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THE HUNCHBACK AND THE MIRROR:



AUDEN, SHAKESPEARE.
AND THE POLITICS OF NARCISSUS*

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1. A MIDDLE-AGED MAN WITH A CORPORATION

"Hic et Ille," W. H. Auden's 1956 sequence of aphorisms in the journal *Encounter*,¹ later collected in *The Dyer's Hand* (1963) under the section heading "The Well of Narcissus,"² adds a droll new inflection to the intellectual history of narcissism. In Auden's version

Narcissus does not fall in love with his reflection because it is beautiful, but because it is his. If it were his beauty that enthralled him, he would be set free in a few years by its fading.

'After all,' sighed Narcissus the hunchback, 'on me it looks good.' (Auden 1956: 33; 1963: 94)

Self-love can handle a hunch back. Auden may have in mind here the fawning self-regard of Shakespeare's Richard III. Certainly, the section which follows "The Well of Narcissus" in *The Dyer's Hand*, "The Shakespearian City," scrutinises Shakespeare's history plays in a series of complexly reasoned essays which frequently return to the theme of narcissism.³ One

essay, indeed, first published in *Encounter* in 1959 as "The Fallen City" (Auden 1959: 21-31; 1963: 182-208) adds the pot belly to the hunch back as an identifying feature of Narcissus, by nominating Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff as the improbable epitome of primary narcissism. It also draws an immediate link between Falstaff's libidinal realm and the order of politics.

If a producer were to cut the Falstaff scenes from the Henry IV plays, the essay suggests, they would become "The middle section of a political trilogy which could be entitled *Looking for the Doctor*," in which the action would be dominated by the quest to find a suitable physician to restore health to the "body politic of England," an "Ideal Ruler," able to establish and maintain "Temporal Justice" (Auden 1959: 23; 1963: 186-7). But the plays are in fact much more than this. In what way, Auden indicates in his change of essay title when reprinted in *The Dyer's Hand* from "The Fallen City" to "The Prince's Dog." Using the title Falstaff bestows whimsically on himself, Auden thus shifts the trilogy's centre of gravity, so to speak, from the body politic to the carnal body. Falstaff is the real heart and guts of the trilogy because he represents all that is left over, left out, when the super-ego has had its say about law, governance and justice:

For Falstaff, time does not exist, since he belongs to the *opera buffa* world of play and mock-action governed not by will or desire, but by innocent wish, a world where no one can suffer because everything they say and do is only a pretence.

There are, however, two places in the plays "where the incongruity of the *opera buffa* world with the historical world is too much, even for Shakespeare, and a patently false note is struck." These are the occasions when Falstaff runs through Hotspur's corpse with his sword, and when he jests, brutally, with the honorable Coleville, who has surrendered to him, and whom he then betrays to execution. "The Falstaffian frivolity and the headsmen's axe," Auden notes, chilly, "cannot so directly confront each other" (1959: 22; 1963: 184-5).

The essay goes on to speculate about how Falstaff would react to a Falstaff-less *Henry IV* if he were a spectator in the audience (1959: 25-7 *passim*; 1963: 192-6 *passim*). He would not, Auden suggests, be able to understand the total commitment with which individuals in both camps devote themselves to abstract principles of right and wrong. "Anger and fear he can understand, because they are immediate emotions, but not nursing a grievance or planning revenge or apprehension, for these presuppose that the future inherits from the past." Falstaff exists in a realm of primary narcissism where "to wish and to do are synonymous." He and Hotspur

represent antithetical forms of selfhood. Each obeys the impulse of the moment, saying what he thinks without prudent calculation, "Falstaff because he has no mask to put on, Hotspur because he has so become his mask that he has no face beneath it." But they inhabit different moral universes. "If Falstaff belonged to the same world as Hotspur, one could call him a liar, but in his own eyes, he is perfectly truthful, for, to him, fact is subjective fact, 'what I am actually feeling and thinking at this moment';" and, in an allusion to *Peer Gynt*, he describes Falstaff as "pure troll," quite able to believe a cow is a girl if it suits him, whereas Hotspur, totally identified with his ideological mask, "is so lacking in imagination that the troll kingdom is invisible to him."

Falstaff, as the embodiment of a self-absorbed, pre-political humanity, innocently and conveniently believing his own lies, becomes for Auden, in "his neglect of the public interest in favor of private concerns . . . an image for the justice of charity" which "speaks for all the insulted and injured of this world" (1959: 30; 1963: 204). That is, "in the comic world of play" (1959: 29-30; 1963: 203) Falstaff becomes "a Lord of Misrule" (1959: 27, 31; 1963: 198, 207-8), embodying the id's perpetual rejection of the super-ego's obsession with governance and order, his corpulent flesh standing for the irruption of Narcissus into the political realm:

Once upon a time we were all Falstaffs: then we became social beings with super-egos. . . . [But] there are some in whom the nostalgia for the state of innocent self-importance is so strong that they refuse to accept adult life and responsibilities and seek some means to become again the Falstaffs they once were. The commonest technique adopted is the bottle, and, curiously enough, the male drinker reveals his intention by developing a drinker's belly.

And, adds an Auden increasingly conscious of his own middle-age spread,

The Greeks thought of Narcissus as a slender youth but I think they were wrong. I see him as a middle-aged man with a corporation, for, however ashamed he may be of displaying it in public, in private a man with a belly loves it dearly: it may be an unprepossessing child to look at, but he has borne it all by himself.⁴

2. THE CURSE OF NARCISSUS

"Hic et Ille" opens with a traditional commonplace of psychoanalysis, that "Every man carries with him through life a mirror, as unique and impossible to get rid of as his shadow." Narcissus need have no high opinion of his own good looks, physical or moral, which makes his self-regard all the more vulnerable: "Most, perhaps all, our mirrors are inaccurate and uncomplimentary. . . . Some magnify, some diminish, others return lugubrious, comic, derisive, or terrifying images." The essay contrasts the strategies of psychoanalyst and politician in dealing with such negative mirror images. The psychoanalyst offers your average Narcissus in the street a therapy of personal reassurance:

The psychoanalyst says: 'Come, my good man, I know what is the matter with you. You have a distorting mirror. No wonder you feel guilty. But cheer up. For a slight consideration I shall be delighted to correct it for you. There! Look! A perfect image. Not a trace of distortion. Now you are one of the elect. That will be £666, please.'

That sum (altered in *The Dyer's Hand* to "five thousand dollars") jovially recalls the Number of the Beast, underlining the diabolic insufficiency of such personalised temptations, as the essay at once spells out: "And immediately come seven devils, and the last state of that man is worse than the first." The frustrations of Narcissus cannot be taken away by personal therapy. To "the last state of that man" (the word "state" tugged between psychological and political discourses), the politician then offers the temptation of fascism's ultimate political State:

The politician, secular or clerical, promises the crowd that, if only they will hand in their private mirrors to him, to be melted down into one large public mirror, the curse of Narcissus will be taken away. (1956: 33; 1963: 93-4)

It's not hard to detect here the influence of such "Left Freudian" 1930s theorising about the popular, libidinal appeal of Nazism as that of Wilhelm Reich in *Listen, Little Man!* and *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, and of Erich Fromm in *The Fear of Freedom*. The politician triumphs by melting down the multitudinous narcissisms of the masses into a collective fantasy, articulating all that private frustration, anger and fear in some orgy of national self-admiration and vengeance. Auden's toned-down language might

lead us to miss the point.⁵ His concern, in 1956 as twenty years earlier, is to explain the sorcery by which totalitarian political movements mobilise the Falstaffian self-love of what the poem "September 1, 1939" calls "the sensual man-in-the-street" in a project which is ultimately not only self-destructive but world-destroying.

Such, indeed, had been a major preoccupation of Auden's 1936 collection *Look, Stranger!*, a volume superficially much concerned with the idea of "love," which repeatedly turns the private obsessions the word implies into a central political fixation. "The earth turns over," for example, written on a Christmas visit home in 1933, links the comically terrifying images in the mirror over the parental mantelpiece with the world of contemporary politics. The young man's own reflection seems initially the externalised "portrait" of self in a world of which it is master, able to find "what view I wish for" in "the mirror world where logic is reversed."⁶

But this is an illusion. The first stanza had already indicated a much more negative view of the external order of things, and this stanza's reference to "the heaven of failures" stresses just how much the mirror world is one of fantasy fulfilment like Alice's (a recurrent figure in Auden's thought). The parental imagos, reflected in the mirror's well of Narcissus, are not only comic but menacing, grotesque, "enormous comics, drawn from life." The mother "chasing letters with a knife" hardly needs spelling out. It's noteworthy, though, that in a late lecture on Freud, "Phantasy and Reality in Poetry" in 1971, Auden recalled childhood terrors at Hoffmann's story of "Little Suck-a-Thumb," relating the figure of the "great long-legged scissor-man" in classic Freudian terms to his domineering mother's prohibitions on nail-biting and to what he calls "the castrating vagina dentata."⁷ A few months earlier in 1933 Auden had published a poem in which the Scissor Man put in an appearance with a whole company of scalpel-wielding hunchbacks:

The bolt is sliding in its groove,
Outside the window is the black remov-
er's van,
And now with sudden swift emergence
Come the women in dark glasses, the hump-backed surgeons
and the scissor-man.⁸

In "The earth turns over" such personal anxieties are inserted into a daytime world where Eros is the dictator in a totalitarian state:

Love's daytime kingdom which I say you rule,
The total state where all must wear your badges,

Keep order perfect as a naval school:
 Noble emotions organised and massed
 Line the straight flood-lit tracks of memory
 To cheer your image as it flashes by;
 All lust at once informed on and suppressed.

Hitler had assumed dictatorial powers in March 1933. For such young leftists as Auden, looking uncertainly towards the new year, such imagery was not merely fanciful. A subsequent poem in *Look, Stranger!*, written less than a year later, in November 1934, draws an explicit link between obsessive personal love and the key symbolic event which made possible Hitler's seizure of power, the Reichstag Fire. Poem XXI, originally published in *The Listener* in February 1935 under the title "A Bride in the 30's," opens with the suggestion that both self-love and love of the other fall under the order of politics, under all the sixteen (nationally distinct) skies of Europe. It speaks of an Eros finding its luck in every "policed unlucky city" of those "bankrupt countries where they mend the roads" (an allusion to Hitler's facile solution for German unemployment). But it also talks, prefiguring the remarks on Falstaff, of how Eros can convert "these lands of terrifying mottoes" into daydream "worlds as innocent as Beatrix Potter's" (the unconvincing off-rhyme stirring our unease). And it takes, as emblem of Narcissus' *opera buffa* desire to convert wish into actuality, the half-mad Dutch communist Marianus van der Lubbe, whom the Nazis, after a show trial, executed for the Reichstag burning. Van der Lubbe's inane giggling at his trial becomes, in the poem, a figure of the vaingloriousness and vanity of any politics founded in the wish-fulfilment and histrionics of the nursery:

Summoned by such a music from our time,
 Such images to audiences come
 As vanity cannot dispel nor bless. . . .

Ten thousand of the desperate marching by
 Five feet, six feet, seven feet high:
 Hitler and Mussolini in their wooing poses
 Churchill acknowledging the voters' greeting
 Roosevelt at the microphone, Van der Lubbe laughing
 And our first meeting.

Demagogues and dictators alike woo the public by appealing to its deepest, most infantile wishes, constructing hunger, love, desperation and vanity into theatrical daydreams of national self-aggrandisement.⁹ They thus reproduce the trickery of Eros, which appears to do tricks "at our proposal,"

fulfilling the programme we want, while in fact all the time working its "public spirit," like Hegel's "cunning of Reason," through "our private stuff." Stanzas 8 and 9 of the poem liken this to the way in which childhood frustrations and repressions transform the innocent narcissism of every infant Falstaff into that of an adult bitter and resentful of lack, angry at being denied "certain prizes for which we would never compete," "Desires to which we could not yield," and brooding just those "Schemes for a life and sketches for a hatred" which Reich and Fromm saw as the raw material for fascism. Fascism succeeds because it offers practical fulfilment for such infantile revenge fantasies: "hatred would proffer her enormous pleasure, / And glory swap her fascinating rubbish / For your one treasure." This reading elucidates the widely remarked obscurity of that final request to the beloved, to be deaf

To what I hear and wish I did not:
 The voice of love saying lightly, brightly—
 'Be Lubbe, be Hitler, but be my good
 Daily, nightly.'

Significantly, this is the voice not of the Tempter but of the Betrayer. Both speaker and addressee respond to his seductive tones, for betrayal is always both suffered and volunteered, externally imposed and internally chosen. Self-insulting, we long for that which will destroy us, agents as well as victims of

The power that corrupts, that power to excess
 The beautiful quite naturally possess:
 To them the fathers and the children turn:
 And all who long for their destruction,
 The arrogant and self-insulted, wait
 The looked instruction.

This is what Auden later means by that public mirror which is the politician's spurious cure for the curse of Narcissus, to which (as "The Fallen City" would put it twenty years later) "all the insulted and injured of this world" are the eager recruits. The question to the beloved, "Will you join the lost in their sneering circles . . . ?," is also addressed to the lover himself. Each Narcissus falls in love with the "engaging face" of a beloved which gives back the mirror-image of his extrojected self-love, and is always, therefore, "the face of the betrayer."¹⁰

The choice between false and real loves is focused in the closing lines of the poem as one between self-consuming cancer and a metaphoric dove which

hovers between Aphrodite and Noah, "Crooked to move as a moneybug or a cancer / Or straight as a dove." "Crooked" like Shakespeare's Richard Crookback or the "hump-backed surgeons" of that 1933 poem, this cancerous love looks forward to the plight of "Miss Gee" in a brutal little poem written in 1937, where ovarian cancer is seen as the ageing spinster's surrogate for the child she never conceived. The image thus links subliminally to the identification, in "The Prince's Dog," of "fatness in the male" with narcissistic self-love, "the physical expression of a psychological wish to withdraw from sexual competition and, by combining mother and child in his own person, to become emotionally self-sufficient."¹¹

Such deluded Narcissi are everywhere in *Look, Stranger!* "Now the leaves are falling fast," for example, which immediately precedes "The earth turns over," telescopes nursery pleasures into fascist nightmare, the prams which go rolling on turning into tanks, its selfish babies, grown up and plucked from the real libidinal delight, seeking a renewed infantile warmth for frozen adult hands, "Lonely on the separate knees," in the Nazi-saluting, goose-stepping ranks where Eros and Thanatos embrace:

Dead in hundreds at the back
Follow wooden in our track,
Arms raised stiffly to reprove
In false attitudes of love.

Starving through the leafless wood
Trolls run scolding for their food;
And the nightingale is dumb,
And the angel will not come.

The Falstaffian sensual man, described by Auden twenty years later as "pure troll," finds that King Belly will not be filled unless such nursery desires are projected outward into the "one large public mirror" of collective aggression. Driven by appetite and wish, such lost souls are self-betrayed to the false fascist solution of which Auden wrote in the Notes to *New Year Letter* in 1940: "Fascism is Socialism that has lost faith in the future. Its slogan is Now or Never. In demanding a dictator it is really demanding the advent of the Good Life on earth through a supernatural miracle" (Auden 1941: 118).

Such are the politics of Narcissus.

3. IMPERIALISM'S FACE

In the "Epilogue" to *Look, Stranger!* those lost souls have already enlisted in what Auden in a contemporary review called "the great Fascist retreat which will land us finally in the ditch of despair" (1996: 61-2):

The feverish prejudiced lives do not care, and lost
Their voice in the flutter of bunting, the glittering
Brass of the great retreat,

And the malice of death.

But, although these feverish prejudiced lives are in one sense betrayed by their leaders, they are also *self*-betrayed, their own longing and prejudice succumbing to the false promises of the dictators. Or rather, since Auden does not exclude himself or his readers from the charge, we all are, for "The rumours woo and terrify the crowd, / Woo us. The betrayers thunder at, black-mail / Us," and; preferring the crooked path, we have turned our faces from the real liberators,

Who without reproaches shewed us what our vanity has chosen,
Who pursued understanding with patience like a sex, had unlearned
Our hatred, and towards the really better
World had turned their face....

—liberators who include Freud and Georg Groddeck, Lenin, D. H. Lawrence and Kafka, and "Proust on the self-regard."

Narcissism, then, lies at the heart of "the great Fascist retreat," and it leads directly to that merging of Eros and Thanatos in the death-wish which haunts the whole of *Look, Stranger!*, a death-drive directed inward and outward simultaneously, as the closing question and answer insist: "Are they dead here? Yes. / And the wish to wound has the power." D. H. Lawrence, Auden observed in his review, showed us that "the Western-romantic conception of personal love is a neurotic symptom only inflaming our loneliness, a bad answer to our real wish to be united to and rooted in life." It is in reality an extrojected narcissism, in which the beloved is merely a mirror-image of a self which wants to drown in its own reflection. No longer does the subject seek, as in the poem "1929,"¹² to "Be weaned at last to independent delight," separating itself from the mother. At the heart of Fascism's totalitarian drive

lies the infantile urge to repossess the (m)other, engulf the other in the well of Narcissus.

Surfacing in New York in October 1939, Auden versified Freud in the charmingly innocent light verse of "Heavy Date":

Love requires an Object,
But this varies so much,
Almost, I imagine,
Anything will do:
When I was a child I
Loved a pumping-engine,
Thought it every bit as
Beautiful as you.

"Heavy Date" was to appear as a section leader in his first American volume, *Another Time* (1940). Only a month before, however, he had written what was to become the most famous poem of that whole volume, "September 1, 1939," a despairing vision of the real, public consequences of indulging such nursery passions. This poem speaks of those "Waves of anger and fear" now circling the globe, obsessing our private lives, as Hitler invaded Poland. "Anger and fear," one recalls, are emotions Auden was later to attribute to Falstaff, "because they are immediate emotions." Now, however, the face in the mirror is that of the real Dorian Gray:

Into this neutral air . . .
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long
In an euphoric dream;
Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the international wrong.

"Vain" here is usually read as meaning "in vain," "pointless"; but set next to "Competitive excuse" in the context I've constructed it also, perhaps predominantly, means "issuing from vanity," from the child's narcissistic misperception of its self in the mirror.

In "Hic et Ille," Auden was to observe that "It is impossible to approach a mirror without composing or 'making' a special face, and if we catch sight of our reflection unawares we rarely recognise ourselves. I cannot read my face in the mirror because I am already obvious to myself" (1956: 38; 1963: 104). This is how those faces along the bar still manage to "Cling to their

average day" in "September 1, 1939." The process corresponds closely to Louis Althusser's account of how the human subject is interpellated to its subject-role in ideology:

As St Paul admirably put it, it is in the 'Logos', meaning in ideology, that we 'live, move and have our being'. It follows that for you and me, the category of the subject is a primary 'obviousness'. . . . [But] the 'obviousness' that you and I are subjects . . . is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect. It is indeed a peculiarity of ideology that it imposes . . . obviousnesses as obviousnesses, which we cannot fail to recognize. (1994: 107)

Admiring our hunch backs and pot bellies in the bar mirror, we see that ideologically constructed self ("free, ethical, etc") as "obvious." The self-made "special face" of the poem's "Collective Man" is here not, however, some invention of Soviet or Nazi totalitarianism, but of American mass democracy. Catching sight of our reflection unawares, we see without recognition what we really are: "Imperialism's face / And the international wrong." But the euphoric haze recomposes itself:

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

Lest we should see where—and who—we are. But the bar is not some larger nursery where we can hide from the ogre forever, even though we have behaved like irresponsible children throughout "a low dishonest decade," conniving at "Mismanagement and grief." Now that "We must suffer them all again," as for Hansel and Gretel abandoned in a haunted wood, the only real option is to grow up quickly.

That means, certainly, unearthing, through accurate scholarship, what has created the psychopathology of Nazi Germany: "the whole offence / From Luther until now / That has driven a culture mad," unearthing, even, what it was in the childhood of Hitler himself ("Find what occurred at Linz")

that attuned his own narcissism so astutely to the national psychosis. But what that is is, in fact, "obvious" to all:

I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn:
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.

What is most needed on "September 1, 1939" is not knowledge of the other, the enemy, but of the self, the betrayer within. For what makes us all equally vulnerable to "The windiest militant trash / Important Persons shout" is precisely that crudest of narcissistic wishes, the craving not for "universal love / But to be loved alone," the "folded lie" of an ideology "bred in the bone / Of each woman and each man." In this ideological discourse, the lies of "the sensual man-in-the-street" and the lie of Authority are mutually supportive, the "curse of Narcissus" taken away and melted down into one large public mirror. Throughout a low, dishonest decade, the "private lives" of all those Falstaffs-in-the-street had conspired with the "compulsory game" of "helpless governors," to sustain a comforting pretence that a fort—an embattled military defence—was really a home. The "euphoric dream" of ideology had fantasised "a world where no one can suffer because everything they say and do is only a pretence."

4. A LOVE WE HAVE NEVER OUTGROWN

"September 1, 1939" is placed in *Another Time* in a final sequence of six "Occasional Poems" which begins with "Spain, 1937," newly revised in 1939 after the final defeat of the Republic. Already, this poem records, "On that tableland scored by rivers, / Our fever's menacing shapes [had been] precise and alive," for those with eyes to see. The preceding sections had been preoccupied with the consequences, for the personal as for the public life, of selves collectively arrested in primary narcissism, from the "deliberate man" of the opening poem, who finds "Fresh loves betray him, daily," through the vision of an Oxford full of creatures "so deeply in love with their lives" and the various sketches of frozen emotion in "A. E. Housman," "Brussels in Winter," "Rimbaud," "Pascal" and "Matthew Arnold," to the chilling injunction to a crooked Narcissus at the end of "As I walked out one evening":

O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress;

Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.

O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.'

The shift from mirror to window, looking outward rather than inward, points towards the revelation expressed in the final poem of the opening section, which attempts to reconcile narcissism and love of others in a life-enhancing ratio:

Nowhere else could I have known
Than, beloved, in your eyes
What we have to learn,
That we love ourselves alone. . . .

But the "menacing shapes" of the narcissistic fever do not go away. They haunt the allegedly "Lighter Poems" of the second section, which, opening with the playful verses later called "Heavy Date" that expound Freud's theory of infantile eroticism, then proceeds to the cautionary tales of a destructive self-love, more callously comic than anything in Hilaire Belloc, of "Miss Gee," "James Honeyman," and "Victor," to end with a series of poems which spell out the political consequences of such introversion, "Epitaph on a Tyrant," "The Unknown Citizen," and "Refugee Blues." This last, with its vision of "Hitler over Europe, saying: 'They must die'" and of "Ten thousand soldiers march[ing] to and fro: / Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me," opens the way to the poems of public occasion of the concluding sequence, bringing together Eros and Thanatos to record a time, in the words of "In Memory of Sigmund Freud":

When there are so many we shall have to mourn,
When grief has been made so public, and exposed
To the critique of a whole epoch
The frailty of our conscience and anguish.

The sequence is carefully orchestrated to gather together the themes of the preceding sections. "Spain, 1937" is followed by two elegies, one for W. B. Yeats, "silly like us," a self-absorbed old man obliquely associated with "cowardice, conceit," notorious exponent of fascist ideas, "hurt" into poetry by a "mad Ireland"; and one for Ernst Toller, German revolutionary, "too in-

jured to get well" by "the Europe which took refuge in [his] head," who had recently committed suicide in New York, seeking refuge in "the big and friendly death outside." Both writers can be seen in different ways as victims of a misdirected primary narcissism, their loves arranged "by powers we pretend to understand." "September 1, 1939" then offers a critique of how that process takes place in the construction of "each woman and each man," driven by a crude narcissistic wish that "Craves what it cannot have, / Not universal love / But to be loved alone."

The final elegy in *Another Time*, "In Memory of Sigmund Freud," extols the "One rational voice" whose insights into the subject's construction out of such narcissistic cravings might have deposed "the ancient cultures of conceit" in all our heads, returning our innocent primary narcissism to us transformed into a genuine "universal love":

...show[ing] us what evil is: not, as we thought
Deeds that must be punished, but our lack of faith
Our dishonest mood of denial,
The concupiscence of the oppressor.

The elegy's concluding reference to the mother-child duo of "Eros, builder of cities" and "weeping anarchic Aphrodite" as mourners at Freud's funeral, ties the poem back in to that Eros evoked at the end of "September 1, 1939," and leads on to the volume's closing marriage hymn, "Epithalamion." In 1960, in a review of Erik Erikson's *Young Man Luther*, Auden was still speculating on those processes in German history which had created the "huge imago" of Nazism and its "psychopathic god" (Auden 1973a). In *The Enchafed Flood* in 1950, still in the shadow of the recent war, he had discerned the essential lesson of the fascist era, that "The further civilization moves towards the open condition," in which every moment is one of personal choice not determined by tradition and authority, "the sharper becomes the alternative: *either* personal choice and through the sum of such choices an actual community, *or* the annihilation of personality and the dissolution of community into crowds" (Auden 1951: 36). Auden later dismissed as meaningless the terse aphorism of "September 1, 1939", "We must love one another or die" (1964: viii). But in the context provided by his struggle, throughout the 1930s, with the devil of primary narcissism, it makes perfect sense: we shall die spiritually, as individuals, unless we learn to love others; but, now, on the brink of global war, we shall also die actually and collectively, unless we can transcend such introverted self-absorption.

"Epithalamion," a hymn for the cross-national marriage of Giuseppe Borgese and Elizabeth Mann, celebrates their personal union in insistently

public and political terms, casting "this quiet wedding" as one which may possibly have "Planted human unity" and initiated "Modern policy," reconciling "Hostile kingdoms of the truth," melting "all national frontiers ... / In a true imperium," and symbolising "the rebirth / Asked of old humanity" in "a common love." The hyberbole of all this is understandable, at the end of a volume permeated by the misery of a world poised before global conflict: it is a programme, out of Freud, for healing the fractures and griefs of a world in which "the kingdoms are at war." A volume deep in collective distress ends with an improbable dream that the human race might emulate Wagner, who "Organised his wish for death / Into a tremendous cry," the book's very final words expressing a desire that "all / wish us joy." But poem XXIV of *Another Time*, later given the title "They," had already set the collective context of this wishful thinking:

For a future of marriage nevertheless
The bed is prepared; though all our whiteness shrinks
From the hairy and clumsy bridegroom . . .

. . . and the crooked that dreads to be straight
Cannot alter its prayers but summons
Out of the dark a horrible rector. . .

In April 1939, three months after the fall of Barcelona and only weeks after the German invasion of Czechoslovakia, Auden's poem sees fascism's invading battalions as the storm-troopers of a deadly, politicised Narcissus:

Where do they come from? Those whom we so much dread
As on our dearest location falls the chill
Of the crooked wing....

Terrible Presences that the ponds reflect
Back at the famous, and when the blond boy
Bites eagerly into the shining
Apple, emerge in their shocking fury.

Narcissus drowned in his own image. "They" are all those internal impulses by which the modern self learnt its identity, learnt to become the spawning ground of fascism. But "They" learnt all that they know "In a mother's distorting mirror"; they come (note how the correlation of lie and mask in the Falstaff / Hotspur contrast is prefigured here) "With lies to unmask the least deception"; "And towards us their hate is directed." Now, self-absorbed, "Our tears well from a love / We have never outgrown." Narcissus

the Hunchback, embracing his pot-belly like a bride, looks in the mirror for an "*opera buffa* world of play and mock action governed . . . by innocent wish." But when it enters the political realm, such innocence turns murderous. On the night of September 1, 1939, the "romantic lie in the brain" of the "sensual man-in-the-street," mutated, smashed through the mirror of history as invading battalions. Now, as "They" had warned, "even our armies / Have to express our need of forgiveness."⁴

NOTES

* This is a revised and extended version of a paper given at the symposium on "Images of Narcissus" at the French Institute, London, July 1997.

1. Auden 1956. This issue of *Encounter* opens with an article called, significantly, "Innocent Abroad" (pp. 3-16), a personal account by Auden's acquaintance and Oxford contemporary Goronwy Rees of how his generation reacted to the political situation of 1930s Germany.

2. Auden 1963: section III, "The Well of Narcissus," pp. 93-167.

3. Auden 1963, section IV, "The Shakespearian City," pp. 171-274.

4. 1959: 26-7; 1963: 195-6. This was a motif Auden was to repeat more positively in one of his very last poems, the posthumously published "Lullaby," written in 1972 (Auden 1974: 41-2), in which he addresses himself as a "Big Baby," fondling his own "almost feminine flesh," "snug in the den of yourself" in the bed's womblike seclusion, and observes:

The old Greeks got it all wrong:
Narcissus is an oldie,
tamed by time, released at last
from lust for other bodies,
rational and reconciled.

But such an Eros is intimate still with Thanatos, for to return to "the domain of the Mothers" is to seek "oblivion: let / the belly-mind take over." The comparison of a drunk with a beer-belly to a woman with child also appears in Stephano's song from "The Sea and the Mirror" (Auden 1945: 7-60), a text which reworks that other play discussed at length in "The Shakespearian City," *The Tempest*. The song (pp. 19-20), which begins "Embrace me, belly, like a bride," converts the whole topos into a metaphysical conceit for mind/body relations. There is much more to be teased out of this complex filiation of associations.

5. Published in April 1956, in a journal edited by his friend and 1930s Communist fellow-traveller Stephen Spender, and subsequently revealed to be funded by the CIA, this essay appeared only a couple of months after Nikita Khrushchev's secret but widely leaked denunciation of Stalin to the XXth Congress of the CPSU. Auden's reflections here are not exactly his-

torically innocent, coming as they are charged subliminally with all the guilts, remorse and anxieties of a born-again one-time fellow-traveller.

6. Cf. "Hic et Ille": "As seen reflected in a mirror, a room or a landscape seems more solidly there in space than they look themselves. In that purely visual world nothing can be hailed, moved, smashed, or eaten, and it is only the observer himself who, by shifting his position or closing his eyes, can change" (1956: 36; 1963: 101).

7. Auden 1995: 184-5. Elsewhere he confided to his friend Alan Ansen that his circumcision, aged seven, at his mother's insistence had been "really something" (cited in Auden 1995: 164). See also "Castration Complex," in Auden 1971: 52-3.

8. *The Listener*, July 1933. Significantly, perhaps, the very page on which this is raised in the original manuscript of his lecture has been, one might say, cut out, and an incomplete replacement starts with the Hoffmann poem, beginning "One day, Mamma said" and going on to outline the maternal threat.

9. Auden's politics here fellow-travel the Third Period orthodoxy of contemporary Stalinism, in which Churchill was seen as a potential, more dangerous because more popular Mosley, and Roosevelt as a capitalist demagogue who had stolen the Left's state-interventionist clothes and whose New Deal programme emulated Hitler's strategy for economic recovery.

10. Auden restored the original *Listener* title of "A Bride in the Thirties" in his first collected volume, *Collected Shorter Poems 1930-1944* (1950). Interestingly, it is here preceded by a newly collected poem, "Alone," which alludes to Proust (cf. "Epilogue"), observes that "Narcissus disbelieves in the unknown; / He cannot join his image in the lake / So long as he assumes he is alone," and concludes that "every lover has a wish to make / Some other kind of otherness his own." The poems in this 1950 volume are organised, capriciously, according to the alphabetical sequence of opening words, so it is perhaps merely gratuitous that "A Bride in the 30's" should be preceded in this way. Since, however, "Alone" is a new, previously uncollected poem, it may be that its own first line was carefully spelt out by Auden to place it where we find it, thus subverting the alcatory principle on which the volume is ostensibly organised. Such deviousness would not be unusual for Auden. The original *Listener* title of "A Bride in the 30's" was deployed to conceal the fact that the poem derives biographically from a homosexual relationship, doubly and dangerously illegal in that the young man involved was probably under age. Auden himself, following Freud, traced the origin of homosexuality to a displacement of primary narcissism, and this supplies the "crooked" subtext of many of these poems. In 1947 he confided to Alan Ansen that he regarded "all homosexual acts [as] acts of envy." But he also argued elsewhere, as for example in his essay on "Shakespeare's Sonnets," that gender-specific biography assumes a universal, ungendered status in poetry. On this, see Stan Smith, "A Faultless Love," (1997: 70-78).

11. Auden 1959: 26; 1963: 196. "The Prince's Dog" (1959: 25; 1963: 192) explains Falstaff's infatuation with "the Prince of this World," "The lovely bully" Prince Hal, by referring to the Shakespeare sonnet, "They that have power to hurt," which also lies behind the closing stanzas of "A Bride in the 30s." The sonnet, which reflects on beauty as a corrupting coldness, and, in the lines quoted in "The Prince's Dog," speaks of those "That do not do the thing they most do show, / Who, moving others, are themselves as stone," was discussed at length in 1930 in a book Auden much admired, William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

12. Originally Poem XVI in Auden 1930.

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VIEW (1940-47), THE AVANT-GARDE, AND THE UNCERTAIN LIFE OF OBJECTS: CRITICISM AS IF FRAGMENTS MATTERED



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MODERNITY, THE AVANT-GARDE, AND THE CULTURE OF OBJECTS

Like its twin aesthetic, modernism, the avant-garde can be read as a response to the daily life of modernity. In German and Anglo-American scholarship, the term "modernity" has often been used to designate the historical stage succeeding the nineteenth-century bourgeois revolutions. It was characterized by increasing secularism, massive technological and industrial growth, urbanization, and the democratization of culture—dependent in turn on widespread literacy and the boom of the culture industry (Habermas 1986: 2-5; Frisby 1985: 20-43). Turn-of-the-century sociologists such as Max Weber and Fernand Tönnies have argued that one result of these developments was the dissolution of pre-modern organic communities and of their religious, social, and ideological alibis (Weber 1958: 17-27, Tönnies 1955: 5-12). At the same time, due to the speed of contemporary changes and to the general instability of social and political life, no new cohesive set of beliefs seemed capable of taking the place of the former ones. Instead, the social realm appeared splintered into multiple ideologies and subcultures to the extent that, in the words of critic Charles Russell, most modern writers and intellectuals live and work with the awareness that "a commonly assumed collective vision has not been possible since the Romantic period" (1985: 6).

While totalizing narratives receded, the material environment experienced a cyclopean growth in the form of proliferating consumer products and mass-manufactured cultural artifacts. In a well-known characterization of modern