even after death. And in this assimilation of what Ian Gibson calls "the mythical view", Auden is once again imitating, or modifying, an aspect of Yeats's art. Even in death, it must have seemed to Auden, Yeats was dogging his footsteps.

## V

> "They sang, but had no human tunes nor words,
> Though all was done in common as before,
>
> They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds".
> "Cuchulain Comforted", W. B. Yeats.

Auden wrote in "Yeats As An Example":

> A poem such as "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" is something new and important in the history of English poetry. It never loses the personal note of a man speaking about his personal friends in a particular setting [...] and at the same time the occasion and character acquire a symbolic and public significance. (Callan 1983: 163)

One of the things Auden admired about Yeats's verse was that it restored *gravitas* to the occasional poem, and in doing so re-enabled the poet to speak about public people and social events. He developed this theme in "The Poet and the City":

> All attempts to write about persons or events, however important, to which the poet is not intimately related in some way are now doomed to failure. Yeats could write great poetry about the Troubles in Ireland, because most of the protagonists were known to him personally and the places where the events occurred had been familiar to him since childhood. (Auden 1975: 81)

The third and concluding section of *Another Time* is called "Occasional Poems" and contains, as well as the Yeats elegy, a re-written "Spain" (now entitled "Spain 1937", as though to highlight the provisional nature of the original), elegies for Ernst Toller and Sigmund Freud, "September 1, 1939" and "Epithalamion". It is, to say the least, a remarkable grouping of poems, and shows Auden fully engaged with the issue of the poet's right to speak



out on behalf of fellow citizens in times not only of personal grief and celebration but of political and cultural crisis.

Though the structure of *Another Time* shows Auden acknowledging his debts to Yeats, it also contains a measure of rebuke. Yeats's *Last Poems* were published posthumously in 1939 and the collection ends with "Politics", prefaced by an epigraph from Thomas Mann: "In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms". Yeats includes the quote only to dispute Mann's belief, arguing that: "How can I, that girl standing there,/ My attention fix/ On Roman or on Spanish politics". It seems highly unlikely that Auden would not have read Yeats's poem without some wry amusement. Mann was of course Auden's father-in-law, Auden having married his daughter, Erika, in 1935 so as to enable her to gain a British passport and to escape Nazi Germany. The Manns were also among Auden's closest friends when he arrived in the States and they introduced him to a wide range of other European exiles and immigrants.

In November 1939 Erika's sister, Elizabeth, married Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, an event Auden celebrated by writing "Epithalamion". Just as "Spain" makes connections between sexual frustration and war, so "Epithalamion" draws a parallel between Elizabeth Mann's marriage to her Italian husband and the altogether less peaceful concord drawn up between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Individual lives, Auden seems to be saying, are related to, if not coterminous with, wider political events, with marriage acting as a microcosm for all social relations, including those between neighbouring states. There is a sense, therefore, in which "Epithalamion" is a direct refutation of the emphasis Yeats places on human behaviour in "Politics", where the sexual and political must be kept apart. "In Memory of Ernst Toller" sustains and extends the critique.

Toller was a German dramatist and poet who Auden first met in Portugal in 1936, and whose work he admired enough to agree to help translate the lyrics to Toller's satirical play *No More Peace!* From 1919 to 1924, he had been imprisoned for his part in the Communist uprising in Bavaria and was eventually forced to leave Nazi Germany in 1933. Finally emigrating to the States, Toller suffered a brief unhappy stint as a scriptwriter in Hollywood, before moving to New York. Convinced that his plays were now *passé*, he hanged himself in his Manhattan hotel in May 1939.

Desperately unsure of how he would himself be received in the States, Auden must have been particularly struck by Toller's death. He may also have known of Toller's meeting with Yeats in London in October 1935, when Toller tried to persuade Yeats, then Nobel Laureate, to support the movement to have the imprisoned German writer, Carl von Ossietsky,

awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The award would almost certainly have meant that Ossietsky would have been released by the Nazi authorities. Yeats refused, saying that he knew nothing about Ossietsky as a writer and that "it was no part of an artist's business to become involved in affairs of this kind" (Coote 1998: 544). If Auden knew of this meeting and Yeats's refusal to add his considerable influence to those trying to release the imprisoned man, his use of the "voice/ rejoice" rhyme in the elegy for the disillusioned Toller becomes a damning indictment of Yeats's concern, in "[The] Man and the Echo", that certain of his actions as a poet may have lead to the murder of Irish Nationalists.

Auden's response to Yeats's doubts in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" is to affirm the poet's role, however circumscribed. This "affirming flame", however, is all but extinguished in the opening lines of the elegy for Toller:

> The shining neutral summer has no voice
> To judge America, or ask how a man dies;
> And the friends who are sad and the enemies who rejoice
>
> Are chased by their shadows lightly away from the grave
> Of one who was egotistical and brave,
> Lest they should learn without suffering how to forgive.

Whispering to Toller that, dead, he could enjoy a world where there was no evil and therefore "no need to write", Death intervenes. Only this time there is no voice straining from the tomb. The poet is silent. It is his enemies who now rejoice.

Weather, so sympathetic to the poet in the Yeats elegy, is here "neutral", perhaps satirising Yeats's professed neutrality in the case of Ossietsky. In this context, it is difficult not to read the sixth stanza as another side-swipe at Yeats:

> Dear Ernst, lie shadowless at last among
> The other war-horses who existed till they'd done
> Something that was an example to the young.

Yeats's example, Auden must have believed, was riddled with contradictions: that while he was admitting moral or philosophical problems into his poetry he was, in his private life, unwilling to take a decisive stand on an issue of exactly this kind. And while Auden was willing to imitate Yeats's example artistically, morally and philosophically he had to turn his back on him.



The figure of the exile and migrant dominates *Another Time*. Voltaire, Rimbaud and Edward Lear find parallels in the contemporary world: Yeats dying in France, Toller in New York and Freud, "an important Jew who died in exile", in London. Amongst their number sits Auden, exiled like Thucydides from the *demos*, "Uncertain and afraid/ As the clever hopes expire/ Of a low dishonest decade". It is therefore not surprising that his thoughts return to the ideal of the "Just City", a place where all men and women can live in creative sympathy, a place where, as he says in "Epithalamion":

> Though the kingdoms are at war,
> All the peoples see the sun,
> All the dwellings stand in light,
> All the unconquered worlds revolve,
> Life must live.

It is a vision he goes on to associate with art and artists:

> Vowing to redeem the State,
> Now let every girl and boy
> To the heaven of the Great
> All their prayers and praises lift:
> Mozart with ironic breath
> Turning poverty to song,
> Goethe ignorant of sin
> Placing every human wrong,
> Blake the industrious visionary,
> Tolstoi the great animal,
> Hellas-loving Hölderlin,
> Wagner who obeyed his gift
> Organised his wish for death
> Into a tremendous cry,
> Looking down upon us, all
> Wish us joy.

In *The Prolific and the Devourer* Auden wrote, more than a little tongue-in-cheek, that one of the reasons why he knew fascism was bogus was that it was "much too like the kinds of Utopias artists plan over café tables very late at night" (Auden 1986: 405). The disparity between these Utopian dreams and the vision with which "Epithalamion" concludes allows Auden to hand responsibility for the creation of the "Just City" not to artists but to ordinary "girls and boys" who, inspired less by the actions of artists than by the products

of their art, will build the "City" for themselves. "Life must live// [...] Wish us joy". Gathered like fairy godmothers invited to bless Elizabeth Mann's wedding, the litany of musicians, poets and novelists look down from the clouds and provide a counterpoint to the hawk-like airmen who haunted Auden's imagination throughout the thirties, terrorised the skies above Spain, and were even then preparing for war "in the new European air".

There is a famous anecdote about Picasso handing out postcards of "Guernica" to German officers who visited him in his studio during the occupation of Paris. Asked by one bemused officer "Did you do this?", Picasso is reported to have answered "No, you did". True or not, the story neatly summarises the complex issues involved in the relationship between art, political action, and history. John Berger, in his influential study of Picasso's art, *Success and Failure of Picasso*, argues that "Guernica" is less a representation of modern warfare and "the specific kind of desolation to which it leads" than an allegorical painting which protests not against a specific historical event with specific historical causes and effects but against "a massacre of the innocents at any time". The problem, argues Berger, is that "Picasso abstracts pain and fear from history" (Berger 1965: 167-169).

Throughout the poems collected in *Another Time*, Auden worked to strike a balance between exactly these tensions. If he observed events from too subjective a position, the historical causes would become blurred and ill-defined; assume too lofty a perspective, and he would become the author of vague abstractions. One of the ways Yeats handled this same problem was to balance figures such as Cuchulain and Pearse, the mythical and the historical, not only within the same poem but often within the same line: "When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,/ What stalked through the Post Office?" (Yeats 1992: 384). The significance of contemporary events is therefore given meaning in their juxtaposition to the mythical.

Though Auden's practice is rarely so stark, *Another Time* is a clear example of the lessons he learnt from, and the debt he owed, to Yeats's influence. As he himself said in relation to poems included in the final section of the collection: "These elegies of mine are not poems of personal grief. Freud I never met, and Yeats I only met casually and didn't particularly like him. Sometimes a man stands for certain things, which is quite different from what one feels in personal grief" (Callan 1983: 164). Though hardly unique in recognising the limited claims subjective experience has to being called Truth, Auden stood alone amongst his generation of English writers in the lengths he was prepared to go to gain a vantage point from which history and human actions might be recognised, read and interpreted. The effort was not without its cost. Ultimately, we might say that Auden was condemned to



a position where all he could do was to look back and, like the prophet Jeremiah, lament the loss and destruction of Jerusalem without being physically able to do anything to remedy it.

## NOTES

[1] Cunningham 1986: 56-57. Asked, in 1937, to "take sides on the Spanish War", Eliot responded by saying: "While I am naturally sympathetic, I still feel convinced that it is best that at least a few men of letters should remain isolated, and take no part in these collective activities". Though less Parnassian, Pound's response was typically pugnacious: "Questionaire an escape mechanism for young fools who are too cowardly to think; too lazy to investigate the nature of money, its mode of issue, the control of such issue by the Banque de France and the stank of England. You are all had. Spain is an emotional luxury to a gang of sap-headed dilettantes".

[2] See Carpenter 1983: 215. ""He was unwilling to talk about his experiences", wrote Isherwood, who saw him immediately on his return, "but they had obviously been unsatisfactory; he felt that he hadn't been allowed to be really useful". Stephen Spender recorded much the same thing: "He returned home after a very short visit of which he never spoke"".

[3] "The phrase "tragic joy" appeared in a 1904 *Samhain*, where it already had the sense of unearthly repletion and detachment: tragic heroes "seek for a life growing always more scornful of everything that is not itself and passing into its fullness, perfectly it may be —and from this as tragic joy and the perfectness of tragedy— when the world itself has slipped away in death"". For a fuller discussion see Daniel Albright's commentary in Yeats 1992: 768-771.

[4] The story is the subject of Victor Shklovsky's "Art as Technique", in which he develops the theory of *ostranenie* (making strange). See Rice 1992: 17-21.

[5] The theme of sexual and emotional frustration is examined elsewhere in *Another Time*, notably in "Three Ballads" from the collection's middle section: "Lighter Poems". "Victor" is reminiscent of Büchner's *Woyzeck*, telling of a man's sexual betrayal and insecurities, and how he is commanded by God to murder his promiscuous wife. In "James Honeyman", the affection-starved child grows up to become an emotionally repressed "hero" who invents a deadly poison which he sells to a foreign power, only to have it later used to kill civilians, amongst them him and his family: "Suddenly from the east/ Some aeroplanes appeared,/ Somebody screamed: "They're bombers!/ War must have been declared!"" Auden's tragicomedy continues in "Miss Gee", the story of a woman

who "passed by the loving couples/ And they didn't ask her to stay". Her sexuality denied, "her clothes buttoned up to her neck", she develops cancer ("It's as if there had to be some outlet/ For [...] foiled creative fire") and dies.

[6] Auden first published "Lay your sleeping head, my love", "Palais (sic) des Beaux Arts", "The Novelist", "Refugee Blues", "The Leaves of Life" and "In Memory of Ernst Toller" in *New Writing*. Lehmann also published translations of Lorca's "The Dawn" (trans. A. L. Lloyd) and "Song" (trans. Stanley Richardson). In his 1946 anthology, Lehmann has this to say about poetry and the civil war in Spain:

> The Spanish War is a gloomy milestone for creative writers, marking as it does the second descent of the twentieth century into the violence of International anarchy, a descent made the more destructive for them by the warring ideologies with warring empires. Rare and lucky were the poets who could find the calm and leisure in the midst of such events for continuous poetic creation at the deepest level; and yet these events, by the passions they excited and the drama they manifested, involving the oldest beliefs and allegiances and spiritual hankerings of our civilisation, were material that most young poets would find it difficult to refuse in any age. Our age, however, has been distinguished above all ages by the tendency, in all fields of activity, to exploit whatever comes to hand as immediately and intensively as possible. (Lehmann 1946: 5-6)

[7] Rilke 1980: 147. The poem, "To Music", contains these lines:

> O you the transformation
> of feelings into what? —: into audible landscape.
> . . . . . .
> . . . the most practised distance, as the other
> side of the air:
> pure,
> boundless,
> no longer habitable.

Returning, with this in mind, to Auden's critique of Yeats's "empty sonorities", we can see how "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" can be read as displaying this absence, this loss of voice in the image of the city gradually "invaded" by silence.

[8] Time and again in "Theory and Function of the *Duende*" Lorca returns to the example of the bullfighter when he wants to clarify what he has to say about the nature of poetry. The death of Sánchez Mejías quickly assumed, therefore, the



status of prophecy for Lorca: "Ignacio's death is like mine, the trial run of mine", he is reported to have said (Gibson 1990: 391). This extraordinary sense of empathy for his dead friend and the circumstances of his death remained with Lorca for the remaining two years of his life. A bullfighter's death, he explained, had nothing to do with sport but was "a religious mystery", "the public and solemn enactment of the victory of human virtue over the lower instincts [...] the superiority of spirit over matter" (ibid.: 391). Such a "mythical view", as Ian Gibson calls it, is not dissimilar to aspects of the final section of Auden's elegy for Yeats.

## WORKS CITED


AUDEN, W. H. 1975. *The Dyers Hand and Other Essays*. London: Faber and Faber.

---. 1986. *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*. Ed. E. Mendelson. London: Faber and Faber.

---. 1991. *Collected Poems*. Ed. E. Mendelson. London: Faber and Faber.

BERGER, John. 1965. *Success and Failure of Picasso*. London: Penguin.

BRODSKY, Joseph. 1986. "To Please A Shadow". In *Less Than One: Selected Essays*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux: 357-383.

CALLAN, Edward. 1983. "Disenchantment With Yeats: From Singing-Master to Ogre". In Bloom, H. (ed.). *Modern Critical Views: W. H. Auden*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers: 161-176.

CARPENTER, Humphrey. 1983. *W. H. Auden: A Biography*. London: Unwin Paperbacks.

COOTE, Stephen. 1998. *W. B. Yeats: A Life*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

CUNNINGHAM, Valentine. 1986. *Spanish Front: Writers on the Civil War*. Oxford: Oxford U. P.

DAVENPORT-HINES, Richard. 1996. *Auden*. London: Minerva.

ELIOT, T. S. 1969. *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*. London: Faber and Faber.

GARCÍA LORCA, Federico. 1980. *Deep Song and Other Prose*. Trans. C. Maurer. New York: New Directions.

---. 1992. *Selected Poems*. Trans. M. Williams. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe.

GIBSON, Ian. 1990. *Federico García Lorca*. London: Faber and Faber.

LEHMANN, John. 1946. *Poems From New Writing: 1936-1946*. London: John Lehmann.

MACNEICE, Louis. (1941) 1967. *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*. London: Faber and Faber.

*NEW VERSE*. 1937. Nos 26-27, November 1937.

RICE, Philip and Patricia WAUGH. (eds.). 1992. *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. London: Edward Arnold.

RILKE, Rainer Maria. 1987. *Selected Poetry*. Trans. S. Mitchell. London: Picador Classics.
SMITH, Stan. 1994. "Auden's Oedipal Dialogues with W. B. Yeats". In Bucknell, K. and N. Jenkins. (eds.). *W. H. Auden: The Language of Learning and the Language of Love*. Oxford: Clarendon Press: 155-163.
THOMAS, Hugh. 1964. *The Spanish Civil War*. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode.
YEATS, W. B. 1961. *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd.
---. 1992. *The Poems*. Ed. D. Albright. London: Everyman's Library.

# QUARRELLING WITH THE OUTSIDE WEATHERS: DYLAN THOMAS AND SURREALISM

CHRIS WIGGINTON
SWANSEA UNIVERSITY

Between June 11th and July 4th 1936, the New Burlington Galleries in London played host to a further noisy assault on that cosy, common-sense bugbear of the *avant-garde*, consensual representational reality —the International Surrealist Exhibition. A green-haired André Breton and his green-clothed wife opened the exhibition. Paul Eluard and Herbert Read delivered their lecture on "Art and the Unconscious" while perched on the backrest of an increasingly unstable sofa. Salvador Dali was almost asphyxiated after giving his paper clad in a diving suit whose helmet became stuck. Among the others involved were a young woman carrying a false leg and a bunch of roses in one hand and a raw pork chop in the other, and a young man who offered visitors cups of boiled string, asking "weak or strong?" The young man was Dylan Thomas. He later read his work at one of the evening events along with Paul Eluard, Samuel Beckett and David Gascoyne.[1]

Thomas's involvement in the 1936 Exhibition is frequently dismissed as inconsequential by a bevy of contemporary critics unwilling to take into account the modernist and, more particularly, surrealist elements in his work. Lurking behind the margins of such readings, which often amount to little more than a kind of bardological empiricism, are attempts to secure Thomas's canonical status by situating him in a metaphysical or romantic tradition. Criticism of this sort has dominated Thomas studies over the past thirty years or so, and even those dissenting voices keen to establish a more positive relationship between Thomas and surrealism have tended to rely upon the same monolithic model as those eager to play down its influence. Paul C. Ray, for example, suggests that "of the major poets of our time, Dylan Thomas was the one most influenced by surrealism", but later claims

*Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 20 (1999): 329-340