

Auden and the New York School Poets

When one thinks of W. H. Auden's influence on postwar poetry, certain names spring to mind - James Merrill, Richard Howard, Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Joseph Brodsky, Thom Gunn, Amy Clampitt, or J. D. McClatchy. Drawing on Auden's blend of urbane wit, suave sophistication, and technical mastery of traditional forms, these poets for the most part drink from the well of the later, American Auden. As Lynn Keller has observed, for poets like Merrill, "Auden's early poems" - those "compressed, elliptical, and obviously modernist" works - "were of minimal interest, while his less obscure American works using traditional poetic forms and a conversational, discursive manner were of tremendous importance" (*Re-Making It New: Contemporary American Poetry and the Modernist Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 185-56). With their elegance and craftsmanship, these poets constitute one important group of Auden's descendants.

However, much less attention has been paid to the relationship between Auden and his other, more reckless progeny - John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler, members of the circle of avant-garde poets who emerged in the 1950s and came to be known as the New York School of poets. Smitten with Auden's strange, daring earlier work, left cold by much of his later poetry, the New York School poets viewed Auden as a major exemplar of inno-

vative poetry. Although Auden clearly played an instrumental role in the developing poetics and dynamics of the New York School of poetry, his impact on postwar experimental poetry has been somewhat obscured. This is perhaps because discussions of the "New American Poetry" - the avant-garde, bohemian poetry movement of the 1950s and 1960s comprised of the Beats, the Black Mountain poets, the New York poets, and other dissenters from the mainstream, who often sang the praises of the Pound/Williams tradition - have left us with the sense that Auden, like T. S. Eliot, was rejected and ignored by these poets and their descendants. But Auden's presence was crucial, especially in the case of the New York School - not only as a poetic influence to be both mined and resisted, but as an arbiter of poetic talent, an important gay literary model, and a social acquaintance.

From the first, these poets revered the early, experimental Auden - the poet of "1929" and *The Orators* - as one of the leading, cutting-edge voices of their time. In one of his earliest poems, "Memorial Day 1950," Frank O'Hara invokes a pantheon of innovative heroes and precursors in order to trace his own avant-garde genealogy. In the midst of venerating "the men who made us" in a wild litany which includes Pablo Picasso, Gertrude Stein, Max Ernst, the "Fathers of Dada," Paul Klee, Boris Pasternak, and Guillaume Apollinaire, O'Hara also - perhaps surprisingly, from our vantage point today - includes Auden as an important father-figure to be celebrated: "And those of us who thought poetry | was crap were throttled by Auden or Rimbaud" (*The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, pp. 17-18).

Like O'Hara, Ashbery also discovered Auden at a young age; he has often noted that his initial exposure to modern poetry was through Auden, and thus considers him "the first big influence on my work" (Peter Stitt, "The Art of Poetry XXXIII: John Ashbery," *Paris Review* 90, Winter 1983, p. 37). While still in high school, Ashbery felt that Auden's poetry was a liberating, barrier-breaking force: "What immediately struck me," Ashbery recalls, "was his use of colloquial speech - I didn't think you were supposed to do that in poetry. That, and his startling way of making abstractions concrete and alive" (Stitt 38).

At Harvard in the late 1940s, when O'Hara, Ashbery, and Koch were all students in Cambridge, Auden cast an imposing shadow. For Ashbery, "he was the modern poet. Stevens was a curiosity, Pound probably a monstrosity, William Carlos Williams - who hadn't yet

published his best poetry - an 'imagist.' Eliot and Yeats were too hallowed and anointed to count" (Stitt 38). Not only did Auden visit Harvard to read on campus in December 1947, but, as O'Hara's biographer Brad Gooch claims, "among the young poets a civil war had developed between those who favored Yeats and those who favored Auden," with the nascent New York School poets aligning with Auden and poets like Donald Hall and Robert Bly with Yeats (*City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*, New York: Knopf, 1993, p. 127). The great poet was more than simply a figure in anthologies and term papers, but also a living icon: as David Lehman reports, "one evening Ashbery and Kenneth Koch were playing pinball at a Harvard cafe when Auden himself entered, had a cup of coffee, and left. Ashbery said he was miffed that the poet had not greeted them. 'But we don't even know him and we haven't published anything,' Koch said. 'Well, you'd think he would know,' Ashbery replied glumly" (*The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*, New York: Doubleday, 1998, p. 137).

As a Harvard undergraduate, Ashbery wrote two incisive, sophisticated papers about Auden's work. In 1949, at the end of his senior year, Ashbery submitted his thirty-page Honors Thesis, entitled "The Poetic Medium of W. H. Auden," in which he observes that

No other poet at this time, I feel, has a comparable medium for expressing the ideas which are common to most modern poets. Eliot, it is true, did much of the ground work for Auden. But his poetry as a whole, though it introduced the idea that the everyday world is part of the province of poetry, remains allusive and refined, lacking in the immediacy and concreteness which Auden gives to all he touches. . . . Mr. Eliot, it is true, introduced the tired clerk and the gaswork to poetry, but in his hands they are general and symbolic; not corresponding to the reality we know. Auden, on the other hand, has particularized them for us by presenting them in a language that is neither stylized and over-literary nor a too-hearty imitation of everyday speech; and when he generalizes them he makes them personify certain immediately grasped and vital ideas. (31-32)

In his final estimation, Ashbery argues "If he is not a great poet, a decision which must be made by time, he has brought innumerable people closer to the world in which they have to live" (32). Ashbery's

college work also provides us with some tantalizing signs of which Auden poems the emerging poet found particularly inspiring. In a 1948 essay (which received an uncharitable B) Ashbery was asked to explain what he would choose to include in a hypothetical anthology of Auden's work. In justifying his inclusion of *The Orators* and "Paid on Both Sides," Ashbery argues that "these early [works] are famously obscure, but their obscurity has never interfered with the tremendous mystery and excitement which Auden here transmits to the reader." It is notable that in celebrating Auden's balance of obscurity and mysterious suggestiveness, Ashbery highlights qualities in Auden that the best of his own poetry would later exhibit. Stressing early works that "show Auden at his freshest and most provocative," Ashbery mentions such poems as "As Well as Can Be Expected," "Year after Year," "As He Is," "Adolescence," "Eyes Look Into the Well," and "Prospero to Ariel," as well as the whole of *The Sea and the Mirror*, which he deems "one of the most amazing poems in English." Regarding "Musée des Beaux Arts," Ashbery writes "I believe it is Auden's finest short poem. In it we see presages of his final (to date) style: an easy, unaffected, and thoroughly successful approximation of the conversational idiom." Some of these works would be tremendously important for Ashbery's later poetry, not least "The Sea and the Mirror," since the poetic prose of "Caliban to the Audience" (which Ashbery declared in his thesis "probably the most brilliant writing Auden has ever done") served as an important model for the prose poetry of one of Ashbery's most highly regarded works, *Three Poems*. In his book-length study of Ashbery, John Shoptaw goes so far as to claim that Auden's *The Orators* - which he calls "Auden's boldest experiment in collaged verse and prose" - is "perhaps the single most productive poem behind Ashbery's own poetry" (*On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery's Poetry*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994, pp. 62, 76-77).

Fortunately, Frank O'Hara also left some clues about his own early favorites among Auden's poems - in the table of contents of a copy of *A New Anthology of Modern Poetry* (1938) edited by Selden Rodman, which resides in Columbia University's Rare Book Room. In the early 1950s, O'Hara gave the book as a birthday gift to a childhood friend, Burton Robie, and - noting that he "couldn't resist marking my favorites" - placed checks next to poems by many poets, like Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Auden. Of Auden's works, O'Hara singled out "Get There if You Can," "Sir, No Man's Enemy,"

"The Airman's Alphabet," "Chorus from *The Dog Beneath the Skin*," and "Prologue" ("O love, the interest itself in thoughtless Heaven,") beside which he wrote "terrific." In his own estimation of Auden, O'Hara seemed to have cherished qualities similar to those valued by Ashbery - the use of colloquial, conversational language, and the innovative inclusion of aspects of everyday, modern life overlooked by other poets. Quoting from O'Hara's own notes for a lecture he gave in 1952, Marjorie Perloff points out that "according to O'Hara, Auden is 'an American poet' in 'his use of the vernacular. . . . Auden extended our ideas of what poetry could be; his poems saw clearly into obscure areas of modern life and they provided us with obscure and complex insights into areas which had hitherto been banal.' O'Hara praises Auden's poetry for being 'intimately based on . . . experiences and expressions of what had been looked down upon by the pretentious estheticism and mysticism of the Eliot school'" (*Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, Austin: U of Texas P, 1977, 61).

While they had revered Auden from afar during their college years, due to a lucky coincidence Ashbery, O'Hara, and Koch would soon get to know Auden personally after they arrived in New York. The link was James Schuyler, also newly settled in Manhattan, who quickly became one of the core members of their literary coterie. During and after the war, Schuyler had become close friends with Auden's lover Chester Kallman, and through him, began a friendship with Auden. The young Schuyler lived in Auden's summer house on Ischia while the poet was in New York for the winter, and was the recipient of Auden's generosity in the form of sizeable check for an operation. In 1949, Schuyler even played Pound to Auden's Yeats, serving as the famous poet's secretary. While Schuyler typed up most of the poems that would appear in *Nones*, he seems to have felt some ambivalence about this apprenticeship - he later remembered that "I would type something of Wystan's and think, 'Well, if this is poetry, I'm certainly never going to write any myself'" (Lehman 259). In an elegy he wrote over twenty years later, Schuyler recalls this larger-than-life figure with a series of small, quirky human details, including that "on Ischia he claimed to take / St. Restituta seriously, and / sat at Maria's café in the cobbled / square saying 'Poets should / dress like businessmen,' while / he wore an incredible peach- / colored nylon shirt" (*Collected Poems*, New York: Farrar Straus, 1993, p. 243).

Given Schuyler's intimate connection to Kallman and Auden, it was only a matter of time until all of the young New York poets had

the opportunity to mingle with the master himself over dinner and at cocktail parties. Considering that Ashbery has recalled that "actually the one poet I really wanted to know when I was young was Auden," it is not surprising that the whole group of fledgling avant-garde artists was somewhat star-struck - in a 1951 letter to Jean Garrigue, the painter Larry Rivers (a close friend of all the New York poets) relates with great excitement that he has just had dinner with John Ashbery, gallery owner John Bernard Myers, and Auden himself, who amazed them all with his humility and his good-humored gossip (Stitt 38; 5 October 1951). In a 1955 letter to a friend, O'Hara reports that he saw the "enchanted" Wystan at dinner at Schuyler's before recounting the elder statesman's witty bon mots. But meeting an idol in person is never easy, and, as Brad Gooch points out, the poets "all had been so inspired by [Auden's] early work that any friendship with him was always a bit strained" (260). Ashbery recalls that "it was very hard to talk to him since he already knew everything. I once said to Kenneth Koch, 'What are you supposed to say to Auden?' And he said that about the only thing left to say was 'I'm glad you're alive'" (Stitt 38).

This personal connection between the New York poets and Auden was a factor in the well-known events surrounding Auden's choice of a winner for the 1955 Yale Younger Poets award. Dissatisfied with the work of the finalists he had seen, Auden decided he was not going to award a prize at all that year. James Schuyler heard this news from Chester Kallman, and quickly informed his friend of two submissions the judge never saw. At Auden's request, two more manuscripts were then rushed to him on Ischia - O'Hara's, which had been rejected for arriving too late, and Ashbery's, which had never made it past the initial screeners. After reviewing them, Auden decided to give the nod to Ashbery's collection, which resulted in the publication of his first volume, *Some Trees*, and effectively launched Ashbery's career. Reporting the outcome in a letter to O'Hara, Auden reflected on the delicacy of the situation: "I'm sorry to have to tell you that, after much heart searching, I chose John's poems. It's really very awkward when the only two possible candidates are both friends."

At the same time, Auden warned O'Hara, as well as Ashbery, about their experimental excesses and their overly French use of disjunctive, illogical imagery:

I think you (and John too, for that matter) must watch what is always the great danger with any "surrealistic" style, namely

of confusing the authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue. (qtd. in Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, pp. 249-250)

O'Hara bridled at Auden's criticism of his Francophilia and off-kilter imagery, telling Koch "I don't care what Wystan says, I'd rather be dead than not have France around me like a rhinestone dog collar" (qtd. in Gooch 261). Auden apparently had reservations about both O'Hara's and Ashbery's poetry; Schuyler confided in Koch that Auden "didn't think either of them was very good, and he chose John's *faute de mieux*" (Lehman 89). (It is worth remembering that the other poets Auden selected for the Yale Younger Poets prize in the mid-1950s included James Wright, Adrienne Rich, and John Hollander, poets far less prone, especially at this point, to such avant-garde excesses). Auden's ambivalence about the surrealist tinge of the Ashbery/O'Hara mode is also evident in his notoriously lukewarm introduction to *Some Trees*, in which he worries about poets who indulge too much in "strange juxtapositions of imagery" and who are "tempted to manufacture calculated oddities" (Perloff, *Poetics* 249).

Perhaps it is not surprising that Auden would have reservations about the emerging poetics of the New York School, since the poets were themselves becoming increasingly dissatisfied with Auden's own work and influence by the mid-1950s. In Kenneth Koch's 1956 salvo against the orthodoxies of the poetry establishment, "Fresh Air," he asks "Who are the great poets of our time, and what are their names? / Yeats of the baleful influence, Auden of the baleful influence, Eliot of the baleful influence" (*On the Great Atlantic Rainway: Selected Poems, 1950-1988*, New York: Knopf, 1994, p. 71). For Koch, Auden's baleful influence could be seen in the ascendancy of restrained, elegant, formal poems written by his more conservative-minded peers, "the men with their eyes on the myth / and the Missus and the midterms" (73). Koch was not only wary of the troubling explosion of Auden-like stanzas filling the pages of the *Hudson* and *Partisan Reviews*, but also distressed by the poet's own recent work. Slated to review Auden's latest, *The Old Man's Road*, for *Poetry* magazine in 1957, Koch worried about how to do so without being too unkind or impolitic. Schuyler reassured Koch that he should pull no punches, telling him "I think you ought to lay the book out like a split cod." Schuyler complained about Auden's "conversion - or, rather,

reversion - to the Anglican church" and his disavowal of his previous interest in a psychoanalytic outlook: "he has become increasingly a lay-preacher (I mean real sermons in real churches), an apologist for Anglicanism and quite willing to attack psychoanalysis" (Lehman 257-58).

In the review, Koch pronounces Auden's volume "disappointing" and critiques it at some length: the book is "too flat and abstract, and resembles the surface of his poetry minus his genius," the poems are filled with ideas that "have been handled in the past, with greater skill, by Auden himself," and "they are either developed too simply and one-dimensionally to have the resonance of poetry, or else they are too clouded with abstractions to be convincing" ("New Books by Marianne Moore and W. H. Auden," *Poetry*, April 1957, pp. 47-50). For Koch, Auden's latest poems seem "like intellectual exercises which he is using his talents to decorate. We don't feel the movement of his mind, we don't feel the hesitations and desires that have made so many of his intellectual poems so satisfying." One can sense Koch's mixture of admiration and disappointment when he concludes: "Since Auden is one of the best poets alive, one can only hope that, wherever he has been, he will come back, and soon, into his poems" (52).

In later years, Ashbery too has made no bones about his preference for the earlier, pre-America Auden, whose work he views as being, oddly enough, more American in its rash experimentalism, in contrast to the more orderly and British-seeming poetry from his American years. In a 1983 interview, he admits that "I cannot agree though with the current view that his late work is equal to if not better than the early stuff. Except for 'The Sea and the Mirror' there is little that enchants me in the poetry he wrote after coming to America. There are felicities, of course, but on the whole it's too chatty and self-congratulatory at not being 'poetry with a capital P,' as he once put it" (39).

Despite their sense of Auden's increasing conservatism and the divergence between his aesthetic and their own penchant for playful, disjunctive experimentation, the New York School poets never relinquished their passionate devotion to Auden's work. In a late interview (1965), O'Hara reflects on his deep and long-lasting admiration for Auden's work:

we all got stuck on Auden and MacNeice in a way ... They really captured us, and, as a matter of fact - like last year, for

instance - I was giving a few readings. And finally I was so tired of reading my own work, I read all Auden's things and some MacNeice and, let's see, one poem of Wallace Stevens. But I found that when I read *The Orators*, which I read the whole of the book because it's been out of print for some time and Auden has repudiated some of the poems and everything, and as a work, however, it goes streaming along like the most marvelous thing imaginable. And I think it was also the most satisfying reading I ever gave of anything. You know, much better than my own work. (*Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen; Bolinas, CA: Grey Fox, 1975, p. 24).

O'Hara goes on to stress the impact of *The Orators* in particular on contemporary American poetry: "even the structure of it, as a book, has had an enormous influence on American writing ... the sheer flippancy and sarcasm and accurate satire is very important." Asked whether he is unhappy with Auden's later work, O'Hara seems to hedge, and then responds "As a matter of fact, he's such a great master that it's very moving - even to have him in operation in the same time that you live is thrilling. And besides, of course, it depends on what you really love. Now, for instance, in 'In Praise of Limestone,' he's going along and then he says, 'Green places inviting you to sit.' That's worth a whole career to have a line like that." What he admires most in Auden at this point is "a certain dashing, Byronic" quality, a sense that "you're sort of galloping into the midst of a subject and just learning about you, you know. You're not afraid to think about anything and you're not afraid of being stupid and you're not afraid of being sentimental. You just sort of gallop right in and deal with it" (*Standing Still* 25). The importance of Auden to O'Hara's own poetry is evident in the proximity between this view of Auden's aesthetic and O'Hara's famous declaration in "Personism" that in poetry "you just go on your nerve."

Auden, and his difficult, hybrid books like *The Orators* and *For the Time Being*, clearly had a greater impact on experimental poets of the 1950s and 1960s than is often recognized. Indeed, with his remarkably varied oeuvre, we should not be surprised that Auden's legacy is large and contains multitudes. Among the many postwar writers indebted to Auden, the New York School poets should be recognized as some of the most significant of those who were nudged, if not hurt, into poetry by Auden's work. O'Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler, and Koch

found inspiration in Auden's earlier work for an experimental American poetry founded upon demotic language and ceaseless formal invention, a love of artifice, an attentiveness to the quotidian and mundane, a poetry of velocity and elision, ironic wit and lightly-worn learning. For O'Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler, the lionized elder poet served as a gay role model of sorts in a time of rampant, Cold War homophobia. And for all of them, he was, thrillingly enough, a living, breathing embodiment of modernist poetry, an actual person who might evaluate one's poems or with whom one could chat over drinks. In his elegy "Wystan Auden," James Schuyler struggled to memorialize this complicated man and poet who had been so important to himself and to his New York School companions:

So much
to remember, so little to
say: that he liked martinis
and was greedy about the wine?
I always thought he would live
to a great age. He did not.
Wystan, kind man and great poet,
goodbye.

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Polish Auden

Auden argued that "the only political duty [for a writer] . . . in all countries and at all times . . . is a duty to translate the fiction and poetry of other countries so as to make them available to readers."¹ Translation involves the introduction to a new type of sensibility, rhetoric, and style, but more importantly, as Auden insists, it enriches any language. Though the poet would no doubt sacrifice mistaken translations for availability, a brief comment on Auden's difficult

¹ Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden*, 406.