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Christianity & Literature, Volume 65, Number 2, March 2016, pp. 207-225
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Christianity & Literature

2016, Vol. 65(2) 207–225

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DOI: 10.1177/0148333115585275

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Abstract

This article explores a noteworthy difference between Alan Jacobs's interpretation of Auden's oratorio and mine. Jacobs sees the oratorio as a Christian poem and proof of Auden's Christianity—which coincides with Auden's turn away from his Romantic roots. I interpret the piece as a sign of Auden's continuing commitment to his Romantic inheritance and intent to serve as an aesthetic (not religious) hero, exploring the aesthetic possibilities to which his imagination is drawn. After delineating the problems each of us has in applying our respective claims, I explain mine as offering the more troublesome challenge of the two.

Keywords

Auden, Christianity, Romanticism, Jacobs, oratorio

He is the Way. / Follow Him through the land of Unlikeness.
—For the Time Being, Auden

Alan Jacobs is certainly not alone in seeing W. H. Auden's oratorio, *For the Time Being*, as proof that Auden's turn to Christianity at mid-career changes his poetry. Similar to critics such as Lucy McDiarmid (in 1990), Jacobs sees this change as good, arguing in his 2013 edition of the work that, as a Christian, Auden intends to write a "thoroughly Christian poem" about the "Incarnate Word" ("Introduction," *FTTB* xx).¹ Jacobs sees that Auden's turn—or return—to Christianity in these terms coincides with his rejection of the inherent, Romantic vanity of his vocation.² His choice of basing his oratorio on the nativity reflects his recognition that the imagination is limited: it cannot represent the sacred nature of Jesus Christ. Auden's adherence to this maxim is made manifest in the fact that he

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presents only the birth of the Christ-child, who, in the oratorio, is “present but silent” and does not “in the strict sense, appear at all” (“Introduction,” *FTTB* xx). Jacobs focuses instead on what does appear throughout the oratorio: an abundance of “theologically inflected language” from scripture and from the Christian thinking of several writers Auden is reading at the time (“Introduction,” *FTTB* xi). In all of these respects, Jacobs finds Auden’s oratorio as the “most explicitly Christian and biblical poem of his career” (“Preface,” *FTTB* viii).

I see the oratorio as a continuation of Auden writing poetry in his inherited, Romantic mode of serving as his own subject, writing about the aesthetic possibilities his imagination explores in the subjective realm of his feelings. His imagination is drawn to this realm as numinous. Like Coleridge, Auden believes the imagination has “no option but to respond” to what strikes it as numinous, and, like Keats, Auden believes that his imagination is drawn to all kinds of “sacred [i.e., numinous] beings and sacred events,” marked by “an overwhelming but undefinable significance” in his consciousness: in the case of Auden’s oratorio, a “crowd of recollected occasions of feeling” emanating from beings and events associated with Christmas (“Making, Knowing and Judging,” *DH, Prose IV* 493; “The Virgin & The Dynamo,” *DH, Prose IV* 502).³ Auden’s genius lies in serving as an actor for his imagination, providing a voice for each being and event, each voice revealing conflicting feelings for some “Possibility” that has entered into the subjective realm of feeling: an “agreeable” disturbance that will be sent away after Christmas (*FTTB* 64). In all of these respects, Auden’s oratorio reflects his decision to continue at mid-career his commitment to serving as a successful, Romantic hero: an aesthetic hero, an “explorer of [aesthetic] possibility,” who offers dramatizations of his subjective world *gratuitously* (*Enchafed Flood, Prose III* 90; “Genius & Apostle,” *DH, Prose IV* 759). Auden’s commitment to remain an aesthetic hero, in fact, coincides with his rejection of the failed Romanticism he sees in Wordsworth trying to be both an aesthetic and religious hero. Indeed, Auden equates playing the role of religious (or ethical) hero with *prostituting* himself to “lie in the service of the False City” (*Enchafed Flood, Prose III* 91).

An initial description of the oratorio prepares the way for the reader to understand the striking difference between Jacobs’s and my interpretations of it: especially in light of the problems Jacobs has applying his approach of *Christian Proof* and the problems I have applying my approach of *Aesthetic Possibility*. A final discussion, *Possible Proof?*, explains why my approach offers a greater difficulty to readers than Jacobs’s approach.

Auden’s oratorio

By definition, an oratorio is a lengthy choral work, often with a religious theme, made up of choruses, solos, and recitatives: performed (sung) without action, scenery, or costumes. In the case of Auden’s *For The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, the work remains an oratorio in name only (without music).⁴ Auden’s work

progresses through nine sections: “Advent”; “The Annunciation”; “The Temptation of St. Joseph”; “The Summons”; “The Vision of the Shepherds”; “At the Manger”; “The Meditation of Simeon”; “The Massacre of the Innocents”; and “The Flight into Egypt.” Each of these sections contains several parts; for example, “Advent” begins with a chorus, followed by a semi-chorus (both speaking for an undisclosed “we”), then shifts to a contemporary Narrator (also speaking for an undisclosed “we”), and so forth. However subjective, every voice has some validity.

Auden’s section titles follow the chronology and foci in the Bible, yet Auden develops narratives that incorporate details from the ancient world into modern settings and contexts. Thus the (modern) clock on the mantelpiece and “Portly Caesar” yawning appear in the first section’s opening chorus, and Joseph appears in a later section with shined shoes and pressed pants looking for his “own true love” (*FTTB* 3, 19). Auden also offers extra-biblical accounts that lack any details that could be distinguished as ancient or modern, such as Mary talking to her infant about her fears that she will teach him “how to be afraid” (*FTTB* 40).

All of the voices exhibit unresolved, conflicting feelings that in some way reflect what the Narrator asserts in his first speech: a radically personal event has disordered the consciousness of the undisclosed “we” he uses to refer to himself: “We can only say that now It is there . . . and nothing like It has happened before” (*FTTB* 6). Beginning as a “Horror” and “wrath of God,” this event becomes, by the oratorio’s end, a person seen by this “we” as an “agreeable / Possibility” who is, however, sent away—again (*FTTB* 6, 7, 64).

Whether reading a human or other-than-human speaker, such as the star of nativity or the angel Gabriel, or a singular voice or the voice of some undisclosed “we,” the reader enters into a dense, aesthetic collage of feelings. Indeed, as the angel Gabriel reminds Mary, like Adam and Eve, who learned as children that some dreams cease to be “pretend,” becoming “true,” so “it lies/Within your power of choosing to/Conceive the Child who chooses you” (*FTTB* 15, 16–17).

Problems with Christian proof

At its best, Jacobs’s reading of Auden’s oratorio as evidence of Auden’s conversion to Christianity reflects Jacobs’s sentient response to the title, *For the Time Being*. The engaged way in which Jacobs writes about the title makes it seem as if pondering the title was a transcendent experience that perhaps prompted his desire to produce an edition of the work. Writing about the influence of Paul Tillich’s *The Interpretation of History*, Jacobs interweaves his own thinking with that of Tillich and Auden, realizing that Auden develops the idea as something that “comes to us as decision because we must respond in some way to it. . . . A response is invited, even in a sense demanded, but what that response will be is neither enforced nor predetermined” (“Introduction,” *FTTB* xix–xx). Jacob’s thinking offers a glimpse of something alive and fluid, neither enforced nor predetermined, in Jacobs’ belief system about the indeterminacy and importance of individual choice in responding to Jesus Christ.

Jacobs, however, does not make use of such insight. From his “Preface” to his “Introduction” and all of his “Textual Notes,” his intent is to explicate the work as proof of Auden’s intent to write a “thoroughly Christian poem” about the literal truth of the “Incarnate Word” becoming flesh—yet not “in the strict sense” appearing at all (“Preface,” *FTTB* viii; “Introduction,” *FTTB* xx).⁵ Jacobs sees that Auden intends not only to write a Christian poem that preserves his Christianity but also his love for his recently deceased mother, Constance Rosalie Auden, to whom he dedicates the work, and his love for the unfaithful Chester Kallman (“Preface,” *FTTB* viii).

Jacobs devotes his primary attention to the first of these: providing his readers with multiple passages of scripture, which Jacobs sees as evidence or proof of the poem’s and Auden’s Christian status.⁶ There are several, interrelated difficulties in applying his argument: the problem of will; the problem of the Christian approach; the problem of the Christian approach extended into a hermeneutical approach; and the problem of seeing Christianity as an opposite of Romanticism.

The problem of will

Jacobs declares initially that the oratorio is written evidence of Auden’s “‘intellectual and poetic will’ to keep his recent return to Christianity from *unraveling*” (“Preface,” *FTTB* viii). Jacobs never defines either of these terms. He does, however, focus on the first by stressing the abundance of Auden’s “theologically inflected language,” which reflects Auden’s incorporation of scripture and the Christian thinking of writers Auden is reading at the time (“Introduction,” *FTTB* xi). Jacobs assumes that Auden composes as he (Jacobs) does: by gathering and arranging ideas that through an act of intellectual will are incorporated into a final product.

On the other hand, Jacobs goes on to say in his “Introduction” that during the period of time Auden writes the oratorio his thinking is “dominated” by the idea of the Christian’s helplessness to do what is right, in effect, to *will* himself to follow Christ (“Introduction,” *FTTB* xiii; my emphasis). The reader wonders if this idea of the helpless Christian will compare and/or contrast with the idea of Auden’s intellectual and poetic will to write a *Christian* poem. The issue becomes further difficult with the recognition that there is nothing in any of Auden’s aesthetic statements about will—or Christianity—being involved in his creative process.

The problem of the Christian approach

To explain Auden’s poem as Christian, Jacobs feels it makes sense to discuss the scripture behind the work’s theological language (“Introduction,” *FTTB* xx). Jacobs does not consider the possibility that Auden might interpret and/or use scripture differently than he (Jacobs) does. Jacobs instead seems to see Auden sharing his (Jacobs’s) evangelical mindset, which Jacobs defined in 2003, as an opposite of “mainline Protestants,” who use their lives and experiences to

determine which scripture applies to them and which is relevant only to the time in which it is written (PBS interview). He does not mention any form of Anglicanism or Catholicism. As an evangelical, he sees all scripture as the means to illuminate and judge his life—and Auden’s oratorio. However, as Edward Mendelson observes throughout *Later Auden*, Auden attends Anglican, Catholic, and Russian Orthodox churches, and his first practice of Christianity is a “lonely existential Protestantism” (*Later Auden* xviii).⁷

Nevertheless, the difficulty here is certainly not in seeing both Auden and Jacobs as Christian, exhibiting distinctly different individualities, but in aligning Auden’s oratorio with Jacobs’s approach. It is difficult to understand Auden’s oratorio with Jacobs’s Bible-based criticism. Thirty of Jacobs’s 119 textual notes refer the reader to scripture that Jacobs sees as proof of Auden’s intent to write a Christian poem, but he does not ever explain how any of these scriptures illuminate Auden’s making process as Christian—or prove Auden’s Christianity. Focusing so heavily on aligning the contents of the poem with scripture blinds Jacobs to what Edward Mendelson recognizes as Auden’s hallmark, aesthetic “bravura,” the brilliant way in which each voice of the poem says what it says aesthetically (*Later Auden* xxii). It does not occur to Jacobs to discuss how Auden artistically incorporates and/or renders scripture.

There is a notable gap between what Auden writes and the scripture Jacobs cites. This problem begins with Jacobs’s first textual note. Jacobs cites the epigraph, a quotation from Romans: “What shall we say, then? Shall we continue in sin / that grace may abound? God forbid”; in his textual note, Jacobs cites the verse from Romans 6:1–2 arguing that Paul in these verses rejects antinomianism and that John Bunyan echoes the verse in his autobiographical work, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (“Textual Notes,” *FTTB* 71).

Although Jacobs obviously assumes that Auden’s oratorio endorses (rather than questions) Paul’s repudiation of the antinomian idea that being saved by God’s grace invites Christians to see themselves outside of moral law, Jacobs does not explain how this applies to the characters in the oratorio: and how—or if—Auden’s oratorio is like Bunyan’s spiritual autobiography.

The section titled “Summons” begins with the “Star of the Nativity” declaring, “I am the star most dreaded by the wise” (*FTTB* 26). Ignoring the decidedly aesthetic nature of a talking star, much less a star that is dreaded rather than a confirming guide, Jacobs declares in his textual note, “First the wise men from the east (Matthew 2:1) are summoned and then those who are ordered to register for taxation,” at which point he goes on to quote Luke 2:1–5, which refers to Caesar Augustus’ order that all should be taxed, and to David taking Mary with him, and so forth (“Textual Notes,” *FTTB* 78). Jacobs does not offer any explanation of how Auden uses these verses to make a Christian poem—or how, in fact, using scripture makes Auden a Christian.

Moreover, Jacobs’s subsequent, rather literal view of the barren Rachel does not help him to explain how Auden artistically explores Rachel’s (ancient) presence at the massacre of the infants: how she feels she exists between “grinning dogs” and “sensible sheep” and how, in this state, she describes one of the slain children (not

yet in heaven) who speaks of the event as something “Long Ago in the language of wounds” (*FTTB* 60). Jacobs overlooks Auden’s dramatization of a Rachel in a kind of limbo place of Grief that “turns her [Grief’s] silence neither in this direction nor in that, *nor for any reason*” (*FTTB* 60; emphasis mine). Jacobs’ claim of bitterness is not evident here; Auden describes a frozen place of *not* feeling, a “coldness” that is, ironically, *not* barren: now reproduced “forever” (*FTTB* 60).

The problem of extending the Christian approach into a hermeneutical approach

Jacobs frequently stretches his Bible-based approach into a hermeneutical approach that uses any text (scriptural, literary, or scientific) in an attempt to explain Auden’s poem.⁸ Such is the case with Jacobs’s textual note regarding the virgin birth. In the section of the poem “The Temptation of St. Joseph,” in which the narrator declares (to Joseph), “You must learn now that masculinity, / To Nature, is a nonessential luxury,” Jacobs observes in a textual note that what the narrator says is “True in this case because Mary will bear a child without having had sex, but the scientifically literate Auden would have known that many animals reproduce by parthenogenesis (‘virgin births’) in which the male plays no part” (*FTTB* 22; “Textual Notes” 78).

Apart from the troublesome comparison of Mary to an animal, the reader wonders about Jacobs’s view of the narrator: if he is wiser than the characters, as Jacobs asserts, “providing corrective or supplemental theological context,” the reader is left wondering what theological content the narrator is supplying in his point about masculinity being a nonessential luxury and how, in fact, Jacobs’s note about parthenogenesis has anything to do with Joseph’s understanding (in the biblical account of his dream) of Mary’s virgin birth as an event brought about by the Holy Spirit coming upon her (“Introduction,” *FTTB* xxviii; *KJV*: Matthew 1:20, 21).

Throughout his notes to the oratorio, in fact, Jacobs sees himself as he sees the narrator of Auden’s oratorio, as one who provides not only corrective theological context but one who corrects or emends theological context—with an increasing number of subjects other than scripture (including Zeno’s paradox and transcendental numbers; “Textual Notes,” *FTTB* #54, page 90, and #31, p. 81). Like all critics, Jacobs, understandably, is interested in demonstrating his intellectual breadth and depth; however, in his case, he seems more interested in demonstrating his evangelical Christian stance as a legitimate, intellectual, and contemporary stance than in using that intellect to illuminate Auden’s poem.

It appears that Jacobs’s hermeneutical approach reflects his alliance with a contemporary “we”: as he declares in his earlier book, *What Became of Wylan: Change and Continuity in Auden’s Poetry*, Jacobs considers that “we” as those who have read such works as Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things* and *Discipline and Punish*, and [somehow] unanimously agree that Reinhold Niebuhr’s thinking, in

The Future and Destiny of Man” (1943), about *man’s* freedom to “reject one environment for another,” is “self-evidently absurd” (6).⁹

The problem of seeing Christianity as an opposite of Romanticism

Jacobs makes Auden part of this “we,” rejecting the Romantic belief in the imagination, a rejection that Jacobs sees conjoined with accepting Christianity. Somehow belief in Jesus Christ necessitates disbelief or skepticism toward the imagination. Thus Jacobs declares in *What Became of Wylan*, that when Auden returns to Christianity, he sees Romanticism as the “real enemy” (16).

Accordingly, Jacobs argues in his edition of the oratorio that Auden realizes (when he becomes a Christian) that the imagination is limited because it cannot represent the sacred nature of Jesus Christ. As Jacobs asserts, in choosing the Nativity narrative on which to base his oratorio, Auden somehow realizes in 1941 (what he states in 1962) that the “Incarnate Word” cannot be represented. Emphasizing that Auden is characteristically “skeptical and dubious” toward representing the sacred anyway, Jacobs quotes from Auden’s essay, “Postscript: Christianity & Art,” where Auden pronounces that Christ “puts an end to all claims of the imagination to be the faculty which decides what is truly sacred and what is profane” (“Introduction,” *FTTB* xx).

Jacobs then concludes, “It makes *perfect sense* for a reader of Tillich who has these *suspensions* to write a thoroughly Christian poem in which Christ does not, in the strict sense, appear at all” (“Introduction,” *FTTB* xx; my emphasis). Jacobs sees that Auden chooses to focus on the nativity because it involves the limited realm of what, as a Christian, he *can* represent: a baby, not Christ, the adult man—although Jacobs declares that even the baby does not even appear at all.

Auden’s “Postscript” essay questions Jacobs’s argument, first in the sense that, when Auden mentions representing baby Jesus, Auden’s focus is on a painter: “to paint either the Bambino with the Madonna or the dead Christ on the cross” (*DH, Prose IV* 776). Moreover, Auden goes on to state that, as a result of the imagination’s inability to represent the “truly sacred,” “*There can no more be a ‘Christian’ art than there can be a Christian science or a Christian diet*” (“Postscript: Christianity & Art,”; emphasis mine); in fact, poems expressing a religious devotion to Jesus Christ make Auden “uneasy”: an argument that questions Jacobs’ idea of the oratorio as a Christian poem (*DH, Prose IV* 776, 777; emphasis mine).

Jacobs, further, does not consider the possibility that Auden’s comments about what can be represented reflect his awareness, nevertheless, of what can be performed—in the case of the oratorio, the characters’ reactions to the truly sacred Jesus Christ present in the subjective realm of Auden’s feelings. Auden’s oratorio performs their conflicting feelings toward Jesus Christ, the man—the driving force behind the sensation, *for the time being*: that “comes to us [as

Jacobs so aptly states] as fate [and] as decision because we *must* respond in some way to it” (“Introduction,” *FTTB* xix).

Problems with aesthetic possibility

At its worst, my reading of Auden’s oratorio in light of his Romantic aesthetics is fraught with the difficulty that, unlike Jacobs, I am using what a lot of current scholars view as an outdated mode of criticism, one focused on the creative process of the artist. I find his creative process to be of central importance in understanding his poetry. Like any of Auden’s poems, the oratorio is the result of his hallmark trait of acting for his imagination, for a wide range of sacred, that is, numinous, beings and events in the subjective realm of his feelings. In his oratorio, these sacred beings discuss and reveal their conflicting feelings toward a truly sacred presence, Jesus Christ.

Three interrelated difficulties stem from my approach: the problem of Romantic aesthetics; the problems of seeing Auden in terms of the imagination and feelings; and the problem of viewing Romanticism in comparison to Christianity.

The problem of Romantic aesthetics

My problem begins with my use of the word *Romantic*. Since I wrote my dissertation (in the late 1980s) I have been aware of how that term, like the term *Christian*, invites multiple interpretations.¹⁰ I am aware, however, that such multiplicity conveniently disappears as both Christian and secular-minded scholars assume they have somehow proved that Romantic poetry evolving into Modern poetry is itself a triumph of the intellect: that it is, indeed, the intellect of the poet that matures, usually by mid-career, waking up to and dismissing any fallacious belief in the imagination.¹¹ Auden is seen as one who at mid-career becomes an anti-Romantic, licensed jester to his vocation, using his vast intellect to undermine the imagination, as well as his vocation.

In this light, Christian scholars praise Auden for undermining his art in an effort to serve God, while secular-minded scholars criticize Auden for undermining his art in an effort to serve God—and, either way, he is declared anti-Romantic. To such scholars, my approach seems not just dated but esoteric, essentialist, dangerously reifying Romanticism, and naively mystified about the imagination. And to Christian scholars in particular, my approach might even appear to be dismissive of Auden’s return to Christianity or, worse, reducing the reality of his Christianity to “merely” aesthetic experience, a Romantic possibility rather than proof.

I make it worse by challenging the either-or thinking that views the metaphysical or religious as mutually exclusive from the secular. No one seems interested in exploring what the noted scholar of Romanticism, Geoffrey Hartman, noticed (over 40 years ago now) about the need for scholars to overcome “naïve antimonies of sacred and secular” (“Structuralism,” *Beyond* 21). More importantly, how the

religious and secular overlap is something Auden observes—but not something his age—or mine—seems to see as an item interesting enough to debate.

However, that overlap is what Auden presents in the oratorio: in the indeterminacy of aesthetic experience (aesthetic experience being something that transcends the either-or categories of religious or secular). Journeying into the subjective realm of his feelings, Auden finds voices for every aesthetic creature or event there, taking what are conventionally perceived as religious voices, such as Mary's or Joseph's or what Jacobs calls the "secular" intellectual voices of the wise men, and revealing in all of them an aesthetic mixture of religious and secular thoughts ("Introduction," *FTTB* xxxii). Thus Auden's "First Wise Man" declares that Nature is as "big a liar as we are" and he doesn't want to be a liar this time: "To discover how to be truthful now / Is the reason I follow this star" (*FTTB* 27). Brilliantly, Auden takes this declaration, repeating it, altered, in the subsequent speech of the three wise men in unison: "To discover how to be human now / Is the reason why we follow this star" (*FTTB* 28). Indeed, to be human is a highly indeterminate mixture of religious and secular nature.

The problems of seeing Auden in terms of the imagination and feelings

I argue that the imagination is central to Auden's aesthetics, and I do so in an age in which scholarly interest in the imagination has almost disappeared. I think of Denis Donoghue's study of the imagination in 1976 (!) in *The Sovereign Ghost*, in which he declares that "Very little energy is spent upon its [the imagination's] use, or upon any other effort to distinguish among the faculties of our nature. Our nature is no longer an object of sustained reflection" (1).

Yet I cannot ignore the importance of the imagination in all of Auden's poetry and statements about his creative process: which come, largely, at mid-career and after, *after* his return to Christianity. I cannot ignore that he bases his creative process on Coleridge's definitions of the imagination (both Primary and Secondary) because, Auden feels, they are both trying "to describe the same phenomenon" ("Making, Knowing and Judging," *DH, Prose IV* 493). Further, as is the case with any of his poems, his oratorio offers a performance of the imagination, drawn to the "crowd" of feelings about numinous beings and events associated with Christmas ("The Virgin & The Dynamo," *DH, Prose IV* 502). My difficulty increases here: for my task is not only to explain an aesthetic approach that is based on Auden's belief in the authenticity and objective truth and veracity of the imagination responding to subjective feelings (which the imagination recognizes as numinous or "sacred"), but to explain his focus on feelings—to scholars who are used to hearing about the primary role of his intellect in writing poetry.¹¹

My difficulty increases in trying to explain Auden's creative process, focused as it is on offering the objective view of the imagination, drawn to feelings: to an age that tends to view poetry as a magic drawing that means anything a person wants or needs it to mean. Such magic often equates with the magical thinking of the

reader making the poem spell out some determinate secular or religious answer. To such an audience, I have to explain the importance of the *aesthetic-based* questions Auden asks as a reader how the “verbal contraption” works and the “kind of guy” who “inhabits” the poem: how he sees “the good life” or the “Evil One” or what he keeps from the reader or himself (“Making, Knowing and Judging,” *DH, Prose IV* 490).

In the case of reading Auden’s oratorio, these questions involve paying attention to each of the guys in the piece, each a sacred being, an aesthetic possibility, an “imaginative projection”: together, a crowd of unsolved conflicts in Auden’s feelings (*Enchafed Flood, Prose III* 89). The crowd of characters in Auden’s oratorio is certainly worth considering in these respects: Mary, Joseph, the fugal-chorus praising Cesar, the star of the nativity, each wise man, each shepherd, each of the four faculties: intuition, feeling, sensation, and thought, the angel Gabriel, Simeon, Herod, soldiers, Rachel, voices of the desert, and various choruses, including a semi-chorus of boys, a chorus of angels, a chorus of shepherds, a fugal-chorus responding to the greatness of Caesar, three recitatives, and the chorus that speaks throughout, beginning and ending the work. There is also the narrator.

What a strange crowd: human and other-than-human, female and male, adult and child, the voices of some undisclosed “we,” some voices believing in truth, some pragmatic relativists. All of the voices react to ancient events very much present in their modern consciousness. It is the crowd of voices in one consciousness. Auden, obviously, is not trying to paint a flattering portrait of himself as a perfectly adjusted, cohesive adult, much less modern and Christian, personality. He is not trying to prove these characters as true or false or Christian or non-Christian. His imagination is drawn to them, finding them numinous, glowing with significance: as Auden observes, using Coleridge’s definition of the Primary (and Secondary) imagination, the Primary imagination has no choice but to respond to whatever it finds *sacred*—as “*that which it is*” (as it is instead of as it ought to be)—whatever arouses the feeling of “awe” (“Making, Knowing and Judging,” *DH, Prose IV* 495). As feelings, they are nonrepresentational: Auden is not concerned with representing them. He invents a voice for each of them to perform—and to reveal himself or herself or itself as someone or something marked by unresolved, conflicting feelings.

Thus he offers Herod, a character who thinks, after all, he is not that bad: he has not had sex “for a month” and is a “liberal” who wants everyone to be happy—and who wishes he had never been born (*FTTB* 58)! The oratorio does not tell the reader what to think about Herod; Auden lets him speak for himself, giving the reader something to think about, to ponder Herod’s “notion of the good life” (“Making, Knowing and Judging,” *DH, Prose IV* 490).

In related terms, the reader has to engage with the drama of an oratorio, a work *performed* (but without action, scenery, or costumes) in each reader’s consciousness as he or she hears or reads what each “guy” has to say. As it turns out, what Edward Mendelson calls the “moral intelligence” of each “guy” speaks with that

notable, aesthetic “bravura” of Auden, presenting such intelligence in an aesthetic “wrapping” (*Later Auden* xxii). This aesthetic wrapping has an entertainment value that engages the reader in something enjoyable—while, in fact, something useful is going on: as Auden declares, poetry “is not magic”; by “telling the truth [of the imagination] poetry’s only purpose is to ‘disenchant and disintoxicate’” (“Writing,” *DH, Prose IV* 473).

The imagination opens a person’s eyes to the supernatural that is there, as a natural part of reality: doing so, it disintoxicates the intellect from its mystified belief that its (flattening) empirical view of reality is really all that exists. In this current age of “reason” or “information,” my difficulty rests on this paradoxical-at-best, oxymoronic-at-worst, task of explaining how Auden’s oratorio *disenchants* with such profoundly brilliant *aesthetic* experience, in a poetry that explores possibilities but does not set out to prove or disprove anything. I realize I sound like an aesthetic zealot (or hippie) hopelessly in love with exploring endless layers of aesthetic complexity; I have to try to follow Auden’s advice: to “minimize rather than to exaggerate the risks” (“Hic et Ille,” *DH, Prose IV* 526).

I doubt if I am accomplishing that: I am emphasizing that *Nothing* happens, *Nothing* being the commentary of the imagination, a voice usually ignored and perhaps the voice that for some people makes Auden’s poetry so strange. That is, serving as his own subject, Auden serves as an actor for his imagination: finding a “figure traditionally associated with the stage” to stand for his imagination, Auden turns to Keats’s description of the poet as “not itself; it has no self—it is everything and nothing” (“Genius & Apostle,” *DH, Prose IV* 761). The poet as such is an “explorer of possibility” (*Enchafed Flood, Prose III* 90). Exploring possibility is the imagination’s endless task—and joy—drawn to what it finds as numinous, exploring it because it is there. *For The Time Being* is a record of Auden in this role: exploring, in the subjective realm of his feelings, the possibility of Jesus Christ as the son of God—an “agreeable” possibility who, nevertheless, is quite typically sent away after Christmas while each of us begs to remain “His disobedient servant, / The promising child who cannot keep His word for long” (*FTTB* 64).

Performing (acting for his imagination)—rather than attempting to represent—his feelings, Auden offers a poetry (throughout his career) that performs what most dismiss as “nothing”: the ongoing, unresolved conflict between imagination and intellect, both drawn to the subjective realm of feelings, but the first interested in exploring what is there and the second interested in proving or disproving what the imagination finds.¹³ As Auden observes, unresolved conflict is what makes poetry of “interest” (*Enchafed Flood, Prose III*, 59).

The problem of seeing Romanticism in comparison to Christianity

Auden does not want to prostitute his poetry “to lie in service of the False City” (*Enchafed Flood, Prose III* 91). To serve as an aesthetic hero entails building the “True City,” the inner city or “*civitas terrena*” of himself (*Enchafed Flood, Prose*

III 33, 45). Put in related terms, Auden declares that he is not an apostle, “called by God to deliver a message to mankind,” but a genius, a person who is “endowed with an exceptional talent for fabrication or expression” (“Genius & Apostle,” *DH, Prose IV*, 765, 761). As an artist-genius, he is not writing about his deeds but his making process (his internalized quests into his feelings).

In these respects, the difficulty of reading the oratorio lies in realizing that it performs Auden’s making process as a Romantic poet serving as his own subject—encountering a radically personal presence and event at Christmas; “nothing like It has happened before” (*FTTB* 6). Quite problematically to most, this aesthetic experience embraces a central, Christian idea: that coming to Jesus Christ involves awakening to the gap between the individual self a person is designed to become and the conflicted self that is drawn to yet resists his or her teleological purpose.

Accepting Jesus Christ is taken by Christians as an event grounded in a specific time and place. I realize in this regard that it is difficult to see Auden’s oratorio dramatizing this Christian event aesthetically, exploring its numinous nature as a possibility. I am keenly aware that, while the idea of Auden’s Romantic aesthetics in comparison with his Christianity is quite evident to me, to many it is not. As Rolland Hein declares, in *Christian Mythmakers*, literary criticism in the 20th century characteristically views Romanticism in opposition to Christianity (69). Hein believes, as I do, however, that the two have much in common: primarily that they focus on realizing the primacy of the journey of the individual self becoming what God has designed him or her to become: not merely a mortal creature but one in whom mortality and immortality interrelate.

In this regard, Auden’s Romantic aesthetics, in fact, subsume his Christianity, as he offers in his poetry a view of Christianity as aesthetic possibility. Observing that playing the part of an actor for his imagination creates a drama or game of sorts Auden declares that it is not a game in which the “players play themselves”; neither is it a rite, in which “the participants may *represent* somebody else, a god.” In both the game and the rite, the players’ actions are real. The drama offers instead a mock imitation—of “mock actions” (“Genius & Apostle,” *DH, Prose IV* 759). This mock imitation, then, which offers mock actions, reflects the “completely gratuitous” aspect of acting, although, as Auden admits, even games have a utile value in that they “develop the wit of those who play them”; that being the case, however, “what conceivable purpose could one human being have for imitating another” (“Genius & Apostle,” *DH, Prose IV*, 759)? Auden here is not simply referring to the job of an actor on stage (or in the movies); he is referring to his role as a poet in the gratuitous act (pretending for fun) of imitating any facet of himself that his imagination shows to him, finding a voice for each facet, acting for the imagination’s view.

In terms of the oratorio, even though its characters speak rather than sing their parts, Auden’s oratorio offers a performance—not a representation—of the various characters in his realm of feelings. Keenly aware of his Romantic inheritance of serving as his own subject, in an age that lacks belief in the “eternity of the physical

universe,” aware, further, that there is no longer the sense that something endures, unchanged, against the transitory nature of human existence. As a result the “traditional sense of art as mimesis” is destroyed; “there is no longer a nature ‘out there’ to be truly or falsely imitated; all an artist can be *true to* are his subjective sensations and feelings” (“The Poet & The City,” *DH, Prose IV* 509).

Auden does not believe that such experience is merely aesthetic; while he may offer in his poetry what he calls ripostes with his reflections in the mirror of his art, he believes, in fact, that one day he will be *judged* according to how he has applied such knowledge (“Hic et Ille,” *DH, Prose IV* 519). Auden believes that the point of having these repeated ripostes with his reflections is, in fact, to become his “actual” self, which is the mark of a successful Romantic hero (*Enchafed Flood, Prose III* 90). The mark of a successful Romantic hero is to become this self (*Enchafed Flood, Prose III* 90). Out of all of this aesthetic experience, pretending for fun but taking such pretense seriously, Auden offers in his oratorio the making process of how different voices conversing about an ancient tale, a nativity story, live in his modern consciousness.

Jesus Christ is the truly sacred presence at the heart of that story, a numinous presence talked about throughout the oratorio, a poem that performs what a crowd of feelings has to say about him—as an “agreeable / Possibility” (*FTTB* 64). In all of these respects, while Auden is a poet who happens to be a Christian, he would never call himself a Christian poet, just as he would never call his poetry Christian. He is a genius, not an apostle, and his creative process is based on acting for the imagination, which, Auden observes, is a “natural human faculty” (“Postscript: Christianity & Art,” *DH, Prose IV* 777). He is not trying to represent what his imagination sees; he is offering a performance of the nonrepresentational reality it explores. And if God gave him this imagination—along with a vocational calling to be a poet—would God ask Auden to tone it down at mid-career?

Considering Auden’s oratorio as a continuation of his Romantic aesthetics in all of these respects, finally, leads to a challenging difficulty that involves one of Auden’s mid-career works that Jacobs does not mention: *The Prolific & The Devourer* (1939). In this work, which is a creative imitation of William Blake’s *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Auden presents the “True Way,” something that “cannot be codified as a philosophy,” since it is not possible to have a “perfect knowledge of the whole of reality” (*Prose II* 424). This “True Way” stands against all other philosophies, which, according to Auden, are all false or counterfeit—because human knowledge is always incomplete (*Prose II* 424). The “True Way” is a “mouthpiece”: a way of happening, spoken by the imagination, much like the mouth of a river “speaks” or makes happen the river: the way the poet speaks as an actor.

Jesus Christ is this way of happening at the end of the oratorio. As the chorus declares, “He is the Way. / Follow Him through the land of Unlikeness” (*FTTB* 65). The “land of Unlikeness” is an aesthetic place, experienced in one’s consciousness, until one day, when “at your marriage” all of the “occasions” from the “World of the Flesh” will “dance for joy” (*FTTB* 65). The end of the oratorio reflects a view of Jesus Christ as a way of happening who reminds human beings

that their knowledge of him as the way, the truth, and life itself is incomplete—by its nature caught up in the conflicted process of becoming.

One day, all conflict will be resolved. Auden, in fact, is aware that Jesus Christ is one who connects the imagination and reason—somehow solving the unresolved conflict between them. In his “Postscript” essay, Auden quotes Rudolf Kassner, in *Die Geburt Christi*: “The difficulty about the God-man for the poet lies in the Word being made Flesh. This means that reason and imagination are one. But does not Poetry, as such, live from there being a gulf between them?” (*DH, Prose IV 777*). Pondering the profound significance of Jesus Christ as the “Word made Flesh,” Kassner raises the issue of what poetry *can* do—as “poetic fiction . . . pointing to and interpreting fact”; Auden declares he hopes there is an answer but does not know what it is (*DH, Prose IV 777*).

There is, then, an unresolved conflict between Auden’s Romantic inheritance and his Christianity. However, even if, as a poet who happens to be Christian, Auden is “uncomfortable” realizing that the New Testament “contains no verse,” he remains true to his Romantic creative process of exploring the unresolved conflict between imagination and reason (*DH, Prose IV 777*).

As such, he remains an aesthetic hero.

Possible proof?

As an aesthetic hero, Auden acts for his imagination, which is drawn to explore, in the subjective realm of feelings, what the intellect subsequently attempts to prove or disprove. Transcending any label of religious or secular, this aesthetic position reveals a larger—improvable—truth about what it means to be an individual human being.

Auden’s poetry, however, continues to be read by readers who are afraid of aesthetic experience: they may not recognize or admit to this fear, but I see it manifested in their marked consideration of *anything other than* the nature and truth of aesthetic experience. The current age of cultural criticism, in fact, shares the anti-aesthetic mindset of the 18th century, which, according to Auden, “oversimplified” the nature of the human: “by denying him [or her] an individual soul or by identifying soul with mind [i.e., intellect], it did indeed make him [or her] equal, but with the equality of billiard balls, not of individual persons” (*Enchafed Flood, Prose III 39*). Auden’s poetry confronts this group-think mindset and challenges its mystified thinking about its ability to engage in aesthetic experience without being affected individually by it—demystifying or displacing its aesthetic power by turning it into a religious or secular (in either case, cultural) dogma it is not meant to be. Very much like Keats in being aware of the intellect’s “irritable reaching for fact and reason,” Auden realizes it is the deified intellect in need of being demystified.¹⁴

Offering the unresolved conflict between the imagination and the intellect, Auden’s poetry promotes the necessity of both: balancing each other. By mid-career, however, Auden realizes that the imagination is a useful jester to his

intellect, engaging the intellect in trying to disprove or prove what by its nature is improvable. He also realizes his age's fear of the imagination and tries to reduce that fear. The amount of people who claim that at mid-career and after his poetry makes nothing happen suggests that Auden might be too good at this minimizing task.

However, in all of these respects, my charge against the deified intellect creates a greater difficulty to my readers than Jacobs's argument: my argument is especially troublesome to Christian scholars seeking to reestablish Christianity as a legitimate, intellectual, and timely philosophy that is somehow part of the current academic community.

The belief persists that "we" are now intellectually free from the allegedly claustrophobic trappings of aesthetic experience. However, because I do not see criticism—or art—as progressive, I do not see my mode of criticism as outdated: my attention to Auden's creative process is not something that tries to make fire by rubbing two sticks together. My attention to his creative process comes from understanding the difficulty many want to ignore: Auden's campaign against his age's desire to make art serve as a substitute religion (or secular ideology) for its age. By giving his readers something to ponder (rather than something that tells them what to think) Auden's poetry offers the possibility of being engaged in the process of examining—as individual persons—their own conflicted feelings. In Romantic terms, this is the game of knowledge played by a poet, Auden, who learns from his ripostes with his reflections in the mirror of his art, engaging in a process of becoming the *actual* self he was created to become. Moreover, this Romantic "game" aligns with a state of faith in Christian terms: believing in the "evidence of things not seen" until one day it *is* real: as David says, "I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness" (*KJV*; Hebrews 11:1; Psalm 17:15).

One day an agreeable possibility becomes true: a possible proof, if you will, that, like faith, aesthetically experienced truth is not mere illusion.

As already discussed, in his "Postscript" essay, Auden is aware of some difference between "the eye of flesh and blood" and "the eye of faith," but I do not know how he felt about the relationship I am suggesting between the aesthetic game of knowledge led by the imagination and the eye of faith ("Postscript: Christianity & Art," *DH* 457). I suspect that linking an aesthetic game of knowledge with a state of faith may be considered by some too huge of a leap.

Like Jacobs, I cannot prove that I am right, any more than I could prove what it is *per se* that continues to make me aware of Jesus Christ as the light that so greatly illuminates what it means to be an individual human being. All I can offer is a final word to those, like me, whose vocational calling was based on their belief in the value of literature to shed light on human existence. Stemming from my awareness of my own, fallible intellect, I would say to any critic who thinks it is the intellect alone that guides him or her, remember it is your imagination that led you to aesthetic experience in the first place, experience that continues to take you into some wordless, transcendent state that illuminates the beauty and truth—and mystery—of your existence.

Such experience casts light on what Auden's study of Shakespeare reveals: the greatest illusion (from which you need to be saved) is that of considering your intellect illusion-free.¹⁵

Notes

1. Especially since Auden's death in 1973, scholars debate Auden's alleged change in poetry at mid-career, some praising his turn to Christianity and some criticizing it but all agreeing that he becomes anti-Romantic. To Christian scholars, such as Lucy McDiarmid, Auden's change is good, showing his humility before God: "Every major poem and every major essay become a retractio, a statement of art's frivolity, vanity, and guilt" (McDiarmid x). However, to secular-minded scholars, such as David Bromwich, the alleged change is bad: Bromwich's deconstructionist assessment of Auden's *Collected Poems* sees Auden changing from an "oracle" to an anti-Romantic "jester," whose poetry makes nothing happen (91). All of my references to Auden's oratorio come from Jacobs's edition, signified by "Preface," "Introduction," "Textual Notes," or from the oratorio itself, indicated with the abbreviation *FTTB*. Jacobs's edition of the work was a Christmas gift to me, from my husband, Tim Reilly, to whom I dedicate my article.
2. The idea of Auden becoming anti-Romantic at mid-career begins at Auden's mid-career in 1939, when he comes to New York. Cleanth Brooks uses the label anti-Romantic to defend Auden, among others, from the charge of being insincere, arguing that Auden is an insightful, Modern poet who at mid-career sees through the fallacious claims of Romanticism and returns to the tradition of 17th-century metaphysical poets.
3. All references from *The Dyer's Hand* are signified not only by title but by the abbreviation *DH* and *Prose IV*. Similarly, all references to *The Enchafed Flood* use that title along with *Prose III*, and all references to *The Prolific & The Devourer* use that title along with *Prose II*.
4. Benjamin Britten was supposed to compose the music; Jacobs discusses the falling out between Britten and Auden that led to the poem as being an oratorio in name only ("Introduction" xxxvi-xxxvii).
5. Jacobs also refers in his textual notes to Auden's poems written in mid-career and later, several of T. S. Eliot's poems, and letters Auden exchanges with his friend, the American poet Theodore Spencer. In his "Introduction," Jacobs also references the Christian thinking in what Auden is reading at the time: including that of Charles Williams in *The Descent of the Dove* (1939), Charles Norris Cochrane in *Christianity and Classical Culture* (1940), and Paul Tillich in *The Interpretation of History* (1936) ("Introduction" xi). However, his textual notes include Williams only once, Cochrane three times, and there are no references to Tillich.
6. Jacobs does not offer any discussion (in either the "Introduction" or the "Textual Notes") of how the oratorio preserves Auden's love for his mother. Jacobs notices only the dedication to her: "In Memoriam: Constance Rosalie Auden, 1870-1941." He apparently does not see any significance in the character of Mary, the mother in Auden's poem, which might link her to Auden's mother. Regarding Mary's speech in the sixth section of the poem, "At the Manger," for example, Jacobs only provides a note that it was published in *Commonweal* on December 25, 1942 and that in "Hic et Ille" Auden observes, "A task for an existentialist theologian: to preach a sermon on the topic of *The Sleep of Christ*" ("Textual Notes" *FTTB* 85). Jacobs does not see Mary's words "At the Manger" as universal to all mothers, much less as applicable to

Auden's mother. Jacobs's silence about Auden's mother does not seem linked to any fear of implying a comparison between Jesus and Auden; in his earlier work, *What Became of Wystan*, Jacobs declares "it may not be too gross an abuse of simile to say that, just as Jesus crossed the sea of Galilee to escape the multitudes, so Auden crossed the Atlantic to escape his fans" (xiv). Jacobs does a better job with Joseph, explaining the evolution of the Joseph character in the drafts of the oratorio. Because he studies these drafts, Jacobs is able to see the result of Auden the artist creating an interesting character rather than a mouthpiece for confessing how he feels about Kallman cheating on him.

7. Mendelson subsequently argues in *Moral Agents: Eight Twentieth-Century American Writers*, that Auden, in fact, believed that being a Christian is a state of becoming a Christian, i.e., something "one can pray to become" (150).
8. Jacobs also draws from Edward Mendelson's *Later Auden* for a sense of what Auden is reading at the time. Jacobs uses Mendelson's text of the poem, which Mendelson prepared for Auden's *Collected Poems* ("Preface," *FTTB*, viii; "Introduction," *FTTB*, xl). Offering only a few variations to that text, Jacobs also studies Auden's notebook drafts of the poem (in the Berg collection of the New York Public Library) and various manuscripts housed in the Princeton and Harvard University libraries ("Preface," *FTTB*, viii). And he consults other scholars of Auden, such as John Fuller, Nicholas Jenkins, and Arthur Kirsch ("Preface," *FTTB*, viii).
9. Jacobs also accuses Niebuhr of sexism, for using the word *man*. But Niebuhr wrote the book in 1943: an age pre-dating gender-conscious language. To judge that age by current standards seems unfair, although Jacobs does somewhat soften his charge against Niebuhr by saying "we" can use him until something "better" comes along (*What Became of Wystan*, 6).
10. I will never forget reading, in fact, that in 1948 F. L. Lucas counted 11,396 definitions of Romanticism (Preminger 717).
11. I am thinking here of Harold Bloom, for example, in his highly influential argument, *The Visionary Company* (1961). Bloom emphasizes that Keats is the first modern poet in the sense that his intellect matures out of any (adolescent) belief in the visionary imagination, paving the way for Modern poets such as Wallace Stevens to write poetry that offers "a satisfaction in the irremediable poverty of life" (Bloom xiii).
12. Consider what Auden confesses to Stephen Spender: "As you know my dominant faculties are intellect and intuition; my weak ones feeling and sensation . . . People imagine that I absorb things easily and quickly; this is true only in the most superficial way." (in Jenkins 72).
13. In his introduction to *The Portable Romantic Poets*, which he edits with Norman Holmes Pearson, Auden declares that the Romantics primarily focus on consciousness (something of primary importance to him as well). The unresolved conflict between imagination and intellect that the poet finds journeying into himself or herself serves this focus, the imagination's predilection to explore (rather than prove or disprove) bringing to consciousness the "abstract intellectualizing" that suppresses "the capacity of the consciousness to experience" and is thus an enemy of consciousness (xv). According to Edward Mendelson, Auden is the sole author of the introduction, not only to the portable anthology of Romantic poets but to all five of the anthologies for which Auden and Pearson chose the selections (*Later Auden* 320).
14. I would add, in fact, that at mid-career and after, Auden increases his role of serving as a jester to the intellect (especially in critics), as I see it trying to develop in his readers what

Keats calls negative capability, the quality in Shakespeare that Keats defines as an intellectual state of being “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Keats 43).

15. Auden observes in his concluding lecture on Shakespeare that Shakespeare presents in all of his plays not only the Christian idea of original sin but the innate reaction to it: “man’s inveterate tendency to foster illusions, one of the worst of which is the illusion of being free of illusion, the illusion of detachment” (*Lectures* 312). I sense that illusion is predominant now, in both religious and secular thinking evolved from the 1970s, when, in Thomas Weiskel’s terms, demystifying the sublime equates with assuring “us” that we are not “imaginative adolescents” (Weiskel 6).

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