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"We Are Changed by What We Change": W. H. Auden's *New Year Letter*

Abstract: This paper considers representations of change, internal and external to a changeable and changing subject, in W. H. Auden's *New Year Letter.* This long poem focuses on three aspects of change: personal responses to a sense of accountability, as experienced especially by poetic artists; diagnoses of change, across three historical epochs, within a world exposed at once to individual and public pressures, most recently those of crowd-consciousness and Fascist dictatorship; and a possible embrace of performative genres and modes, including dramatic conversation and Horatian epistolography, through which these lines of personal and conceptual discourse may tend towards convergence.

Keywords: W. H. Auden, *New Year Letter*, life-writing, change, conversion, Horace

1. Introduction

In this paper I shall consider representations of change—change as a process, or a set of processes, both internal and external to a notional (but, *ex hypothesi*, changeable and changing) self—in W. H. Auden's *New Year Letter.* This, the longest of Auden's non-dramatic poems, was published, separately in London and in New York in 1941, as part of a larger volume, *The Double Man*, containing a wide range of material implicitly or explicitly related to *New Year Letter*—a prologue, a sonnet-sequence entitled *The Quest*, an epilogue, together with notes, some by Auden (some in prose, many in various verse forms), many by other authors. Such a wealth of material resists consideration within the format of the present paper, which concentrates on the tripartite *New Year Letter.*

Is *New Year Letter* an example, or a field, of life-writing? Without tangling with possible definitions of this term, one can make two brief points. First, the most extended essay in poetic autobiography within Auden's *oeuvre* is to be found not

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in *New Year Letter* but in the earlier poem *Letter to Lord Byron*. Here the reader could satisfy curiosity concerning the author's birth, upbringing, schooling, and poetic vocation, and such material is, on the whole, not retraced in the later *Letter.* Secondly, as regards *New Year Letter,* the focus of both Auden's biographers and, to a lesser extent, his critics has been not upon the representation of an extended life-span, or particular continuous periods or processes within it, but upon what it has seemed appropriate, even a matter of routine, to refer to as one particular and major change: his "conversion" to, or back to, Christianity. Humphrey Carpenter writes that

> The last stage of his conversion had simply been a quiet and gradual decision to accept Christianity as a true premise…Certainly there was…a "leap of faith", but Auden had come to the conclusion that such leaps are made in all spheres of life… (297)

For Richard Davenport-Hines "[t]he first great poetic expression of Auden's reversion to Christianity is … in … *New Year Letter*" (203). For Carlo Izzo, writing during Auden's lifetime, "*The Double Man* (or *New Year Letter*) was the announcement of a conversion" (137). Monroe Spears, also writing while Auden was alive, referred to "changes … in the late Thirties … all in the same direction" issuing in "the fundamental commitment to Christianity" (3). Carpenter's sense of the poem is that it "had wound its way to a position that was nearly Christian" (294).

Is this long poem, then, to be regarded as a record of a process of change developing clearly towards the goal of Christian conversion? Other critics, whatever their views of Christianity or of Auden's supposed commitment to it, have taken further Carpenter's audible reservations about the poem's sense of direction. Referring to its self-proclaimed "epistolary" genre, C. H. Sisson declared that "the letter is a form of journalism … making entertaining play with received ideas" (211), while in a similar vein Martin Seymour-Smith, seeing *New Year Letter* as "rather like a glossy 'dictionary of thoughts'", declared that Auden, "careless with his technical gifts … never finished a poem off properly; he has nothing personal he dares to share, and a real voice is uncannily absent" (328, 327)—nothing, then, as real and presumably personal as a conversion, and no "momentum", within the poem, of the kind perceived by Marianne Moore (52), or by Edmund Wilson, for whom

> [t]he last lines of this poem give voice to the poet's exhilaration in moving about the world and the conviction of solidarity with companions in anxiety everywhere—a stirringly positive verdict, but one whose emphasis on "worldliness" avoids any reference to Christianity. (56)

On these issues the verdict of Edward Mendelson, Auden's literary executor, is measured and persuasive: "Auden wrote *New Year Letter* partly to understand, partly to induce the transformation of his beliefs" (99). Auden was writing, firstly, about life, about the lives of others, shared and individual, and certainly about his own life, in such a way as to seek change, in beliefs and in consequent practices. He was also writing, secondly and simultaneously, about "received ideas", not as their exponent but as their critic, archaeologist, and assessor. His aim was to make

sense of how people’s conceptions of their lives had, across decades and centuries and millennia, changed.

His stance, in this function, as an exponent of ideas about change was necessarily, but problematically, related to his pursuit of change in himself—to his sense that, as a self, he was a site of change. Stan Smith puts the point, initially, with an emphasis on its general application. For Auden, “‘man’ is perpetually out of sync with himself, ahead of his time or lagging behind it in consciousness, and it is this lack of synchronization which has made history …” (122). Later in his admirable treatment of *New Year Letter* Smith turns to Auden’s focus on personal displacement:

> We have repeatedly and with difficulty to “Learn who and how and where we are” in a process that constantly lags behind all the displacements that undermine any knowledge we already have … The strangeness in the end is our own… (131–32)

Smith here is considering what one might call Auden’s “languages of change”. He draws together his own view of “the provisionality of poetic language” with a citation of the passage, central in its force to Auden’s poem, to which my title appeals:

> For we are all insulted by
> The mere suggestion that we die
> Each moment and that each great I
> Is but a process in a process
> Within a field that never closes;
> As proper people find it strange
> That we are changed by what we change,
> That no event can happen twice
> And that no two existences
> Can ever be alike … (lines 351–60)[1]

I shall consider here, then, three overlapping and intertwined aspects of Auden’s *New Year Letter*: its consideration of quests for personal change, particularly those to be found in the lives of poets; its project for the diagnosis of change within a world at once individualized and public; and its embrace of written and performative genres and modes by which these two lines of poetic and conceptual discourse may tend towards convergence, if not fusion. In this third area, I shall suggest, perhaps breaking new ground, the relevance to *New Year Letter* of a body of philosophical poetry, well-entrenched within European literary traditions, yet rarely adduced in this connection: the *Epistles* of Horace.

2. “Self-loving things … who struggle for their liberty”

In the fourth verse paragraph of its first part, Auden’s poem identifies a project—perhaps a “quest for personal change”—salient for all humans but especially identifiable, and problematic, for verbal artists:

[1] All references to *New Year Letter* are taken from Auden (*The Complete Works*), 9–49, and quotations are identified by line numbers without further indication.

> To set in order – that's the task
> Both Eros and Apollo ask;
> For Art and Life agree in this
> That each intends a synthesis,
> That order which must be the end
> That all self-loving things intend
> Who struggle for their liberty,
> Who use, that is, their will to be … (57–64)

My quotation extends for eight lines. The sentence continues across twelve more lines, as the formulation of the succinct opening couplet, submitting itself to paraphrase, qualifies itself into rich obscurity, rescuing its initial force by (perhaps literally) a *coup de grace*—the invocation of "A true *Gestalt* where indiscrete / Perceptions and extensions meet" (74–75).

Art, we shall soon be told, deploys "… a convention that creates / Autonomous completed states". The echoes of diplomatic language and political theory are certainly intentional, and the power of "art" to sustain, by "convention", "autonomy" may be no more securely based than were, say, the treaties and pacts of inter-war negotiators in face of what Auden has already called "the presence of the Thing"—Hitlerian and Nazi Germany (21). But even artistic conventions purport to offer a spatial stability: "The symmetry disorders reach / When both are equal each to each" (68–69).

This stable symmetry, in works of art, of convergent spatial forces is different in kind from the "order" of Life, or of a life, full as it is of "Unique events that once took place / Within a unique time and space" (89–90). "Order", for such a unique personal life, is likely to be sequential and temporal rather than spatial or symmetrical. And the "order" desiderated by "Eros"—the "will to be" of "all self-loving things"—may be understood as the sequential order of a life which has been brought to understand itself as unique and therefore as free, and as obliged, to order itself. Such an ordering in time is only retrospectively intelligible as a unity. It is:

> An abstract model of events
> Derived from past experiments,
> And each life must itself decide
> To what and how it be applied. (95–98)

The application of a model to a life is a possible, even a persuasive, way to understand "conversion". As this claim, or challenge, is developed, the poem invokes the "surveillance" (138) of a board of judges—fellow poets (this is part of the point) whose standards of artistry are accepted by the writer as his own personal canons of excellence. But the Dante, the Blake, and the Rimbaud whose lives are staged (165–99) represent, more than purely literary models, lives which "challenge, warn and witness" (127):

> And to the growing and the weak
> Your final transformations speak,
> Saying to dreaming "I am deed."

> To striving "Courage. I succeed."
> To mourning "I remain. Forgive."
> And to becoming "I am. Live." (121–26)

The poem's presentation of these three poets constitutes a fulfilment of its earlier injunction concerning the need for "each life" to apply, in practice and in unspecifiable ways, available models of "events / Derived from past experiments" (95–96).

An assumption, here, is significant and pervasive throughout the first part of Auden's poem. It is that any life, and therefore any poet's life, can be understood as at once a series of events and a set of ultimately conclusive transformations. One effect of this assumption emerges through the terms in which the lives of Dante, Blake, and Rimbaud are described—above all through the predominance in these lines of active verbs. Dante "spoiled a temporal career"; he "saw the whole / Environment that keeps the soul", and "grasped in its complexity / The Catholic ecology" (165–74). Blake "threw his spectre in the lake", "[b]roke off relations in a curse / With the Newtonian Universe", and "Spoke to Isaiah in the Strand" (184–91). Rimbaud, perhaps Auden's least predictably chosen judge, is "[s]kilful, intolerant and quick" and "[s]trangled an old rhetoric" (195–99).

What are the implications, for the poem's and the poet's projects, of such lives, when they are represented, thus, as applicable models? One kind of implication appears when the speaker declares his own particular vulnerability to judgments based on such models:

> I relapse into my crimes,
> Time and again have slubbered through
> With slip and slapdash what I do,
> Adopted what I would disown,
> The preacher's loose immodest tone;" (218–22)

The crimes here seem to involve a lack of self-criticism, combined with an overconfidence in the supposed possession of appropriate rhetorical styles and moral standards with which to criticize and judge others. One can develop the point by noting the patterns of active achievement, artistic and personal at once, within the represented lives of the three chosen poetic paragons. Rimbaud, whatever else, had no compunction in clearing out dead wood both behavioural and linguistic. Blake jettisoned all trust in a rationalist system of thought (widely though not, as the poem will later emphasize, universally accepted), earning the opportunity for everyday conversation "in the Strand" (191) with the prophet of the Messiah. Dante exchanged a potentially successful "temporal career" (166) for an exile which allowed him to focus his newly unified energies of "passion, senses, will and thought" (168) upon new orders of society–"the three kingdoms of the dead" (170). Across the three lives, violence, refusal, and loss are the enabling conditions, and the chosen risks, which clear the way for rewards altogether incommensurate with the prices paid.

Is Auden drawn to his three chosen "judges" because he sees them as exemplars of "conversion"? This thought, not a common interpretation of the passage or the

poem as a whole, is worth entertaining. Yet it may be a little tactless to insist on the applicability of a term, conversion, at once radical and religious, which the poem does not voice. The first part, which parades (as I'm suggesting) these examples of what one might call "loss and gain", offers models, for personal change, both more and less active and demanding in their implications. On the one hand, we hear of "great masters" who, "weaker than some other men", nonetheless displayed "courage that survives / Soiled, shabby, egotistic lives", and who were "Hunted … out of life to play / At living in another way; / Yet the live quarry all the same / Were changed to huntsmen in the game" (105–112). In a different tone, and with a far more general reference, writers and readers alike are allegedly included amongst the "loose formations of good cheer" whose "reflections turn about / A common meditative norm, / Retrenchment, Sacrifice, Reform" (3, 9–11).

The pressures to which such reflections respond are said to be "the familiar weight / Of winter, conscience and the State" (1–2). One possible ordering of these pressures, from which the whole poem sets out, might suggest that the resolutions characteristic (and characteristically, in their effect, short-lived) of every New Year's Day amount to opportunities for the reconsideration of commitments at once to others and to oneself. If this seems, indeed, less demanding than the vocation attributed to "great masters" of poetry, one might remember (for Auden's hyper-articulate discursiveness keeps some cards up its sleeve) that winter is also the hunting season.

In this section I have been generally concerned to establish the relevance, as regards changes of life, to the first part of *New Year Letter* of a challenge, posed variously by "Eros", by "Life", by "Time", and by "Art". The challenge is addressed particularly to poets, insofar as their powers to articulate an artistic "fait accompli" (80) may lead them, and their readers, to underrate or neglect the disorders involved in the "struggle for their liberty" (68, 62). But in fact, the challenge is addressed to "each life". It begins—so much, though perhaps little more, is clear—in "avoidance of sin" (230). It may extend as far as a demand for fulfilment ("I am deed"), for "courage", and for exchanges of forgiveness (123–25). The challenge—here one is closest to, if not Christianity, then to "Abrahamic faith"—is voiced by one who, as challenger, can say the words "I am", and can articulate the command (Pauline, but not only so) "Live" (126). Again, Auden implies, without openly averring, an accountability to the God of the Old and New Testaments.

If this much, in connection with the notion of *New Year Letter* as a poem preoccupied with change and conversion, were granted, there remains one rather obvious caveat. The more universal the challenge, the less specific can be—and, within the poem, the less specific certainly are—the demands, for such actions, negative and positive, as would constitute recognizable change; such actions as would count as manifest tokens of "conversion". The poet acknowledges guilt, not for any action, but for an attitude ("slip and slapdash") and a tone (loose, preacherly, and immodest) (220–22). One may gather, though, from these acknowledgments, a certain justification for the absence of more particular moral or practical injunctions. The voice

of the poem seeks to "strangle an old rhetoric", and to abandon the position of the pulpit which has separated speaker from audience, in favour of an acceptance of a more lowly but irreducible status—that of the unique individual whose uniqueness is, precisely, what is most shared with everyone else. A speaker—a conversationalist (like Blake), a letter-writer (like, we're to understand, Auden here and now)—occupies no position more privileged than that of any of the other "children of a modest star" (344); and—to turn the poem's transitive verb intransitive, or, rather, reflexive—"each life must itself decide" (97).

3. "All the special tasks begun / By the Renaissance have been done"

Why does *New Year Letter* articulate itself, or simply fall, into three parts? Parallels have been sought with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with the operations of Marxist dialectic, and with what have been taken to be the three Kierkegaardian modes of consciousness, or of life—the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. Smith parallels, with the operations of Marxist dialectic, the claim, at the close and climax of Part II, that the devil "cannot always fool us thrice, / For he may never tell us lies, / Just half-truths we can synthesize. / So, hidden in his hocus-pocus, / There lies the gift of double focus" (825–29) (Smith 138).

In this connection, a suggestion by Greenberg seems worth pursuing:

> We live, Auden believes, at the end of the Protestant era or, as he has it here, the Renaissance, and the poem is his analysis of the factors bringing the era to disaster and of the situation we confront in readying ourselves to set out anew. (100)

Pursuing this general claim Greenberg finds, in the poem's Part I, a representation of the climate and the aftermath of 1939; in Part II, a consideration of the 1930s; and in Part III, a reflection upon the nature and the upshot of the Renaissance. I shall indicate reservations about such specific dating. Yet it is right to emphasize the extent to which *New Year Letter* is preoccupied, not simply with "the world" (supposedly as against the individual conscience or consciousness), but with the fact, and the detail, of that world as it is changing and as it has, for the poet, changed. It is also a defensible view that such changes, for Auden's thinking, comprise three stages.

Prescinding, now, from what may be unanswerable questions concerning the overall structure of the poem, I shall pursue its diagnosis of change in what is, in Auden's conception, a world at once private and public; a world where

> There are two atlases: the one
> The public space where acts are done,
> In theory common to us all,
> Where we are needed and feel small …
> The other is the inner space

> Of private ownership, the place
> That each of us is forced to own …
> The landscape of his will and need …
> Two worlds describing their rewards,
> That one in tangents, this in chords;
> Each lives in one, all in the other,
> Here all are kings, there each a brother … (1036–62)

The poem's insistence, in the lines that follow, upon the dangers—indeed, the "Fall"—consequent on a belief that the two worlds are one and the same, should not conceal the point that one's power conceptually to distinguish these worlds illuminates the fact, and the specific points, of their causal interconnection. Thus, the Renaissance, and the subsequent eras which the poem distinguishes, are defined at once by public events and by movements—by "turns", by "changes"—in those "inner spaces", those structures of thought, by which "public space" is and has been articulated and legitimated.

I shall consider now the epochal changes which, in my view, the poem emphasizes. The first of these is (as in this section's subtitle) "the Renaissance" and its construction, or validation, of "a new *Anthropos*, an Empiric Economic Man", who "did what he was born to do" (1220–21, 1231). On this Man the poem expatiates at some length, dividing faint praises with scarcely less faint damns.

> He had his half-success; he broke
> The silly and unnatural yoke
> Of famine and disease that made
> A false necessity obeyed …
> Subjected earth to the control
> And moral choices of the soul …
> And if his half-success broke down,
> All failures have one good result:
> They prove the Good is difficult. (1233–36, 1250–52)

Here the poem's voice, I think, is unconvinced and somewhat unconvincing. Auden's overall argument, about the seesawing balance between a changing "soul" and the world, or "earth", which a soul has the power to change, needs the evidence, and the claims, of (to rephrase Auden's terms) early-modern scientific humanism, to get itself off the ground.

Still, a half-success counts for something, by way of change. How are we invited to understand (what I take to be) the second epochal change? For the poem, this is constituted by the times and situations in which, against "him", Empiric Economic Man,

> … at the very noon and arch
> Of his immense triumphal march
> Stood prophets pelting him with curses
> And sermons and satiric verses …
> Their grapevine rumour would grow true,
> Their alphabet of warning sounds
> The common grammar all have grounds

To study; for their guess is proved:
It is the Mover that is moved.
Whichever way we turn, we see
Man captured by his liberty … (1259–62, 1281–87)

This second epoch is heralded by Blake’s prophecies, Rousseau’s sentimentalism, and (perhaps above all) by “ironic Kierkegaard” (1264–66). It is plausibly read in terms of Marxian “alienation” by Stan Smith, who, citing the immediately following lines—“Man captured by his liberty, / The measurable taking charge / Of him who measures” (1287–89)—remarks that “[l]est this should be too abstract, Auden offers more concrete images of the economy as a process without a subject … an increasingly irrational capitalism … a world enmeshed in struggles to break down or ensure the reproduction of the means of production” (147). Such struggles, indeed, characterize both Europe and north America, “This raw untidy continent / Where the Commuter can’t forget / The pioneer … / More even than in Europe, here / The choice of pattern is made clear / Which the machine imposes, what / Is possible and what is not …” (1492–94, 1519–22). And, if “this raw untidy continent” is “here”, Greenberg’s sense, that the “now” of the poem’s second epoch is, or has continued into, the 1930s, has much to be said for it, despite the nineteenth-century placing of the epoch’s prophets and its preeminent “*poètes maudits*” Baudelaire and Wagner.

Yet the third epoch has, by this time, already begun (just as the curses of second-epoch romantic prophets and ironists by no means spelled the immediate doom of the first epoch’s “Empiric Economic Man”). On this point the poem lays its cards on the table, in Part II, with its striking and often misinterpreted encomium of the Marx who, “Obscure in gaslight London, brought / To human consciousness a thought / It thought unthinkable …” (681–83). Smith splendidly defends the plain meaning, tone, and emotion of this passage against those who, following John Fuller, see in Marx one of the devil’s followers (135–36). Yet, if Marx promulgated “the theory that forecast the deed” (678), the “deed” itself (the Russian revolution of 1917) was inaugural and revolutionary—“The odd phenomenon, the strange / Event of qualitative change” (671–72). The tone here must seem, a hundred years later, naïve. Yet this reading of the Russian Revolution belongs, in the poem’s economy, alongside that of a different yet (as we may still feel) comparable “discontinuity”—one which, we are told, requires from us, more than a mere interpretation of putative change, some active choice.

We face our self-created choice
As out of Europe comes a voice,
A theologian who denies
What more than twenty centuries
Of Europe have assumed to be
The basis of civility,
Our evil Daimon to express
In all its ugly nakedness
What none before dared say aloud,
The metaphysics of the crowd … (1016–25)

Hitler (for whom an Auden of our own time might find other names) is a sign and an embodiment of, again, "the strange / Event of qualitative change".

These, then, are the three epochs which, particularly but not only in its third part, *New Year Letter* proposes for reflection. In the first, the material world came to seem responsive, to some extent, to the soul. Between the "public" and the "private" worlds (of Auden's more general formulation) there was, at once, differentiation and communication. In the second, such seemingly one-way traffic, between soul and world, mind and material, was shown to be vulnerable—"It is the Mover that is Moved": vulnerable, yet not, at this stage, disabled, for that which is moved does not thereby cease to move others. The third epoch, undermining further the instability of the second, offers a fusion, or a vicious stand-off, between extremes—not civil philosophy but "metaphysics", not "civility" but "the crowd" and the techniques of crowd control.

It is this discontinuity—the perceived onset of this third epoch—to which the poem owes its conception and which its presentation and analysis of change, both psychological and historical, proposes to highlight. A process of apparent, albeit gradual and only partially successful, construction (the Renaissance and the Renaissance Man)—a process already based on a critical deconstruction of supposed necessities—yielded to its own dismantling, as its heroic "movers" found themselves "moved" by the forces they had sought to control, changed by processes they had sought to change. This is the age of Faust and of Frankenstein. Such an unstable but artistically productive balance of energies, in turn, yielded to the monolithic certainties of a diabolic modernity, of Hitler the theologian.

Was this, is this, as bad as all that? The poem raises the question in its treatment of Marx:

> Heroic charity is rare;
> Without it, what except despair
> Can shape the hero who can dare
> The desperate catabasis
> Into the snarl of the abyss …? (696–700)

"If way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst"—thus Hardy, one of Auden's judges (168). Or, again, "God writes straight with crooked lines" one of the epigraphs to the huge drama of theodicy, *Le soulier de satin*, by Paul Claudel, upon whom Auden, in his elegy for Yeats, had pronounced Time's pardon (7).

4. "Truth resents … approaches that are too intense"

In my first section I worked towards the idea that *New Year Letter* embodies a challenge, as to readers so to its writer, to confront, without the mantle of the amateur preacher or the protection of artistic formality, the need for personal change by

means of individual choice. In my second section I argued that the poem represents a process of historical change—the elimination, across successive but discontinuous historical epochs, of those modes of self-understanding which allow and involve a positive valuation of individual choice, or even of a dialectic between "mover" and "moved". For the argument of the poem, these modes of self-understanding are being eroded and replaced by a naked confrontation of, or a mutual subsumption between, a dictator and an undifferentiated crowd. Such changes have shaken, and are tending to destroy, earlier models of social and psychological thought which postulated an operative and sustainable balance of forces between individual projects and social stability. In my brief third section I shall suggest ways in which *New Year Letter* offers, or implies, a way forward from this (to say the least) undesirable situation.

The way forward may lead in the direction of some personal religious conversion, towards which the poem's final paragraphs, in their remarkable imagery, seem to point. Such individual conversion, though, does not in itself address the issues of social and inter-subjective crisis which have been increasingly prominent in the poem. On this point, I would suggest, the poem embodies within its own procedures, and also voices in some of its explicit recommendations, a valorization of the procedures, and of the demonstrable fact, of human conversation. Much more, in this area, could be said, with reference particularly to the poem's metrical form, its polyglot language, and especially its range of cultural reference. I shall touch here upon just three issues—the poem's representation of "eternity", its allusions to the forms and resources of drama, and, in conclusion, its alignment with a collection of Latin poems, the first book of Horace's *Epistles.*

In Part II of the poem Auden's line of argument rehearses the functions of "the devil"—a role identified with the Mephistopheles of Goethe's *Faust*—in "pushing us into grace" (426). On the one hand, the devil must

> … all through tempting us to doubt
> Point us the way to find truth out
> … He cannot always fool us thrice,
> For he may never tell us lies,
> Just half-truths we can synthesize (397–98, 825–27).
> But, alongside such 'crooked' progress, we have another resource;
> Our best protection is that we
> In fact live in eternity. (429–30)

This resonant declaration, which risks making further elaboration of the devil's tricks redundant, is followed by perhaps the poem's most elusive passage of argumentation. Its emotional core, however, lies in its invocation, in adjacent couplets, of "love" and of "Elizabeth"—"my friend", Elizabeth Mayer, the dedicatee of the whole poem. Part III opens with an evocation of "the unexpected power / That drove our ragged egos in / From the dead-ends of greed and sin / To sit down at the wedding feast" (845–48).

Once again, in this connection, and against the whole run of preoccupations, elsewhere, with change and discontinuity, "eternity" is invoked:

> Yet anytime, how casually,
> Out of his organised distress
> An accidental happiness,
> Catching man off his guard, will blow him
> Out of his life in time to show him
> The field of Being where he may,
> Unconscious of Becoming, play
> With the eternal Innocence
> In unimpeded utterance. (871–79)

Auden's deployment of the image of "the wedding feast", derived from a parable of Jesus, may owe much to his admiration of the writings of Charles Williams, whose book *The Descent of the Dove* is put to fascinating use in the Notes of *The Double Man*. Yet, where Williams's thought, in his treatment of the history of the Christian church, dwells repeatedly on the image of "the just city" (a conception also invoked by Auden here), Auden's desires are captured more by the milieu of the dinner party—the field of "unimpeded utterance" amongst friends (Williams 70 and passim) Such a milieu also offers the pleasures of classical music in competent amateur performance—of "Schubert … and Mozart … and Gluck" (854–55).

Gluck's name, here, may be owed to its German meaning of "good fortune". Mozart and Schubert, within the domain of Austrian classical symphonic style, appropriately symbolize a conversational, rather than a developmentally aggressive, style of musical discourse. But the function of this "wedding feast" resembles also that of the "breakthrough" moments in a later symphonist, Gustav Mahler, where the distant goal of a troubled developmental section suddenly manifests itself—a reward, for such "development", that may never be attained but which operates as a metaphorical motivation. So with Auden's invocations of "eternity"; like the Faustian moment, they are fatal if treated as objects of possession, yet, as projections of hope, mysteriously substantial. Symphonic music, and the dinner-party ambience to which (I have suggested) such music is, within Auden's poem, related, share crucial features of good conversation. They allow the voicing of individual and intentional utterances; they posit the mutual relevance of such utterances, and the sustaining of a medium by which such mutual relevance may be sustained and supported; and, importantly, they do not pretend to any once-for-all closure. They may seem temporal and even, occasionally, directional; yet the values which they embody are, in some sense, eternal.

From dinner party conversation to Romantic and modern drama the step is not large. Auden's involvement with dramatic modes led him from obscure, powerful and Brechtian experiments in England in the 1930s towards (mostly in collaboration as librettist with Chester Kallman) operatic libretti commissioned by Britten, Stravinsky, and Hans Werner Henze. Auden and Kallman's opera libretti include

a lovers' pastoral (in *The Rake's Progress*), a wedding feast (in *Paul Bunyan*), and bitchy intellectual conversations (in *Elegy for Young Lovers* and *The Bassarids*). In each libretto, individual choices and paths towards grace or damnation are imbricated with presentations of bilateral human relationships, and representations of the options open to, and pressing upon, larger societies. Edward Mendelson, stressing the many ways in which another and an epic drama, Goethe's *Faust*, represents, for Auden's poem, a crucial resource and intertext, points up the initial interplay, in Goethe's drama, between the solitary thinker in his study contemplating and successively rejecting options for worldly fulfilment, the crowd of townsfolk rejoicing unthinkingly in the liberation of spring weather (another seasonal rite of passage, like the dawn of a new year), and the theological framework which sets individual and public choices and chances within the context of devilish stimuli and Eastertide hope for resurrection. The comparison, here, indicates Auden's transmutation, into the mode of apparent poetic monologue, of a dialogic, dramatic, and multi-vocal diversity of options and projects. The sheer polyglot virtuosity of *New Year Letter* might be paralleled with the social fact of an international community of opera lovers, devoted to music and, through such devotion, acquiring at least a minimal competence in, and enjoyment of, the several diverse vernacular languages of the libretti with which operatic music is inextricably associated.

Goethe's Faust, seeking glory as the founder of a free civic community, falls disastrously short, redeemable only by divine and Marian grace. An earlier poet, Horace, applied himself, in his first book of *Epistles*, to a project resembling Auden's—a project in which, like Faust, he can claim no final success, but for which, as (I would suggest) in Auden's poem, even an asymptotic approach to a goal may count for something.

> So I lay down my poems and other toys of my youth
> To devote myself to one main subject: the truth.
> What is right and honest? This I would like to know.
> I am laying up stores, setting them all in a row,
> Of the only thing that will keep on helping me grow.
> … At times I'm the Practical Man,
> The heroic, Stoical Man, who takes Part in Life,
> And Care of Truth, and Charge of Inflexible Virtue.
> At times, I slip off unseen to the opposite side,
> To fit the world to myself, not me to it. (Horace 165–66)

Through a series of epistolary poems, Horace launches a personal quest for self-ordering and for philosophical virtue—a quest in which he expects to rely on help from friends; a quest, in turn, which may entitle him to preach to them. The positive content of such virtue, however, remains, throughout the first fifteen (of twenty) *Epistles*, elusive (though its concomitant conditions seem to include both comfortable solitude and, at a distance, friendly connections with correspondents). Moreover, like Auden's epistolary poem, Horace's *Epistles* are

surprisingly short of specific advice, susceptible of issuing in practical action, addressed to any of his friends—perhaps the most striking, though negative, point of contact between the two poets. What becomes clear (especially in the sixth and sixteenth *Epistles*) is that pretensions to virtue must be deconstructed. The "loose immodest tone" of preachers, and their claims to specific virtues, are to be exposed to the cold levelling glance of mortality. The collection works, in its last five *Epistles*, towards two points of relative stability—the life of upper-class patronage and civilized social intercourse (analysed in the seventeenth and eighteenth *Epistles*, and the supreme claims of an abstract virtue (central to the sixteenth *Epistle*) which can only be defined by negations and can only be completely achieved at the point of death.

Auden will have read Horace, in general, during his years at Gresham's School, and his late poem *The Horatians* testifies to the enjoyment Auden found in the Roman poet. The relevance of Horace's *Epistles* to Auden's *New Year Letter*, which needs and merits much more exploration, rests most obviously on their shared combination of a professed commitment to personal change with a concern for false public professions of virtue and legitimacy. Both poets, moreover, were ready to perceive virtue, both personal and artistic, in modes and milieux of social conversational interchange. In these ways, the three parts of Auden's poem answer to three emphases, and three assignments of value, which can also be found in Horace's collection of epistolary poems. Can anything more decisive, in this area, be said? The ordering of Horace's *Epistles* carefully avoids any final clarity. If *Epistle* sixteen implies that true individual virtue cannot be experienced as an accomplished achievement within a human life, do the two succeeding *Epistles* situate any lasting value in their apparently less demanding emphases upon human conversational sociability? (Horace's two final *Epistles* discuss, in somewhat polemical terms, his own status within contemporary Roman poetry, and might interestingly be compared with Auden's representation of his trial by self-chosen poetic "judges".)

Auden's *New Year Letter* seems to suggest that personal fulfilment would be unattainable without some superhuman, or divine, assistance; yet, as has been emphasized, the joys of conversation, as of music, are demonstrably, even if only occasionally, available here and now. If one asks whether conversation embodies a process of change, whether conclusive or otherwise, one is likely to return to Auden's formulation: "we are changed by what we change". In ideal conversation there are no goals; the markers and the criteria for change, being characterized above all by the quality of responsiveness, are themselves subject to constant change. Sermons, in more sense than one, have ends; conversations need have none. Auden's couplet—a good point on which to conclude—fuses the two Horatian ideals, of virtue in death and sociability in life: "O every day in sleep and labour / Our life and death are with our neighbour" (1703–04).

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