

W. H. AUDEN, **The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose: Vol. V 1963-1968**, ed. Edward Mendelson, Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. 561.

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To start with, a little personal anecdote. A short while ago a friend of mine, working on an article, asked me if I happened to know whether W. H. Auden had ever written on Heinrich Heine. I said I couldn't recall anything but would check; I did so, flicking through my various Auden volumes and trawling through the Web. I wrote back and told my friend I couldn't find anything. The very next day the mail brought the two hefty volumes here under review. The very last essay in the second volume was a review of Heine's *Selected Works*. The useful end-note informs us that the article was «Unpublished. Perhaps written for *The New York Review of Books*», in September 1973, the month of his death.

This little coincidence served to reaffirm my awareness of the breadth of Auden's reading and understanding; it turned out that a poet that he had never mentioned anywhere before in his writings was actually well-known to him, at least as a poet; he admits that till receiving these volumes he «had never read a line of his prose». The essay that follows is, of course, witty, perceptive and studded with well-chosen quotations.

Auden was always the consummate professional; his prose writing was what kept him financially afloat (he never held a long-term teaching post), and he always carried out the assigned tasks with total dedication. In certain cases, as Edward Mendelson tells us in his introduction, after writing full-length essays he found himself being asked by editors to rewrite them for reasons of political or personal expediency; he always refused, in one case (as he himself noted ruefully) probably losing his chance of the Nobel Prize, and in another losing a fee of ten thousand dollars, which he had been promised by *Life* magazine.

As in the previous four volumes, Mendelson provides an extremely helpful introduction (it is placed at the beginning of Volume V, but also serves Volume VI), showing how Auden's prose writings in this period (1963 to 1973) relate to his poetry, and commenting on the development of his ideas, in particular on the role of the artist in the contemporary world. Mendelson says about his essays and reviews in these last dozen years of his life that they «are most vivid and memorable when he writes explicitly about others' lives or elliptically about his own. He was especially fascinated by artists and writers who were more or less monstrous or obsessive, who exemplified intellectual temptations that he himself had experienced and refused.»

Auden frequently stated his aversion to biographical studies of writers, and it is well-known that he asked his correspondents to destroy all letters from him. However, many of these essays are reviews of just such biographies, and on each occasion he finds a reason to break his rule, saying, for instance, of a biography of Pope: «It is not often that knowledge of an artist's life sheds any significant light upon his work, but in the case of Pope I think it does»; of a life of Trollope, he states: «As a rule, I am opposed to biographies of writers, but in Trollope's case, for a number of reasons, I approve.» He makes similar remarks about the letters of Oscar Wilde and a biography of Wagner. He is in fact immensely interested in the personalities of writers; art is for him always a matter of direct and personal communication. As he said in a speech to students: «And as readers, I am convinced that it is as single persons, not as members of any group, large or small that we respond. [...] My feeling when I read a book, be it fiction or poetry, which delights me, is of being personally addressed: this book, so to speak, seems to have been written especially for me.» Elsewhere he writes: «works of art are our chief means of breaking bread with the dead, and without communication with the dead a fully human life, I believe, is not possible.» This might remind us of T. S. Eliot's lines

from *Little Gidding*, «The communication / Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living»; however, in Auden's phrasing, the desired communication, while still expressed in terms that recall a religious rite, is warmly social.

It is in these late essays that we find him at his most direct and personal, in fact. Despite declaring that he will never write an autobiography (the commonplace book, *A Certain World*, included in Volume VI, he says, is the closest he will ever get to doing it, describing it as «a map of my planet»), he weaves an account of his own early years into a review of two autobiographies, one by Leonard Woolf and one by Evelyn Waugh. It is interesting to see the generosity with which he treats Waugh's memoir, considering the savagely satirical portrait that the novelist had drawn of him in his *Sword of Honour* trilogy.

Writing about some of the great writers from the past Auden reflects on the possibility of imagining his relationship with them in terms of personal friendship, declaring that «There are some, like Byron, whom I would like to have met once, but most, I feel, would either, like Dante and Goethe, have been too intimidating, or, like Wordsworth, too disagreeable.» He goes on to mention just two that he would like to have known well, «William Barnes and George Herbert.»

These volumes contain a number of tributes to poets and artists who were in fact personal friends, including Benjamin Britten, Louis MacNeice, T. S. Eliot, Stephen Spender, Stravinsky, and C. Day Lewis. And it is touching to see how he manages to combine critical perceptiveness with the personal note. For example, after paying moving tribute to Louis MacNeice the poet and writer, he concludes by saying: «When it can be said of a poet that, without in any way sacrificing his artistic integrity to Mammon, he sponged on no one, he cheated no one, he provided for his family, and he paid his bills, these facts, I consider, deserve to be recorded.»

In part this is indicative of the respect Auden always has for those who do their jobs with professional commitment. Despite having a perfectly clear notion of the distinction between a craftsman and an artist («a craftsman knows in advance what the finished result will be, while the artist knows only what it will be when he has finished»), he cannot conceive of a great artist who is not also a great craftsman. He praises the literary critic Christopher Ricks by stating «that he is exactly the kind of critic every poet dreams of finding. No poet wants either uncritical admirers or decoders who discover in his poems secret symbols and meanings which never entered his mind. But every poet thinks of himself as a craftsman, a maker of verbal objects: what he hopes for is that critics will notice the technical means by which he secures his effects.»

With reference to himself he has no doubt where his own particular skills lie: «Age dulls many faculties, but it should grant an increased sensitivity of ear and, to be frank, I am rather vain about mine.» He is, of course, talking specifically about his own poetry here, but there is no doubt that this sensitivity informs his own prose—and his criticism. Auden has an ear for what is distinctive about whatever writer he is discussing. It is what makes him such a brilliant anthologist and editor, and also a highly convincing champion of other writers, sometimes considered minor or unfashionable. It is a quality that he himself praises in the critical works of T. S. Eliot: «To this day, I have never understood exactly what the objective correlative is. But his quotation of six lines of Dryden suddenly made me see that poet in a completely new light.» Elsewhere he says: «One of the hallmarks of the good literary historian is an ability to cite examples which nobody before him had noticed but nobody henceforth will forget.»

It is rather difficult for me to review these two volumes with the necessary critical detachment. My own taste has to a great extent been formed by Auden's criticism. He has led me to a number of writers I might never have found by myself: Hardy (the poet, as opposed to the novelist), Thomas Hood, Marianne Moore, William Barnes, Walter de la Mare, and John

Clare. He has hugely influenced my views on writers I already knew and respected, such as Byron and G. K. Chesterton. This volume contains the preface to an anthology which has always been a favourite of mine, *Nineteenth-Century British Minor Poets*. Auden's preface contains a sentence which has become a touchstone for me, whenever I feel the temptation to make a critical generalisation: «Every genuine poet, however minor, is unique, a member of a class of one, and any trait that two poets may have in common is almost certain to be the least interesting aspect of their poetry.»

To conclude on a slightly more professional note (out of respect to Auden), it only needs to be said that these two concluding volumes maintain the same high standards of editorial excellence as all the previous ones. Those already familiar with Auden will, of course, find many works they know (the complete texts of *Secondary Worlds* and *A Certain World*, together with many essays previously collected in *Forewords and Afterwords*), but also a magnificent treasure-trove of articles and reviews previously uncollected, and, in some cases, previously unpublished. The notes and appendices are all extremely helpful. No reader can be left in any doubt, after studying these volumes, that Auden was not only one of the greatest poets of his age but also one of its greatest essayists and critics.

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