Wrestling with Angels:
T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and the Idea of a Christian Poetics

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the impact of religious conversion on the later works of Eliot and Auden, and the manner in which they responded to each other as they developed a Christian poetics. Following an introduction which discusses the nature of their relationship as well as their basic theological positions, Chapter One examines their postconversion criticism, and particularly their stance on what is typically formulated as "the problem of belief in poetry," which focuses on how ideology influences a work's creation and reception. Chapter Two considers their transitional poetry, wherein their new religious beliefs figure prominently and their anxiety over the potential conflict between artistic and spiritual values is most acute. Chapter Three looks at their major postconversion poems and specifically at how Eliot's and Auden's understanding of the Incarnation informs their views on time, history, language, and literature, as embodied by these works. Chapter Four centers on their drama, initially comparing their early plays-- written when Eliot was a Christian but Auden was not-- to show how they employed similar techniques to further different ends, before turning to an examination of Eliot's later verse plays and Auden's libretti. I investigate the ideological motivation behind the adoption of these different dramatic forms, as well as the specific ways in which they affect how belief is conveyed. Throughout the dissertation, the effects of Eliot's and Auden's conversion upon their reputations and the difficulties facing modern Christian artists in general are given particular consideration.

Résumé

Cette thèse est consacrée à l'impact de la conversion religieuse sur les œuvres tardives d'Eliot et Auden et à la façon dont ils se sont répondus à travers l'élaboration d'une poétique chrétienne. L'introduction décrit la nature de leur relation ainsi que les fondements de leurs opinions théologiques ; le premier chapitre aborde ensuite le discours critique d'après leur conversion, et en particulier leur position sur ce qu'ils formulent par « le problème de la conviction en poésie », qui explore la manière dont l'idéologie influence la création et la réception d'une œuvre. Le chapitre deux envisage la poésie de cette période de transition, au cours de laquelle leurs nouvelles convictions religieuses figurent au premier plan et leur angoisse du conflit potentiel entre les valeurs artistiques et spirituelles est la plus aiguë. Les poèmes majeurs d'après leur conversion font l'objet du troisième chapitre, qui examine spécifiquement comment leur manière de comprendre l'Incarnation informe leurs visions du temps, de l'histoire, du langage et de la littérature, telles qu'incarnées par ces œuvres. Le chapitre quatre est dédié à leur théâtre : il compare tout d'abord leurs pièces de jeunesse (écrites alors que Eliot Auden était chrétien mais non Auden) afin de montrer comment leur emploi de techniques similaires leur a servi à des fins différentes ; puis il procède à un examen des pièces en vers écrites ensuite par Eliot et des livrets de Auden. J'y analyse la motivation idéologique qui est à la source du choix de ces différentes formes dramatiques, ainsi que les moyens particuliers qu'elles mettent en œuvre pour transmettre cette conviction. Tout au long de la thèse, une attention particulière est accordée aux effets que la conversion religieuse d'Eliot et Auden ont eu sur leur réputation, ainsi qu'aux difficultés que rencontrent les artistes chrétiens de la modernité.

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Introduction

When W. H. Auden converted to Christianity in 1940, "his first clear statement of his new beliefs, outside his circle of intimates, was in a letter to T. S. Eliot": "I think a lot about you and whether you are safe, the more so because, thanks to Charles Williams and Kierkegaard, I have come to pretty much the same position as yourself, which I was brought up in anyway. (Please don't tell anyone about this)" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 158-59). Eliot was similarly reluctant to publicize his conversion when he joined the Anglican Church over a decade earlier, in 1927. As his biographer Peter Ackroyd notes, Eliot's baptism was, like "so many of the major events of his life, performed in great secrecy. The front doors of the church were locked, and a verger was posted on guard at the vestry . . ." (162). For both writers, however, this initial period of reticence quickly passed. At the urging of Irving Babbitt "to come out into the open" (Eliot *TCTC* 14), Eliot declared in the Preface to *For Lancelot Andrewes* (1928) that he was "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion" (7). Likewise, Auden started to express his convictions in his work "with the aggressive certainty of a new convert" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 159). Orthodox Christian theology began to dominate their writing, and remained of utmost importance throughout their careers. This dissertation examines the effects of these religious beliefs on the post-conversion prose, poetry, and drama of Eliot and Auden.

Many critics seem to assume that neither poet struggled to determine the place of religion in his work or in literature in general. They cite, for example, Eliot's claim that "[t]he poet makes poetry, the metaphysician makes metaphysics, the bee makes honey"

(*SE* 138) and Auden's declaration, "Culture is one of Caesar's things," that is, firmly entrenched in the secular realm (*DH* 458). Both poets realized, however, that the spheres of religion and literature are not as discrete as these statements might suggest, and that "no art, and particularly and especially no literary art, can exist in a vacuum" (Eliot "Poetry and Propaganda" 31). In my study of how these two spheres overlap in their own critical and creative works, I argue:

(1) Eliot and Auden had considerable difficulty in defining their roles as Christian poets and finding the proper place for religion in their work. They looked to one another as they began to develop a viable modern Christian poetics, Auden in particular bearing the marks of Eliot's influence. In their prose, they articulate strikingly similar positions regarding the ways in which religion and literature impinge upon one another, and both betray a fear that spiritual and artistic values may be, in some respects, incompatible.

(2) Their anxiety regarding the potential conflict between their religious beliefs and their artistic vocation is particularly evident in the poetry written immediately following their conversions. Moreover, although neither poet claims or aspires to be a Christian apologist, in these poems their new religious convictions are forcefully expressed in the hope that they might exercise a degree of spiritual influence. Their major postconversion poetry tends to be less strident than these transitional works, but nevertheless also asserts the truth-claims of Christianity, specifically by emphasizing the relevance of the doctrine of the Incarnation to modern readers.

(3) Eliot may uphold "*un*consciously Christian literature" (*SE* 392) as his ideal, but Auden is ultimately more successful in preventing his religious beliefs from dominating his work, as particularly revealed in their drama.

This thesis is the first in-depth examination of the relation of religion and literature in the later works of both Eliot and Auden and of the ways in which the two poets respond to each other in their postconversion careers. Such a study is unprecedented primarily because their later works, and the treatment of theology within these works, tend to receive less critical attention than their earlier productions. In fact, this neglect stems in part from the extraordinary success of their early poems, which led them both to be hailed as the voices of their respective generations. Auden describes the kind of frustration which both he and Eliot experienced as a result of their initial reception:

> The work of a young writer . . . is sometimes a therapeutic act. He finds himself obsessed by certain ways of feeling and thinking of which his instinct tells him he must be rid before he can discover his authentic interests and sympathies, and the only way by which he can be rid of them forever is by surrendering to them. Once he has done this, he has developed the necessary antibodies which will make him immune for the rest of his life. As a rule, the disease is some spiritual malaise of his generation. If so, he may . . . find himself in an embarrassing situation. What he wrote in order to exorcise certain feelings is enthusiastically welcomed by his contemporaries because it expresses just what they feel but, unlike him, they are perfectly happy to feel in this way; for the moment they regard him as their spokesman. Time passes. Having gotten the poison out of his system, the writer turns to his true interests which are not, and never were, those of his early admirers, who now pursue him with cries of 'Traitor!' (*DH* 18-19)

One might assume that enthusiasm for the early poems would create a receptive audience for whatever followed, but they can evoke such a passionate response that readers may become impatient or even angry with any further developments, as seen in the responses to Eliot and Auden. They *were* both denounced as traitors when they began to explore new poetic avenues, and critics still routinely claim that their careers went into decline as a result. In a 1931 essay, "Thoughts after Lambeth," Eliot remarked, "when I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the 'disillusionment of a generation,'" a notion which he calls "nonsense" (*SE* 368). By 1928, however, only six years after the publication of *The Waste Land*, he was already being condemned by some critics as, "if not a lost leader, at least a lost sheep; what is more, I was a kind of traitor . . ." (*SE* 368). An anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement*, for example, wrote "what I can only describe as a flattering obituary notice. In words of great seriousness and manifest sincerity, he pointed out that I had suddenly arrested my progress-- whither he had supposed me to be moving I do not know-- and that to his distress I was unmistakably making off in the wrong direction" (*SE* 368). Readers since have frequently described Eliot's later work as only the tired output of an aging and increasingly reactionary poet. Therefore, although he remained a towering figure in the literary scene during and after his lifetime, helped in part by his influential position with Faber, his reputation is largely sustained by the early poems and essays to which the later works-- *Four Quartets* sometimes, but certainly not always, excepted-- are unfavorably compared.

Although it did not achieve quite the totemic status of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Auden's poetry of the late 1920s and the 1930s was seized upon as emblematic of a

major new movement in literature. He became the center of the so-called "Auden Group," comprised of writers like Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day-Lewis, and Louis MacNeice, which was praised for reinvigorating literature by engaging with contemporary politics and developing a new poetic idiom. From the 1940s onwards, however, Auden was frequently dismissed by former admirers as no longer important or relevant, the view propounded by two of his most influential critics, Randall Jarrell and Philip Larkin. In "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry" (1941), Jarrell complained that Auden's later poems, starting from "New Year Letter" (1940), had become overly accessible and dealt in too many abstractions. Larkin's famous 1960 essay "What's Become of Wystan?" discounts all of Auden's later poetry, noting "how little the last twenty years have added to Auden's reputation": "The appearance of his latest collection, *Homage to Clio*, marks the end of the third decade of Auden's poetic life and does not alter the fact that almost all we value is still confined to its first ten years" (123). In "What Really Became of Wystan?: Auden, Niebuhr, and *For the Time Being*" (1995), Brian Conniff declares that thanks in part to Larkin's criticism, "This notion of a declining Auden would become a critical commonplace by the last decade of Auden's life, finally reaching the level of absurdity in the past few years" (134). English critics were especially prone to denigrate Auden's later poetry because of their anger over his decision to emigrate to America in 1939, leaving his country in a time of crisis: "[T]o the extent that his later work could be seen as a decline, it would be viewed as some sort of punishment for his unforgivable act of betrayal" (Conniff "Answering Herod" 299). Anthony Hecht relates that during World War II "large segments of the British public had written him off as no longer of any consequence" (*Hidden Law* 326). More generally,

critics have claimed that the relocation was harmful because they believe that after he left his native land his inspiration dried up. According to Larkin, when war broke out and Auden went to America, "he lost his key subject and emotion-- Europe and the fear of war-- and abandoned his audience together with their common dialect and concerns. For a different poet this might have been less important. For Auden it seems to have been irreparable" (125). Larkin claims his progress was consequently retarded because with this move he "had elected to remake his entire poetic equipment" (126). While Auden did reinvent himself after his emigration, these changes did not have the fatal effect upon his poetry that Larkin describes. Nevertheless, the view that he "had been in a steady and discernible decline as a poet ever since he went to America . . . gradually became the accepted or even standard view of Auden, and it has largely remained so, despite the fact that it does not fit the evidence" (Carpenter 420). In a review from 2000, Michael Hennessy remarked that in spite of recent studies that seek to rehabilitate the later Auden-- by, for example, Hecht, Lucy McDiarmid, and, most notably, Edward Mendelson, Auden's literary executor and leading scholar-- the "widely held perception that Auden's powers as a poet declined" after the 1930s "is remarkably tenacious" (564).

Although critics may cite Auden's stylistic changes or the supposedly damaging effects of his emigration to explain their disappointment in his later career-- and some readers no doubt dislike the poetry solely for such reasons-- there is often another underlying factor motivating their rejection of this once favored poet. In fact, the *primary* cause of both Auden's and Eliot's fall from grace was their acceptance of Christianity. It is not a coincidence that critics from the beginning have traditionally marked the period around their conversions as the turning-point in their careers. Eliot

was attacked for his new beliefs as soon as he acknowledged being "classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and anglo-catholic in religion." Edmund Wilson, for example, expressed "regret" over "the unpromising character of the ideals and institutions which he invokes" (*Axel's Castle* 126). Similarly, the *TLS* reviewer who was convinced that Eliot "was making off in the wrong direction" was dismayed chiefly by the poet's avowals of orthodox Christianity: "[I]t is our view that by accepting a higher spiritual authority based . . . upon the anterior and exterior authority of revealed religion, he has abdicated from his high position. Specifically he rejects modernism for medievalism" (953). Many of Eliot's friends and acquaintances were also perturbed by his conversion. For example, Ezra Pound rebuked him for taking religion seriously when "[t]he fact is that 'religion' long since resigned" ("Mare's Nest" [1934] 30), and Virginia Woolf, in a theatrical letter that nevertheless reveals her real disdain for Eliot's new beliefs, declared to her sister:

> I have had a most shameful and distressing interview with poor dear Tom Eliot, who may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God. (qted. in Timmerman 41)

More recent readers have similarly dismissed the later Eliot because they claim that the Christianity informing his poetry makes it irrelevant to a modern secular world. Harold Bloom, for instance, claims that Eliot was already out of date during his lifetime-- "To have been born in 1888, and to have died in 1965, is to have flourished in the Age of

Freud, hardly a time when Anglo-Catholic theology, social thought, and morality were central to the main movement of mind"-- and that the passage of time has only made his positions seem more "unreal" ("Eliot" 74). In accounts of Eliot's later career, "his conversion has been the object of such intemperate comment" that Denis Donoghue states, "I do not understand why Eliot's becoming a Christian attracts more aggressive comment than any other poet's agnosticism. If it could be shown that his conversion resulted in the impoverishment of his poetry, that would be a different matter, but I don't see that any such consequence has been shown" ("Communication" 55). As Donoghue implies, some readers adopt a condescending and often contemptuous attitude towards the later work not because of its particular qualities but because of a prejudice against Christianity in general.[1]

Fascinatingly, Auden's early rise was due in part to this disappointment and anger over Eliot's conversion. Although Eliot himself championed Auden, some critics promoted him in the hopes that he would displace the older poet. Certainly by 1939, "With Yeats dead and Eliot in early retirement (both of them political reactionaries, in any case)"-- as such critics argued-- "would-be king-makers looked to Auden as a likely successor, a poetic leader who might wave the anti-flags of his generation and create a new idiom for British verse" (Ohmann 172). The push to dethrone Eliot in this way was largely motivated by his religious as well as political affiliations. In "'The Prophets': Auden on Yeats and Eliot," Anne Margaret Daniel is right to suggest that in William Empson's case, for example, "Enthusiasm for Auden . . . might have been combined with skepticism over the Christian Eliot" (33). The editor of *New Verse*, Geoffrey Grigson,

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[1] Elsewhere, Donoghue makes this point explicitly, asserting that Eliot's low standing in academic circles is a direct result of his religious beliefs: "He was, after 1927, a Christian, and the animus against Christianity is rampant and vicious in our profession" ("A Response to Ronald Schuchard" 39).

also seemed to praise Auden at least in part to denigrate Eliot. In the "Auden Double Number" in 1937, for example, he declared, "We salute in Auden . . . the first English poet for many years who is a poet all the way round," whereas "[t]here are angles from which Mr. Eliot seems a ghost" (1). Unlike Eliot, Auden "live[s] in a new day," and Grigson praises him for being "revolutionary" (1). A few issues later, he even commissioned Charles Madge to write "an obituary for T. S. Eliot," called "In Memoriam T. S. E" (Madge 18).[2] Scott R. Christianson, in "The Poetics and Politics of Eliot's Influence on W. H. Auden," explains that "from his advent Auden was considered the leader of a 'new generation,' in the phrase coined by Naomi Mitchison in 1932; critics and reviewers first expressed hope and then insisted that Auden would approach, equal, or surpass Eliot's achievement" (103). The two poets were often presented as diametrically opposed in every respect, even though Auden himself acknowledged his indebtedness to Eliot.[3] Christianson points out, however, that critics have traditionally "minimized those features of Auden's poetry which resemble Eliot's in ways that got Auden's poetry recognized as 'the right kind,'" including ideologically-speaking, "in a context defined by Eliot's dominance" (108). Critics who were distinguishing between Auden's and Eliot's poetry thus no doubt assumed that Auden shared their animosity towards the older poet, because their mindsets seemed so dissimilar and because of the seemingly dismissive reference to Eliot in *The Orators* (1931): "Where is Eliot?

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[2] Although Madge claims to admire Eliot, after considering "seriously whether Mr. Eliot . . . could properly be regarded as dead," as Grigson contends, "it seemed to me that though neither spiritually nor physically dead, yet his relation to the world of letters and to the public was such that the *obituary* was in fact a proper form in which to discuss him" (18). Madge comes to this conclusion because of Eliot's supposedly outmoded "political and religious views," which resemble those of Dryden, a Catholic convert, "to such an untimely extent" (18).

[3] For example, he revealed that "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" had showed him how to solve "the problem of diction and imagery, of how to integrate the traditional 'poetic' properties with the properties of contemporary industrial civilization" (*CR* 226-27), the kind of integration which came to characterize much of his early verse.

Dreaming of nuns" (*EA* 105).[4] Not surprisingly, therefore, many of those critics who had supported Auden at least partially because of his ideological differences from Eliot were taken aback when he chose to convert to Christianity as well.

Speaking of those critics who had held up Auden as the hope of the future, the political poet who would topple Eliot once and for all from his high position, Richard T. Ohmann remarked, "No wonder . . . that some threw eggs at the monument when, in the early stages of war . . . Auden left England for America, began declaring that the artist had no stake in politics or causes, and (culminating betrayal) became a Christian" (172). Since his conversion occurred shortly after his emigration, the claims that the English Auden is superior to the American Auden sometimes have nothing to do with nationalism or the perceived deleterious effects of expatriation; Some readers actually mean that they prefer the secular Auden to the Christian Auden, or at least that both his expatriation and conversion had a negative impact on his career. As Arthur Kirsch states, "the American Auden is emphatically a Christian Auden," which, he suggests, is an "often unacknowledged . . . reason for the depreciation of the achievement of his later poetry" (170). For example, Larkin's contempt for the later work was motivated by Auden's national *and* ideological change in allegiance. Although "Auden works hard to reinvigorate the Christian myth as a poetic subject," Larkin implies that such an attempt is doomed to fail because Christianity is no longer relevant in the modern world (126). For critics like Larkin, Auden lost all importance after taking "the journey to Canterbury

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[4] This passage, like much of *The Orators*, is heavily ironic, however. Although Auden writes that for those like Eliot or "Robert and Laura spooning in Spain," that is, Robert Graves and Laura Riding, "Their day is over" (*EA* 105), he didn't subscribe to that view himself. For example, Auden consistently praised Graves for his artistic ability and "strength of character" (*CR* 256). In a 1961 review, Auden revealed, "I first came across Robert Graves's poems . . . when I was a schoolboy, and ever since he has been one of the very few poets whose volumes I have always bought the moment they appeared" (*CR* 256). For Auden, Eliot's day wasn't "over" either, and despite their conflicting views, he never felt that he and Eliot were enemies, as some critics tried to represent them.

via America" (Ohmann 173). Similarly, readers who may seem to reject Auden's later work solely because of its stylistic changes are frequently reacting to its Christian dimension as well. Although Jarrell may give the impression in "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry" (1941) that his complaints about the later Auden are purely formal in nature, like Larkin, he was also repelled by the poet's new convictions. As the noted Auden scholar Monroe K. Spears reveals in "Auden Twenty Years After: A Question of Poetic Justice" (1994), the "hostile pieces of Jarrell's, which still do great damage to Auden's reputation," betray an "extraliterary animus in Jarrell's disapproval of Auden's changing political and religious stance . . ." (479).[5] In fact, Jarrell's well-known essay "Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden's Ideology" (1945) is a lengthy tirade against Auden's Christianity. For example, he claims that the tenor of Auden's latest works can best be suggested by such phrases as "*Grace Abounding*" or "*Waiting for the Spark from Heaven to Fall*" (440). He denigrates Auden's new "Christian optimism" (441) and his "overweening humility which is the badge of all his saints" (451). Therefore, as Conniff explains, the anti-Christian bias of critics like Larkin and Jarrell is largely responsible for their dismissal of Auden's postconversion poetry, poetry which developed "through a rich and sometimes idiosyncratic encounter with modern theology": "The enormous gap between the critical reception of Auden's later work, on the one hand, and his poetic accomplishments of this period, on the other, is primarily the result of a refusal on the part of his most influential readers to take this encounter seriously" ("Answering Herod" 304). An aversion to Christianity thus played a significant role in the rejection of Auden's *and* Eliot's later works, even when other factors are cited as well.

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[5] Spears states that there is also an "oedipal element in Jarrell's violent rejection of Auden as literary father-figure" ("Poetic Justice" 479), which the poet himself detected. After reading a harsh review, Auden remarked, "Randall Jarrell is really just trying to flout Papa" (qted. in Sansom 278).

Even those readers who prefer the early works, for ideological or other reasons, cannot afford to ignore the later works if they hope to gain an adequate understanding of either poet. The later productions are not the dull remnants of once vibrant talents, nor are they an insignificant proportion of the poets' oeuvres. In fact, for both writers the early poems span approximately a decade, whereas the later poems stretch over three decades.[6] Therefore, a proper appreciation of their careers as a whole *and* of the early poems themselves depends upon an awareness of these later works. In a 1953 review of Eliot's *Collected Poems*, "T. S. Eliot So Far," Auden complains of the "habit of labeling a collection of past work by a still living writer as the collected . . . or 'complete,'" as in the present instance, because,

> Apart from the misrepresentation, such titles encourage the tendency of most readers to forget that no judgment about a contemporary work can be more than tentative. The more important the writer, the more his separate productions are, like the movements of a symphony, subordinate parts of his whole 'oeuvre' and cannot be seen in proper perspective until that is complete . . . (*CR* 225).

When the work *is* complete, one should be able to trace the ways in which it forms a "consistent *oeuvre*" (*DH* 21), and thus examine how one poem may comment upon or evolve from another, and how certain thematic concerns alter over the course of a poet's career. Eliot even claims that the presence of these unifying aspects in a body of work is the hallmark of a "major" poet. In "What is Minor Poetry" (1957), he states that a small

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[6] For this reason, it might be more appropriate to divide the postconversion period for both poets into a "middle" and "late" period, even given that their last years, especially Eliot's, were not terribly productive. There would no doubt be resistance to this idea, however, since a writer's middle period is often taken as the peak of his career, when he is a mature artist creating his most significant work. Since many critics value the early productions of Eliot and Auden most highly, they would be loath to give the impression that the postconversion work marks the summit of their careers. Although it challenges the common assumptions about the postconversion period of both poets, this dissertation will conform to the traditional manner in which their careers are divided, into "early" and "late," for the sake of clarity.

selection from a "minor" poet may be anthologized without the reader's understanding being greatly impaired, but such a procedure is not recommended for the work of a "major" poet because "a knowledge of the whole, or at least a very large part, of a poet's work . . . makes one understand better . . . any one of his poems" (*OPP* 49-50). Readers familiar with only the early poetry might not realize the extent to which Eliot's imagery of the garden or Auden's treatment of mountains as sites of trials, for example, are a part of their poetic vocabulary, not the incidental effects of any one particular work. So studying their entire oeuvre helps to highlight which images and ideas are of particular importance to the poets. Moreover, the various ways in which these common elements are used throughout their careers allows one to follow their development and to appreciate the often dramatic nature of the alterations they undergo, as when their changes in belief lead them to turn an image from an early poem to the opposite effect in a later poem. So it is essential to know the early *and* later works of Eliot and Auden thoroughly in order to understand either period and to grasp the shape of their careers as a whole.

Since Eliot and Auden are recognized as important poets, no period of their career suffers the extreme neglect that might attend that of less well known writers. Their later works are treated in critical studies, of course, although often less extensively and enthusiastically than the early works. When the later work is discussed, however, the Christian theology at its centre is frequently treated in too cursory a manner, which is not surprising given that a main reason for the work's neglect is its religious content. Even those scholars who are not antagonistic to Christianity tend not to examine the beliefs

expressed in the poetry in a penetrating way, however, because the field of religion and literature is not given a high priority within the academy. As F. W. Dillistone explains:

> Traditionally religion and philosophy have interacted fruitfully so that the philosophy of religion has been regarded as a respectable discipline. This has not, however, been the case with theology and literature. In general it has been assumed that each should have its own subject matter and methodology and that there should be no straying from one department into the other. (1)

One reason this ground has been left relatively untilled is that many modern intellectuals are uninterested in religion, if not actually disdainful of it, a fact which both Eliot and Auden lament. Eliot insisted, for instance, that "we must treat Christianity with a great deal more intellectual respect than is our wont . . ." (*Christianity* 6), and Auden, writing in 1941, complained that for "Cultured people . . . theological terms were far more shocking than any of the four-letter words" (*Prose II* 131). Although Auden hoped that the situation was improving and that the intelligentsia "may even overcome this final prudery" (*Prose II* 131), it has since worsened. Readings that probed the relation of religion and literature were once somewhat more common, but, as John Timmerman explains in his 1994 book *T. S. Eliot's Ariel Poems: The Poetics of Recovery*, "Religion in general and Christianity in particular have been eschewed by critical methodologies of the last two decades" (25). Such a state of affairs is deeply regrettable since an understanding of Eliot's and Auden's postconversion careers-- essential for any understanding of their oeuvre as a whole-- depends upon an awareness of the theology that influenced the writers so profoundly.

There are some critics who do focus on the effects of their religious convictions on their work, however. Besides an early study by Kristian Smidt, *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot* (1961), which examines the different kinds of belief, broadly defined, exhibited in the early and late poetry, and Timmerman's own work, which centers largely on the religious dimension of the transitional poems, John Xiros Cooper examines elements of Eliot's philosophy in *T. S. Eliot and the Ideology of Four Quartets*. While he makes many valuable observations about Eliot's religious beliefs, however, Cooper is actually most concerned with situating him sociologically and politically, not theologically. In fact, there are no book-length studies devoted solely to Eliot's theology which provide in-depth readings of all of the poetry and drama of his postconversion period.

Nevertheless, scholars do tend to treat Eliot's religious beliefs more extensively and respectfully than Auden's. One reason for this discrepancy is that Eliot traditionally has been more attractive to Christian scholars, who are often best equipped to deal with the theological concepts embodied by literature. In describing Auden's fall in reputation, Ohmann states, "Oddly enough, when Auden was dropped by the enthusiasts of the radical thirties, no band of conservative, metaphysical critics stepped forth to adopt him" (173). Alan Jacobs also remarks upon the phenomenon in a 2001 article, noting that "the many readers who have rejoiced in the work of Auden's fellow British Christians, the Inklings-- Lewis, Tolkien, Charles Williams, and (peripheral to their circle) Dorothy Sayers-- have paid little attention to this remarkable man or the extraordinary work that emerged from his embrace of the Christian faith" ("Limits of Poetry" 26). "Why are Christians so indifferent to Auden? . . . It is certainly true that Auden is not nearly as

accessible a writer as Lewis, Tolkien, Sayers or Charles Williams. Neither, however, is T. S. Eliot," but many Christians still study Eliot, "while Auden is almost completely neglected" (30). According to Jacobs, "The first problem is an obvious one: throughout Auden's life he was a practicing homosexual," and "the mere fact that he was homosexual has written him off the books of many Christians . . ." (30). It's unlikely that Auden's sexuality is the main reason for this neglect, however. Rather, Christian critics tend to be conservative in general and prefer conservative writers, like Eliot. Although Auden received many honors during his lifetime and was the prestigious Professor of Poetry at Oxford during the 1950s, he was never considered an establishment figure like Eliot because of his liberal politics and unconventional lifestyle. Also, those Christian readers not already well-acquainted with Auden's later career might not realize the extent to which his conversion affected his work, since anthologies, for example, tend to represent Auden primarily as the eternal political poet of his youth.[7] Despite this relative neglect on the part of many Christians, Auden's beliefs certainly aren't completely overlooked in accounts of his later career. Jacobs praises Mendelson, for example, for his "brilliant and sympathetic analysis" of Auden's Christian works (30). Mendelson often deals with Auden's religious beliefs in great detail, in *Later Auden* (1999) and elsewhere, but they are not his sole concern. His considerable scholarship is directed towards all aspects of Auden's career. A recently published book by Kirsch does devote

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[7] As Hennessy reveals, "anthologists continue to treat Auden largely as a poet of the 1930s":

> The venerable *Norton Anthology of English Literature*-- both the 1974 edition . . . and the 2000 edition-- concludes that while Auden is 'one of the masters of twentieth-century English poetry,' he is 'an uneven poet . . . who in the opinion of some critics never quite fulfilled the enormous promise of his early work.' Both *Norton* editions include only three post-1939 poems, none of them written after 1952, leaving nearly twenty years of Auden's career unrepresented. The recently published *Longman Anthology of British Literature* (1999) gives even sparser coverage of the later Auden-- a single poem written in 1948. (565)

He also relates that the collection of Auden's love poetry in the 1994 volume *Tell Me the Truth about Love* "consists solely of work written in the 1930s" (565).

itself to the poet's beliefs, as the title indicates, *Auden and Christianity* (2005). Kirsch's study isn't entirely satisfactory, however, because while much of what he says is accurate he doesn't always focus on the most essential elements in Auden's Christian thought, as shown, for example, in his chapter on Auden's criticism.[8] Nonetheless, Kirsch's work is still useful in many respects, not least because it may spur other critics to look more closely at Auden's postconversion career. Only when more critics deal with the Christianity in Auden's and Eliot's work in at length, without oversimplifying their theological positions, will these works receive the attention they require. As Eliot said in a 1933 essay, it is unlikely that one can "judge and enjoy a man's poetry while leaving wholly out of account all of the things for which he cared deeply, and on behalf of which he turned his poetry to account" (*UPUC* 87).

Some critics don't grapple with the poets' beliefs adequately because they don't acknowledge, despite all the evidence to the contrary, the profound ideological change which their conversions signaled. For example, T. S. Matthews insists that "'conversion' is too loud a word for Eliot's reception into the church. He was merely re-entering the house where he had been born and brought up" (qtd. in Timmerman 42). Timmerman correctly asserts that Matthews "seems to miss entirely the thoroughly radical nature of Eliot's religious affiliation with orthodox Christianity," and that the poet actually "turned (*conversio*) in an entirely new direction" (42). In reality, Eliot didn't even regard the Unitarianism of his childhood *as* a religion and he certainly did not return to it. He was

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[8] Kirsch divides the chapter on Auden's criticism into four sections: "Classical Literature and Culture," "Romantic Love," "Shakespeare" and "Cervantes and Herman Melville." He doesn't misrepresent Auden's opinions on these topics, but by choosing to focus so narrowly on them he overlooks some crucial concepts in Auden's criticism, such as his views on the problem of belief in poetry. Auden's attitude towards love *was* central to his Christianity, but the other subjects Kirsch explores tend to be peripheral to the main line of his thought.

repulsed by its rejection of external authority and such orthodox Christian tenets as the doctrine of the Trinity, concepts which were essential to the Anglicanism he embraced. Other critics who underestimate the significance of his conversion argue that he was always an inchoate Christian, and it was by a gradual and inevitable process that the Eliot of *The Waste Land* became the Eliot of *Ash-Wednesday*. There is undoubtedly some continuity in his thought-- as seen, for example, in his insistence on the need for external authority-- but the critics who make such a claim don't take into account the true nature of his earlier beliefs. Although Eliot showed some interest in Buddhism and other Eastern religions while a student, he was essentially a materialist (Menand 101). As Eloise Knapp Hay relates, "[H]e had said, 'I cannot see my way to the admission that reality is spiritual,' and this point of view is sustained by everything that Eliot wrote before 1925" ("Conversion" 8). Louis Menand explains:

> [T]he presumption that everything in his career should be read backwards from his Catholicism, a presumption that has always informed much Eliot criticism, is unfair to him . . . because the conversion was nothing so comfortable as the full acceptance of the principles inherent in his earlier writings; it was, in the beginning especially, a severe self-discipline, and it would not have meant as much to Eliot as it did if it had not entailed a renunciation of (among much else) his former intellectual beliefs. (96)

Eliot himself acknowledged the drastic nature of his conversion. After making his first confessions, he wrote to Stead, "I . . . feel as if I had crossed a very wide and deep river: whether I get much farther or not, I feel very certain that I shall not cross back, and that in itself gives one a very extraordinary sense of surrender and gain" (qted. in Schuchard

152). Eliot's sense that a gulf separated him from his old life and convictions is supported by the shocked reactions of most of his contemporaries, who clearly didn't view his turn to Christianity as an inevitable development.

Because Auden was raised in the Anglican Church and returned to it as an adult, critics are even more likely to underestimate the change his conversion wrought in his life and work. Samuel Hynes, for instance, claims that he didn't convert at all but "simply chose to renew an interrupted religious commitment" (44). Similarly, Kirsch describes "the lapse in his interest in religion" as though it were a temporary and insignificant event in Auden's life (6). However, as Auden relates (speaking of himself in the third person), "he discover[ed] that he ha[d] lost his faith" when he was only fourteen years old (*FA* 517). Although he grew up in a religious household, the extent to which he really believed in Christianity as an adolescent is even questionable, since, as Carpenter explains, "[h]e began to suspect that the devout phase he had been going through was really a case of pseudo-devotion" (27), inspired by such things as his attraction to ecclesiastical ritual. At any rate, Auden was without faith for his entire adult life until he entered the Church in 1940. Although his early poetry and plays occasionally include elements which recall his religious background-- as in a series of poems obliquely inspired by the Easter season-- for the most part the work of this period, and his development as an artist in general, is clearly informed by agnosticism. As with Eliot, his acceptance of Christianity had a dramatic effect on his approach to poetry, in theory and practice; Auden evidently felt that the difference between his old and new convictions was pronounced enough that he could not continue to write in the same vein. So the Christian beliefs expressed in the later work of the two poets tend to be dismissed by

critics antagonistic to Christianity, overlooked or oversimplified because of a general lack of attention to the nexus of religion and literature in academic discourse, or misrepresented by those scholars who assume-- because they imagine the poets themselves changed little-- that these beliefs resemble their preconversion ideologies more closely than they actually do. This thesis distinguishes itself from most studies, therefore, by focusing on the poets' later works *and* on the beliefs which inform them, including the ways in which their theology evolves over the course of their postconversion careers.

Relative inattention to their later work, and particularly to its religious dimension, is detrimental not only because it hinders one's comprehension of each poet individually, but also because it prevents one from fully appreciating their relationship to each other. Following their conversions, they both applied themselves strenuously to the study of how religion and literature interact and set themselves the task of developing a Christian poetics that would be viable in a secular world. In the pursuit of this goal, carried out in their critical and creative works, they followed each other's progress closely, and consequently their formulations and practices bear some remarkable similarities and also some instructive contrasts to each other. Auden especially was influenced by Eliot, since the older poet, who had preceded him into the Church by over a decade, laid much of the foundation for their shared enterprise through his many essays which dealt extensively with religion and literature and through the example of his poetry and drama. The significant and prolonged manner in which Eliot and Auden, two of the most important poets of the twentieth century, responded to each other throughout their postconversion careers has been underexplored.

The studies that do include both Eliot and Auden are often helpful, but they either tend not to focus on the role of religion in their work, treat the poets more or less discretely, or don't discuss the work in enough detail.[9] The aforementioned articles about the two poets by Christianson and Daniel certainly make a number of interesting and important points, as does an excellent chapter of Peter McDonald's *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill*, which deals with the relationship of religion and literature in the work of both Eliot and Auden, as well as the influence of the former upon the latter. Their investigations are naturally limited, however; McDonald, for instance, focuses primarily on a comparison of Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*. Often Auden scholars provide the best accounts of the poets' interactions with each other's works, likely because it is generally acknowledged that Eliot cast a large shadow over the generation of poets that followed him and they feel compelled to make at least some gesture towards defining Auden's particular attitude towards him. For example, Mendelson, Spears, and Hecht quite frequently draw Eliot into their discussions of Auden, showing how he borrows from and contrasts to the older poet. On the other hand, Eliot specialists are more likely to compare their subject to his contemporaries like Pound or his immediate predecessor Yeats. There are some exceptions, of course, such as Cooper, who references Auden and the members of his circle throughout his discussion of Eliot's later career. Unfortunately, whether their principal focus is Eliot or

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[9] For example, religious belief is not the focus of Richard Ellmann's *Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Auden*, A. C. Partridge's *The Language of Modern Poetry: Yeats, Eliot, and Auden*, or Patrick Deane's *At Home in Time: Forms of Neo-Augustanism in Modern English Poetry*. These books also treat the two poets separately for the most part and in individual chapters. A. S. P. Woodhouse's *The Poet and His Faith: Religion and Poetry in England from Spenser to Eliot and Auden* and R. L. Brett's *Faith and Doubt: Religion and Secularization from Wordsworth to Larkin* address the Christian dimension of Eliot's and Auden's work, but given their scope only a short space is devoted to each poet. Also, Woodhouse and Brett only draw a connection between the two poets sporadically. Brett does compare Eliot and Auden in a few very illuminating passages, but his chapters actually pair them with other poets for the purposes of discussion, Eliot with Pound and Auden with Larkin.

Auden, certain critics who do compare the two concentrate solely on the interaction between Eliot and the *early* Auden, overlooking the ways in which their relationship changed when they came to share the same faith.

Some scholars don't treat the later Auden and Eliot together in detail because they assume that their most significant encounters occur early in Auden's career, particularly when he was a budding poet. Eliot's influence during this period was undoubtedly important, and his poetry made an extraordinary impression on the young Auden, as revealed in a well-known anecdote recounted by Neville Coghill, Auden's tutor at Oxford. Auden entered his office one day, declaring, "I have torn up all my poems . . . they were no good. Based on Wordsworth. No good nowadays" (82). He then told Coghill, "You ought to read Eliot. I've been reading Eliot. I now see the way I want to write . . ." (82). Following this revelation, Auden began to write poetry heavily derivative of Eliot's, as Mendelson relates: "For about a year he wrote almost exclusively in Eliot's driest and most satiric manner, constantly alert to the contemporary and grotesque" (*Early Auden* 29). Isherwood, writing in 1937, comically describes the often unhappy results:

> The discovery of *The Waste Land* marked a turning-point in his work-- for the better, certainly; though the earliest symptoms of Eliot-influence were most alarming. Like a patient who has received an over-powerful inoculation, Auden developed a severe attack of allusions, jargonitis and private jokes. He began to write lines like: '*Inexorable Rembrandt rays that stab . . .*' or '*Love mutual has reached its first eutectic . . .*' Nearly all the poems of that early Eliot period are now scrapped. (76)

Carpenter calls the poems of this period "pastiche-Eliot" and asserts that Auden "adopted not just Eliot's style but his whole attitude to poetry" (58-59). Auden came to decide that Eliot's style was too idiosyncratic to take as his own, however, and that "if one took him as a poetic model, one could only write Eliot-and-water," as he had done (qted. in Carpenter 58). Since this period of slavish imitation was short, Carpenter concludes that "Eliot's importance for Auden was . . . limited" (59). Christianson rightly takes issue with those critics like Carpenter who "have distorted the relation between Eliot and Auden" by contending that Auden was only truly influenced by Eliot during this early, regrettable phase (98). He acutely points out that when Carpenter discusses the effects of Thomas Hardy's work on Auden, for example, he doesn't narrowly "equate 'influence' with 'parody'" as he does in Eliot's case, but contends that Hardy's influence is detectable in more subtle ways (100). Similarly, Edward Callan claims that Auden borrows from Eliot in early poems like "Thomas Epilogises" but that he was only "attracted to him during his Oxford years" (144). While Isherwood implies that Eliot ultimately had a positive and long-lasting effect on Auden, many other readers assume like Carpenter and Callan that his influence is chiefly confined to the years when Auden was struggling to find his voice. As Christianson explains:

> Eliot's 'influence' was felt everywhere; his was a looming presence over contemporary literature and criticism in the 1920s and 1930s; and his presence set the terms for much of the critical reception and discussion of contemporary writing. Yet, at the same time, the discussion of that influence on particular poets-- and on Auden, especially-- relied upon a limited definition of Eliot's

> influence which . . . equated it with 'pallid imitation'-- with 'Eliot-and-water.' (103-4)

Auden ceased to write "Eliot-and-water," but he continued to take lessons from the older poet, even in the Thirties when their ideological differences were most pronounced.

The common conception that Auden, after maturing and finding his own style, dispensed with Eliot feeds into the notion that during the Thirties the two poets had very little in common, aesthetically or ideologically. A number of critics do challenge this view, however, and reveal some of the ways in which Eliot and Auden responded to each other during this period. In *The English Eliot*, for example, Steven Ellis complains of the "tendency among critics writing on the 1930s to displace Eliot from that decade, to ignore or obscure the connections between his work and that of the rising poetic generation," which arises because "the 'agèd eagle' is seen as sitting in reactionary and isolated splendour on one side of the fence while Auden and company pursue revolution and communism on the other" (141, 2). He devotes a chapter to the relation of Eliot and Auden in particular, making two important points: that "these two poets, who certainly watched each other's work very carefully, exercised a mutual influence" (142), and that Auden was influenced by the early *and* later Eliot. He even asserts that "[w]here his influence is admitted in the 1930s scene it is held to derive solely from the 'radical' early poetry" (2), but "we can indeed make the case that it is the later, more austere, more 'classic' Eliot . . . whose influence is most discernible on the young Auden" (143). While he may be right-- and Eliot's later verse undoubtedly exerted at least some influence on Auden during this period-- the evidence he marshals to support this and other claims isn't

as strong as one would like.[10] Also, Ellis's argument of mutual influence tends to be much too narrow in focus, as when he claims, "The major import to Eliot from Auden . . . was the abundant use of the definite article" (145). So while his efforts to link Eliot and Auden are laudable, in a sense this study is a missed opportunity. More satisfying are the sections which deal with the two poets in David Trotter's *The Making of the Reader* and especially Michael J. Sidnell's *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the Thirties*, which demonstrate how they borrowed techniques from one another in order to construct an audience and advance their different causes. Their shared strategies are particularly evident in their plays of the period, as will be discussed in Chapter Four. Cooper, in his treatment of Eliot's interactions with Auden's generation, notes that his "patient mentoring of many younger writers and thinkers," especially MacNeice, Spender, and Auden, is "known" but "not well known enough" (34, 202). However, in relating him to these younger, highly politicized writers, Cooper tends to underestimate Eliot's own involvement with the era's tumultuous events, and supposes him to be more complacent than he was. Lucy McDiarmid is more attuned to Eliot's anxiety during this period and the ways in which it resembled Auden's own. In the often insightful *Saving Civilization: Yeats, Eliot, and Auden Between the Wars*, she contends that all three poets were torn between their desire to "save civilization," which entails different things to each poet, and to remain artistically aloof, revealing that during the Thirties Eliot was not the disengaged artist some assume nor Auden the revolutionary firebrand. Of course, as

[10] For example, in his discussion of Auden's influence on Eliot, he suggests that Eliot "would have seen in the public-school and Oxford-educated Auden an authentic English voice, from which he could learn" (144-45). If Eliot did desire such a model of "Englishness," he would not have had to rely solely on Auden, and Ellis doesn't convincingly show that he did. The title is also significant in this respect. Since the book attempts in part to articulate Eliot's understanding and construction of "Englishness," Ellis explains, "[I]n giving the book its title I am deliberately gesturing to Mendelson's collection *The English Auden*, in exploring the relationship between two fundamentally and consciously opposed approaches to Englishness" (2).

in these other studies that focus primarily on the Thirties, McDiarmid only deals with the early Auden.[11] While these works are undoubtedly valuable and offer a welcome corrective to the commonly received images of Eliot and Auden during this period, they obviously do not address the radical ways in which their relationship changed following Auden's conversion, when, contrary to popular opinion, their most meaningful and sustained encounters with each other's critical and creative work began.

As Cooper and others acknowledge, Eliot nurtured the careers of a number of young writers, publishing them at Faber and in *The Criterion* and helping them however he could. He was particularly solicitous of Auden, in whom he saw great promise. As Auden's editor, he remarked to an acquaintance, "This fellow is about the best poet that I have discovered in several years," and, as Harry Levin relates, "his predictions for Auden's future virtually constituted a laying on of hands" (qted. in Carpenter 95, 137). "But from the beginning he worried privately about Auden's ethics," Cooper states, "wishing him rather 'less flashy' and in possession of 'more character,'" as Eliot admitted in a letter to Herbert Read (202). Eliot also told him, "I chiefly worry about Auden's ethical principles and convictions, not about his technical abilities" (qted. in Carpenter 137). When Auden became a Christian, Eliot's concerns on this point were alleviated to such a degree that he could remark to their mutual friend Ursula Niebuhr, "I think his spiritual development has outstripped his technical abilities" (qted. in U. Niebuhr 114). Always respectful of one another, the two poets drew much closer once the ideological wall dividing them had, to a considerable degree, collapsed. In the same

[11] Her later work, *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, does complement *Saving Civilization* somewhat, since it addresses Auden's postconversion career in detail, and can be read alongside her earlier study to show that Auden's conflicted views regarding his role as an artist following his conversion were, like Eliot's, largely a result of his religious convictions.

letter, written after a 1946 trip to New York in which he had visited Auden and the Niebuhrs, Eliot confided to Ursula, "I should like you to know what a comfort it has been to know that you have taken such an interest in Wystan Auden. Wystan is one of the youngest poets of whom I have the highest hopes, and with whom I feel the closest sympathy" (qted. in U. Niebuhr 113). These warm feelings were reciprocated, Auden, for example, remarking at the end of the inaugural T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures (1968) upon the "comfort, in hours of doubt and discouragement, I have derived from thinking of the example [he] set both as a poet and as a human being" (*SW* 127). Given the context, some critics might be inclined to greet this tribute to Eliot with skepticism. Auden repeated such sentiments in other, less public forums, though. For example, in 1945 he told Louise Bogan, who had praised him at the expense of Eliot, "I shall never be as great and good a man if I live to be a hundred" (qted. in Carpenter 413).[12] Their relationship was not an uncomplicated one, however. Since they were ambitious poets with an eye towards posterity, it's natural that there was some rivalry between them, similar to that which both felt towards Yeats, for instance. Moreover, Auden's entry into the Anglican communion did not obliterate all of their ideological differences, since even the kind of Anglicanism each practiced was quite distinct.

In a 1926 article, "The Classical Revival," John Middleton Murry called Eliot "the apostle of authority" who "has no authority to submit to" (650). Since Murry believed that "to be without a knowledge of God is an agony to him," he suggested that

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[12] Auden often found occasion to praise Eliot and testify to their friendship, stating in a radio obituary, for example, that "no future changes and fluctuations in taste will consign his work to oblivion" (qted. in Carpenter 412). He later told an interviewer that Eliot "was a great poet and a great man . . . I knew him since 1929, and we were very good friends" (qted. in Osborne *Life* 283). Elsewhere, he described Eliot as "one whose personal and professional example are to every other and lesser writer at once an inspiration and a reproach," and, as McDonald asserts, "it is clear from this that more than just stylistic admiration is involved" ("American Liberal" 10).

Eliot "should make a blind act of faith and join the Catholic Church: there he will find an authority and a tradition" (653, 650). Although Murry did not know it, Eliot had already begun to move in that direction. During that year, he met regularly with a fellow American, William Force Stead, a priest in the Anglican Church. Stead became Eliot's spiritual guide and introduced him to the work of theologians like the seventeenth century Anglican Lancelot Andrewes, whose sermons played an important role in Eliot's subsequent conversion (Gordon *Early Years* 125). When Eliot began to consider Christianity seriously, he was drawn to Anglicanism, and specifically High Anglicanism, because, as Murry astutely noted, he did seek "an authority and a tradition." Although Eliot praised "the spirit of Anglicanism" for "its persistence in finding a mean between Papacy and Presbytery" (*SE* 341-342), he did not follow this *via media* between High and Low Church himself. According to Lyndall Gordon, he was interested "in a revival of the Catholic tradition," like "the Anglo-Catholic inheritors of the Oxford Movement which, a hundred years before, had attempted to revive within the Church of England the best aspects of the Roman Church" (*Early Years* 127). Eliot, who described himself as a "strong High Churchman" (qted. in Ackroyd 173), argued that only an authoritarian Church, which emphasized liturgy and dogma, would prevent people from relying on their "Inner Light, the most untrustworthy and deceitful guide that ever offered itself to wandering humanity" (*ASG* 64). Although he regarded "the Church of England . . . as a branch of the Catholic Church, the Catholic Church in England" (*SE* 384), when Paul Elmer More, another American convert to Anglicanism, worried that Eliot was a short step away from becoming a Roman Catholic, Eliot reassured him that he was "an enemy of Rome" (qted. in Ackroyd 173). Regardless of any specific quarrels he may have had

with its various policies, Eliot would not have considered converting to the Roman Church, as Newman had done before him, because he felt that he should adhere to the religious practice of his adopted country. In fact, some of his contemporaries suspected that he joined the Anglican Church solely from a desire to become more embedded in the English establishment, to Eliot's great annoyance.[13] Joseph Pearce, in *Literary Converts*, doesn't doubt the sincerity of Eliot's faith but does allege that "his becoming an Anglican," rather than a Roman Catholic, for instance, "was a necessary part of his becoming an Englishman, part of the psychology of an outsider trying a little too hard to become an insider" (130). Though Eliot would have disagreed with Pearce's contention that he entered the Anglican communion only as "part of his becoming an Englishman," his emigration did undoubtedly influence his choice of denomination. He believed one's religion should be intimately connected to one's culture and that "If England is ever to be in any appreciable degree converted to Christianity, it can only be through the Church of England" (*SE* 383). So he chose an Anglican denomination in large part because he wanted to participate in the spiritual life of his new country. However, the form of Anglicanism he practiced differed in many respects from that of his fellow parishioners.

In a letter to More, Eliot contended that the people who don't see the need for religion seem

> to be unconscious of any void-- the void that I find in the middle of all human happiness and all human relations, and which there is only one thing to fill. I am one whom this sense of void tends to drive towards asceticism or sensuality, and

[13] Eliot exclaimed in exasperation, "Let other people think what they choose to think. If the suggestion is that I was seeking social status, like a man who wanted to get into a good club, I observed many years ago that one advantage of living in a post-Christian age was that no one could say one had become a Christian for respectability's sake" (qted. in Timmerman 42).

> only Christianity helps to reconcile me to life, which is otherwise disgusting. (qted. in Schuchard 152)

Eliot himself was driven towards asceticism rather than sensuality, telling Stead, "I feel that nothing could be too ascetic, too violent, for my own needs" (qted. in Schuchard 157). Accordingly, he pursued the negative way, as laid out by the sixteenth century mystic and poet, St. John of the Cross. In *T. S. Eliot's Negative Way*, Eloise Knapp Hay explains that as a student Eliot had read William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and agreed with James's classification of St. John of the Cross's thought as an example of unhealthy mysticism (98). As late as 1926, Eliot in a lecture included him in a group of "pathologicals" (Hay *Negative Way* 99). After he fully embraced Christianity, however, his attitude towards St. John of the Cross altered. He began to study his works more thoroughly, particularly *The Dark Night of the Soul*. This long poem advocates purging oneself of all earthly attachments in order to progress towards a union with God. It calls for "an annihilation" of the self, "wherein the soul finds itself when it can find no pleasure, support, consolation or abiding-place in anything soever" (2.19.435). Eliot's attempt to achieve spiritual growth through negation was highly unusual for a member of the Anglican Church, as Ackroyd explains: "This craving for discipline is not unknown in Christian practice, but it is rare in the Church of England" (169). Cynthia Ozick concurs, writing in her acerbic profile of Eliot for the *New Yorker* that "he was possessed by guilty notions of sinfulness and martyrdom and by the monkish disciplines of asceticism, which he pursued in the unlikely embrace of the established English church" (122).

Eliot's theology, with its emphasis on dogma and asceticism, struck many of those people who were already dismissive of Christianity as particularly anachronistic. For example, Russell Kirk relays that in a television documentary, *The Mysterious Mr. Eliot*,

> Several of the poets and critics . . . wondered condescendingly at Eliot's quaint attachment to the superstitions of the childhood of the race. William Empson was quoted solemnly to the effect that Eliot had possessed, or been possessed by, a medieval mind, believing in hell and damnation. Stephen Spender put in, 'All these things people in the Middle Ages believed in were very real to him.' (139)

Eliot objected to the frequent descriptions of his religious thought as medieval, and argued that it was primarily his rejection of "unrestrained individualism" which contributed to this unfair perception of him, since from a liberal perspective, "Anyone who dissents from this view must be either a medievalist, wishful only to set back the clock, or else a fascist, and probably both" ("Literature, Science and Dogma" 397). Nevertheless, in spite of his insistence that he hadn't, contrary to the *TLS* reviewer's claim, "declared for medieval against modernism" (953), he was undoubtedly influenced by medieval theology more than the average Anglican. As Iris Murdoch explained in "Eliot as a Moralist" (1958), "Mr. Eliot turns to appeal, over the head of the dominant creed of the time, to an older, purer tradition" (164). For Eliot, this purer tradition originated in the Middle Ages. He even preferred Andrewes, the seventeenth century Anglican, to his contemporary John Donne because he believed the former was more essentially medieval in thought: "Of the two men, it may be said that Andrewes is the more medieval, because he is the more pure, and because his bond was with the Church,

with tradition" (*SE* 352). Unlike the Renaissance, when the schism of the Western Church brought about a proliferation of competing theologies, the Middle Ages were "pure," according to Eliot, because they were largely dominated by the systematic thought of one person, Thomas Aquinas. Eliot's admiration for Aquinas's theology is even partially responsible for his deep attachment to Dante, whose work was informed by Thomism:

> It happened that at Dante's time thought was orderly and strong and beautiful, and that it was concentrated in one man of the greatest genius. Dante's poetry receives a boost which in a sense it does not merit, from the fact that the thought behind it is the thought of a man as great and lovely as Dante himself: St. Thomas. (*SE* 136)

While Kirk defends Eliot's interest in medieval theologians and writers, arguing that, unlike his detractors, "Eliot's imagination could transcend the twentieth century in which he and they found themselves, while their imagination was confined by what Eliot considered to be 'the provincialism of time'" (140-41), most readers held that his beliefs were curiously outdated and incongruous with modern Anglicanism and the modern world in general.

In his account of his conversion in *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims* (1956), Auden relates that while he was in Spain during the Civil War, he first began to reexamine his attitude towards Christianity when he discovered that the closure of the churches there left him "profoundly shocked and disturbed" (41). He had "consciously ignored and rejected the Church for sixteen years," but realized that he must still care somewhat about "the existence of churches and what went on in them" although he didn't know why he

should (41). He only came to accept Christianity, however, after he became disillusioned with secular humanism following the rise of the Nazis. Watching a film of the German conquest of Poland in a Yorkville cinema in New York, Auden was alarmed when many people in the predominantly German audience yelled "Kill them!" any time the Poles appeared onscreen. As Auden explains, "We assumed that there was only one outlook on life conceivable among civilized people, the liberal humanism in which all of us had been brought up," but "[t]he novelty and shock of the Nazis was that they made no pretense of believing in justice and liberty for all" (*Canterbury* 39, 40). Under the circumstances, "one could hardly avoid asking the question, 'If, as I am convinced, the Nazis are wrong and we are right, what is it that validates our values and invalidates theirs?'" (*Canterbury* 40). Reflecting upon the incident, Auden wondered "why I reacted as I did against this denial of every humanistic value. The answer brought me back to the church" (qted. in Carpenter 282). His conviction that Nazi and humanist values could not be equally valid made him realize that he did not accept relativism, but believed that morality must have a metaphysical foundation, a foundation revealed, he contended, through Christianity.

Although Auden came to join the Episcopalian Church, the branch of the Anglican Church in America, his version of Anglicanism differed in many respects from Eliot's. Instead of relying so heavily on external authority, Auden embraced existential Christianity as articulated by Søren Kierkegaard, whose works were just beginning to be widely known outside his native Denmark, and by his followers, contemporary theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Introduced to Kierkegaard through Charles Williams's *The Descent of the Dove* (Mendelson *Later Auden* 129), Auden found his non-systematic, non-Thomist approach to theology compelling. He absorbed

Kierkegaard's distinctions between the three spheres of existence, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, and, like the philosopher, emphasized the supra-rationality of the religious sphere which could only be entered through a leap of faith. Auden was also profoundly affected by Kierkegaard's teachings, adopted by later Christian existentialists, on the sinfulness of all men and the need to rely on the grace of God. Consciously echoing Kierkegaard, he declares, "[I]t is just as true as it ever was that man is born in sin, that the majority are always, relatively, in the wrong, the minority sometimes, relatively, in the right . . . and all, before God, absolutely in the wrong" (*DH* 320). This universal sinfulness forces man to rely on God's mercy, since he is incapable of redeeming himself. Accordingly, Auden "put tremendous emphasis on the grace of God as the saving power, rather than on any natural goodness or good works in Man" (Carpenter 300). So even though some people, including Auden himself, claimed that he had returned to his childhood faith, in actuality "his beliefs took the form of a lonely existential Protestantism quite unlike the . . . Anglo-Catholicism he had abandoned at fifteen" (Mendelson *Later Auden* xviii). Therefore, both Auden and Eliot practiced an atypical form of Anglicanism that was distinct from that of their fellow communicants and from that of each other.

Auden also distinguishes himself from Eliot through his greater acceptance of the body and the natural world. Despite his debt to existential thinkers, Auden contends, "Like all polemical movements, existentialism is one-sided. . . .[T]he existentialists have invented an imagery anthropology from which all elements, like man's physical nature . . . are excluded" (*DH* 103). Kierkegaard, for example, "would never have denied the orthodox doctrine that God created the world" or claimed that matter is inherently

evil, but he is if "not intellectually . . . in his sensibility . . . a Manichee" (*FA* 191). Although Eliot differs in many respects from Kierkegaard, they do share this characteristic. Auden had complained, "A writer today may believe, if he is a Christian like T. S. Eliot or Graham Greene, that the temporal world is an analogue of the eternal . . . but it is very difficult for him to imagine what he believes, to portray, for instance, a temporal relationship like marriage as anything but sordid and corrupting" (*Armada* foreword).[14] He would have contended that Eliot, at least when he first embraced Christianity, was, like Kierkegaard, "a monodist, who can hear with peculiar acuteness one theme in the New Testament-- in his case, the theme of suffering and self-sacrifice-- but is deaf to its rich polyphony" (*FA* 191). Whereas Eliot, who admitted to having "a Puritanical temperament" (*OPP* 209), predominately followed the negative way, particularly in the years immediately after his conversion, Auden was more inclined towards the positive way. Rather than attempt to purge himself from all earthly attachments, he regarded such attachments as potential avenues through which to approach God. So while Auden accepted Williams's contention that the positive and negative way were both legitimate (*Dove* 57-58)-- for example telling Ursula Niebuhr that, relative to the theology of her husband Reinhold, "I would allow a little more place, perhaps, for the *Via Negativa*" (qted. in U. Niebuhr 106)-- he clearly placed more value on the former. He embraced the affirmative way in part because he felt the demands of the body could not be ignored, since one's life was determined through an interplay of free will and necessity. By necessity, Auden meant "the habits of our socially acquired 'second nature,'" as well as, and more importantly, "the necessities of our physical nature," including sexual drives (*DH* 434). He explains the relationship between these

[14] This short foreword to *An Armada of Thirty Whales* by Daniel G. Hoffman does not have any pagination.

two forces thus: "As a biological organism Man is a natural creature subject to the necessities of nature; as a being with consciousness and will, he is at the same time a historical person with the freedom of the spirit" (*DH* 130). From Auden's perspective, those who pursue the negative way, like Eliot or Kierkegaard, attempt to deny a substantial part of themselves.

The various streams of Auden's theology contributed to his complex attitude towards his homosexuality. According to Isherwood, "His religion condemned it and he agreed that it was sinful, though he fully intended to go on sinning" (qted. in Carpenter 299). One reason was his belief that "of all human functions" which are governed by necessity "sex is the least controllable by the personality" (Carpenter 300). Also, he felt that this example of his "sinfulness" served to remind him that he was, as Kierkegaard taught, always "before God, absolutely in the wrong" (*DH* 320). He often took a more positive view of his sexuality, however, particularly after falling in love with Chester Kallman. In accordance with his affirmative approach to Christianity, he contended that Eros could serve as a stepping stone to Agape. As he wrote in a poetic letter to Kallman in 1941, "Because it is through you that God has chosen to show me my beatitude, / As this morning I think of the Godhead I think of you" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 44). Auden saw another benefit to his homosexuality. He wrote to Isherwood, "Though I believe it sinful to be queer, it has at least saved me from becoming a pillar of the Establishment, and it might not even have done that if I hadn't bolted to America. No power in Heaven or on earth will ever make Chester-- God bless him!-- respectable" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 455-56). So from Auden's point of view, his

homosexuality, and specifically his relationship with Kallman, helped to prevent him from being co-opted by those in power.

Although the perception of Auden as a non-establishment figure may have contributed to his neglect among Christian critics, it helped his reputation in other quarters. In fact, the later Auden is generally much better received than the later Eliot. While many critics regret Auden's religious conversion, they nevertheless tend to regard his brand of Anglicanism as more palatable than that of the elder poet. Richard Tillinghast, for example, avers, "[I]f Auden's journey back to the Anglican church is not one on which every reader would accompany him, still his version of Christianity seems less forbidding, more forgiving of human weakness that that of his co-religionist T. S. Eliot" (435). Even Bloom, who continually rails against Christianity, makes some concessions for Auden. Writing in 1968, he claims, "Eliot is gone, and Auden now occupies his place" as the leading Christian poet and sage, "though with a difference. The difference is refreshing; Auden is wittier, gentler, much less dogmatic . . ." (*Auden* 3). So Auden's Christianity seems at least somewhat less objectionable to those critics like Bloom who would reject Eliot outright.

Auden's comparatively positive reception stems in large part from the fact that he remained politically liberal after his conversion, a stance encouraged by his interactions with radical Protestants like Niebuhr and Tillich, while Eliot seemed increasingly reactionary. According to Mendelson:

> Auden's sense of Christianity's ethical and political meanings was insistently different from Eliot's, although both worshipped in the same church and recited the same creed. . . . Auden treated Eliot with reverential gratitude for his support

> and friendship, but went out of his way to dispute Eliot's religious ethics and politics. (*Later Auden* 150)

Auden found Eliot too elitist, for example. In "Port and Nuts with the Eliots" (1949), a review of Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, Auden praises him for addressing the important question of how culture is transmitted in Western society, but suggests that "his approval of hereditary classes" leads him to overestimate their importance in this respect. "Mr. Eliot is only partly right . . . in asserting that in the past the role of transmission was played by a class or by classes," because, Auden contends, "[f]or many centuries, it was transmitted by the Church: i.e., by an institution . . . whose members could be drawn from any social class" (93-94). Eliot's elitism extended into the spiritual realm as well, as when he proposed the formation of a "Community of Christians" within the Church, a group of "intellectual and spiritual superiority" (*Christianity* 28). Auden, on the other hand, saw in Christianity "a radical levelling principle that eliminated hierarchies and distinctions between people-- smart and stupid, even good and bad-- and left them all sinners in a single boat" (Gopnik 88). He insisted that the Christian faith "flatters none as being less in peril than any other . . . for in it there is . . . no elite of any kind" (qted. in Gopnik 88). Auden was also more accepting of those who didn't share his faith. Menand describes the later Eliot as "a man whose orthodoxy was so punctilious it amounted to eccentricity" and as "the establishmentarian who entered in a fervid spirit a British religious community that had long before made its peace with secularism . . ." (101). Whereas Eliot believed "all unorthodoxies issued from enemy territory" (Wood 135), Auden's position was more tolerant. For example, in his

contribution to the *Partisan Review*'s symposium, "Religion and the Intellectual" (1950), Auden condemns the Church for its attitude to other religions:

> In theory she has always held that every other religion was a revelation, partial or distorted but real, of the true God, that she must always say, 'like St. Paul on the Acropolis, 'He whom ye ignorantly worship, Him I declare unto you.' In practice she has all too often denied this out of cultural pride . . . (128)

Unlike Eliot, Auden did not desire a religiously homogenous society. When Eliot sent him a copy of *After Strange Gods* (1934), which equates "heterodoxy" with "heresy" (22), Auden replied, "Some of the general remarks, if you will forgive my saying so, rather shocked me, because if they are put into practice . . . [they] would produce a world in which neither I nor you I think would like to live" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 150).

Auden was no doubt particularly shocked by Eliot's soon to be notorious pronouncement regarding "free-thinking Jews": "The population should be homogeneous; where two or more cultures exist in the same place they are likely either to be fiercely self-conscious or both to become adulterate. What is still more important is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable" (*ASG* 20). Although the case has been made, by Ronald Schuchard among others, that Eliot is objecting primarily to their "free-thinking" as opposed to their "race,"[15] the statement understandably continues to offend many readers and lays Eliot open to charges of anti-Semitism. In recent years, the

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[15] "To Eliot, any large number of free thinking New Humanists or any secular humanists, Christian or Jewish would be intellectually 'undesirable'" ("Burbank with a Baedeker" 16), Schuchard contends. As part of his evidence, he cites a letter Eliot wrote to an offended Isaiah Berlin: "I still do not understand why the word 'race' occurs in the sentence, because my emphasis was on the adjective 'free-thinking'" (qted. in "Burbank with a Baedeker" 16).

question of whether or not Eliot was anti-Semitic has taken on new urgency and become a central issue in Eliotic discourse. Sparked largely by Christopher Ricks's *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (1988)[16] and the more recent book by Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* (1995), and complicated by such discoveries as Eliot's correspondence with the Jewish intellectual Horace Kallen, the issue is considered so important and raises such passion on every side that all of Eliot's most prominent critics feel compelled to contribute to the dialogue. For example, in 2003 two issues of *Modernism/Modernity* were devoted to "Eliot and Anti-Semitism," and drew responses from a vast array of noted Eliot scholars, including Schuchard, Donoghue, and Julius himself. Besides the passage in *After Strange Gods*, debate focuses primarily on the 1920 poems, "Gerontion," "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar," and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" (in which "Rachel *née* Rabinovitch / Tears at the grapes with murderous paws" [*CPP* 56]), as well as "Dirge: Full fathom five your Bleistein lies," an excised section of *The Waste Land* (Eliot *WL* 118-21). While the depiction of Jews in these early poems is troubling and seems to indicate at least a degree of anti-Semitism, Eliot appears to have altered his views as he grew older. He soon regretted his statement in *After Strange Gods*, consequently refusing to allow the book to be republished,[17] and his later works tend to present Jews in a much more positive light. Many critics, most notably Julius, don't address these changes sufficiently, however, and portray instead the

[16] Ricks doesn't deal with "prejudice" in a narrow sense however; Only a chapter of his book addresses the question of anti-Semitism in detail. Besides addressing a variety of topics related to Eliot's work, he seeks to show how prejudice, by which he means any preconceived notion that mediates between experience and understanding, is an integral part of one's intellectual development.

[17] As Ricks states, "It is necessary to take offence at some things in *After Strange Gods*; it is necessary, too, to give Eliot credit for at least some rescinding of the book" since he wouldn't allow it to be republished, "which, for a professional publisher and a writer whose works did not lack readers, amounts to a substantial withdrawing" (40).

early *and* later Eliot as irredeemably anti-Semitic, his religious beliefs infected with bigotry.[18]

No such ugly charge is levied against Auden, however. His pronouncements against anti-Semitism, his respectful portrayal of Jews in works like *For the Time Being*, and his relationship with the Jewish Kallman all contribute to the perception of Auden as free from such bigotry. In "As it Seemed to Us" (1965), he relates that when he was growing up, "Among middle-class Gentiles . . . a mild and for the most part quite unthinking anti-Semitism was very common" (*FA* 496), yet, as his brother John remarked, Auden himself "was from his youth singularly devoid of prejudices about class, religion and race . . ." (29). Auden even seems to denounce such prejudice in Eliot.

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[18] Most critics who address anti-Semitism in Eliot don't deal adequately with his later works, like "A Song for Simeon" and *The Rock*. Julius, for example, subjects "A Song of Simeon" (1928) to a grossly distorted reading. He calls the poem a "revisiting" of "Gerontion" (70), and claims that "Simeon, the witness to Christianity's superior truth, is a 'self-judging' Jew who, by dying, does all that an anti-Semitic could wish for" (*T. S. Eliot* 70-71). Julius's claim that "A Song for Simeon" is essentially an anti-Semitic poem ignores the parallels between Simeon and the Magus of "Journey of the Magi" (1927) as well as the autobiographical speaker of *Ash-Wednesday*, parallels which reveal that Eliot is not making an anti-Semitic statement-- not even, I would argue, unconsciously-- but merely using these personae to portray the difficulties involved in the conversion experience, which entails the death of the old self. Craig Raine, in "In Defense of T. S. Eliot," correctly remarks that "Julius can be a very inaccurate reader" (326) and that he often distorts any work "which presents a difficulty for his thesis" (330), like the pageant play *The Rock* (1934). In this drama, Eliot sympathetically portrays the Jews rebuilding the Temple (*Rock* 35-38), and, as in all of his postconversion works, treats Jewish prophets with great respect; For example, Nehemiah makes an appearance and encourages the people in the face of persecution: "Our God shall fight for us" (36). In the scene for which Eliot was solely responsible ("Prefatory Note"), he condemns anti-Semitism expressly through his depiction of the fascist Blackshirts. They declare that they won't "reverence the temple," because "*Your vesture, your gesture, your speech, and your face, / Proclaim your extraction from Jewish race*," therefore, "*we must firmly refuse / To descent to palaver with anthropoid Jews*" (44). Raine reasonably asserts that "the passage is hostile to the Blackshirts because they are contemporary examples of anti-Semitic hatred" (329-30), but Julius only claims that "[t]he rejection of the Blackshirts' anti-Semitism is a rejection of anti-Christian paganism . . . It is not a plea for modern Jewry, it is an endorsement of Christianity" (197). Julius complains that Eliot defends Judaism here and elsewhere in *The Rock* largely because Christianity sprang from its roots, which is true, but while one might allege Eliot is thereby guilty of a kind of insensitive cultural appropriation, to suggest the drama is tinged with anti-Semitism, as Julius does, seems an abuse of the term. In general, Julius tends to give the later works short shrift and seems much more comfortable dissecting the early works, which provide better support for his two-prong thesis that "Eliot wrote anti-Semitic poetry and prose, which makes him an anti-Semite" and "Eliot's anti-Semitic poetry is innovative and imaginative, and therefore cannot be dismissed as an inconsequential blemish in his oeuvre" ("A Response" 41). Since other critics also tend to concentrate on his more contentious early poetry, the intense focus on the question of anti-Semitism in Eliot is another reason why the later works, which provide less controversial material, are relatively neglected.

While his disapproval of *After Strange Gods* suggests that he was objecting at least in part to Eliot's statement about "free-thinking Jews," Auden charges Eliot with anti-Semitic tendencies more overtly and publicly in an essay on G. K. Chesterton. Speaking of the anti-Semitism common among Chesterton's contemporaries, he remarks, "I myself am inclined to put most of the blame on the influence, both upon their generation and upon the succeeding generation of Eliot and Pound, exerted by the *Action Française* Movement" (*FA* 396), a profoundly conservative and some would say nearly fascistic Catholic movement headed by Charles Maurras.[19] So another reason why many critics find Auden's Christianity more acceptable than Eliot's is that it doesn't have the anti-Semitic dimension which, they claim, taints the elder poet's beliefs. For example, Conniff, who remarks that "Auden's most conspicuous Christian sources are more appealing than the most politically reactionary of Eliot's-- say, Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, as opposed to Charles Maurras and the *Action Française*," suggests that now that "debate has resumed, once again, over Eliot's anti-Semitism and its relation to his constricted vision of a Christian culture," critics should turn their attention to Auden's postconversion work to see "a compelling alternative vision" from another Christian writer, "distinguished most of all by its . . . sustained generosity of spirit" ("Auden Criticism" 186). Bloom, more bluntly, claims that Auden "does not feel compelled to demonstrate the authenticity of his Christian humanism by a judicious anti-Semitism" as Eliot does (*Auden* 3), incidentally insulting Christians in general by the implication that

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[19] Eliot acknowledged that he had been influenced by Maurras, who emphasized the importance of the Church as a social institution which provided society stability, but this influence has often been overestimated and "he clearly was aware of Maurras' limitations" (Germer 18). Moreover, as A. V. C. Schmidt revealed, Eliot "repudiated the anti-Semitism of Charles Maurras" (qted. in Raine 331). For example, in a 1941 article, Eliot spoke against the "Anti-Semitism . . . among parties of the extreme right" in France, like the *Action Française*: "[W]e can only hope that there has been, or that there will be, some organized protest against such injustice, by the French ecclesiastical hierarchy" (qted. in Raine 331).

Auden's lack of anti-Semitism is exceptional among those of his faith.[20] Whether the common perception of the later Eliot as anti-Semitic is justified or not, his views on the ideal role of the Church in society-- including his desire for religious homogeneity-- are enough to lead many critics to regard his Christianity as particularly irrelevant and archaic, if not actually offensive, especially when compared to the more politically and socially progressive Auden.

So much as accounts of the Thirties have "minimized those features of Auden's poetry which resemble Eliot's in ways that got Auden's poetry recognized as 'the right kind'" (Christianson 108), politically and otherwise, discussions of Auden's postconversion career tend to downplay his resemblance to Eliot in order to present Auden as "the right kind" of Christian poet, insofar as such a thing is possible. Their admittedly abundant theological and sociological differences are thus used to justify the lack of sustained comparison between their later incarnations. For example, Kirsch, in his study of Auden, essentially dispatches with Eliot in one paragraph, declaring, "Auden was a friend of Eliot but never shared his religious and social prejudices" (87). While these differences *are* important-- and will be expanded upon, particularly as they manifest themselves in their work-- they should not be allowed to occlude the fact that many of Eliot's and Auden's ideological and artistic concerns converge in their later careers.

Critics may claim that "Auden's Christianity was nearly the direct reverse of Eliot's" (Gopnik 88), but that is not actually true. For instance, although they practiced

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[20] Bloom makes the same implication, using almost the same words, in his latter essay on Eliot, in which he complains of "his flair for demonstrating the authenticity of his Christianity by exhibiting a judicious anti-Semitism" (71). Even given the history of Jewish persecution by certain elements within the Church, such a statement is unjustified.

different versions of Anglicanism, they each placed great importance on religious ritual. They both described themselves at times as "Anglo-Catholic" as opposed to only "Anglican" to show that while Anglicanism entails both High and Low Church practices, they adhered to the former. Auden, whose "first religious memories [were] of exciting magical rites" (Auden *Canterbury* 33), explained to Ursula Niebuhr that "[h]is liturgical practice, in contrast with the Protestantism of his theology, was 'Anglo-Catholic, though not *too* spikey,'" that is, *excessively* ritualistic (Mendelson *Later Auden* 174). When he began to attend an Episcopalian Church in New York, he went primarily for the sacraments, for example attending an early service so that he could take communion while avoiding the sermon (Carpenter 297). Eliot, who had declared himself an "Anglo-Catholic" in *For Lancelot Andrewes*, also put enormous emphasis on the ritualistic components of his religion. As Ackroyd explains, he "gave his full intellectual assent to the propositions of the faith which supported him" but "the ritual observances of that faith-- in the devotional discipline of confession, Mass and communion-- were of equal if not greater significance to him" (163).

As well as this similar approach to liturgical practice, their theological beliefs were more alike than many critics suppose. For instance, like Auden, though not through any influence from Kierkegaard, Eliot spoke often of man's sinfulness and consequent need for humility before God. In a negative review of Van Wyck Brooks's *Primary Literature and Coterie Literature* (1942), Auden even defended Eliot's beliefs, including those views on original sin which were akin to his own: "It is significant that Mr Brooks's Bête Noire should be Mr Eliot who holds the Christian faith, i.e. who really believes that the virtues of 'courage, mercy, justice, honour, love' are absolutes but also

believes in Original Sin, i.e. in the virtues of humility and contrition which to Mr Brooks are perverse celebrations of 'the death drive'" (*Prose II* 151).[21] Also, while the Incarnation is obviously central to Christianity, Eliot and Auden devoted much more attention to it than most other Christian writers. As Chapter Three will demonstrate, their understanding of the Incarnation and its ramifications informed all major aspects of their postconversion thought, including their positions on art. There are some critics who do acknowledge that despite their differences Eliot and Auden are not diametrically opposed in their faith, and further suggest that Eliot may in fact have influenced Auden's religious beliefs. Daniel, for example, writes, "Without *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* to hand, the wasteland would have been deeper, wider, harder perhaps for those like Auden, who returned to the faith, to transcend" (35), and Spears, in his discussion of Auden's "Autumn 1940," states, "Auden closes with a deeply-felt prayer in praise of the Logos, part of which sounds so much like Eliot that it suggests that Eliot may have had some spiritual influence at the time" (*Auden* 191). Whether or not Eliot influenced Auden's religious beliefs, he undoubtedly helped to shape Auden's views on the relation of these beliefs to his work.

Eliot's effects on the poetics of the later Auden-- even more than his effects on the poetics of the early Auden-- tend to be drastically underestimated, however. For example, Conniff makes a number of valuable observations about Auden's later career, but unfortunately doesn't recognize the degree to which he was indebted to Eliot. He correctly states that in the period after Auden's conversion, "the development of his poetry . . . can best be explained as a result of his deliberate attempt to reinvent himself as

[21] Hecht underlines the similarities between the two writers when he suggests that in his prose, "Auden's 'protectiveness'" of Eliot, "someone who was a fellow poet, his editor, and a co-religionist, may have been a covert self-defense" (*Hidden Law* 239).

a Christian poet" ("Answering Herod" 303-04). According to Conniff, however, this struggle "to come to terms with the question of how to use his own talent-- or, as he more often put it, his 'gift'-- to become a Christian poet" in the modern world was especially challenging because "such a feat had not been accomplished in any way that seemed to him sufficient":

> Of course, in his return to Christianity, Auden was well aware of T. S. Eliot's 'conversion' more than a decade earlier.[22] But despite Auden's more or less official statements of admiration for Eliot, there are telling suggestions, in the development of Auden's own Christian poetics, that he did not see Eliot as a satisfactory example. ("Answering Herod" 302-03)

Admittedly, Auden had claimed in a 1942 article that "[a]s a writer who is also a would-be Christian, I cannot help feeling that a satisfactory theory of Art from the standpoint of the Christian faith has yet to be worked out" (*Prose II* 163),[23] but he certainly wasn't repudiating Eliot thereby. He repeatedly praised Eliot's postconversion work in official *and* unofficial statements-- calling him in 1942 "the greatest poet that his country has the honour to have produced" (*Prose II* 149)-- but even more importantly, his own work, which bears the mark of Eliot's influence, testifies to his respect for Eliot's accomplishments as a Christian artist. Auden is merely acknowledging, as Eliot himself had done, the extraordinary difficulties involved with developing a Christian aesthetic,

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[22] Conniff's use of quotation marks around the word "conversion" reveals that he is one of those critics who assume Eliot was always an inchoate Christian, thus not realizing the dramatic effect that his turn to Christianity had upon his life and work.

[23] Auden's description of himself as a "would-be Christian" should not be taken to indicate that his acceptance of Christian tenets was tentative. Rather, he agreed with Kierkegaard's assertion that, because of man's sinfulness, one may not be called a Christian but only said to aspire to become a Christian. In "Purely Subjective" (1943), for example, Auden explained, "There is no such things as a Christian or a Christian society for no one can say: 'I am a Christian,' only 'I am a sinner who believes that Jesus is the Christ whom I am required to become like. I shall not be a Christian or even understand fully what the word Christian means until I have become like him'" (*Prose II* 193).

especially in a secular society. Even when Auden doesn't seem in sympathy with Eliot's views on the relation of art and religion, or more generally on the role of religion in society, it is nevertheless important to be aware of Eliot's presence behind some of his formulations because in many such instances Auden is writing pointedly against the older poet. As Mendelson stated, Auden at times "*went out of his way* to dispute Eliot's religious ethics and politics" [emphasis added] (*Later Auden* 150), showing that Eliot exerted a kind of negative influence. Thus, Auden scholars must be familiar with Eliot's work in order to know when and how Auden is reacting against the older poet, and also to identify certain phrases and ideas in Auden's writing which he lifts from Eliot, usually to show his accord with the older poet but sometimes to rebut him.[24] Despite the points of contention between them, however, Auden's development as a Christian artist shows that he had a great deal more in common with Eliot than critics like Conniff suspect, aesthetically as well as theologically.

In his discussion of Eliot and Auden, Christianson asserts that there is "a closer filiation" between the two poets "than the critical commonplaces about their relation . . . have acknowledged" (109). After his conversion, Auden did feel a great sense of kinship with Eliot, but their relationship would actually be better classified as collaborative than filial. In their attempt to address the various issues regarding the ways in which religion and literature interact, Eliot often framed the questions and made the first attempt at their answers, but, as already indicated, Auden did not accept his conclusions blindly. He challenged Eliot, often qualifying or, from his perspective, correcting his approaches and

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[24] For example, in *For the Time Being* (1942), Auden's Narrator sardonically states, "the recent restrictions / Upon alien and free-thinking Jews are beginning / To have a salutary effect upon public morale" (*CP* 373), which clearly echoes Eliot's statement in *After Strange Gods* and, in context, condemns its intolerance.

assertions. Also, as in the 1930s, Auden likely influenced Eliot at times; Certainly, in the 1940s, Eliot came to adopt certain theological positions which he knew Auden to hold. Their work can also be regarded as collaborative in another sense because even when they aren't necessarily responding to each other, it is still beneficial to read them in tandem. Despite their inconsistencies, contradictions, and failure to reach all of their goals, together they provide the best approach, in theory and practice, to many of the most pressing problems relating to religion and literature. Studying them in relation to each other helps to compensate for any gaps or weaknesses in either poet's work, and makes clear which elements of their thought are particularly idiosyncratic or contentious, and thus perhaps less useful to any writer or scholar who would follow in their footsteps. Moreover, the differences in their theology and in their techniques often complement one another and expand the field of inquiry, allowing one to probe the effects of both negative and affirmative theology on literature, for example. Therefore, only by studying their later careers together can one begin to appreciate the extraordinary complexity and richness of their encounters with each other's thought and work, and their contributions to the study of religion and literature which sprang from these encounters.

Chapter One addresses Eliot's and Auden's theories on religion and literature, and shows how they serve to reinforce or qualify one another. Particular attention is given to their anxiety over the possibility of reconciling spiritual and artistic values, because, the poets contend, they often seem mutually exclusive. They argue that the difficulties for the religious artist are compounded in a secular age, because he may be tempted to overemphasize his beliefs and write what amounts to propaganda and also because more

readers are inclined to reject his work because of the beliefs informing it. In their criticism, the poets tried to unravel the ways in which differences in belief affect a work's creation and reception in order to understand how best to proceed with their own poetry and drama. Their essays also reflect their uncertainty over how to use their talents to assert Christian truth without undermining the aesthetic integrity of their work.

Chapter Two focuses on their attempts to put their evolving theories into practice in their transitional poetry: Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* and the Ariel poems, and Auden's *The Double Man*, especially the long poem "New Year Letter." The works of this period detail their conversions and the consequent change to their poetics, including their adoption of a more accessible style. The ways in which their conflicting beliefs shape their poetry is discussed at length, specifically how their views on negative and affirmative theology and the relative importance of free will are revealed through their appropriations from Dante. Their shifting positions on engagement are also explored. Whereas Auden began to retreat from, although not completely reject, his position as an engaged artist, Eliot for the first time started to exploit art for its instrumental possibilities in order to support the Church. In these years immediately after their conversions, their concern over their responsibilities as Christian artists was particularly acute, and often expressed explicitly in these works.

Chapter Three examines the importance of the doctrine of the Incarnation in the major poems of their postconversion period, particularly Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Auden's *For the Time Being*, *The Sea and the Mirror*, and *Horae Canonicae*. Although Auden writes pointedly against Eliot at times in order to affirm his existential theology, in general their positions on the significance of the Incarnation are remarkably alike,

reflecting to a large degree Eliot's influence on the younger poet. Together, they work to show the relevance of the Incarnation to the modern world, especially through their treatment of time, history, language and literature. They devote particular attention to the relation of human language to the Logos because of its significance to their own work, especially regarding their ability to articulate religious truth. This chapter also traces the development in Eliot's beliefs, when, as his poetry attests, he became somewhat more receptive to affirmative theology, partly through his exposure to the writings of some of the same theologians who exerted so much influence on Auden. This evolution in his thought led him to emphasize the benefits of the Incarnation to a greater degree than in his transitional poetry as well as the power of grace, as demonstrated by his allusions to the Atonement.

Chapter Four covers their considerable body of dramatic work, and the manner in which their beliefs determined what and how they chose to write for the stage. Eliot's and Auden's verse plays of the Thirties are first compared to show how they employed some of the same methods in order to further different causes: Eliot worked on behalf of the Church in *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral*, while Auden supported Leftist politics in *The Dance of Death* and the plays he wrote with Isherwood, *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, *The Ascent of F6*, and *On the Frontier*. The chapter also discusses the ideological reasons behind their later decisions to turn to different genres, as Eliot began to write increasingly conventional plays and Auden, as a Christian, turned to opera. Their views on the limitations and possibilities of the dramatic forms which they adopted reveal that while Eliot sought to exercise greater spiritual influence via the stage, Auden became less eager to exploit drama for instrumental purposes. The ways in which these

forms impinge upon how their beliefs are conveyed, and their continuing theological differences, are detailed as well. The chapter also discusses how these dramatic works, and particularly the place of theology within these works, affected their later reputations.

Chapter One

A New Preoccupation: Probing the Relation of Religion and Literature

In his preface to *Secondary Worlds*, a collection of the inaugural T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures, Auden wrote:

> Mr Eliot was a poet writing in English in the twentieth century; he was also a Christian. Nobody can be both without asking himself two questions: 'What difference, if any, do my beliefs make, either to what I write, or to my conception of my vocation? Secondly, in what ways do the problems of a Christian writing in this century differ from those of a Christian writing in earlier periods?' (12)

In this chapter, I will examine some of the ways in which Eliot and Auden attempted to answer these questions in their prose. Their Christian beliefs had an immediate and lasting impact on their critical writings, which often deal explicitly with the place of religion in literature. Some scholars wrongly assume that Eliot's turn to Christianity did not have a significant effect on his criticism because he maintained some of his former views and stated in the 1928 Preface to *The Sacred Wood* that "what had happened in my own mind, in eight years, was not so much a change or reversal of opinions, as an expansion or development of interests" (vii). Speaking of Eliot's conversion, Frank Kermode claims in his introduction to Eliot's *Selected Prose*, "What is surprising . . . is that this change [in belief] is not accompanied by any marked discontinuity of literary interest or method" (19). However, Eliot's critical perspective was radically altered when he became a Christian, and, as he revealed in the Preface, his chief concern became "the

relation of poetry to the spiritual and social life of its time and other times" (viii).[1] Although Kermode implausibly suggests that only Eliot's "Religion and Literature" (1935) "could not have been written very much earlier" (19), most of his later essays reflect a profound interest in the relation of art and religion that is not found in his early pieces.[2] Similarly, as Kirsch relates, "Auden's criticism is deeply influenced by his faith and is often an explicit testament to it" (73). For example, Auden explained to Stephen Spender that his major prose collection, *The Dyer's Hand* (1962), was about "Christianity and Art. . . .That is what the *whole* book is really about, the theme which dictated my selection of pieces and their order" (qted. in Carpenter 404). Also, much as Eliot often "found the opportunity, sometimes gratuitously to the subject matter, to interject an asseveration of faith" (Timmerman 41), Auden introduced religious themes into his essays even when they didn't seem particularly relevant. According to McDonald, he "was anxious to take any opportunity that offered itself to write huge overviews of man and society, art and life, in abstract terms" and "book reviews can veer from their ostensible subjects into large and daunting surveys of man, God and culture . . ." ("American Liberal" 9). In fact, the problematic relationship between religion and

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[1] Much like Kermode, Murdoch, writing in 1958, alleges that Eliot's critical positions remained relatively unchanged throughout his career, and that the "unity of Mr Eliot's attitude is . . . my excuse for treating as one 'position' utterances made over a number of years" (164). Contrary to her assertion, Eliot insisted that his essays should be dated when referenced precisely because his positions did not remain constant, especially after he entered the Church. In "To Criticize the Critic" (1961), he stated, "I find myself constantly irritated by having my words, perhaps written thirty or forty years ago, quoted as if I had uttered them yesterday. . . .When I publish a collection of essays, or whenever I allow an essay to be re-published elsewhere, I make a point of indicating the original date of publication, as a reminder to the reader of the distance of time that separates the author when he wrote it from the author as he is today" (*TCTC* 14). The dates of Eliot's and Auden's essays will accordingly be noted when first referenced, except for Auden's essays in *The Dyer's Hand* and *Forewords and Afterwords*, which are not individually dated.

[2] Besides the seminal "Religion and Literature," some of the more important of these essays include: "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" (1927), "Dante" (1929), "Poetry and Propaganda" (1930), "Shelley and Keats" (1933), "Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" (1937), and "The Social Function of Poetry" (1957). However, this list is by no means inclusive, and it would be the rare postconversion essay which did not at least touch upon the subject of belief and art.

literature became *the* most frequently addressed subject in the post-conversion criticism of both writers, and, contrary to Conniff's assertion, Auden adopted many of Eliot's views on the nature of this relationship. They devoted so much critical attention to this subject not out of disinterested scholarship but because they wanted to determine what kind of role their own religious beliefs should assume in their poetry and drama. Their prose writings thus reveal the anxiety that attended their efforts to establish the proper place for their new convictions in their work, both by their continual revisiting of the questions regarding the role and status of belief in literature and by their emphasis on the many ways in which artistic and spiritual values can conflict.

Erica Riggs, in "W. H. Auden as Seriocomic Critic," remarks that Auden conceded that "his critical principles were but partial truths"-- particularly since he wrote occasional pieces rather than comprehensive, analytical studies-- so "he set them into strenuous dialectic relation with the debates of other poets and critics: thus he could share in a communal generation of truths beyond his own conceiving" (207). Auden's views on the place of religion in art evolved largely through his engagement with Eliot, and this interaction between the two poets allowed them to advance understanding in this important field of criticism more than either could have done alone. Perceptively, McDonald notes that Auden's later prose reveals that "Eliot represented for Auden the ideal poetic and cultural voice of . . . religious and ethical scruple . . . . Crucially, Eliot provided Auden with the clues that helped him plot a relation between 'the ethical life' and the life of art" ("American Liberal" 10). Furthermore, Auden helped Eliot's ideas on religion and literature gain more currency by "repeating and amplifying some of Eliot's motifs" and bringing them "to the public space . . . with a diagnostic certainty"

("American Liberal" 10). Auden's absorption and propagation of many of Eliot's ideas was therefore mutually beneficial.

Throughout his career, Auden showed great respect for Eliot's criticism. He included the elder poet on a list on his favorite critics (*CW* 372), and remarked that "America has good reason to be proud of her literary criticism," including as it does "[t]he essays of T. S. Eliot" (*Prose II* 11). When as a student he first discovered Eliot, he was impressed by his prose as well as his poetry, and "adopted not just Eliot's style but his whole attitude to poetry," subscribing whole-heartedly to such Eliotic tenets as the importance of impersonality and the literary tradition, as set forth in *The Sacred Wood* (Carpenter 58). His admiration for Eliot's critical faculty was not based solely on these early, enormously influential essays, however. Auden was also well-acquainted with Eliot's later essays, which despite their importance often go unread. In his own prose, Auden references an array of Eliot's later pieces, including his essays on "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" and "Yeats" (1940) and his introductions to collections by Marianne Moore (1936) and Rudyard Kipling (1941),[3] all of which address at least some aspect of Eliot's thought on the interaction between belief and art. Moreover, when writing for *The Griffin*, Auden chose to review not only Eliot's *The Collected Poems* but

[3] For example, Auden refers to a passage of Eliot's "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" (*SE* 130-131) in his essay on *Othello*, "The Joker in the Pack" (*DH* 268). In his 1942 review of Joseph Hone's *Life of W. B. Yeats* (*Prose II* 173), Auden paraphrases the last lines of Eliot's 1940 "Yeats" essay, which had affirmed that Yeats "was one of those few whose history of their own time, are a part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them" (*SP* 257). Auden quotes from Eliot's 1935 Introduction to Marianne Moore's *Selected Poems* in his 1944 review of Moore's *Nevertheless*, "Beauty is Everlasting," in which he expresses his embarrassment that he had not immediately agreed with Eliot's high opinion of Moore when he first encountered her poetry the previous decade, presumably in the volume Eliot had introduced (*Prose II* 234). Auden's "The Poet of the Encirclement" (1943) is a review of *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (1941), which Eliot edited and introduced. In his review, Auden frequently refers to Eliot's Introduction (*Prose II* 198-203), which was later reprinted as "Rudyard Kipling" in *On Poetry and Poets*. As these references indicate, Auden frequently read Eliot's essays shortly after they were published. Since we know Eliot sent him a copy of *After Strange Gods*, it's possible that he sent him other pieces as well, as he did for many of his friends and acquaintances, which would have helped Auden to stay abreast of any developments in Eliot's thought.

also the 1951 reissue of his *Selected Essays*. In the review, Auden maintains that the essays testify to "how great an advantage a critic who is by vocation a poet, and a good one, has over a critic who is not": "[T]he fact of having written authentic poetry himself lends to his critical opinions an authority . . . which the other cannot . . . hope to have" (5). Moreover, a poet-critic like Eliot will not simply bemoan current literary circumstances, but "is compelled, if he is to write at all, to seek a cure for the malaise of the present" (5), a malaise which included, from Eliot's and Auden's perspective, a disregard for the role of belief in art, which their work accordingly attempted to rectify. Auden is not in complete accord with Eliot, however. He implies that Eliot devotes too much space in his prose to the place of religion in society, as opposed to focusing primarily on its connection to literature. Rather than applying himself only to the problems of the literary world, Eliot attempts "to diagnose and prescribe for the ills of modern civilization" (6), which, incidentally, Auden himself is prone to do. Although he admires some of these more sociological pieces-- calling "Thoughts after Lambeth," for example, "his finest essay of this kind" (6)-- one suspects that Auden would have been more receptive to them in general if the two poets' views on religion and society were as similar as their views on religion and literature; Auden's response to *After Strange Gods* and his review of "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture" reveal that he takes issue with many of Eliot's prescriptions "for the ills of modern civilization." Nevertheless, Auden for the most part found Eliot's prose congenial and instructive, and in *Secondary Worlds* describes himself as one of those "familiar with his critical writing" and his special preoccupations as "a poet, a dramatist, and a twentieth century Christian" (11). Even Bloom, who finds Eliot so distasteful, must acknowledge that Auden's own prose

testifies to his allegiance to the elder poet: "I think it is unfortunate that he should find himself in apostolic succession to Eliot, but *Secondary Worlds* seems to indicate that the succession is not unwelcome to him" (*Auden* 3).

Their criticism provides invaluable insight into their understanding of what it meant to be "a poet, a dramatist, and a twentieth century Christian," and of the kinds of pitfalls which they were trying to avoid. So even if one were like those of Eliot's contemporaries who could, as More describes them, take the poetry and leave the prose ("Cleft Eliot" 235), one should still study the prose of Eliot and Auden if only to understand the poetry better. They both acknowledge the intimate relationship between their creative and critical work. In 1957, Eliot described his prose "a by-product of my private poetry-workshop; or a prolongation of the thinking that went into the formation of my own verse" (*OPP* 106). He maintained that "the critical writings of poets . . . owe a good deal of their interest to the fact that the poet, at the back of his mind, if not as his ostensible purpose, is always trying to defend the kind of poetry he is writing or to formulate the kind that he wants to write" (*OPP* 26). Although Auden cautions, "The critical opinion of a writer should always be taken with a large grain of salt" (*DH* 9) and that sometimes "all they are really saying is: 'Read me. Don't read the other fellows'" (*DH* 52), he agrees with Eliot that a poet's criticism can shed light on his poetry. According to Auden, "in assessing the critical remarks of any practising artist, we must remember that his primary concern is, very properly, with the works which he is making himself" (*CR* 188). More specifically, he explains that a poet's literary pronouncements are "manifestations of his debate with himself as to what he should do next and what he

should avoid" and that "taken as critical admonitions addressed by his Censor to the poet himself, there is generally something to be learned from them" (*DH* 9; 52-53).[4]

Among other things, one may discover from these essays that Eliot and Auden were not always sure how to proceed as Christian poets and were well aware of the various, and, from their perspective, nearly insurmountable, problems facing them. Some scholars don't realize how extensively the poets grappled with the questions relating to the role of belief in art, however, and when they do address the later essays they are inclined to elide many of the subtleties and even contradictions in their criticism. The poets themselves are partially responsible for this state of affairs because they do sometimes utter what appear to be unambiguous statements or definitive formulations on some aspect of the relationship between religion and art, as when Auden declares, "Culture is one of Caesar's things" (*DH* 458). The aphoristic quality of many of Auden's pronouncements, like this one, in particular tempts scholars into thinking that they can neatly summarize his critical positions with a plummy quotation. As Carpenter explains, however, often these kinds of statements "did not reflect the full range of his opinions," and in fact "he sometimes flatly contradicted" them (xv).[5] Critics are especially prone to assume that Auden's and Eliot's often highly quotable claims regarding the distinctions between the spheres of art and religion meant that they thought the boundary between the two spheres was quite clearly delineated, and they therefore had little difficulty in defining the relationship between them. If this were the case, the poets would not have

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[4] As Hynes says of Auden's prose, "This is the justification for reading a poet's forgotten lectures and reviews-- that they contain the mind and the knowledge that made the poems . . ." (38).

[5] Whenever Auden appears to dismiss a complicated issue with an epigram or a sweeping generalization, he is often being intentionally provocative or amusing, and trusts that in such instances his readers will not take him too seriously. As he said, "Every genius, from time to time, talks nonsense-- only minor artists are never foolish . . ." (*CR* 195).

felt driven to examine the nature of this relationship repeatedly in their postconversion prose in an effort to refine their own understanding of it. Thus only a thorough knowledge of their prose serves to qualify and contextualize such claims, revealing that they experienced much more anxiety as they tried to define the place of religion in literature in general and their work in particular than certain isolated statements might lead one to assume. When taken in context, however, their statements which seem to mark a clear line between religion and art do indicate a significant aspect of their postconversion thought. While Eliot and Auden argue that religion and art continually impinge upon one another, the poets also insist that the two spheres are not and should not be treated as identical, and rebuke those artists and critics who attempt to do so.

Distinguishing between Art and Religion, the Poet and the Preacher

In defining the limits of art relative to religion, Auden subscribes to many of Eliot's critical positions. For example, he agrees with Eliot that a poet in a modern society has a more circumscribed role than a poet in a primitive society. In "The Social Function of Poetry" (1945), Eliot had stated that in more primitive societies poetry was often "used in religious ritual" and some "early runes and chants . . . had very practical magical purposes-- to avert the evil eye, to cure some disease, or to propitiate some demon" (*OPP* 16). In such instances, the poet is inseparable from the priest. As Eliot explains in "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," in these "more primitive communities the several activities of culture are inextricably interwoven," but "[a]s civilization becomes more complex, greater occupational specialization evinces itself" and "religion, science, politics and art become abstractedly conceived apart from each other" (*Christianity* 96-7). In modern, specialized societies, poetry may still be used at

times in religious rituals, as is the case with hymns, but in general its social functions are more limited. Auden echoes Eliot, arguing that "the so-called fine arts have lost the social utility they once had" and that, unlike in some primitive societies, in our culture "the poet has an amateur status, and his poetry is neither public nor esoteric but intimate" (*DH* 74; 54). Poetry becomes gratuitous and "in a society governed by the values appropriate to Labor," that is, in a capitalist society like our own, "the gratuitous is no longer regarded-- most earlier cultures thought differently-- as sacred" (*DH* 74). In contrast, Eliot and Auden contend that the modern poet's duties are secular: to protect language and to entertain. Even while they insist on the limited nature of the poet's role in society, however, they reveal that the execution of these duties has ramifications beyond the world of art.

As Eliot famously declared in "Little Gidding," the poet must endeavor "To purify the dialect of the tribe" (*CPP* 194). Both he and Auden wrote throughout their careers of a poet's responsibility to language. Eliot explains that he should strive "first to preserve, and second to extend and improve" his language (*OPP* 20), and may be deemed a success if he is able "To pass on to posterity one's own language, more highly developed, more refined, and more precise than it was before one wrote" (*TCTC* 133). Both poets insisted that preserving and improving one's language affects more than the state of literature, however. Auden, for example, who praised the "enormous" influence of "Eliot's efforts 'to purify the dialect of the tribe,'" contended that Eliot's advocacy of language reflects his "public-spirited concern" to defend society "against the heretic and the barbarian" ("Selected Essays" 4-5). Eliot would certainly agree with Auden's assertion, since he argues that a nation's language helps to define its sensibility (*OPP* 22)

and links the "preservation of developed speech" to the perseveration "of civilization against barbarism" (*TCTC* 160). Eliot believed that a society's values are shaped by the language in which they are expressed, so if its language becomes corrupt, so too will these values. Therefore, the poet who performs his duty to language well not only helps future writers but "everybody after him who speaks that language, whose mother tongue it is, whether they are poets, philosophers, statesmen or railway porters" (*TCTC* 133). Similarly, Auden, who felt that a poet must "be as intimate with [language] as with his own flesh and blood" (*DH* 286), railed against "one evil that concerns literature which should never be passed over in silence but be continually publicly attacked, and that is corruption of language" (*DH* 15). He attributed this debasement of language to such factors as the prevalence of political rhetoric and the rise of a consumer culture. For instance, in "Shorts II" (1969-71), he writes:

> Yes, a Society so obsessed with rabid consumption
>
> stinks, I entirely agree: but, student radicals, why,
>
> why protest in its own dehumanized language of Ad-Mass?
>
> if you would civil our land, first you should civil your speech. (*CP* 859)

Thus, in keeping with Eliot's views, Auden avers that the improvement of society depends upon the improvement of its language. From their perspective, the defense of language is not the narrowly literary responsibility it may appear to be, but an essential part of maintaining society's health.

Although they claim that poets perform this valuable service to society, Eliot and Auden are nevertheless inclined to undermine the importance of poetry when compared to things of the spirit. In his important essay, "Postscript: Christianity and Art," Auden

declares, "To a Christian," unlike a polytheist or a materialist, "both art and science are secular activities, that is to say, small beer" (*DH* 457). Such an attitude was encouraged by his reading of existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, who emphasized the chasm between worldly and heavenly concerns, but was also likely influenced by his reading of Eliot. As Spears acknowledges, there is a "curious parallel between Auden and Eliot" in their assertions that "that poetry is 'fundamentally frivolity,'" as Auden puts it, when compared to religion ("Poetic Justice" 481). As well as frequently deprecating poetry-- for instance calling it "a mug's game" (*UPUC* 148)-- Eliot had earlier differentiated between the activities of the poet and the theologian in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca": "The poet makes poetry, the metaphysician makes metaphysics, the bee makes honey . . ." (*SE* 138). Because modern poets have lost their priestly functions and no longer perform religious rites, Eliot and Auden claim that they should primarily strive to entertain. For example, in the 1928 Preface to *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot famously called poetry "a superior amusement" (viii), and elsewhere states that "there is no doubt that a poet wishes to give pleasure, to entertain or divert people; and he should be glad to be able to feel that the entertainment or diversion is enjoyed by as large and various a number of people as possible" (*UPUC* 22). Auden agrees, claiming that "every author, however difficult, would like to give pleasure" (*FA* 265) and suggests that a poet should regard "himself as an entertainer" (*Light Verse* xv).

Eliot and Auden objected to the Romantics because they conflated religion and art and instead of accepting the limits of their role-- to protect language and to entertain-- strove to ascend again to the high position poets once held. The two poets condemned anyone whom they thought tried to make a religion out of art, singling out Matthew

Arnold and P. B. Shelley in particular. Arnold, for instance, claimed, "More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry" (161-62). According to Eliot, Arnold "discovered a new formula: poetry is not religion, but it is a capital substitute for religion-- not invalid port, which may lend itself to hypocrisy, but coffee without caffeine, and tea without tannin" (*UPUC* 17). This attempt to substitute poetry for religion is vain, because "nothing in this world or the next is a substitute for anything else" (*UPUC* 113). Auden, who likewise ridicules Arnold's assertion that "poetry was a substitute for religion," criticizes those who "attempt to find in art a bolster or substitute for a faith in which people no longer believe . . ." (*Prose II* 448; 85). Eliot and Auden agree that if one has lost one's faith, one must not delude oneself into thinking that art can take its place. They thought the Romantic poets were especially prone to treat art as a religion and consequently try to elevate their own status in society. McDonald remarks that Auden is employing "Eliot's idiom" ("American Liberal" 10) when he states, "One of the less agreeable symptoms of Romanticism, and one from which we still suffer, has been the exaggerated importance which it claimed for the arts" (*Prose II* 152). Both target Shelley in particular for this poetic self-aggrandizement. Eliot, for instance, states that the Romantics' excessive "claims for poetry . . . reach their highest points of exaggeration in Shelley's famous phrase, 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind' (*UPUC* 16). Similarly, Auden (who, unlike Eliot, quotes Shelley correctly) regrets that during the Romantic period instead of the poet "regarding himself as an entertainer," he becomes "a prophet, 'the unacknowledged

legislator of the world'" (*Light Verse* xv). Elsewhere he condemns Shelley explicitly, exclaiming, "How glad I am that the silliest remark ever made about poets, 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world,' was made by a poet whose work I detest. Sounds more like the secret police to me" (*Prose II* 348). Because Eliot and Auden insist that a poet is not an "unacknowledged legislator" or a priest, and that poetry cannot be a substitute for religion, they might seem to posit that there is a clear separation between religion and literature. However, even their assertions regarding the limits of art are influenced by their own religious convictions, since their Christianity prompts them to make a distinction between the secular and the sacred in the first place. Auden claims that poetry is "one of Caesar's things" and one ought to "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's" (*DH* 458; 430), but he also explains that one of theology's "perennial task[s] to perform" is "instructing the devout, both the institutional authorities and the mass of the laity, in the difference between the things of God and the things of Caesar" (*FA* 52). Thus, when poets like Eliot and Auden acknowledge that their work is frivolous and mere entertainment in comparison to "the things of God," they are actually performing a theological function. While they condemn treating poetry *as* a religion, they both acknowledged that poetry is affected *by* religion. They may allude to poetry as a worldly pursuit, but they realize it cannot be so neatly compartmentalized-- the distinction between secular and sacred concerns blurs upon closer examination. In fact, the greatest challenge of their postconversion career was uncovering the ways in which artistic and religious elements act upon one another in order to determine how best to relate them in their work, ideally creating poetry which is strengthened rather than compromised by their beliefs.

The Inextricability of Literature and Belief

Despite their interest in the effects of belief on poetry, Eliot and Auden insisted that poetry must first be appreciated *qua* poetry. In the 1928 Preface to the *Sacred Wood*, Eliot states that his early essays often dealt with "the problem of the integrity of poetry, with the repeated assertion that when we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing" (viii). In "The Function of Criticism" (1923), for example, he had remarked, "I have assumed as axiomatic that a creation, a work of art, is autotelic" (*SE* 30).[6] Following his conversion, he continued to maintain that "to understand a poem it is . . . necessary . . . that we should endeavour to grasp what the poetry is aiming to be; one might say-- though it is long since I have employed such terms with any assurance-- endeavouring to grasp its entelecy" (*OPP* 110). Auden also embraces this notion of poetry's autotelicity, as when he writes, "The pattern or structure of a work of art is a unique, self-imposed world bounded by space" (*Prose II* 491). Thus, one must grasp the poem's inner structure and logic, its essential wholeness. Eliot and Auden praised those poets who guarded the integrity or autotelicity of their work, and were not concerned with any secondary functions it may perform. For example, Eliot commended Keats's devotion to his poetry, stating that, unlike many of his contemporaries, "he was merely about his business" (*UPUC* 102). Auden makes the same claim for Shakespeare, to whom Eliot likens Keats (*UPUC* 102), in "The Dyer's Hand." In this review of Mark Van Doren's biography of Shakespeare, Auden declares, "His range of curiosity was unlimited, but he confined himself to one mode of understanding, the poetic. . . .The dyer's hand was completely immersed in what it

[6]For a comprehensive examination of Eliot's defense of the autotelicity of poetry, see Sue Laver's dissertation, "Poets, Philosophers, and Priests: T. S. Eliot, Postmodernism, and the Social Authority of Art."

worked in" (*Prose II* 30). However, according to Eliot and Auden, the fact that poetry should first be considered "as poetry and not another thing" does not mean that it is a closed system, independent from life. Much as poetry affects the world outside its bounds-- through its guardianship of language, among other things-- extraliterary factors inevitably affect poetry. Therefore, they both dismiss the notion of "Pure Poetry" as delusive. For example, Auden states that while Shakespeare is in a way "the purest poet who ever lived" because "he explored all life through a single medium, that of language," he does not succumb to "the temptation to write 'pure' poetry in the false sense," the sense in which the term is usually understood, which Auden equates with trying "to use language to explore not life but itself, to commit verbal incest" (*Prose II* 30). Shakespeare's plays may be autotelic, but they are not solipsistic. Auden was even skeptical about the ability of those who *were* tempted to write pure poetry to achieve this goal. Of the Symbolist's attempt to create "*la poésie pure*," Auden says, "If it could be written, which is doubtful, it would not necessarily be the best poem" and that "The only kind of speech which approximates to the symbolist's poetic ideal is polite tea table conversation . . ." (*DH* 58; 26). Eliot, who was annoyed that some people assumed his insistence that "poetry is poetry and not science or religion" meant that he was advocating "pure poetry" ("Religion without Humanism" 109), likewise doubted the possibility of achieving this Symbolist ideal. Before his conversion, in "The Idea of a Literary Review" (1926), he asserted, "Even the purest literature is alimented from non-literary sources, and has non-literary consequences. Pure literature is a chimera of sensation; admit the vestige of an idea and it is already gone" (4). Following their conversions, the two poets focused much of their attention on these "non-literary

sources" of literature, and the frequency with which they wrote about the role of religion in poetry testifies to their conviction that one's beliefs are among the most important of these sources.

Eliot and Auden took very similar positions on what was typically formulated as "the problem of belief in poetry," which centered on the place and status of belief in poetry and its effects on reception. "Belief" in this context refers to any philosophy or ideology underpinning a work of art, explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously.[7] Eliot addressed this problem repeatedly, one might say obsessively, in his postconversion criticism-- including in many of the essays which Auden read-- as part of his ongoing debate with I. A. Richards. In "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," "his most significant early attempt to articulate a 'Theory of Belief'" (Schwartz 217), Eliot declared that the problem of belief was "very complicated, probably quite insoluble" (*SE* 138). In this and other essays, Eliot asserts, contrary to Richards, that one can never separate poetry from belief of some kind. Even if a poem is nihilistic, it is still informed by a particular philosophy, that of nihilism. Consequently, in "Dante," another important essay on this subject, Eliot remarks that he finds Richards's claim in *Science and Poetry* that in *The Waste Land*, he "effected 'a complete severance between his poetry and *all* beliefs' . . . to be incomprehensible" (*SE* 269).[8] Auden also entered into the debate, not surprisingly on Eliot's side. In "Criticism in a Mass Society" (1941), for

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[7] Unless otherwise stated, any mention of Eliot's and Auden's "belief" refers to their orthodox Christianity. In all other cases, "belief" will be used in this broader sense, which is in accordance with Eliot's and Auden's usage.

[8] Eliot is more temperate in "The Modern Mind" (1933), in which he states "when Mr. Richards asserts that *The Waste Land* effects 'a complete severance between poetry and *all* beliefs' I am no better qualified to say No! than is any other reader" (*UPUC* 122). However, in this passage Eliot is speaking of the intentional fallacy, and only endeavoring to show that readers are entitled to decide upon the meaning of a work of literature. Consequently, Richards may read an absence of belief in the poem if he chooses. Nevertheless, Eliot continues, "I will admit that I think that either Mr. Richards is wrong, or I do not understand his meaning" (*UPUC* 122).

example, he states, "Dr Richards once said that *The Waste Land* marked the severance of poetry from all beliefs. This seems to me an inaccurate description. The poem is *about* the absence of belief and its very unpleasant consequences . . ." (*Prose II* 96).[9] Both poets imply that Richards tries to undermine the importance of ideology in literature because of his antipathy towards Christianity, the belief system which informed most Western literary works until the twentieth century. According to Eliot, "Mr. Richards is much occupied with the religious problem simply in the attempt to avoid it" (*UPUC* 118-19), as part of a maneuver to dismiss religion and elevate art above its station. In his review of Richards's *Science and Poetry*, "Literature, Science, and Dogma" (1927), Eliot objects to his claim that "Poetry 'is capable of saving us' . . . it is like saying that the wall-paper will save us when the walls have crumbled" (243). He believed that Richards was guilty of "subscribing to the Arnoldian tenet that poetry can replace religion" (Manganiello 68). Similarly, Auden, who agrees with Eliot that "the problem of Poetry and Belief" is "an immensely important and difficult question" (*Prose II* 54), complains that Richards, "[i]n seeking to account for the experience of all readers of poetry, that the metaphysical beliefs expressed in a poem are not solely decisive in our assessment of its value . . . denies them any rôle at all. This is going too far" (*Prose II* 96). From Auden's perspective, Richards falls into a similar error as William York Tindall, who in his biography of D. H. Lawrence condemns him "for not separating his art from his beliefs. If we must have religion, he would rather it were left in church where it can do no harm" (*Prose II* 32). Despite the wishes of those like Richards and Tindall, who seek to keep

[9] The year before, in "Against Romanticism," Auden had made his first objection to Richards's interpretation of *The Waste Land*. He asserted that Richards had overlooked that "[t]he *subject* of the poem is non-belief; but behind its organization lies an impassioned belief in the reality of spiritual and social damnation . . ." (*Prose II* 54).

belief and literature rigorously apart, Auden affirms, "I do not believe such a separation is possible" (*Prose II* 32). Thus, Eliot and Auden assert that poetry cannot replace religion but neither can it be separated from some form of belief. They realized that "no art, and particularly and especially no literary art, can exist in a vacuum," ideological or otherwise (Eliot "Poetry and Propaganda" 31).

Eliot's and Auden's theories of criticism amply demonstrate their conviction that literature and belief are intimately related. They emphasized that literature cannot be created *or* evaluated in isolation from ideological considerations. More had the impression that Eliot "seems to cherish the theory-- very heretical in my eyes-- that ethics and aesthetics are to be kept rigorously separate" (qted. in Dakin 269), but that is not the case. Eliot actually repudiated the notion that art was an independent sphere of activity, which he argued gained currency during the Renaissance. As McDiarmid explains in a chapter of *Saving Civilization* called "The Myth of the Seventeenth Century," Eliot's and Auden's "notions of the good civilized place with its happy community are displaced into the Middle Ages. The Renaissance bears the burden, in this scheme, for all the fragmentation and alienation of the modern age" (35-36), including the fragmentation between different spheres of human thought and endeavor, like art and religion. Thus, Eliot complains in "Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" that during the Middle Ages "the audience could enjoy [drama] in a much more comprehensive way that we can" (9), and rails against "the compartmentalization of life in general . . . the sharp division between our religious and our ordinary life. I know that in the world in which we live this compartmentalization is constantly being forced upon us" (13). Although Auden did not share Eliot's intense interest in medieval theology or want the religious

homogeneity of medieval society, he did admire the Middle Ages for its lack of compartmentalization-- especially between religion and art-- compared to the modern world. Like Eliot, he blamed the Renaissance for this current state of affairs, explaining in "Criticism in a Mass Society" (1941):

> The Renaissance broke the subordination of all other intellectual fields to that of theology, and assumed the autonomy of each. The artists of the Renaissance sought canons of esthetic judgments which should be independent and self-supporting, and believed that they had found them in the classics, forgetting that the esthetics of the Greeks were inseparable from social habits and religious beliefs which they themselves did not share. The attempt to make esthetics an autonomous province resulted in academic esthetics, the substitution of the pedant for the priest. (*Prose II* 95)

Nevertheless, Eliot and Auden contend that despite the efforts of Renaissance thinkers, and more contemporary scholars like Richards, art and belief can never really be separated.

According to the two poets, readers are always influenced by belief, whether they acknowledge it or not. As Eliot stated, "it is impossible to fence off literary criticism from criticism on other grounds, and that moral, religious and social judgments cannot be wholly excluded" (*TCTC* 26). Similarly, in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" (1928), speaker "B," who serves as Eliot's spokesman, affirms, "You can never draw the line between aesthetic criticism and moral and social criticism; you cannot draw a line between criticism and metaphysics . . ." (*SE* 55). Although we may try to "separate our literary from our religious judgments . . . the separation is not, and never can be,

complete" (*SE* 392). Rather than trying to pretend that the act of criticism is ideologically neutral, scholars should acknowledge the effects that belief, both their own and that within the work, have upon reception. In "Goethe as Sage" (1957), Eliot maintains:

> Literary criticism is an activity which must constantly define its own boundaries; also, it must constantly be going beyond them: the one invariable rule is, that when the literary critic exceeds his frontiers, he should do so in full consciousness of what he is doing. We cannot get very far with Dante, or Shakespeare, or Goethe, without touching upon theology, and philosophy, and ethics, and politics . . . (*SE* 215)

Eliot insists that this extra-literary dimension of criticism is not to be regretted. Rather, the fact that one's own beliefs and ideas enter into an evaluation of a work can make one a richer, more perceptive critic. In "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1957), Eliot states, "A critic who was interested in nothing but 'literature' would have very little to say to us, for his literature would be a pure abstraction" and that "the critic must be the whole man, a man with convictions and principles, and of knowledge and experience of life" (*OPP* 116). Also, in "Poetry and Propaganda" (1930), he mused, "I do not suppose that there ever has been, or ever will be, a critic of any art, whose appreciation was a separate faculty, quite judicious and wholly isolated from his other interests and his private passions: if there was, is or will be, he was, is or will be a bore with nothing at all to say" (32). So a purely aesthetic approach to a work of art is not only impossible but undesirable.

Auden insists that a literary critic should be aware of the effects of ideology on art because one of his main functions is ideally to "Throw light upon the relation of art to life, to science, economics, ethics, religion . . ." (*DH* 9). Moreover, Auden asserted that "life does not exist in a series of autonomous departments, esthetic values do not nourish themselves, and . . . the critic who does not realize this will be a bad critic who misleads the public and at best can only be right on occasions by luck" (*Prose II* 97). So a responsible critic acknowledges the impact that other fields like religion make upon art. Such a critic will also be more aware of his own biases, the extra-literary factors that influence and, so Eliot contends, enrich his reading. According to Auden, "All the judgments, aesthetic or moral, that we pass, however objective we try to make them, are in part a rationalization and in part a corrective discipline of our subjective wishes" (*DH* 6). He argues that a critic should reveal what constitutes his "dream Eden," which he does himself, so that a reader knows the prejudices and predilections, the general mindset, that colors the criticism. When describing his Eden, Auden includes his religious preference (*DH* 7), indicating that critics as well as readers should be aware that a critic's religious beliefs are one of the factors that inevitably affect his criticism.

Throughout their postconversion careers, of course, both Eliot and Auden were not only conscious of but openly acknowledged the profound role their beliefs played in their critical response to literature. In fact, as indicated above, their criticism became primarily ideological in focus. As Eliot states in his Kipling essay, "the most important thing about a man," including a writer, is "his religious attitude" (*OPP* 242). As well as directing so much of his attention to the problem of belief in poetry and to religious literature in general, Eliot declared in "Religion and Literature," "Literary criticism

should be completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint," and that in a secular age like the present, it is "more necessary for Christian readers to scrutinize their reading . . . with explicit ethical and theological standards" (*SE* 388). He goes on to state, "I am not concerned here with religious literature but with the application of our religion to the criticism of any literature" (*SE* 389). So he advocates that his fellow Christians read both secular and sacred literature through the prism of their faith, as he did. In "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," Eliot argues that only criticism "completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint" will be able to make certain moral judgments on art: "Esthetic sensibility must be extended to spiritual perception, and spiritual perception must be extended into esthetic sensibility and disciplined taste before we are qualified to pass judgment upon decadence or diabolism or nihilism in art" (*Christianity* 102-3). Smidt, like Kermode, may claim that after his conversion Eliot's critical positions, specifically regarding the importance of belief in poetry, "were not fundamentally changed" (61), but the extraordinary emphasis he placed on belief in his later essays, and his often explicitly Christian readings, prove otherwise.

Like Eliot, Auden also read from "a definite ethical and theological standpoint," and interpreted secular and sacred literature in the light of his Christian beliefs. As Spears explains, "Like most aphorists, Auden is essentially a moralist, and the critic in him cannot be separated from the sage and teacher. . . .Auden has many brilliant passages of technical analysis, but his central interest is in the larger questions of the nature of poetry, its relation to society, its effect on the writer and the reader, and its religious significance" (292). In "A Grammar of Assent" (1941), Auden quotes approvingly from Kenneth Burke's *The Philosophy of Literary Form*: "A critic's perspective . . . implicitly

selects a set of questions that the critic considers to be key questions" (*Prose II* 141). As Spears asserts, these key questions for Auden have a clearly moral dimension. In "Making, Knowing and Judging," Auden reveals that his interests in a poem, beyond its technical attributes, are "in the broadest sense, moral: 'What kind of guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or the good place?' His notion of the Evil One?" (*DH* 50-51). His approach to a work of art isn't always moral "in the broadest sense" either; oftentimes it is explicitly Christian, as when he revealed that *The Dyer's Hand* was really about "Christianity and Art" (qted. in Carpenter 404). So although Auden once claimed, "Questions of religion and history, however interesting and important, are not the business of the literary critic" (*DH* 211), he didn't abide by these strictures himself. Regardless of the kind of work he was evaluating, he employed "Christian concepts as a means of describing the intellectual-spiritual processes he found at work in literature" (Carpenter 404). He even takes P. G. Wodehouse's Wooster and Jeeves books "[t]o illustrate the use of the master-servant relations as a parable of agape" (*DH* 139).[10] As well as applying Christian concepts to all manner of literature, Auden and Eliot scrutinized the particular beliefs inherent in different literary works, and their perception of the validity of those beliefs dramatically affected their valuation.

In "Religion and Literature," Eliot insists that, while one must employ literary standards to determine whether a work qualifies as literature, "The 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary values" (*SE* 388). The cogency of the philosophy employed must also be taken into account: "How complete, how intelligent, how well understood, is the philosophy used by the poet, how completely does he realize

[10] Praising Wooster's humility, which earns him the services of "the godlike Jeeves," Auden quotes a passage in which Wooster expresses his great appreciation for his servant, and concludes, "So speaks comically . . . the voice of Agape, of Holy Love" (*DH* 145).

it poetically; where does he get it from, how much of life does it cover?" ("Poetry and Propaganda" 36). A poet may create great poetry from an inferior philosophy or bad poetry from a better philosophy, "Yet we can hardly doubt that the 'truest' philosophy is the best material for the greatest poet; so that the poet must be rated in the end both by the philosophy he realizes in poetry and by the fullness and adequacy of the realization" ("Poetry and Propaganda" 37). Eliot's conviction that an adequate philosophy helps one to write well is the reason why he was concerned about Auden's ideology before his conversion. He worried about "Auden's ethical principles and convictions," because "I think that if a man's ethical and religious views and convictions are feeble or limited and incapable of development, then his technical development is restricted" (qted. in Carpenter 329). The Christian Auden came to agree with Eliot about the importance of what they regarded as a cogent philosophy. For example, to Kenneth Burke's assertion that "art is safest only when the underlying moral system is sound," Auden responds, "Precisely" (*Prose II* 143). In "Mimesis and Allegory" (1940), which deals quite extensively with the problem of belief in poetry, Auden states:

> Art is not metaphysics any more than it is conduct, and the artist is usually unwise to insist too directly in his art upon his belief; but without an adequate and conscious metaphysics in the background, art's imitation of life inevitably becomes, either a photostatic copy of the accidental details of life without pattern or significance, or a personal allegory of the artist's individual dementia, of interest primarily to the psychologist and the historian. (*Prose II* 87)

So the beliefs in a work of art help to give it relevance and significance, but only if they are "an adequate and conscious metaphysics." Elsewhere, Auden goes so far as to say,

"False beliefs in fact lead to bad poetry" and bad literature in general, as shown in the work of Thomas Wolfe: "[A] false conception of human nature led Thomas Wolfe to write the grandiose rubbish he mistook for great prose" (*Prose II* 96). While they argue that all readers are influenced by whether or not they think the philosophy espoused by a work is sound, Eliot and Auden, with their focus on belief, are particularly swayed by this aspect of a work in their valuations.

Since the poets, after their conversions, regarded orthodox Christianity as a sound philosophy, it seems to follow that they would argue that a literary work can only benefit, technically and otherwise, when it espouses their theology. Indeed, they do at times make this argument. For example, both poets make the claim that secularism severely limits art. Eliot, in "Notes towards the Definition of Culture, remarks, "The artistic sensibility is impoverished by its divorce from the religious sensibility, the religious by its separation from the artistic . . ." (*Christianity* 98-99). Auden, in his aforementioned defense of Eliot against Brooks, states, "A healthier and more intelligent man than our subject would have been led by this to ask himself whether . . . the faults both of society and its art do not indicate that perhaps the doctrine of the natural goodness of Man and the Idea of Progress," which Auden links with secular humanism, "are an inadequate basis for true Democracy or *great Art*" [emphasis added] (*Prose II* 150). In "The Fall of Rome" (1966), Auden makes the grand claim, "One may like or dislike Christianity but no one can deny that it was Christianity and the Bible which raised Western literature from the dead" (*In Solitude* 130). According to Auden, Christianity made everyone, rich and poor, educated and ignorant, a potential subject for literature since all were important and engaged in a dramatic struggle for salvation. Similarly, Eliot, much like Graham

Greene, asserted that Christianity benefited literature because characters seemed more dynamic and their actions of more consequence when they were presented as battling for their souls as opposed to negotiating merely worldly problems. In *After Strange Gods*, he complains that "with the disappearance of the idea of Original Sin," which Brooks had castigated him for believing, "with the disappearance of the idea of intense moral struggle, the human beings presented to us both in poetry and in prose fiction today . . . tend to become less and less real" (45-46).[11] Similarly, Auden suggests, "Only a belief in a personal relation between an erring soul and a God of truth who is at all times concerned with that soul can make the history of its errors significant" (*Prose II* 247). Further, Auden, who believed that "the *Weltanschauung* of a poet is of importance in assessing his work," states, "there is, after all, a relation, however obscure and misunderstood, between art and goodness" (*Prose II* 54). In "Marianne Moore," he praises Moore's poems because, on top of their other qualities, "they convince the reader that they have been written by someone who is personally good. Questioned about the relation between art and morals, Miss Moore herself said:

> 'Must a man be good to write good poems? The villains in Shakespeare are not illiterate, are they? But rectitude *has* a ring that is implicative, I would say. And with *no* integrity, a man is not likely to write the kind of book I read.' (*DH* 305)

Auden, who ends the essay on that note, implicitly agrees with Moore. Since Christianity enjoins one to live the kind of morally upright life that Auden and Moore associate here, however obliquely, with good literature, embracing Christianity would seem advantageous for a poet. Eliot and Auden also give specific examples of poets whose

[11] Although Eliot essentially disavowed *After Strange Gods*, presumably for its objectionable sociological statements, his literary views expressed therein are often illuminating and consistent with his opinions expressed elsewhere.

Christianity inspired their work, such as George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins,[12] and Eliot of course credited the Thomist theology at the core of Dante's *Divine Comedy* for much of the epic's power (*SE* 136). So it seems there should be no tension between the two writers' religious convictions and poetic ambitions. A close examination of their prose and poetry shows, however, that both Eliot and Auden thought that spiritual and artistic values may be in some respects irreconcilable. They betray an anxiety that their commitment to art might hinder their spiritual journey *and* that their religious beliefs might undermine the quality of their work.

The Spiritual Dangers of Art

The fear that art might threaten one's spiritual development is reflected in the Church's traditional ambivalence towards secular art. As Helen Gardner explains in *Religion and Literature* (which includes her T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures, delivered in 1968):

> From the earliest times the Christian attitude to secular learning and secular art was Janus-like, or double-faced, corresponding to the contrary strains in Christian thought: the impulse to deny the world and all secular values, even the highest, and the impulse to embrace the world and sanctify its values. The two strains, denial of the world and affirmation of the world, existing together in tension, are perhaps essential to every religion, but in Christianity the tension is explicit, and the conflict of attitudes between individuals and within individuals is there from

[12] In *George Herbert* (1962), for example, Eliot stated, "Of all the poets who may be said to belong to 'the school of Donne,' Herbert is the only one whose whole source of inspiration was his religious faith. . . .[I]t was only in the Faith, in hunger and thirst after godliness, in his self-questioning and his religious meditation, that he was inspired as a poet" (20-21). Eliot continues, "If there is another example since his time of a poetic genius so dedicated to God, it is that of Gerard Hopkins" (21), whose artistic success Auden likewise credits to his Christianity. In an essay on Hopkins, Auden claims that the poet's conversion to Catholicism and entry into the Jesuits "turned an esthete, no better or worse than half a dozen bright young men of the sixties and seventies, into a serious and unique artist" (*Prose II* 220).

> the beginning; St. Paul, on the one hand declaring that he wishes to know nothing 'save Jesus Christ and him crucified,' and on the other quoting to the Athenians from their own poets. (144)

Gardner, who discusses Eliot at some length, claims that he doesn't suffer from this ambivalence, however: "Eliot does not feel an incompatibility between the practice of religion and writing poetry . . ." (*Religion* 125). In truth, Eliot *did* worry that his devotion to God was compromised by his profession. He himself said, "A saint limits himself by writing poetry" (*ASG* 52), and while he didn't consider himself a saint this statement nevertheless suggests that he thought artistic and religious values were often at odds. Similarly, although Auden claims that Tolstoy was unusual in feeling qualms about his calling following his conversion (*Prose II* 301), he betrays such qualms himself. In *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, for example, McDiarmid reveals how his poems "insist on their own guilty triviality, as if poets were in perpetual need of intercession" and how this poetic guilt derives in large part from his religious convictions (8). His sense of unease over the potential incompatibility of his artistic and religious commitments is reflected in a quotation from Kierkegaard used as an epigraph to "Squares and Oblongs" (1948): "He would like to be religious but remains a poet. Consequently, he is unhappily in love with God" (*Prose II* 339). Eliot and Auden contended that artistic pursuits can hinder one's spiritual development in a number of ways, principally by tempting one to lead a sinful life for the sake of one's work, encouraging pride and an idolatrous attachment to art, putting one into seeming rivalry with God, and distracting one from religious duties.

Although Auden had stated, in accordance with Moore's position, that "there is, after all, a relation, however obscure and misunderstood, between art and goodness"

(*Prose II* 54), he more frequently makes the claim that there is in fact a "lack of identity between Goodness and Beauty, between the character of man and the character of his creations" (*Libretti* 246), a disconnect which he explores at length in the portrayal of the talented but deplorable artist Gregor Mittenhofer in the libretto *Elegy for Young Lovers* (1959-60). Thus, Auden repeatedly asserts that sinful living can actually inspire great poetry. For instance, in the "Postscript" to "The Cave of Making" (1964), a poem dedicated to Louis MacNeice, he writes,

> Time has taught you
>
> how much inspiration
>
> your vices brought you,
>
> what imagination
>
> can owe temptation
>
> yielded to,
>
> that many a fine
>
> expressive line
>
> would not have existed,
>
> had you resisted . . . (*CP* 694)

Auden insists that nearly all poets, not just MacNeice, are inspired by vice. In "Words and the Word," he claims that "every artist knows that the sources of his art are what Yeats called 'the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart,' its lusts, its hatreds, its envies, and that Goethe was speaking for all artists when he wrote:

> Poetic fire sank low in me,
>
> When it was good I sought to see;

But up it flamed, up to the sky,

When it was evil I sought to fly. (*SW* 118)

Poems often won't betray their sinful origins either: "How many ravishing things whose innocent beauty astounds us / owe their existence to Greed, Fear, or Vainglory or Guilt" (*CP* 856). Interestingly, at the end of the "Postscript" to "The Cave of Making," Auden writes, "You hope, yes, / your books will excuse you," but suggests instead:

God may reduce you

on Judgment Day

to tears of shame,

reciting by heart

the poems you would

have written, had

your life been good.

So a poet doesn't necessarily have to derive inspiration from sin, which Herbert and Hopkins demonstrate. If a poet thought a sinful life provided the best material for art, however, he might be reluctant to reform since, according to Auden, poets are often tempted "to avoid a change in one's life that would threaten the source of one's art" (Mendelson *Prose II* xxiii). Such a poet might instead assert, like the speaker of the pun quoted in "Notes on the Comic," "When I am dead I hope it may be said: / His sins were scarlet, but his books were read" (*DH* 380). This temptation to cling to a sinful life for the sake of one's work reveals what is at the core of all of the dangers faced by a Christian writer--the susceptibility to forget one's priorities and place artistic concerns above religious duties.

As Eliot and Auden repeatedly point out, the overvaluing of art is one of the reasons why artists are so susceptible to pride when they should rather seek humility. In "The Idea of a Christian Society," Eliot declares that "only in humility, charity and purity-- and most of all perhaps humility-- can we be prepared to receive the grace of God without which human operations are vain," but admits elsewhere that humility is a virtue "not conspicuous among modern men of letters" (*Christian* 75; *SE* 370). Vince Passaro suggests that Eliot "understood that humility was required of him, whether he managed to muster it or not" but that perhaps all artists suffer from arrogance (68). Auden also speaks of the lack of humility among artists, calling it "that rarest of virtues" (*DH* 145). In *The Enchafèd Flood*, he states that for a person with exceptional gifts, like a great artist, "the danger is pride, ie, thinking that his superior qualities are not given by the gods or fate or nature, but earned by him" (94), whereas a humble person will, according to the seventeenth century theologian Henry More, "attribute all that he has or is or can do to God the Author and Giver of every good and every perfect gift" (More *Anglicanism* 642). Auden's acute awareness of the dangers facing a Christian artist is due largely to the influence of Kierkegaard, from whom he learned:

> The spiritual dangers for the man of great talent are two. He is tempted to take personal credit for a gift which he has done nothing to deserve, and so to conclude that since he is superior to most others at art or science he is a superior human being to whom ethical and religious norms do not apply. And he is tempted to imagine that the particular activity for which he has a talent is of supreme importance . . . At exposing such pretensions, Kierkegaard is better than anybody else; here, indeed, he is a prophet, calling the talented to repentance. No person

> of talent who has read him can fail to realize that the talented man, even more than the millionaire, is the rich man for whom it is so difficult to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. (*FA* 197)

This difficulty is compounded by artistic ambition. As Auden wrote in "Shorts II," "Talent calls for display, some public space to perform in: / Virtue hills itself, even from virtuous men" (*CP* 858). Although a humble man should feel "a disgust, or at least a deadness, to the glory of the world and the applause of men" (More *Anglicanism* 642) and Auden acknowledges that Christianity "has always condemned excessive preoccupation with success as a sin" (*FA* 342), both he and Eliot remained ambitious men, concerned with their reputations and place in posterity.[13] Facing these obstacles, it might seem "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle" (Matt 20:24) than for an artist to attain humility, that essential Christian virtue.

Jacques Maritain, in "Poetry and Religion" (1927), the two-part article which Eliot published and introduced in the *Criterion*,[14] denounces pride and idolatry among artists: "The naive idolatry which most artists pay to their work, which becomes thrice holy once it has left them, is a proof of the essential creative weakness of the human creature. God does not worship his works. He knows, nevertheless, that they are good" (225). Those poets who do idolize art, like many of the Romantics, make the "mortal error" of "look[ing] to poetry for the super- substantial food of man" that only God can supply (20). Auden, who incidentally had read Maritain's article while a student,[15] is

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[13] See, for instance, Ackroyd 331, Menand 90; Auden *Prose II* 389.

[14] Timmerman notes that there is proof Eliot actually translated the article as well, although the translation is credited to F. S. Flint (44). The reason why Eliot did not take credit for the translation is uncertain.

[15] In the Preface to *Oxford Poetry 1927*, which Auden wrote with Cecil Day-Lewis, they quote from Maritain's article in their discussion of what they call "[t]he ethical conflict": "a struggle to reconcile the notion of Pure Art, 'an art completely isolated from everything but its own laws of operation and the object to be created as such' [Jacques Maritain, 'Poetry and Religion'; *New Criterion*, V, 1], with those exigencies

keenly aware of this danger of idolizing art. In *A Certain World*, he warns, "All pleasures are equally good, but there is no pleasure which the Evil One cannot, according to our natures, use to tempt us into evil" (303). For an artist, one form this evil can take is idolatry-- treating art with the reverence due only to God. According to Auden, "Whatever or whom ever we love carries with it a temptation to its own special kind of idolatry: those who . . . love words are tempted to idolize them" (*SW* 27). He also shows how "the pleasure of beauty," specifically poetic beauty, can corrupt. In "The Virgin and the Dynamo," he claims, "Every beautiful poem presents an analogy to the forgiveness of sins" through its reconciliation and harmonizing of a poet's contradictory feelings (*DH* 71). Despite this positive analogy, beauty's "effect is evil to the degree that beauty is taken, not as analogous to, but identical with goodness, so that the artist regards himself or is regarded by others as God, the pleasure of beauty taken for the joy of paradise . . . " (*DH* 71). In this case, the artist and his work are worshipped, a type of idolatry of which Auden himself is occasionally guilty. For example, in "Epithalamion" (1939), a poem written shortly before his conversion, he adjures "every girl and boy / To the heaven of the great / All their prayers and praises lift," and then directs "their prayers and praises" to artists such as Mozart, Goethe, Blake and Tolstoi. As McDiarmid explains, "Here creators of Western culture (a select group of Auden's favorites) from the eighteenth century onward are apotheosized into an order of deities offering benediction to the assembled guests" (*Apologies* 63). Even after his conversion, Auden sometimes exhibits

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which its conditions of existence as a product of a human mind and culture must involve, where the one cannot be ignored nor the other enslaved" (Auden *Prose I* 4). Auden's sense of this conflict only grew more acute after his conversion, when he became absorbed in the question of the role of religion, one of "those exigencies" which a work of art's "conditions of existence as a product of a human mind and culture must involve." Auden also wrote a review of *Art and Faith: Letters between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau* (1948), which, he claims, "arouses in one reader at least an immense nostalgia for the time when, as an undergraduate, he first read them" (*Prose II* 398). So Auden was at least somewhat familiar with Maritain's thought from the start of his poetic career.

an overly worshipful regard for certain artists. In "At the Grave of Henry James" (1941), for instance, he asks James to

> Pray for me and for all writers, living or dead:
>
> Because there are many whose works
>
> Are in better taste than their lives, because there is no end
>
> To the vanity of our calling, make intercession
>
> For the treason of all clerks.

Auden's prayer to James is not "entirely serious" (McDonald *Serious Poetry* 122), but even so, as Mendelson explains, "When Auden applied his ideas about sainthood to an artist like James, he revived his fantasies about the unique greatness of the artist's vocation-- only a year after Kierkegaard had silenced them" (*Later Auden* 163). Thus, a tendency to idolize art or artists is inextricably related to poetic pride. Although Auden praised Kierkegaard for warning of the spiritual dangers facing the "person of talent," he didn't always heed these admonitions himself.

Eliot, who had praised the article by Maritain, "the most conspicuous figure, and probably the most powerful force, in contemporary French philosophy," as "one that will command . . . serious attention" (3), agreed with Maritain about the dangers of artistic idolatry. Although Eliot condemned those poets like the Romantics who attempted to make a religion out of Aestheticism, however, before his conversion he exhibited similar idolatrous tendencies. In "The Function of Criticism" (1923), for instance, he states, "There is . . . something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and obtain his unique position" (*SE* 24). This distinctly religious language is continued in "Imperfect Critics"

(1920), where Eliot proclaims, "The Arts insist that a man shall dispose of all that he has, even of his family tree, and follow art alone" (*Sacred Wood* 32). Throughout these early essays, sacrifice is enjoined on behalf of Art, not God, and the poet's calling is likened to that of a disciple. Jewel Spears Brooker, in "Substitutes for Christianity in the Poetry of T.S. Eliot," discusses at length how Eliot, before becoming an Anglican, tried to use poetry as a substitute for religion and "make art the still point of his turning world" (912). Naturally, his conversion forced him to displace poetry from this central position, a shift in allegiance demonstrated in essays like "Thoughts after Lambeth," where he advocates a self-abnegating and apostolic commitment to Christianity, not art. There is still the danger that Eliot could backslide, however, and allow poetry to return to the throne on which it once sat. Brooker suggests that "his mind was like the mind he describes in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent,' 'a mind which changes, and . . . this change is a development which abandons nothing en route'" (913), so he would have found it difficult to rid himself completely of his early reverence for art. Like Auden, therefore, he had to guard against the possibility of valuing art more highly than he ought.

Neither poet preaches that poetry is forbidden to a Christian, but they do at times seem consumed by guilt about their literary pursuits because of the potential clashes between artistic and spiritual values. In Eliot's case, he manifests an anxiety that he won't be able to subordinate his artistic ambitions to his religious obligations. Hopkins may have been inspired by his faith, but nevertheless Eliot points out in "Types of English Religious Verse" that "He had no wish for notoriety; he had scruples even about writing poetry, and but for the encouragement of his superiors might not have persisted in writing" (qted. in L. Higgins 301). Eliot's tone suggests that he didn't feel any such

scruples himself. However, in a comparison of Hopkins and Eliot, Shyamal Bagchee correctly states that "Eliot was not a priest nor was he a Roman Catholic, but he found the disjunction between a literary 'heresy' and the commitment of a Christian to be absolute *unless* he was able somehow to subjugate his poetry to his religion" (49).

Though an artist's creative power has often been likened to God's creative power-- Auden for instance claims that "the poet's activity in creating a poem is analogous to God's activity in creating man after his own image" (*DH* 70)-- an artist can also be seen as trying to rival God. As Dominic Manganiello explains, "The medieval poet believed he participated in the creative power of his Maker, whereas his modern counterpart renounced such theocentric conceptions in favor of an extremely divergent order of collaboration," typified by Gide's assertion, "Il n'y a pas d'œuvre d'art sans la collaboration du démon" (69,71). In "Silence and the Poet," George Steiner, in his oracular mode, asks, "Does the act of speech, which defines man, not also go beyond him into rivalry to God?" (37). This rivalry is more pronounced for the poet, who "makes in dangerous similitude to the gods" (37): "Being, in the nature of his craft, a reacher, the poet must guard against becoming, in the Faustian term, an overreacher" (38). So an intense devotion to art may not only contribute to one's failure to meet religious obligations, such as to seek humility and to worship only God, but may actually seem to place one in conscious opposition to God. The anxiety that pervades Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) arises in part because of fear over this "potentially sacrilegious character of the act of the poet." As will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two, the speaker's torment and the presence of the "broadbacked figure" betray Eliot's fear that,

now that he is a Christian, he should perhaps forswear poetry since it can separate him from, or put him in rivalry with, God. Ricks relates that in 1917, Eliot wrote:

> 'And might it not be maintained that religion, however poor our lives would be without it, is only one form of satisfaction among others, rather than the culminating satisfaction of all satisfactions?'. . . .But in the passionately perturbed poems of 1925 to 1930, the convert's poems, the question is always seeking to rephrase itself as this: 'Might it not be maintained that religion is not one form of satisfaction among others but the only form of satisfaction?' And is not Christ's Satisfaction the only satisfaction? . . . [I]t needed all of Eliot's powers of resistance not to succumb to a mis-estimation (not over-estimation) of religion as the only satisfaction, rather than at once the foundation and the capstone of all satisfactions. (235-36)

Later on, Eliot was more prone to see poetry as one of these theologically-sanctioned satisfactions, but in works like *Ash-Wednesday* written in the few years immediately after his conversion, he does betray a fear that poetry will only lead him astray.

It may seem that Auden should feel less anxious than Eliot regarding the role of poetry in his life because of his views on the differences between European and American attitudes towards literature. According to Auden, "every European poet," with which he identifies himself, "still instinctively thinks of himself as a 'clerk,' a member of a professional brotherhood," whereas "[i]n the States, poets have never had or imagined they had such a status, and it is up to each individual poet to justify his existence . . ." (*DH* 365). Because of his sense of a professional status, "A British poet can take writing more for granted and so write with a lack of strain and overearnestness" compared to an

American poet like Eliot (*DH* 366). So conversion might only have intensified Eliot's insecurity over the legitimacy of poetry, since, Auden would argue, as an American he would always have felt the need "to justify his existence" as a poet.

As Auden admits elsewhere, however, the sense that one must justify writing poetry is common among modern poets regardless of nationality. In "Making, Knowing and Judging" (1956), while discussing Baudelaire's views on criticism written by poets, Auden states, "In trying to formulate principles, a poet may have another motive which Baudelaire does not mention, a desire to justify his writing poetry at all, and in recent years this motive seems to have grown stronger" (*DH* 53). Such a poet isn't only trying to justify writing poetry to his readers-- he's trying to justify it to himself as well. The fact that many poets *fail* to convince themselves is indicated by the prominence of "The Rimbaud Myth-- the tale of a great poet who ceases writing, not because, like Coleridge, he has nothing more to say," or so Auden claims, "but because he chooses to stop" (*DH* 53). Auden says that this myth, which radically undermines the perceived value of poetry, "haunts the artistic conscience of this century" (*DH* 54). So even though he once suggested that "no artist, Tolstoy excepted, felt serious qualms about his right to follow his calling" (*Prose II* 301), Auden reveals that many modern artists at least question the value of following said calling, if "calling" it be, and he himself is not immune.

While the "Rimbaud Myth" touches upon an anxiety that all modern poets, secular and religious, may face, Auden reveals that his questioning of the ultimate value of poetry is intimately related to his religious convictions. He states, "Christianity draws a distinction between what is frivolous and what is serious, but allows the former its place. What it condemns is not frivolity but idolatry, that is to say, taking the frivolous

seriously" (*DH* 430). Categorizing art as frivolous, as Auden generally does, might seem to safeguard one from the possibility of an idolatrous attachment to it. However, the very fact that art *is* frivolous, "one of Caesar's things," implicates it: "Since Art and Science are human activities, there is always an element of sin, the sin of idolatry, in our creation and enjoyment of either" (Auden *Prose II* 169). As Kierkegaard asserted, "From the Christian point of view and in spite of all aesthetics, the poet's existence is a sin, viz., the sin that one is writing poetry instead of living; that one occupies oneself with God and truth only in one's imagination instead of aiming at experiencing both existentially" (qted. in Hecht *Hidden Law* 444). Rimbaud stopped writing poetry in order to engage more directly with life; Kierkegaard suggests that the religious poet should perhaps stop writing poetry in order to engage more directly with God. In *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, McDiarmid states that Auden's poems "insist on their own *guilty* triviality, as if poets were in perpetual need of intercession" [emphasis added] (8), as shown for instance in "The Ballad of Barnaby" (1968). Barnaby, "the finest tumbler of his day," has a religious epiphany and enters a monastery (*CP* 824). Unlike the monks, "Learned in the sciences and the arts" and thus types of the artist, Barnaby is illiterate and so instead of illuminating manuscripts or "compos[ing] Latin Sequences in verse and prose," he can only tumble before a statue of the Virgin Mary to show his obeisance to her (*CP* 825). When the Abbot sees him tumbling, he realizes, "This man is holy and humble," and after Barnaby dies he receives "the personal blessing of the Virgin," which "the monks will never experience" (McDiarmid 6). As McDiarmid explains, poets like Auden "can observe and describe the Barnaby's of the world, but the textuality of their talents will forever create barriers between themselves and divinity" (6). Poetry may be only

frivolous, but, as Kierkegaard affirmed, it can nevertheless prevent one from experiencing fully what *is* serious, the divine.

Art's frivolity is responsible for Auden's ambivalence towards poetry in other respects. For example, he admits, "So many critics with a social conscience seem to suffer from an uneasy suspicion that, perhaps, Art is wicked" (*Prose II* 52). He himself seemed to suspect this at times, because of art's frivolity, its lack of contribution to the alleviation of social ills. Moreover, in "Postscript: Christianity & Art," he proclaims, "No artist . . . can feel comfortable as a Christian" (*DH* 456) because of art's status as one of Caesar's things. As Michael Edwards explains:

> One might suppose that the standpoint of faith would make writing a straightforward, though challenging, activity, and would offer comfortable thoughts about the constitution of the self and the movement of history. Yet seeing things in a biblical light can render the 'vanity' of history, of self and of writing even more momentous and intolerable. To convert is to be shown a new world but also to realize more fully just how fallen is the old one. (147)

Literature's frivolity can seem "intolerable" from a theological perspective and lead to guilt over writing poetry at all. So although Auden frequently defends poetry and the paradoxical importance of frivolity-- claiming for instance that "among the half dozen or so things for which a man of honor should be prepared, if necessary, to die, the right to play, the right to frivolity is not the least" (*DH* 89)-- "he sometimes seems to have pretended to be more single-minded than he was" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 369), since he so often equates frivolity with guilt.

Auden also suggests that art often engenders delusions, preventing one from confronting the starkness of reality and religious truth. In his review of Eliot's edition of Kipling, Auden remarks, "Art . . . is not Magic, i.e. a means by which the artist communicates or arouses his feelings in others, but a mirror in which they may become conscious of what their own feelings really are: its proper effect, in fact, is disenchanting" (*Prose II* 198). Although art is not, like magic, to enchant or manipulate by arousing certain feelings, which he elsewhere associates with propaganda, Auden concedes that much of the time it does not fulfill its disenchanting function. According to Auden, "Christ did not enchant men," but poets often do (*CW* 150). Consequently, in the epigraph to his *Collected Poems*, Auden calls himself "one of those / Who feel a Christian ought to write in prose, / For poetry is magic." There's certainly an element of playfulness and irony in the epigraph-- it fronts a book of poetry, after all-- but it does betray Auden's real anxiety that, for a Christian, writing poetry may involve a kind of transgression. Mendelson relates that in many of Auden's postconversion poems, he was troubled by specific ways in which his poetic vocation may seem in conflict with his Christianity, but also with "a larger biblical objection to aesthetics, typified by this passage in the Book of Amos: 'Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (*Later Auden* 368). So although Auden doesn't claim that art is "forbidden to a Christian," he does think that "Christ calls all art into question" (*SW* 120). Like Eliot, therefore, he fears that poetry and Christianity might ultimately be incompatible. Though they both continued to write after their conversions, their work often betrayed their guilt over the possible moral danger involved in doing so. At the

same time, however, they did not plan on renouncing all of their artistic ambitions in the name of their religious convictions. Their prose reveals that as well as worrying over the effects of their art on their religion, they were deeply concerned about the effects of their religion on their art.

The Limits of the Religious Writer

As discussed in the Introduction, many of Eliot's and Auden's contemporaries, as well as more recent critics, contended that their embrace of Christianity marked a sharp decline in their work. Many such readers supposed that religion was inimical to the spirit of artistic creativity. For example, Timmerman states, "Ezra Pound was not being entirely facetious when he wrote: 'In any case, let us lament the psychosis / Of all those who abandon the Muses for Moses.' Religion to him did seem very much a threat to creativity, and there was little question that Eliot was serious indeed about his religion" (40). Similarly, Ohmann voices a common opinion when he claims that Auden "had substituted metaphysics for poetry" (173). Such reactions generally reveal only the reader's intolerance and prejudice against Christianity. However, Eliot and Auden themselves admit that in some respects religious beliefs can seem to have a deleterious effect on poetry. Although they agree that a poem benefits from a sound underlying philosophy like orthodox Christianity, they show that religious literature nevertheless faces some unique difficulties, particularly regarding its subject matter and reception. As Christians, Eliot and Auden should have been primarily concerned about the possibility of art undermining their religious commitment. While they certainly betray ample anxiety on this point, their essays suggest that they may have been even more worried that their beliefs would impinge on their artistic freedom and hinder their success.

Eliot and Auden were both anxious to avoid the many pitfalls associated with religious poetry. In "Religion and Literature," Eliot characterizes the attitude of the "typical lover of poetry" towards "'religious' or 'devotional' poetry":

> He believes, not always explicitly, that when you qualify poetry as 'religious' you are indicating very clear limitations. For the great majority of people who love poetry, '*religious* poetry' is a variety of *minor* poetry: the religious poet is not a poet who is treating the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit but a poet who is dealing with a confined part of this subject matter: who is leaving out what men consider their major passions, and thereby confessing his ignorance of them. (*SE* 390)

Eliot remarks, "I am ready to admit that up to a point these critics are right," which might suggest a more reluctant agreement with this rather negative assessment of religious poetry than is borne out elsewhere. For example, in *After Strange Gods*, he wonders, "Why . . . is most religious verse so bad; and why does so little religious verse reach the highest levels of poetry?" (30). One of the reasons he posits is that religious poets are prone to "pious insincerity . . . writing as they want to feel, rather than as they do feel" (*ASG* 30-31), whereas, as Auden puts it, a poet properly employed "is not trying to feel something that he would like or thinks he ought to feel but to find out what his feelings really are, and, of course, most of these will be neither pleasant nor good" (*Prose II* 167). Lord David Cecil, editor of the *Oxford Book of Christian Verse*, agrees that too often a Christian poet "does not say what he really feels, but what he thinks he ought to feel," and that in consequence, "a large proportion of religious verse is poor stuff" (xiii, xi). In a review of the anthology, C. S. Lewis counters by pointing out that "much devotional

poetry had as its subject not what the poet ought to feel but the fact that he did not feel as he ought" (qted. in Gardner *Religion* 128). Unlike love poetry, "which seems to suggest that the lover is always at the highest pitch of feeling," "The religious poets show much more awareness of the vicissitudes of their emotional lives, and are much more ready to treat of their failures and perplexities" (Gardner *Religion* 128). Gardner acknowledges the validity of Lewis's points, including his contention that religious poets are not "overdecorous" but are "commonly very bold in the images they employ and the language they use about the Deity," but notes "All the same he did not dispose of the fact that Lord David started from: that in any anthology of Christian verse we shall find, after the seventeenth century, that our greatest poets are not represented, or are represented by their weaker poems" (*Religion* 128; 129). Eliot is generally in accord with those critics like Lord David who fault the poor quality of much religious poetry, and not only because of its tendency to pious insincerity.

Eliot often seems to define religious poetry in such a way as to preclude the possibility of "greatness." For instance, in "What Dante Means to Me," he calls Dante "the greatest 'religious' poet," but then immediately qualifies the statement by saying "though to call him a 'religious poet' would be to abate his universality" (*TCTC* 134). Although he sometimes calls writers like Baudelaire a "religious" poet because of his awareness of the reality of damnation and the necessity of Christianity (*SE* 338, 342), Eliot generally treats "religious poetry" as synonymous with "devotional poetry," a kind of minor poetry. As indicated above, he regards it as minor in part because of its limited scope and subject matter. While Dante treats "the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit" and "expresses everything in the way of emotion, between depravity's

despair and the beatific vision, that man is capable of experiencing" (*SE* 390; *TCTC* 134), the typical "religious poet" is "a poet who is dealing with a confined part of this subject matter: who is leaving out what men consider their major passions, and thereby confessing his ignorance of them" (*SE* 390). While it's debatable that this narrow scope can be attributed to ignorance, other critics do argue that "the poet who writes as a religious man does write in fetters" (Gardner *Religion* 134-35). Lord David also claims that religious poetry is constraining and supposes that "those poets who have invoked both the sacred and the profane must have, with some striking exceptions," such as Donne, "found themselves more comfortable with the profane" (xi). As Eliot states, "To be a 'devotional poet' is a limitation"; Not only is it true that "a saint limits himself by writing poetry," but "a poet who confines himself to even this subject matter is limiting himself too" (*ASG* 52).

Auden exhibits a similar ambivalence towards religious poetry, though his ambivalence is again related to his conviction that poetry is one of Caesar's things. He argues that a poet's religion can inspire him, as is the case with Hopkins (*Prose II* 220), but nevertheless admits, "Poems, like many of Donne's and Hopkins', which express a poet's personal feelings of religious devotion or penitence make me uneasy" (*DH* 458). He is made uneasy by devotional poems because of what he perceives as the inability of poetry, with its secular orientation, to distinguish adequately between the difference in kind and degree of a poet's devotion to a person, as in love poetry, and a poet's devotion to Christ. Poetry can't properly convey Christ's uniqueness in such a situation. According to Auden, "A penitential poem is even more questionable. A poet must intend his poem to be a good one, that is to say, an enduring object for other people to admire.

Is there not something a little odd, to say the least, about making an admirable public object out of one's feelings of guilt and penitence before God?" instead of confining such feelings to prayer (*DH* 458). Auden is not alone in making these objections. Samuel Johnson in his "Life of Waller," exclaims, "Let no pious ear be offended if I advance, in opposition to many authorities, that poetical devotion cannot often please" (173). Unlike those such as Pound, Johnson doesn't object to religious poetry out of disdain for Christianity but rather because he esteems it so highly. According to Johnson, "Contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical. Man admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator and plead the merits of his Redeemer is already in a higher state than poetry can confer" (173). Rather like Auden, he believes that religious activity, like prayer and devotion, are ultimately too exalted for poetry. Further, Johnson suggests that poetry is not well served when it attempts to portray such religious subjects, because they don't need poetic embellishment:

> Of sentiments purely religious, it will be found that the most simple expression is the most sublime. Poetry loses its lustre and its power, because it is applied to the decoration of something more excellent than itself. . . .The ideas of Christian Theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction, and too majestick for ornament. (174)

Auden would agree with Johnson's contention that when a poem attempts a religious subject, it often only manages to reveal its own limitations.

Whereas Eliot complains that religious poets tend to be too narrow in focus, Auden contends that they can't even adequately deal with those subjects traditionally within their purview. Although Auden often imposes theological concepts on works of

literature in his criticism, as in his interpretation of the Wooster and Jeeves books, he nevertheless contends that there are many Christian ideas and subjects that literature cannot convey well, such as charity or forgiveness (*DH* 200). He also claimed, "There are certain kinds of experience with which art can't deal at all," such as beatific visions-- Dante would disagree-- but also more prosaic religious experiences (*Prose II* 493). As Kierkegaard states, "A king who conquers kingdoms can be represented in the moment, but a cross bearer who every day takes up his cross cannot be represented in art because the point is that he does it every day" (qted. in Auden *DH* 200). Moreover, Auden not only claims that "It is impossible to represent Christ on the stage," but that art can't properly represent *any* holy person:

> To a Christian, the godlike man is not the hero who does extraordinary deeds, but the holy man, the saint, who does good deeds. But the gospel defines a good deed as one done in secret, hidden, so far as it is possible . . . This means that art, which by its nature can only deal with what can and should be manifested, cannot portray a saint. (*DH* 457)

While Auden concedes there are exceptions-- he considers Don Quixote a saint, for example, but thinks his portrayal only succeeds because of the novel's "ironic vision" (*DH* 455)-- in general he argues that showing a saint "aesthetically is very difficult" (*Prose II* 379). Auden claims that it is particularly challenging to portray religious subjects in drama, because spiritual reality is so inward and the theatre can only deal with what is manifested outwardly. When discussing *Measure for Measure*, for example, he states that "it is impossible to distinguish in dramatic action between the spirit of forgiveness and the act of pardon" since they appear outwardly the same (*DH* 200). As

will be discussed in Chapter Four, his conviction that much of religious experience is lost on stage directs his criticism of Eliot's plays, especially *Murder in the Cathedral.* For example, he asserts, "The virtues produced by pride cannot be distinguished objectively from the virtues produced by faith. When Becket . . . is assailed by the fourth tempter, who suggests that he be martyred for self-glorification, it is impossible for Eliot to prove to us that Becket resists the temptation; he can only state that it exists" (*Prose II* 379). So just as forgiveness and pardon cannot always be distinguished on stage, Becket's true motives, his spiritual state, cannot be dramatized. So a Christian artist, besides having to forgo many of the vices that can inspire artists, might be tempted to choose one of the many religious subjects which, according to Auden, are very difficult to execute successfully.

Auden may warn of the difficulties of portraying religious subjects and even "wonder if there is not something a bit questionable, from a Christian point of view, about all works of art which make overt Christian references" (*DH* 458), but both he and Eliot frequently wrote explicitly Christian poems themselves. For instance, though Auden claims "Christmas and Easter can be subjects for poetry, but Good Friday, like Auschwitz, cannot" because "the reality is so terrible" (*CW* 168), his sequence "Horae Canonicae" (1954) centers precisely on the events of Good Friday. Eliot likewise wrote poems inspired by events on the Church calendar, such as *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) and the Nativity-based *Ariel* poems. He didn't want to write only "religious poetry," telling an interviewer that "one wants to keep one's hand in, you know, in every type of poem, serious and frivolous and proper and improper. One doesn't want to lose one's skill," which Eliot associates with being able to write on a wide range of subjects (*Writers at*

Work 100-01). Even more than Auden, however, Eliot tended to choose religious subjects, and all of his major post-conversion works, poetry and drama, explore elements of Christian belief. In the lecture "Types of English Religious Verse," Eliot reveals the difficulty of classifying a poet who uses religious subjects in his work, as he and Auden do: "You will agree . . . that the distinction between a man who is primarily a poet, and makes use of religious subjects, and a man who is primarily a devout, and uses poetry to express his devotion, is a very fine one: and we can never be sure on which side of this imaginary line any particular religious poet belongs" (qted. in Higgins 300). While most would agree that Eliot and Auden are primarily poets "mak[ing] use of religious subjects" as opposed to devouts, the religious dimension of their work is undeniably pronounced. Belief of some kind may inform all literary works, but in their case it *was* a very "conscious metaphysics" (Auden *Prose II* 87). The fact that their Christianity was stamped so prominently on their postconversion poetry and drama made the chances of these works being well-received even more unlikely, because even if they successfully negotiated all of the various difficulties afflicting religious writers, they still had to contend with "the unfriendliness of their age to anything religious" (Gordon *Early Years* 133). When confronted with secular readers who were not hostile to Christianity, however, Eliot and Auden still had to deal with the significant complications that arise from their differences in belief.

An "Unpropitious" Age for Religious Literature

In "East Coker," the second of the *Four Quartets*, Eliot describes the difficulties he faces as a poet, "Trying to learn to use words," in which "every attempt / Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure": "There is only the fight to recover what has

been lost / And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions / That seem unpropitious" (*CPP* 182). As Gardner shows in *Religion and Literature*, conditions are particularly "unpropitious" for Christian poets in a secular society, like Eliot and Auden. On top of dealing with the limitations and challenges common to all Christian poets, the Christian poet in a secular society faces additional difficulties because of the clash between his values and those of his society. In his introduction to *Secondary Worlds*, Auden had stated that as twentieth century Christians, one of the questions he and Eliot had to ask themselves was "in what ways do the problems of a Christian writing in this century differ from those of a Christian writing in earlier periods?" (12). Both poets were to discover that as modern Christian poets their work was made even more problematic because, as well as dealing with the widespread prejudice against Christianity, they had to contend with such things as the modern emphasis on originality, the current lack of biblical knowledge, and an increased self-consciousness on their part.

One reason for the unpropitiousness of the modern age-- as opposed to the seventeenth century, for example, which Gardner considers the golden age of religious poetry-- is due to the current emphasis on originality. In the seventeenth century, there was stress on craftsmanship, "poetry as an art, and on the poem as something made and judged according to known canons of composition" (Gardner *Religion* 171). Starting from the nineteenth century, however, originality tended to be vaunted above technical prowess. Though Eliot and Auden, from early in their careers, were praised as innovators, they lamented what they saw as the current valorization of originality at the expense of craftsmanship. For example, Auden, who believed "An artist . . . should think of himself primarily as a craftsman, a 'maker'" (*FA* 432), complains that too many

writers "confuse authenticity, which they ought always to aim at, with originality, which they should never bother about" (*DH* 19). Also, in "Squares and Oblongs" (1948), he remarks, "As T. S. Eliot has said in one of his essays, the sign of promise in a young writer is not originality of idea or emotion, but technical competence" (*Prose II* 344).[16] As Auden suggests, Eliot valued craftsmanship highly, for instance praising Dante for his technical mastery: "[V]ery few poets of similar stature . . . have been a more attentive student of the *art* of poetry, or a more scrupulous, painstaking and *conscious* practitioner of the *craft*" (*TCTC* 132). Like Auden, he contends that too few of his contemporaries pay adequate heed to the technical aspects of their poetry in their quest for originality. In "Johnson as Critic" (1944), Eliot warns, "In a time like ours . . . novelty is often assumed to be the first requisite of poetry," but "originality, when it becomes the only, or the most prized virtue of poetry, may cease to be a virtue at all" (*OPP* 168; 182). This emphasis on originality is detrimental to religious poetry in particular since religious poetry is informed by traditional beliefs, not one's own idiosyncratic philosophy, like Blake's cobbled-together belief system, and often employs traditional Biblical imagery and language. As Gardner details:

> Propitious ages for the writing of religious verse . . . would seem to be ages in which poetry is regarded as an art, and the poet is not thought to be betraying his vocation as a poet by writing . . . a work in which he devotes his skill to the expression of what are accepted as known truths. Less propitious ages are those in which originality is demanded of the poet. . . .If it is the test of originality that we apply . . . then religion will be felt to inhibit poetry. . . . (*Religion* 136-37)

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[16] It is unclear to which essay Auden refers, since Eliot repeated this idea more than once.

Johnson, living in an age which had more respect for technical competence and less for originality, had argued that religious subjects are ill-suited for poetry because they offer limited scope for invention (291-92)-- one must adhere at least somewhat to received scriptural truth if it is to be considered Christian literature at all. Modern readers are even more likely to condemn religious literature on these grounds, since originality is now so highly prized. Thus, they would be predisposed even against "innovative" religious poetry, such as that of Hopkins or Eliot and Auden themselves, because they seek great originality in matter as well as form.

Conditions are also unpropitious for Christian poets because modern readers are often ill-equipped to deal with religious literature. Auden, for instance, points out that in contemporary society very few people, even among the supposedly well-educated, have an adequate knowledge of the Bible (*Canterbury* 37). Readers without this knowledge of the Bible might have difficulty understanding the theology underpinning a religious poem, as well as identifying and appreciating the significance of Biblical allusions, particularly obscure ones. So even if one wanted to deal with less well-known religious subjects in order to seem more original, the reader might only become confused. More dispiritingly, in "The Social Function of Poetry" (1957), Eliot suggests that modern readers are less likely to be able to appreciate *any* poetry that deals with religious experience:

> Much has been said everywhere about the decline of religious belief; not so much notice has been taken of the decline in religious sensibility. The trouble of the modern age is not merely the inability to believe certain things about God and man which our forefathers believed, but the inability to *feel* towards God and man

> as they did. A belief in which you no longer believe is something which to some extent you can still understand; but when religious feeling disappears, the words in which men have struggled to express it become meaningless. (*OPP* 25)[17]

Religious poetry therefore may be judged "meaningless" or irrelevant by those who can no longer share the kinds of feelings expressed therein. This decline in Biblical knowledge and religious sensibility is one of the reasons why "The religious poet today has to meet a problem of communication that did not exist for earlier centuries" (Gardner *Religion* 137).

The secular nature of modern society also creates unpropitious conditions for the *writing* of religious poetry, as well as its reception. Modern poets whose work is informed by Christianity, like Eliot and Auden, can no longer assume their values are shared by their society, as could poets in more propitious ages like the seventeenth century. As Auden explained, "As long as society was united in its religious faith and its view of the universe . . . audience and artists alike tended to have much the same interests and to see much the same things," but that is no longer the case (*Light Verse* x). In consequence, compared to "the unembarrassed boldness and naturalness" of much seventeenth century poetry (Gardner *Religion* 193), more recent religious poetry can seem strident, particularly because of their awareness that many readers actively reject their beliefs:

> The effect of the disappearance of a general acceptance of Christianity, however conventional, halfhearted, or even cynical it may have been with many people,

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[17] Similarly, Eliot states in "Literature, Science, and Dogma" that "emotions and sentiments appear and disappear in the course of human history, and rapidly too . . . certain sentiments of the late Middle Ages, which we should be glad to have if we could, have completely disappeared . . ." (243). No doubt he would include the medieval "religious sensibility" among these regrettably lost "emotions and sentiments."

> can be seen in the two most impressive religious poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Hopkins and Eliot there is a certain straining of feeling and language that one is not aware of in poets of earlier ages. (Gardner *Religion* 137)

The awareness of poets like Hopkins and Eliot-- and Auden-- that they are *not* expressing generally accepted beliefs makes them more self-conscious than their seventeenth century counterparts, whose work "has such security of tone, such an absence of strained feeling" (Gardner *Religion* 172). Of course, Gardner recognizes that "a growth in self-consciousness is not confined to religious poets, or even to poets in general. It is a feature of all intellectual life since the Romantic period," but notes, "It is peculiarly marked in religious poets and is particularly baneful with them since it is at war with the essential religious effort to deny the self" (*Religion* 138). Similarly, Eliot describes the "progress in self-consciousness" in poets, being careful to add, "I have not wished to exhibit this 'progress in self-consciousness' as being necessarily progress with an association of higher value" (*UPUC* 114). On the contrary, he laments this increased self-consciousness in English literature, "including its religious verse" (qted. in L. Higgens 300). Though he rues the effect of this self-consciousness on literature, neither he nor Auden, as modern poets *and* Christians, can escape it entirely. Although these are the kinds of problems unique to a Christian writer in an unpropitious age, Eliot and Auden devoted much of their attention to the ways in which a clash in ideology between the beliefs espoused by a work, whatever they may be, and those held by the reader influences reception, a major aspect of the problem of belief in poetry.

Complications of Belief in Poetry

It was only after their conversions that Eliot and Auden focused so much of their criticism on the problems that arise when the beliefs within a work conflict with those of the reader, because it was only then that it became a major issue for them. Both poets remarked that their early success sprang largely from the fact that readers regarded their poetry as an expression of a view of life which they shared (Eliot *SE* 368; Auden *DH* 18-19), but the beliefs in Eliot's and Auden's postconversion works were no longer consonant with those of the majority of their readers. Therefore, they had a vested interest in understanding how differences in belief affect reception, and how one may still value works, like theirs, which are informed by beliefs one does not necessarily share. In this as in so many aspects of their postconversion criticism, they stake out remarkably similar positions-- no doubt because Auden's views were so influenced by his reading of Eliot-- and take a very reasonable stance regarding the possibilities of appreciating works with diverse beliefs, as well as the limits of appreciation in such circumstances.

Richards had suggested that any ideological differences between the belief in a work and the belief of a reader were largely irrelevant because neither belief was of any real importance in an appreciation of a work. As Eliot describes his position, Richards, despite his assertion regarding *The Waste Land*, "holds that while it is probably necessary for the poet to believe something, in order to write his poetry," which he seems to regard as a limitation soon to be overcome, "the ideal reader will appreciate the poetry in a state of mind which is not belief, but rather a temporary suspension of disbelief" (Eliot "Poetry and Propaganda" 30-31). However, as Manganiello points out, Richards himself did not

read with a suspension of disbelief, since his determination to underplay the role of belief of any kind in literature, and his dismissal of certain writers like Dante, stems at least in part from his antagonism to Christianity.[18] Further, Richards propounded that in poetry, unlike science, there can be no true or false statements, only "pseudo-statements," so a reader needn't seriously engage with the belief of a poem in order to enjoy it. However, Eliot claims that Richards's "theory of 'pseudo-statements'" is inadequate because statements like Dante's "*la sua voluntade è nostra pace*" ("in his will is our peace") strikes him as "*literally true*" so "the distinction between a statement and a pseudo-statement is not always, in particular instances, possible to establish" (*SE* 270). In general, both he and Auden took fundamentally different positions from Richards on these questions regarding the importance of ideology in a work, and contended not only that a work cannot be ideologically neutral, but that the reader's beliefs matter, the beliefs within a work matter, and that the reader's response is determined in part by his or her sense of the sincerity as well as the cogency of the work's beliefs. Therefore, any conflict between the reader's belief and that within the work can have a crucial effect on his or her understanding and appreciation of it.

Since Richards suggests that poets are only capable of making pseudo-statements, he regards the question of whether a poet actually subscribes to the particular philosophy he employs in a poem as unimportant. At times Auden and Eliot seem to agree with him. For example, Auden had claimed that "the artist qua artist is of all people the most skeptical, because in his art he does not have to believe what he says, only entertain it as

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[18] Manganiello relates that "Richards found that his antipathy to religion was too difficult to overcome. The result was an extraordinary quarrel with Dante (and Eliot)," and in his book of poetry and prose, *Whose Endless Jar*, "Richards sharpens his pen against Christian beliefs at every opportunity" (60). "[E]ven Richards' biographer," John Paul Russo, "concludes that the full-scale attacks on Dante and Christian dogma became 'one-sided, moralizing, distracting, and shrill'" (Manganiello 70).

a possibility" ("Religion and the Intellectuals" 126-27). Elsewhere he states, "The value of a framework of general ideas, e.g., Catholicism or Marxism . . . lies not in its scientific truth, but in its immediate convenience," that is, its ability "in organizing the writer's experience" (*Prose II* 421). Eliot also seems to suggest that it doesn't matter, when evaluating a poem, what a poet *actually* believes: "I doubt whether belief proper enters into the activity of a great poet, *qua* poet. That is, Dante, *qua* poet, did not believe or disbelieve the Thomist cosmology or theory of the soul: he merely made use of it . . ." (*SE* 138). Despite these statements, however, both poets actually believed that, contrary to Richards, sincerity was extraordinarily important, as they repeatedly affirm.

Eliot may seem to endorse the legitimacy of marking a sharp division between what a poet believes and what he writes, as when he notes in his 1929 essay on "Dante" that "we can distinguish between Dante's beliefs as a man and his beliefs as a poet" (*SE* 269). Nevertheless, he argues that "we are forced to believe that there is a relation between the two, and that the poet 'means what he says.' If we learned, for instance, that *De Rerum Natura* was a Latin exercise which Dante had composed for relaxation after completing the *Divine Comedy*, and published under the name of one Lucretius, I am sure that our capacity for enjoying either poem would be mutilated" (*SE* 269). So our appreciation for a poem can be contingent upon our trust that the poet *is* expressing his true beliefs. In "Goethe as the Sage" (1957), Eliot articulates his position on the importance of sincerity in poetry unambiguously, and aims to correct any mistaken impressions he may have conveyed about his views on that point in earlier essays, like "Dante." In response to the criticism of the scholar Erich Heller over his purported answer to the question "when he [the poet] expresses a particular 'philosophy' in his

poetry, should he be expected to believe this philosophy, or may he legitimately treat it merely as suitable material for a poem?", Eliot declares:

> . . . in so far as anything I have written on the subject in the past says or suggests that the poet need not believe a philosophical idea which he has chosen to embody in his verse, Professor Hiller is, no doubt, quite right in contradicting me. For such a suggestion would appear to be a justification of insincerity, and would annihilate all poetic values except those of technical accomplishment. To suggest that Lucretius deliberately chose to exploit for poetic purposes a cosmology which he thought to be false, or that Dante did not believe the philosophy drawn from Aristotle and the scholastics, which gave him the material for several cantos in the *Purgatorio*, would be to condemn the poems they wrote. (*OPP* 222-23)

Of course, Eliot did not actually make those assertions regarding Lucretius and Dante in "Dante," but he sets right any readers who thought he did hold such opinions because of certain ambiguous statements he may have made in the past.

Despite certain suggestions to the contrary, Auden also contends that it does in fact matter whether a poet believes what he says. He may at times seem less committed to the notion of sincerity than Eliot, however, as when he states:

> A poet is constantly tempted to make use of an idea or a belief, not because he believes it to be true, but because he sees it has interesting poetic possibilities. It may not, perhaps, be absolutely necessary that he *believe* it, but it is certainly necessary that his emotions be deeply involved, and this they can never be unless, as a man, he takes it more seriously than as a mere poetic convenience. (*DH* 19)

So it may appear that he thinks it is sufficient for a poet only to be emotionally involved in the philosophy he employs, viewing it as something worth consideration but not necessarily subscribing to it himself. However, Auden more consistently-- and often very forcefully-- asserts that poets *should* espouse the beliefs within their work, that it is not enough that they have some respect for these utilized beliefs. He declares, for instance, that the poet has an "obligation to speak no more and no less than the truth," as he sees it (*CR* 259). Moreover, in opposition to Richards, Auden proclaims, "I cannot accept the doctrine that there is a 'suspension of disbelief.' A poet must never make a statement simply because it sounds poetically exciting; he must also believe it to be true" (*CW* 425). So although the poet has the option of treating "all facts and all beliefs" as merely "interesting possibilities" (*DH* 19), Auden doesn't actually regard this approach as acceptable. For instance, he accuses Yeats of using "woozy doctrines" in his poetry "while remaining personally, as Eliot rather slyly remarks, 'a very sane man'" (*Prose II* 156)-- indicating that he and Eliot assumed, not quite fairly, that Yeats adopted said doctrines not because he thought they were true but because he thought they were aesthetically appealing. Auden repeatedly targets Yeats as the epitome of the insincere poet. As McDonald points out, "There is no doubt that, after 1939, Auden grew more concerned about poetry's relation to the inauthentic, and that Yeats became a focus for the anxieties involved" ("O love" 6).[19] Moreover, he contrasts Yeats in this respect with Eliot. Auden argues that, as some of Yeats's work shows, "the adoption of a belief which one does not really hold as a means of integrating experience poetically, while it may produce fine poems, limits their meaning to the immediate context; it creates Occasional

[19] For example, he reiterates in "Yeats as an Example" (1949), "we find Yeats adopting a cosmology apparently on purely aesthetic grounds, i.e. not because it is true but because it is interesting" (*Prose II* 386).

poems lacking any resonance beyond their frame"-- as proof of which he compares Yeats's "The Second Coming" unfavorably to Eliot's "East Coker" (*Prose II* 156). Similarly, he states that because Yeats's poems "lack a certain inner resonance," when "[c]omparing his poetry with that, for instance, of T. S. Eliot or Robert Graves"-- whom Auden had also praised for knowing that a poet has an "obligation to speak no more and no less than the truth"-- "I find it, beautiful as it is, lacking in seriousness . . ." (*Prose II* 174).[20] So from Auden's perspective, even a poem's claims to "seriousness" are dependent on one's perception that the poet means what he says, at least for those like Auden and Eliot who value sincerity so highly.

Those statements that seem to undermine their position on the necessity of sincerity might suggest that they would grant other writers a little leeway on this issue. Particularly following their conversions, however, they demanded sincerity from themselves and were troubled when they suspected that they might not be fully committed to whatever they have proclaimed in their work. This attitude derives at least partly from their new religious convictions. Coupled with an increased emphasis on personal integrity, their sense of respect for their Christian beliefs seemed to make them demand more respect for beliefs in general, and argue that they should not be cynically exploited for the sake of art, which they suggest "insincere" poetry does. Seeing the centrality of his Christianity to his work, Eliot after his conversion was less inclined to

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[20] Interestingly, Gardner, while asserting that Eliot faced many difficulties as a Christian poet, thought that in some respects he had an advantage over Yeats, and praised him in terms somewhat akin to Auden's. She states, "The two greatest poets in our language of this century, Yeats and Eliot, exemplify very well the limitations of the religious poet in an age in which conditions are in many ways 'unpropitious'" (*Religion* 169). According to Gardner, "Yeats . . . refused to accept the fetters of religious commitment," and therefore "'[h]is unchristened heart' gives to Yeats's poetry a far wider range than Eliot enjoys . . ." (169-70). Nevertheless, "Eliot's deep sense of commitment, the persistence and *integrity* with which he endeavours to make sense and find meaning in what seem to him his most significant experiences, gives his poetry a special kind of intensity and a special immediacy that the richer and more various poetry of Yeats lacks" [emphasis added] (170).

mark a division between, as he put it in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (*SE* 8), at least ideologically speaking. Thus, in a 1930 essay, Eliot speaks of "the duty, the *consecrated* task, of sincerity" [emphasis added] (*SE* 426), revealing that he attached some religious importance to the effort to write only what one believes. Auden makes even more apparent that he regarded sincerity as a kind of religious imperative. As he wrote in "Ode to Terminus" (1966): ". . . abhorred in the Heav'ns are all self-proclaimed poets, who to wow an / audience, utter some resonant lie" (*CP* 811). Moreover, he claimed that insincerity is actually a form of idolatry, since "Idolatry of the word can express itself . . . in an aestheticism which sets beauty of language above truth," as the poet sees it (*SW* 27). The great importance Auden placed on sincerity after his conversion is reflected in the abundant revisions and rejections to which he subjected his poetry, since a main reason for his disavowal of some or all of a poem was his insistence that he had never really believed the philosophy espoused therein. However, he came to doubt the possibility of achieving total sincerity in art, which he regards as "incorrigibly stagy." Therefore, he began to affirm that art can only be sincere when, paradoxically, it acknowledges its artificiality, which many of his postconversion poems and libretti do explicitly, as will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four respectively. So the overt artifice of these works actually testifies to the value Auden placed on sincerity, a major concern of his later career. As he wrote in "Dichtung und Wahrheit" (1959), he won't be satisfied with any poem he writes unless he is assured that it is "true" (*CP* 649).

Since, unlike Richards, they argued that the beliefs within a poem cannot be dismissed as mere "pseudo-statements" nor does the reader approach a poem in a

"suspension of disbelief," Eliot and Auden contend that these beliefs must be grappled with when discussing the reception of a work. However, they do agree with Richards that one can still appreciate a work which expresses a belief to which one does not subscribe. For example, Auden remarks, "As Dr. I. A. Richards has shown in his *Practical Criticism*," only unsophisticated readers "insist upon identity of belief" (*Prose II* 84). He agrees with Richards that "the reader does not have to share the beliefs expressed in a poem in order to enjoy it" (*DH* 19). In "Dante," Eliot likewise states that Richards is right when he contends "the reader can obtain the full 'literary' or (if you will) 'aesthetic' enjoyment without sharing the beliefs of the author" (*SE* 269). According to Eliot, "If you deny the theory that full poetic appreciation is possible without belief in what the poet believed, you deny the existence of 'poetry' as well as 'criticism'"-- because you would be implying that a poem is only a sum of its beliefs, negating the effects of its technical aspects and aesthetic beauty-- "and if you push this denial to its conclusion, you will be forced to admit that there is very little poetry that you can appreciate . . ." (*SE* 269-70). Therefore, "You are not called to believe what Dante believed," for example, "but you are called upon more and more to understand it" (*SE* 258).

Moreover, Eliot and Auden contend that one may actually prefer poetry informed by a philosophy with which one does not agree to that informed by a philosophy to which one subscribes. Although they agree that generally "the 'truest' philosophy is the best material for the greatest poet" (Eliot "Poetry and Propaganda" 37), they concede that a poet using a philosophy that strikes a reader as flimsy may nevertheless write better poetry than one using what the reader regards as a more legitimate philosophy. Since the

execution of the philosophy in the poem, as well as the philosophy itself, affects its valuation, "we may find a poet giving greater validity to an inferior philosophy, and another employing a better philosophy and realizing it less satisfactorily" (Eliot "Poetry and Propaganda" 37). Since both poets argued that one cannot separate a poem's verse from its philosophy, one may find oneself admiring a poem that is aesthetically pleasing but philosophically unsound. As Eliot says of *Paradise Lost*, "the poetry" cannot be separated "from the peculiar doctrines that it enshrines" (*ASG* 35).[21] Similarly, Auden stated in his review of Tindall's biography that "Lawrence's beliefs were certainly heretical" but we cannot separate "his art from his beliefs," and he admires him nevertheless (*Prose II* 32-33). Elsewhere, Auden reveals, "What fascinates me about the poems of Lawrence's which I like is that I must admit he could never have written them had he held the kind of views . . . of which I approve" (*DH* 278). Likewise, Eliot claims that writers like Lawrence and Wordsworth "would not have been as great as they were but for the limitations which prevented them from being greater than they were" because "the greatness of each . . . is indissolubly attached to his . . . error," including what Eliot would consider his ideological error (*UPUC* 99-100). So certain poets would likely not improve by adopting a better philosophy, since their current philosophy, feeble as it may be, serves their needs.

Eliot and Auden continue to emphasize the need for sincerity on the poet's part, however, even if the poet does subscribe to a feeble philosophy. They go so far as to suggest that sincerity is actually more important than the cogency of the philosophy employed. Auden, for instance, remarks that one doesn't have to share the poem's

[21] Incidentally, in his review of Eliot's *Selected Essays*, Auden rather amusingly remarks that "his occasional summary words of disapproval, like his famous strictures on Milton, are not as arrogant as they sound" (5).

beliefs to enjoy it but "one must be convinced that the poet really believes what he says, however odd the belief may seem to oneself" (*CW* 425). Interestingly, in "Goethe as Sage," Eliot explains that one may learn from a poet even if one does not agree with his ideology by drawing "a distinction between the philosophy of a poet and his wisdom" (*OPP* 224). Though one many disagree with a poet's philosophy, as he does Goethe's, one can still recognize his wisdom-- "a native gift of intuition, ripened and given application by experience, for understanding the nature of things, certainly of living things, most certainly of the human heart" (*OPP* 221). However, as Eliot had remarked in his response to Professor Hiller, the appearance of insincerity in a poem "would annihilate all poetic values except those of technical accomplishment" (*OPP* 222-23), including its "wisdom." Moreover, Eliot's disdain for the "pious insincerity" of much religious verse reveals that even when poetry employs what he regards as "*the* 'truest' philosophy," orthodox Christianity, without sincerity it is of little value.

While they agree with Richards that one can and often does appreciate poetry with various beliefs, Eliot and Auden also acknowledge that a difference in ideology between poet and reader sometimes *cannot* be overcome, thus barring the reader's appreciation of the work. For instance, Eliot may claim, "Only by the exercise of understanding without believing, so far as that is possible, can we come to some point where we believe and understand" ("Propaganda and Propaganda" 37), but he concedes "I am quite aware of the ambiguity of the word 'understand' (*SE* 270):

> In one sense, it means to understand without believing, for unless you can understand a view of life . . . without believing in it, the word 'understand' loses all meaning . . . But if you yourself are convinced of a certain view of life, then

> you irresistibly and inevitably believe that if any one else comes to 'understand' it fully, his understanding *must* terminate in belief. It is possible, and sometimes necessary, to argue that full understanding must identify itself with full belief. (*SE* 270)

So Eliot suggests that it is not always, if ever, possible to "understand" a poem completely if one doesn't share its beliefs. He also admits that oftentimes one is more attracted to a poem with similar beliefs to one's own: "In practice our literary judgment is always fallible, because we inevitably tend to overestimate a poem which embodies a view of life which we can understand and which we accept" ("Poetry and Propaganda" 38). For instance, he prefers Dante to Shakespeare because Dante's poetry, informed by Thomist theology, "seems to me to illustrate a saner attitude towards the mystery of life" (*Sacred Wood* x). Since he admires Dante's poetry for its philosophy as well as its technical virtuosity, Eliot admits, "I can only conclude that I cannot, in practice, wholly separate my poetic appreciation from my personal beliefs," and, he implies, neither can any reader (*SE* 271). In his Kipling essay, he argues that a reader ought to try at least "to overcome the prejudices which they may entertain against any verse which has a different subject matter or a different point of view from that which they happen to accept" (*OPP* 233), but contends that overcoming these prejudices is made even more difficult by the diversity of belief in our present society. In "Johnson as Critic and Poet" (1944), he writes:

> We are all, of course, influenced in our degree of attraction to any particular work of art, by our sympathy with, or antipathy towards, the ideas, as well as the personality of the author. We endeavour, and in our time must endeavour, to

> discount this attraction or repulsion, in order to arrive at a just valuation of the artistic merit. If we lived, like Johnson, in an age of relative unity and of generally accepted assumptions, we should probably be less concerned to make this effort. . . .But in an age in which no two writers need agree about anything . . . we are forced to make this abstraction. (*OPP* 184)

So, according to Eliot, conditions in modern society are particularly unpropitious for religious poets, but they are also unfavorable for poets in general, because this proliferation of philosophies means that now more than ever one must exert oneself to overcome one's prejudices and, "so far as . . . possible," understand poetry with beliefs one doesn't share.

A difference in beliefs, besides potentially rendering a reader's quest for understanding more difficult, can lead him to reject a poem outright. In "Mimesis and Allegory," Auden states, "My personal experience tells me that, while one does not necessarily have to accept the beliefs expressed in a work of art in order to appreciate it, they cannot be ignored and that sometimes they seem so silly as to arouse aesthetic dislike" (*Prose II* 84). So a reader may find a poet's philosophy so uncongenial that he *cannot* "obtain the full 'literary' or . . . 'aesthetic' enjoyment" (Eliot *SE* 269). For instance, although Auden is able to enjoy Lawrence's work despite his "heretical" beliefs (*Prose II* 32-33), Eliot cannot because he is so repulsed by Lawrence's "insensitivity to ordinary social morality, which is so alien to my mind that I am completely baffled by it as a monstrosity" (*ASG* 64). Eliot also says that he "lost touch" with poets like Tennyson, Browning and Arnold because "their philosophy of life came to seem to me flimsy, their religious foundations insecure" (*OPP* 209-10). Further, he claims that "a

poem arising out of a religion which struck us as wholly vile, or out of a philosophy which seemed to us pure nonsense, simply would not appear to be a poem at all" (*OPP* 225). So according to Eliot, a poem's beliefs might even be "vile" enough to disqualify it as poetry.

As well as deprecating Shelley's attempts to exalt poets above their station, both Eliot and Auden point to him as a prime example of how a poet's beliefs can be so uncongenial that one *cannot* appreciate the poetry. In "Shelley and Keats" (1933), Eliot writes, "I find his ideas repellent" and consequently "cannot enjoy" his poetry at all (*UPUC* 89). As he demonstrates, when "the doctrine, theory, belief, or 'view of life' presented in a poem . . . is one which the reader rejects as childish or feeble," as he does Shelley's, "it may, for a reader of well-developed mind, set up an almost complete check" (*UPUC* 96). He doesn't deny that Shelley was talented, but wishes he had put his "poetic gifts, which were certainly of the first order, at the service of more tenable beliefs" than those "that excite my abhorrence" (*UPUC* 96-97).[22] Similarly, as Mendelson relates, Shelley was "the poet Auden attacked most vehemently and consistently throughout his career" (*Early Auden* 200). Even before his conversion, "Auden's specific objections" to Shelley "derive largely from Eliot's," as shown in "Psychology and Criticism" (1936), Auden's review of Herbert Read's *In Defense of Shelley* (*Early Auden* 200). Read dismisses Eliot's objection to Shelley as "irrelevant prejudice . . . and such I would suggest is the kind of poetic approach of all who believed, with Mr Eliot, that 'literary criticism should be completed from a definite ethical and theological standpoint'" (qted. in Auden *Prose I* 131). Instead of any kind of

[22] In his Goethe essay, Eliot had written that our attempt to understand "diverse beliefs," even "tenets which we find abhorrent . . . is part of our own pursuit of wisdom" (*OPP* 221). Apparently, he felt this was too difficult in Shelley's case.

"ideological criticism," Read propounds "ontogenetic criticism, by which I mean criticism which traces the origins of the work of art in the psychology of the individual and in the economic structure of society" (qted. in Auden *Prose I* 131). As he was later to do in his review of Brooks, who condemned Eliot's Christian beliefs, Auden defended Eliot, first disagreeing with Read "when he implies that ontogenetic criticism makes no moral judgments" and then attacking the beliefs in Shelley's poetry himself. For instance, he states, "Abstractions," such as Shelley's, "which are not the latest flowering of a richly experienced and mature mind are empty and their expression devoid of poetic value" (*Prose I* 132). So, as with Eliot, his intense dislike of Shelley's beliefs prevents him from appreciating the poetry informed by them.

The various ways in which readers may react to poetry informed by different beliefs than their own is shown in the reception of Eliot's and Auden's postconversion poetry. With their change in beliefs, the two poets did gain access to a new audience-- particularly Eliot, whose plays *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral*, for example, were well attended by Christians-- revealing that people are often attracted to work "which embodies a view of life which we can understand and which we accept" (Eliot "Poetry and Propaganda" 38). However, as Eliot and Auden had hoped, other readers were still able to appreciate their later poetry even when they didn't subscribe to their beliefs. Also, as discussed in the Introduction, the complications that can ensue regarding the problem of belief in poetry are shown by the way in which some readers, like Bloom, could tolerate the Christianity of one and not the other, at least enough to have a degree of appreciation for the work. So their turn to Christianity did not mean that their work was automatically rejected, even by those hostile to their beliefs. As Cleanth Brooks

wrote in 1991's "The Serious Poet in a Secularized Society: Reflections on Eliot and Twentieth-Century Culture," "Since ours is a secular society, Eliot's poetry was frankly moving against the hard currents of such a society. In view of this fact, he deserved special credit as a man who had to win his way against difficulties and perhaps his basically non-Christian audience deserves some credit too for as much tolerance as it accorded him" (110). However, Brooks continues, "his intellectual position encountered and continues to encounter a powerful resistance" (110), as does Auden's. While some poetry informed by Christianity is still "admired and loved by many who are not Christians and who normally find religious poetry repellent" (Gardner *Religion* 172-73), it is most often the work of earlier poets like Herbert or Donne. As Auden explains, "We do not criticize artists of the past for holding religious or political or scientific beliefs which differ from our own. We do so criticize contemporary artists . . ." (*Prose II* 421).[23] If Eliot's and Auden's sensible perspective on the effects of belief on reception were better known, more readers might be able to recognize their own ideological biases, and perhaps compensate somewhat for them-- thus enabling more readers to appreciate the two poets' later work.

The Instrumental Functions of Religious Literature

Despite all of the disadvantages they faced as Christian poets in a secular society-- both because of the particular unpropitiousness of the age for writers of religious poetry and because of the kinds of complications that can arise from any difference in belief between the reader and writer-- neither Eliot nor Auden attempted to

[23] In "Mimesis and Allegory" (1940), he posits, "I suspect that when one likes a work containing beliefs with which one disagrees, one . . . tries . . . to allegorize them, to see them in historical relation to a historical absolute background of one's own beliefs" (*Prose II* 84), suggesting that such tolerance is actually indicative of a kind of historical condescension.

conceal or downplay their religious convictions. In fact, their postconversion works are often highly didactic. Auden posits, in his introduction to *Poets of the English Language*, that many of his contemporaries would regard medieval poetry as "very 'impure' poetry, always forsaking the poetry for moralizing or teaching," and consequently would find it difficult "to appreciate . . . aesthetically" (xxiii). Similarly, in "Johnson as Critic and Poet" (1944), Eliot remarks that while didactic poetry was common during Johnson's age, now "we distrust verse in which the author is deliberately aiming to instruct or to persuade" (*OPP* 184). Neither Auden nor Eliot is prejudiced against didactic poetry in this way, however. Auden even claims in some respects "verse is superior to prose as a medium for didactic instruction" (*DH* 26). They themselves laid out their religious convictions quite clearly and forcefully because, as well as wanting their poetry and drama to be a sincere reflection of their beliefs, they hoped that the Christianity informing their works might have a positive effect on their audience. Although they argued that poetry is to be considered first *as* poetry, and its autotelicity respected, they did not think that precluded it from performing instrumental functions. For example, Eliot had praised Keats for being "merely about his business," devoting himself completely to his poetry, but hastened to add "that does not imply that poets of other types may not rightly and sometimes *by obligation* be concerned about other uses" [emphasis added] (*UPUC* 102). Eliot's and Auden's criticism reveals that they both felt a certain religious obligation to express their beliefs in their work, so that they might edify their readers. Thus, in response to Auden's other query in *Secondary Worlds*, their beliefs make a tremendous difference "to what [they] write" and "to [their] conception of [their] vocation" (12).

Auden once claimed, "We expect an essay to instruct or edify; for aesthetic satisfaction we turn to poetry or fiction" (*FA* 380). However, he himself realized that these functions are not mutually exclusive nor limited to one genre or another. In fact, both he and Eliot aimed to instruct *and* please through their art. Although they claimed that the poet is meant to entertain, they did not mean that he need only entertain. As Eliot said of the theatre, for example, "The element of amusement is indispensable; if a play does not amuse people it can do nothing for them," and "audiences are always wanting something better" than mere entertainment "though they may not know it" ("Religious Drama" 12). According to the two poets, one may instruct, even in spiritual matters, without succumbing to the Romantic presumption that one is akin to a priest performing religious rites. Eliot in particular emphasized the necessity for a Christian to write in an edifying manner. For instance, he tells his fellow believers, "We cannot be satisfied to be Christians at our devotions and merely secular reformers all the rest of the week," but must rather keep in mind our duties to God and to our fellow man "every day and about whatever business," including, one presumes, the writing of poetry (*Christianity* 77). He also argues that for a Christian "live and let live" is not an option: "To accept two ways of life in the same society, one for the Christian and another for the rest, would be for the Church to abandon its task of evangelizing the world" (*Christian* 72). Though he doesn't want to be a Christian apologist, Eliot's prose reveals that he still feels a responsibility to help the Church, however indirectly, in its evangelizing task. In "Religion and Literature," he states, "Though we may read literature merely for pleasure, of 'entertainment' or of 'aesthetic enjoyment,'" "this reading never affects simply a sort of special sense: it affects us as entire human beings; it affects our moral and religious

existence" (*SE* 396). Therefore, Eliot, unlike many of his contemporaries, doesn't deride the Johnsonian notion that "poetry should teach wisdom or inculcate virtue" (*OPP* 182), but rather cautions that one shouldn't ignore "the moral value of poetry" (*OPP* 184).

Although Auden agreed with Eliot that "a faith . . . which really is a faith and believes, therefore, that it is in possession of the truth, is by necessity missionary and must intend to convert the world" (*DH* 128), he usually sounds a much less evangelistic strain than the elder poet and appears less anxious about his religious duties. For instance, whereas Eliot exhorts Christians to concentrate on their religious duties "every day and about whatever business" (*Christianity* 77), Auden worries that some people will give *too much* thought to their religious obligations: "God, surely does not intend us to sit around thinking of and loving him like anything" instead of leading active lives (*CW* 175). Also, he disagrees with Tolstoy's contention in *What is Art?* that art should be valued primarily, if not exclusively, for any religious functions it may perform. While he insists art's main purpose is aesthetic enjoyment, however, Auden agrees that art can legitimately perform such secondary functions, and further that "once one has read the book, one can never again ignore the questions Tolstoi raises" (*DH* 9)-- suggesting perhaps that his certainty regarding the primacy of aesthetic enjoyment over spiritual significance has been somewhat shaken. As his attitude towards Tolstoy suggest, Auden often had "a strong impulse to connect poetry with moral or spiritual improvement" *and* a "strong impulse not to" (McDiarmid *Apologies* 23), because he was leery of art overextending itself into religious matters and vice versa.

However, while he exhibits more ambivalence than Eliot on this point, Auden's prose and poetry reveals that he does share some of Eliot's sense of responsibility as a

Christian poet to his faith. Auden had famously declared in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939) that "poetry makes nothing happen" (*CP* 248), but after his disillusionment with political art, he meant primarily that art could not change society as a whole, as he had tried to do with his socialist poetry and drama of the 1930s. He agreed with Eliot that art could have some effect on the individual's spiritual state, however, and specifically that art can edify. Even before his conversion, Auden's attribution of spiritual influence to art is revealed in his conception of "parable-art." In "Psychology and Art To-day" (1935), Auden explains that, unlike "escape-art," "parable-art" "teach[es] man to unlearn hatred and learn love" (*EA* 342). As McDiarmid explains, "Parable-art looks across the border at the spiritually significant world where people love and hate, though the way it 'teaches' will be determined by the reader's disposition, as each one 'according to his immediate and peculiar needs may draw his own conclusions'" (*Apologies* 25). After his conversion, he continued to affirm that art can impact one's spiritual state, but reasonably asserts that it won't necessarily affect everyone in the same way: "We do not mean that art has no moral effect but only that the latter depends upon our individual responses" (*Prose II* 83). Moreover, he praised those artists who attended to the spiritual effects of literature. For example, in his essay on Graves, he remarked, "Like nearly all writers worth reading, Mr. Graves is a moralist, and the artistic merits of his poems cannot be divorced from the conception of the good life which they express" (*CR* 257), which, recall, Auden described as part of the "moral" dimension of one's work (*DH* 50-51). Further, in his review of Anthony Trollope, Auden shows how influential this moral instruction of a writer can be: "The novelist creeps in closer than the school-master, closer than the father, closer almost than the mother. He is the chosen guide, the tutor

whom the young pupil chooses for herself" (*FA* 267). Discussing the effects of literature on morality, Auden cites Simone Weil's contention that "real evil is gloomy, monotonous" but "imaginary evil is romantic and varied," which can make "evil" behavior seem more appealing to misled readers (qted. in *FA* 267). For such reasons, "the task of teaching morals is not easy" (*FA* 267), but Auden argues the enterprise should not be abandoned. He commends Trollope for his belief that "the object of a novel should be to instruct in morals while it amused. . . .I wish more modern novelists shared his belief" (*FA* 267). Auden also tried "to instruct in morals" while he "amused" in his own work. Deane remarks, for instance, that Auden may claim that "poetry makes nothing happen," but in works like *New Year Letter* (1940), a "highly didactic" long poem, "the *raison d'être* . . . is to accomplish some sort of mental reorientation in the reader that will have ramifications in the world beyond poetry" (59), and as Chapter Two will demonstrate, these desired ramifications are of a decidedly spiritual order.

Auden's awareness that literature can instruct morally and otherwise without compromising its integrity is reflected in his contention that poetry is comprised of "Ariel" and "Prospero" elements, the former associated with aestheticism and the latter with instrumentalism. In an essay on Robert Frost, Auden explains that the presence of these two elements in poetry reflects our sometimes conflicting demands on a literary work:

> We want a poem to be beautiful, that is to say, a verbal earthly paradise, a timeless world of pure play, which gives us delight precisely because of its contrast to our historical existence with all its insoluble problems and inescapable suffering; at the same time we want a poem to be true, that is to say, to provide us

> with some kind of revelation about our life which will show us what life is really like and free us from self-enchantment and deception, and a poet cannot bring us any truth without introducing into his poetry the problematic, the painful, the disorderly, the ugly. (*DH* 338)

So the "Ariel" component reflects our desire for beauty and "pure play" while the "Prospero" component reflects our desire for truth. Auden elsewhere describes this Prospero element in a poem as "some kind of illumination about our present wandering condition, since, without self-insight and knowledge of the world, we must err blindly with little chance of realizing our hope. We expect a poem to tell us some home truth, however minor . . ." (*FA* 385). Ideally, as Frost writes, a poem "begins in delight and ends in wisdom . . . a clarification of life-- not necessarily a great clarification such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion" (qted. in Auden *DH* 342). So any secondary function a poem may perform, such as edification, reflects the Prospero side of its nature. While theorizing on the relationship of the Ariel and Prospero sides of poetry, Auden states, "Though every poem involves *some* degree of collaboration between Ariel and Prospero, the role of each varies in importance from one poem to another: it is usually possible to say of a poem and, sometimes, of the whole output of a poet, that it is Ariel-dominated or Prospero-dominated" (*DH* 338). He claims for example that Campion "is an example of an Ariel-dominated poet in whose work verbal beauty is almost everything, and what is said matters very little. In Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, on the other hand, Prospero dominates and Ariel contributes very little; it might almost have been written in prose" (*FA* 385). Although he may not be so extreme as Wordsworth, Auden himself is clearly a "Prospero-dominated poet" (*DH* 431) who

places an extraordinary amount of importance on what he says not just how he says it. Classifying Auden thus does not mean that he didn't place a high value on a poem's aesthetic beauty and technical accomplishments, however. After all, "in every poet," including Auden, "there dwells an Ariel, who sings, and a Prospero, who comprehends" (*FA* 385). So, as he writes of Frost, another Prospero poet, "the beautiful verbal element is not absent," but "this is subordinated in importance to the truth of what it says" (*DH* 340). Auden even suggests that most "great" poetry is primarily distinguished by its Prospero not Ariel dimension, claiming, "In the end, of course, it is not the poet's technique but his vision which decides the value of his work" (*Prose II* 323), and this "vision" is linked to the poet's Prospero nature. Further, he states, "though there are certain lyrics the appeal of which lies almost entirely in their beautiful verbal play," their Ariel component, "most of the poetry we call great possesses a quality, call it a vision, wisdom, what you will, which transcends the actual verbal expression" (*CR* 193-94).[24] Since Auden focuses so much attention on the content of his own poetry-- and this content is deeply informed by his religious convictions-- he seemed to position himself in such a way as to exercise more spiritual influence than most other poets, since the philosophy of an Ariel-dominated poet, for example, would generally not be as prominently displayed because of a relative lack of didacticism.

Despite the didacticism of Auden's postconversion poetry and his assertions that writers need to be aware of the effects of literature on, as Eliot put it, the reader's "moral and religious existence" (*SE* 396), he was nevertheless wary of using his poetry to

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[24] For example, Auden contends, "It is impossible to read a prose translation of *The Iliad* or *The Divine Comedy* without being made to feel that these are works of great value, although their 'music' has been abolished" (*CR* 193-94). Of course, some critics might counter that translators may be able to retain a degree of the original "music" or at least replace it with their own, but Auden's claim nevertheless reveals how much importance he places on the Prospero aspect of poetry.

promote his Christian beliefs too directly. He was at times more comfortable taking a Kierkegaardian approach to show readers the validity of Christianity. As Auden relayed, "To show the non-believer that he is in despair because he cannot believe in his gods and then show him that Christ cannot be a man-made God because in every respect he is offensive to the natural man is for Kierkegaard the only true kind of Christian apologetics" (*FA* 180). He often maintains that art can best witness to God in an indirect way, like Kierkegaard's apologetics. For instance, Auden writes, "Art cannot make a man want to become good, but it can prevent him from imagining that he already is; it cannot give him faith in God, but it can show him his despair" (*Prose II* 109). He employs this indirect method particularly in his major postconversion poems. For example, in poems like *The Sea and the Mirror*, he aims to "prevent [man] from imagining that he already is" good, by pointing to the "essential emphatic gulf" which separates him from God (*CP* 444). By affirming Christian truth indirectly, Auden could satisfy himself that he was not preaching in his poetry but was still edifying his readers.

Compared to Auden, Eliot tends to place even more responsibility on Christian artists and on himself in particular, because as well as emphasizing that art affects one's spiritual state in general, he asserts that writers can have a significant effect on how readers regard various ideologies. Thus, he is very conscious of his role as a representative of orthodox Christianity. For example, he contends, "A church is to be judged by its intellectual fruits, by its influence on the sensibility of the most sensitive and on the intellect of the most intelligent, and it must be made real to the eye by monuments of artistic merit" (*SE* 342). No doubt, Eliot regarded himself as one of the "most sensitive" and "most intelligent" members of the English Church-- which he notes

"has no literary monument equal to that of Dante" (*SE* 342)-- and therefore believed that the Church would be judged in part by the quality of his work. This idea that the Church will be judged by its art relates to Eliot's overlooked concept of "esthetic sanction":

> The orthodox Christian . . . is hardly likely to take Dante as proving Christianity; the orthodox materialist is hardly likely to adduce Lucretius as evidence of materialism or atomism. What he will find in Dante or in Lucretius is the *esthetic* sanction: that is, the partial justification of these views of life by the art to which they give rise. And there is no doubt that we are all of us powerfully influenced by the esthetic sanction; and that any way or view of life which gives rise to great art is for us more plausible than one which gives rise to inferior art or to none. ("Poetry and Propaganda" 36)

Eliot, for example, seemed to find the "esthetic sanction" for Christianity in the work of Dante, whom he admired tremendously from his youth and whose work is so dominated by orthodox theology, and Lancelot Andrewes, of whose sermons he writes: "It is only when we have saturated ourselves in his prose, followed the movement of his thought, that we find his examination of words terminating in the ecstasy of assent" (*FLA* 19-20). Since Eliot stated "As a Christian I must naturally desire that everyone in the world should be converted to Christianity" (qted. in Schuchard "Burbank" 19), it follows that he felt compelled to use his artistic gifts to provide others with this "partial justification" for his faith. Interestingly, Eliot's undeniable influence on Auden suggests the possibility that the younger poet *did* find in his work the esthetic sanction for Christianity. As shown, Auden repeatedly demonstrates his admiration for the early *and* later work of Eliot, and he did so even before his own conversion. For example, Auden reveals his

knowledge and appreciation of Eliot's Christian poetry in "Letter to Lord Byron" (1936) when he writes, "But Eliot spoke the still spoken word; / For gasworks and dried tubers I forsook / The clock at Grantchester, the English rook" (*CP* 110), which alludes to *Ash-Wednesday* as well as *The Waste Land.* Also, recall that Auden testified that he preferred Eliot's poetry-- and he cites the later poetry in particular-- to Yeats's because of its greater resonance and seriousness, springing in large part from its sincerity (*Prose II* 156; 174). So Conniff's allegation that Auden completely dismissed Eliot's work as a Christian poet is unfounded. Auden's conviction of the power of Eliot's later poetry may in fact have convinced him that, whatever drawbacks a Christian poet may face, he can still write "great" poetry, reassuring him that he wouldn't have to sacrifice all of his artistic ambitions were he to convert. So by writing in an edifying manner and by providing the esthetic sanction for Christianity, Eliot could influence both readers and fellow writers, thus contributing in at least a small way to the Church's evangelizing mission.

Negotiating between Instrumentalism and Aestheticism

Eliot and Auden agreed that literature could serve religious functions, and both felt an obligation, though not to the same degree, to use their poetry to assert the truth of Christianity, but they nevertheless argue that poetry cannot be used solely as a conduit for one's beliefs. It must first be respected as poetry, an autotelic creation, or else one is only writing what amounts to propaganda. Artists whose beliefs are at odds with those of their society, like modern Christians, are particularly susceptible to writing in a propagandistic manner. Unlike those earlier poets, such as Donne, who could approach religious subjects with an "unembarrassed boldness and naturalness" (Gardner *Religion* 193),

Auden explains, "The modern artist is in a dilemma. If he has beliefs, realizing that he cannot assume them in his audience, he is tempted to underline them in his work and to become a preacher of pious religious or political sermons to the faithful" (*Prose II* 87). Eliot also asserts that modern religious writers, because their beliefs differ from those of the majority of their readers, may be prone to writing propaganda, as shown in the case of G. K. Chesterton (*SE* 391). In "Religion and Literature," he claims that "no one admires and enjoys" Chesterton's novels more than he does, but objects to "such writings . . . because they are conscious operations in a world in which it is assumed that Religion and Literature are not related. It is a conscious and limited relating" (*SE* 392). Eliot then proclaims, "What I want is a literature which should be *un*consciously, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian: because the work of Mr. Chesterton has its point from appearing in a world which is definitely not Christian" (*SE* 392). According to Eliot, "when religion is in a flourishing state, when the whole mind of society is moderately healthy and in order, there is an easy and natural association between religion and art" (*SE* 440). However, he asserts such is not the case now because of a lack of religious homogeneity and because in highly specialized societies, such as ours, religion and art (as well as politics and science) "reach a point at which there is a conscious struggle between them for autonomy and dominance" (*Christianity* 97). Given his awareness that the world *is* not Christian and therefore there is not "an easy and natural association between religion and art," his condemnation of Chesterton's writings because they acknowledge the prevalence of secularism seems somewhat unreasonable. Moreover, in "Religion and Literature," Eliot also describes "Propaganda" as "the literary works of men who are sincerely desirous of forwarding the cause of religion" (*SE* 391).

Since he believed that "[a] people without religion will in the end find that it has nothing to live for" ("Interview" [1958]) and he hoped that his work would help in some small measure to persuade people to adopt Christianity, under this definition all of his postconversion work might be classified as propagandistic. While his definitions of propaganda are not terribly satisfying, they nevertheless betray his anxiety over the extremely difficult position in which modern Christian writers, like Auden and him, find themselves if they want to incorporate their beliefs in a meaningful way without becoming overly conscious of them and thus emphasizing them to the detriment of their work. Although Eliot and Auden were acutely aware of the dangers of propaganda, their vulnerability on this point is revealed in some of their postconversion works, in which they do allow their desire to "preach" to overshadow aesthetic considerations.

Before *and* after converting, Auden shows a susceptibility to "misuse" poetry in this way. He condemned a number of the works which he wrote in the 1930s, in which he acted as "a preacher of . . . political sermons." As he wrote in a letter, "The reason (artistic) I left England and went to the U.S. was precisely to stop me writing poems like 'Sept. 1st, 1939', the most dishonest poem I have ever written" (qted. in Mendelson *Early Auden* 330). He considered many of these poems, which he often revised or rejected, as "dishonest" because he had sacrificed sincerity for political expediency, not acknowledging his actual ambivalence towards certain causes to which he seemed fully committed. When he became a Christian, he no longer wrote these kinds of poems but was instead tempted to become "a preacher of pious *religious* . . . sermons" [emphasis added] *(Prose II* 87). Mendelson remarks that in 1940, when "Auden 'began going, in a tentative and experimental way, to church' . . . there was little that was tentative or

experimental about the display of theology and dogma in his poems," and that even his love poems "tended to preach" (*Later Auden* 148, 153). For instance, in "Christmas 1940" (1940), which Mendelson calls one of his "extended sermons in verse," Auden goes so far as to incorporate parts of his review of a theological work by Niebuhr and baldly states the necessity to "serve the Unconditional" (*Later Auden* 243, 161; Auden *CP* [1945] 120). At times Eliot also overemphasized his beliefs in propagandistic ways. Although he claimed to want "*un*consciously" Christian literature, his major post-conversion works tend to be overtly and very consciously Christian, particularly his drama. For example, in a discussion of *The Rock* (1934), a pageant-play commissioned by the Anglican Church which critics routinely condemn for its preachiness, Eliot himself confesses that he is "haranguing" the audience with his beliefs (*OPP* 91). In the early essay "The Function of Criticism" (1923), he had stated, "I do not deny that art may be affirmed to serve ends beyond itself; but art is not required to be aware of these ends, and indeed performs its function, whatever it may be, according to various theories of value, much better by indifference to them" (*SE* 24). After his conversion, Eliot could not be indifferent to these ends, since he insisted a Christian should focus on his religion "every day and about whatever business" (*Christianity* 77), and, at any rate, he could not escape the self-consciousness endemic to religious poets. Like Auden, however, he remained aware that giving too much consideration to the possible instrumental functions of literature, including its ability to effect spiritual change, can lay one open to the charge of writing propaganda. The two poets thus sought a way to express their religious convictions in what might be called an aesthetically responsible manner-- a procedure which required the proper transmutation of their beliefs.

Both poets insisted that the material which goes into a poem must be adequately transmuted or transformed if the poem is to be regarded as "genuine." This notion of genuineness suggests that "verse" has to qualify to be labeled as "poetry," a marker that the work in question has at least a degree of integrity and quality, an essential soundness. Auden maintains that a poem in order "to satisfy me . . . must . . . be true" (649), but "of any poem written by myself, my first demand is that it be genuine" (*CP* 649). Also, Eliot contends that while "the 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards . . . we must remember that whether it *is* literature or not can be determined only by literary standards" [emphasis added] (*SE* 388)[25] and that "[t]he most that I should venture to commit myself to, about the work of any living poet when I met it for the first time, is whether this is *genuine* poetry or not" (*OPP* 50). Similarly, in his essay on Marianne Moore, from whom he likely derived this idea of genuineness, Eliot states that it is difficult to recognize "greatness" in contemporary poetry, "[b]ut the *genuineness* of poetry is something which we have some warrant for believing that a small number . . . of contemporary readers can recognize" (105). One of the qualities of genuine poetry is that it is, one might say, fully processed, that it is a work with some autonomy so that knowledge of the material which went into making it is not required in order to appreciate it. According to Auden, a "genuine" poem bears the poet's individual "handwriting" (*CP* 649), but the material is not stubbornly personal because it has been transmuted or transformed into art. So, as he states in *A Certain World*, to a writer, "in a sense all of his works are transmutations of his personal experiences" (vii). Eliot in

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[25] He does contradict this claim somewhat when he suggests that one's assessment of the validity of a poem's beliefs-- not something judged "only by literary standards"-- can be enough to disqualify it as literature. As mentioned above, he thought that "a poem arising out of a religion which struck us as wholly vile, or out of a philosophy which seemed to us pure nonsense, simply would not appear to be a poem at all" (*OPP* 225).

particular emphasized this requirement, before and after his conversion. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), for example, he famously claimed, "[T]he more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material" (*SE* 18). Later, in "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," he declared that Shakespeare "was occupied with the struggle-- which alone constitutes life for a poet-- to transmute his personal and private agonies into something rich and strange, something universal and impersonal" (*SE* 137). However, in "Hamlet and His Problems" (1919), he claims that Shakespeare also illustrates how a writer can fail "to transmute his personal and private agonies" because, according to Eliot, Hamlet's disgust at life is not justified by his situation, and must therefore be a reflection of some disgust Shakespeare himself experienced: "Hamlet . . . is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or *manipulate into art*" [emphasis added] (*SE* 144). Because this "stuff" has not been sufficiently turned into art, "[w]e need a great many facts in his biography" to help us understand his portrayal of Hamlet and why through him Shakespeare "attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible" which he apparently felt (*SE* 146). As a play, therefore, *Hamlet* lacks a degree of autotelicity, or self-containment. Eliot again makes the connection between properly transmuted material and impersonality in "Yeats." In this essay, he praises the impersonality "which is more and more achieved by the maturing artist. . . .[T]hat of the poet who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth; retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol" (*SP* 251).

As their emphasis on sincerity reveals, however, Eliot and Auden do not accept, as critics like Richards do, that beliefs themselves should be fundamentally transformed. Rather than being changed into pseudo-statements, for example, for them, ideally, the belief within a poem should be identifiable with the belief outside the poem. Nevertheless, they do maintain that the way in which this belief is incorporated into the work is important. Transmutation in this case entails ensuring that the belief becomes an integral part of the work, woven into its seams. According to the two poets, treating belief in the proper manner does not preclude didacticism, however. Eliot continued to believe, as he had stated in "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), that "The possible interests of a poet are unlimited; the more intelligent he is the better; the more intelligent he is the more likely that he will have interests: our only condition is that he turn them into poetry, and not merely meditate on them poetically" (*SE* 288).[26] So a poet is free to use his interests and ideas, as long as "he turn[s] them into poetry," that is, transmutes them. Eliot and Auden objected not only to Shelley's beliefs but also to the manner in which he employed these beliefs, because they thought he had not turned them adequately into poetry. Eliot points out that "Shelley said that he disliked didactic poetry; but his own poetry is chiefly didactic" (*UPUC* 93). However, he does not disparage Shelley because he is "deliberately making use of his poetic gifts to propagate a doctrine; for Dante and Lucretius did the same thing" (*UPUC* 96). Rather, he suggests that, unlike Dante, who was "about as thoroughgoing a didacticist as one could find" (*UPUC* 95), Shelley did not intertwine his doctrine fully into his work. Instead, Shelley's ideas are "bolted whole and

[26] Eliot, however, did come to disagree with what he had said next: "A philosophical theory which has entered into poetry is established, for its truth or falsity in one ceases to matter, and its truth in another sense proved" (*SE* 288-89). As his early essays show, he often seemed to have more sympathy with Richards's conception of pseudo-statements before his conversion.

never assimilated, visible in the catchwords and creeds outworn, tyrants and priests . . ." (*UPUC* 92). Auden likewise attacked Shelley's treatment of his philosophical beliefs, which gives his work an overly "abstract" quality (*Prose I* 132). One gets the impression that he "never looked at or listened to anything, except ideas," ideas which were then applied in too unmediated a way in his poetry (*Prose I* 132). As Eliot stated, "the poet must be rated in the end both by the philosophy he realizes in poetry and by the fullness and adequacy of the realization" ("Poetry and Propaganda" 37). According to the two poets, Shelley fails on both counts. He espoused beliefs they deemed inferior and he failed to turn even these "shabby" beliefs into poetry. In their own works which might be considered propagandistic, Eliot's and Auden's beliefs similarly appear to be "bolted whole and never assimilated," which is quite literally the case in Auden's "Christmas 1940" since he lifted phrases virtually unchanged from his polemical review of Niebuhr's book. Similarly, in *The Rock*, even granted that it is a commissioned pageant play, Eliot does not seem to give the characters much life of their own or function beyond their ideological one-- they merely serve as the mouthpiece for the author. Therefore, in order to qualify as genuine poetry, even the philosophy in a didactic work must be transmuted, truly integrated and metabolized. As this metaphor of digestion suggests, a transmuted belief is thoroughly absorbed and insinuated into the lines, giving strength to the work as a whole, as in Dante's *Divine Comedy*-- the work is not a mere slate upon which the philosophy is scrawled.[27]

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[27] As well as stating that Shelley's beliefs were "bolted whole," Eliot uses this metaphor of digestion to describe transmutation in his response to Auden's *The Orators* (1931). As Fuller relates, the work derives thematically in part from St-John Perse's *Anabase*, which Eliot had recently translated. After reading his manuscript, Eliot told Auden that "Book I, 'The Initiates', 'seems to me to have lumps of undigested St-John Perse embedded in it'" (92). So, as Eliot asserts elsewhere, transmutation requires the transformation of all material which enters a poem, including one's belief, personal history as well as literary influences.

So Eliot and Auden must strive to write genuine poetry informed by their beliefs in a nourishing not detrimental way-- a task made more difficult by their positions as Christian poets in a secular society. While writers like Dante could take for granted that their readers for the most part shared their views, Eliot's and Auden's awareness that they were ideologically at odds with the majority of their society made them extremely conscious of their beliefs, and tempted them to emphasize these beliefs in a propagandistic way instead of transmuting them into art. Despite these challenges, they did not want to minimize the place of belief in their work either, because then they would seem to be shirking what they felt was their responsibility as Christian writers-- to provide some spiritual edification and instruction-- for the sake of their artistic ambitions. In such circumstances, they would be guilty of idolatry, essentially valuing their devotion to art above their devotion to God. As Eliot in particular shows, however, poetry can best perform these spiritual functions when it is well regarded *as* poetry, since only "great" art, not propaganda, will provide the "esthetic sanction" for Christianity and bolster a church "judged by its intellectual fruits" ("Poetry and Propaganda" 36; *SE* 342). Also, he agreed with Johnson that when we read a poem, "We do not have *two* experiences, one of pleasure and one of edification; it is one experience" (*OPP* 183). Eliot criticizes Johnson, however, for not allowing "the possibility of any development or expansion of enjoyment": "It is the immediate favourable impression of rhythm and diction which disposes us to accept a poem, encourages us to give it further attention and to discover other reasons for liking it" (*OPP* 183, 167). Aesthetic beauty can compel one to examine a poem more closely, including its philosophy. Eliot's understanding of this potential development in one's response to poetry accords with Frost's contention, which Auden

quotes approvingly, that a reader's encounter with a poem ideally "begins in delight and ends in wisdom," Ariel gives way to Prospero (qted. in *DH* 342). Also, much as Eliot maintains that in the 'greatest poetry,' sound and sense are of the highest quality (*OPP* 169), Auden states that "in every good poem" the relationship between the Ariel and Prospero elements "is more or less happy" (*DH* 338). Nevertheless, as Auden explains, "Every poem shows some sign of a rivalry between Ariel and Prospero," and even in those poems in which "their relation is more or less happy . . . it is never without its tensions" (*DH* 337-8). These tensions are especially acute in the works of Eliot and Auden because of the particular difficulties they faced as modern Christian poets. In their efforts to negotiate between purely aesthetic and purely instrumental claims, they must walk a kind of tightrope, neither allowing their work to descend into propaganda nor allowing an undue respect for art to lead them to ignore their religious duties.

Despite their fraught position, the friction that results from their sense of being pulled between their duty to art and their duty to God can result in a healthy tension. In "The Modern Mind" (1933), Eliot states that "between the motive which Rivière attributed to Molière and Racine," to entertain, "and the motive of Matthew Arnold bearing on shoulders what he thought to be the orb of the poet's fate," to provide spiritual sustenance, "there is a serious *via media*" (*UPUC* 130). Eliot is often ambivalent towards Yeats and his achievements, but in "Yeats" he does praise him for finding this "middle way" between aestheticism and instrumentalism:

> Born into a world in which the doctrine of 'Art for Art's sake' was generally accepted, and living on into one in which art has been asked to be instrumental to social purposes, he held firmly to the right view which is between these, though

> not in any way a compromise between them, and showed that an artist, by serving his art with entire integrity, is at the same time rendering the greatest service he can to his own nation and to the whole world. (*SP* 257)

By "the greatest service," he is likely referring primarily to Yeats's contribution to language, but Eliot would also affirm that one can best serve religious functions as well "by serving . . . art with entire integrity" (*SP* 257), which he and Auden attempted to do.

They explicitly set themselves the task of writing poetry that adhered to high artistic standards while still allowing them to express their beliefs in a significant manner. For example, Eliot wrote to Stead in 1930:

> Between the usual subjects of poetry and 'devotional' verse there is a very important field still very unexplored by modern poets-- the experience of a man in search of God, and trying to explain to himself his intenser human feelings in terms of the divine goal. I have tried to do something of that in 'Ash Wednesday.' (qted. in Bush 131)

Eliot doesn't want to succumb to what he regarded as the limitations of traditional "devotional" poetry, "a variety of minor poetry" (*SE* 390). As well as avoiding "pious insincerity" by acknowledging the struggles inherent in spiritual development, in *Ash-Wednesday* and his other postconversion poems he wants to treat, as Dante did, "the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit" and express "everything in the way of emotion, between depravity's despair and the beatific vision, that man is capable of experiencing" (*SE* 390; *TCTC* 134). Treating "the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit" is even more difficult now than it was in Dante's time, however, since modern Christian poets are prone to overemphasize their beliefs in a narrowly religious

way. Therefore, Eliot sees himself as a pioneer, working in this "very important field still very unexplored by modern poets." Auden embarks on this mission with Eliot to expand the possibilities for modern religious poetry. In a letter to J. R. R. Tolkien about "Homage to Clio" (1955), which he revealed is really "a hymn to Our Lady," Auden "praised Tolkien for having solved in *The Lord of the Rings* the problem he had implicitly set for himself in writing this poem: 'how to write a 'Christian' piece of literature without making it obvious or 'pi,'" that is, "exaggeratedly pious" (Mendelson 396). While Tolkien bristled at the suggestion that *The Lord of the Rings* was a Christian allegory, he revealed that it was informed by his Christian beliefs. He told Auden, "I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief" (355), and wrote to another acquaintance, "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision . . . the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism" (172). Auden would have agreed that Tolkien's beliefs were transmuted into his work, informing it in a powerful way without forcing the work into the narrow confines of propaganda. Tolkien, he would argue, respected the integrity of his art. Like Tolkien, Auden, in works such as "Homage to Clio," attempted to write literature which was fundamentally edifying and a sincere reflection of his beliefs but nevertheless avoided the traditional pitfalls of religious literature. As well as having Tolkien as a model, Auden could look to Eliot, whose situation as a modern Christian poet so closely approximated his own. As Auden remarked, a "poet naturally looks for and finds the greatest help in the work of those whose poetic problems are similar to his because they have experiences in common" (*Prose II* 386). Eliot helped to show him how to manage a productive friction between

artistic aspirations and religious obligations, and consequently they both became trailblazers in modern religious poetry.

The two poets articulate strikingly similar theoretical positions on the relation of religion and literature, but, as Chapter Two demonstrates, they often diverge in practice. In the poems written immediately after their conversions, they took their first steps towards developing a viable Christian poetics and were confronted by the magnitude of the task they had set themselves. Their anxiety is reflected in these works, in which a sense of conflict between artistic and religious values is most apparent. Although they took some of the same approaches-- both began to write in a more accessible style, for example-- their poems reflect their significant theological and political differences. Quite often, Auden, always so aware of Eliot's example before him, seems to be writing against the older poet. Therefore, these poems are extraordinarily important because they capture Eliot and Auden in the midst of transforming themselves into Christian poets, and highlight some of the differences in their understanding of their new roles.

Chapter Two

The Birthpangs of Conversion: The Transitional Poetry

Eliot's and Auden's prose testifies to their concern over locating the proper place for their religious convictions in their work, through the intensity of their investigations into the nature of the relation of religion and literature in general and the implications they draw regarding the potential incompatibility of religious and artistic values. Although they often sound a pessimistic note in their essays regarding the possibilities of reconciling these values and overcoming the various difficulties facing a modern Christian poet, they generally appear even less sanguine in their poetry. For instance, in their essays they may assert that literature can serve religious purposes, edifying as it entertains, but in their poetry they often doubt their own ability to effect this kind of spiritual change. As Eliot reveals, "In one's prose reflexions one may be legitimately occupied with ideals, whereas in the writing of verse one can only deal with actuality" (*ASG* 28). Moreover, although Auden claims a poet uses his criticism to determine "what he should do next and what he should avoid" (*DH* 9-10), he and Eliot tended to focus primarily on the latter. For the most part, their essays on religious poetry lack positive prescriptions and instead detail the numerous challenges facing poets like themselves. In their verse, however, they cannot simply point out what the Christian poet should avoid-- the religious errors of idolatry and pride on the one hand, and the artistic compromises entailed by devotional poetry and propaganda on the other-- but must strive to find a path forward which doesn't transgress in these ways. They began to develop a Christian poetics which would satisfy their rigorous standards in their transitional poetry, written

during or shortly after their conversions. These works include Eliot's Ariel poems and his most important poem of the period, *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), and the poems of Auden's *The Double Man* (1941), "Prologue," "Epilogue," "The Quest," and the centerpiece of the volume, the long poem "New Year Letter," with its appended notes. In these poems, their anxiety regarding their roles as Christian poets is most pronounced as they try to negotiate for the first time between what they regarded as artistic and religious imperatives. They each focus on a different aspect of the modern religious artist's dilemma, however. Whereas Eliot betrays a fear that he will allow his artistic ambitions to compromise his spiritual development, Auden reveals that he is most worried that he will allow his religious beliefs to undermine his artistic integrity.

As has been shown, despite Conniff's assertion, Auden greatly valued Eliot's work as a Christian poet and often praised *Ash-Wednesday* explicitly. For instance, he singles out a line from the poem as a model of "good poetry" which he strives to emulate: "[W]hen I read good poetry, for example Mr. Eliot's line

'The place of solitude where three dreams cross'

my reaction is one of delighted admiration: a standard of excellence has been set in one way which I must try to live up to in mine" (*Prose II* 303). As with Eliot's postconversion poetry in general, Auden clearly knew the poem well and admired it.[1] However, when Auden came to write as a Christian poet himself, his work did diverge considerably from Eliot's. Although they both introduced similar stylistic changes and

[1] He even seems to allude to *Ash-Wednesday* in *The Double Man*, when in the "Prologue," for example, he writes "Our bones cannot help reassembling themselves" (*DM* 12), which strongly recalls the scattered and, it is implied, reassembled, bones of Part II of Eliot's poem (*CPP* 91-92). In "New Year Letter," Auden describes "The garden of the Three Estates / Turned desert, and the Ivory Gates / Of Pure Idea to gates of horn" (*DM* 38), picking up the garden and desert imagery common in Eliot's poetry, including *Ash-Wednesday*, but also Eliot's reference to "The empty forms between the ivory gates" in Part IV of the poem (*CPP* 98), alluding to the ivory gates of the *Aeneid*. Further, Auden quotes a passage from Part I of *Ash-Wednesday* (*CPP* 89) in the notes to "New Year Letter" (*DM* 120-21).

addressed their conversion experiences at length, there are significant differences in their poetry, largely due to their conflicting theological and sociological positions. Their postconversion poems, particularly *Ash-Wednesday* and "New Year Letter," can nevertheless be fruitfully read together because even when Auden expresses ideas that run counter to Eliot's, he often appears to be consciously opposing the older poet, as in his appropriations of Dante. As will be demonstrated, Eliot evokes Dante to show the value of the purgative process of the negative way and the need for religious submission, but Auden, writing against him, alludes to Dante in order to convey the superiority of the affirmative way and existential theology. In these transitional poems, they also take differing views on the limits of art and on artistic engagement-- primarily engagement of a religious rather than political order, although there is a connection between them for both poets, especially for Auden. After his conversion, Eliot for the first time became an engaged poet, spurred by his sense of responsibility as a Christian, whereas Auden, disillusioned after his highly political period of the 1930s, was inclined to focus on the inefficacy of art and give the poet a more circumscribed role. In a sense, they both moved towards the other's preconversion position regarding engagement. However, as the poems reveal, they are not entirely consistent in their views, and Auden in particular vacillates in his claims for art and the role of the artist in society. In fact, although he is wary of using poetry for instrumental purposes, Auden, like Eliot, sometimes preaches his beliefs in a very explicit manner in these poems in the hope of exerting spiritual influence. Because of the various confusions and contradictions within the poetry, their transitional period is particularly revealing. While in their later works their anxiety regarding their role as a Christian poet seems at least somewhat allayed, in these earlier

poems, their fears are more transparent and their struggles to reconcile art and religion more intense.

Towards a New Style

While in their transitional poems Eliot and Auden often convey conflicting views on theology and their roles as Christian poets, there are nevertheless significant similarities in the *manner* in which they express their views. They did not begin to write in the same style, but rather they both adapted their own style in order to write increasingly accessible, sincere and personal verse. They may have been partly motivated to make these stylistic changes because they wanted to experiment and avoid the danger of imitating themselves, but these changes also stem from their new religious convictions. As Edward Callen relates in "Auden's *New Year Letter*: A New Style of Architecture," "Auden holds that a change or a shift in emphasis, in the answers to man's fundamental questions about his situation 'changes the style and subject matter of poetry and the poet's conception of his function'" (152). For both Auden and Eliot, the change in their subject matter and conception of their function led them to write verse which expressed their convictions more clearly than had their early poetry, and in a way which would ideally appeal to more readers, reflecting their sense of responsibility to edify through their verse.

In "The Cleft Eliot" (1932), More recounts posing this question to Eliot when he was taking his first steps towards Christianity:

> 'And now, when you have completed this heroic program and have returned, as your intention is, to verse, will your form and style show any signs of this conversion, or will you cling to the old impossible (so I expressed it) manner of

> the "Waste Land"?' 'No,' he exclaimed, losing for a moment his armor of placid irony, and shaking a defiant fist in the air, -- 'No: in that I am absolutely unconverted!' (235)

Despite Eliot's dramatic assurances to the contrary, when he began to write his postconversion poetry his style did in fact alter. Although More, who felt that a more orthodox style befits more orthodox beliefs, notes disapprovingly that certain elements remain, such as the use of free verse, he does acknowledge that Eliot's poetry had changed to such an extent that poems like *Ash-Wednesday* have been "pretty harshly judged by certain narrow champions of his earlier style" ("Cleft Eliot" 235). Eliot's poetry initially was "pointedly inaccessible to anybody expecting run-of-the-mill coherence. The doors to Eliot's poetry were not easily opened. His lines and themes were not easily understood" (Ozick 119). While his early verse often seemed calculated to alienate readers, in many of Eliot's later poems, "[h]is form is simple, expressive, homogenous, and direct, and without the usual elements of violent contrast" (Tate 25). Most readers would likely find reading *Four Quartets* for the first time a less jarring and bewildering experience than an initial reading of *The Waste Land.* Even a work like *Ash-Wednesday*, considered by many to be a difficult poem, employs fewer potentially alienating esoteric allusions and foreign languages, which can hinder comprehension, than *The Waste Land* or the 1920 poems. So in his later poems, there are fewer potential obstacles blocking the reader's understanding of the beliefs expressed therein. The Ariels are especially straightforward and prominently display Eliot's religious convictions, reflecting his understanding that "the didactic function of poetry is best served by a style that is accessible and unobtrusive" (Deane 39).

Auden had written occasionally in a direct and even colloquial style before his conversion, as in *Letter to Lord Byron* (1936), but his poetry was best known for its oblique and gnomic quality. As Gopnik amusingly relates, during the 1930s "Auden held a position that can only just be suggested by that of Bob Dylan in 1967: indisputably the voice of his generation, he also wrote in a style so cryptic and allusive that the generation puzzled over what exactly it was they were supposed to be saying" (88). However, Auden's dense, coiled style began to relax in this transitional period and many readers objected to "[t]he informal, conversational manner" of a poem like "New Year Letter" (Bahlke 59). In his discussion of Auden's evolving style and how it affected the reception of this poem, Hynes remarks, "Readers coming to it in 1941 from the earlier work must have been shocked at how different, and how much less 'modern,' it was: neither elliptical, nor parabolical, not melodramatic, not imperative, but a long, relaxed, discursive poem in that most facile of meters, the tetrameter couplet" (45). Critics complained that "his style had lost its edge of tough obliqueness" (Ohmann 173), and that the poem unfortunately "abjures obliquity in favour of directness" (Deane 56). Although condemned by many readers, his new style did give Auden the opportunity to convey his beliefs more forcefully than he had in earlier poetry. Moreover, in "New Year Letter" he could express his theological views even more clearly than Eliot could in *Ash-Wednesday* because instead of employing Eliot's fractured free verse, Auden chose to write "a Horatian verse epistle," which Deane points out is inevitably "highly didactic" (19). Auden had described the poem to Elizabeth Mayer, to whom it was addressed, as "versified metaphysical arguments" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 103). Therefore Jarrell was correct when he claimed that Auden's later poems, especially "New Year

Letter," were extremely "abstract," because they did deal so extensively with theological concepts-- although of course one need not agree with Jarrell that this is cause for censure ("Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric" 197, 205).[2] While a writer might possibly express his beliefs forcefully in this way without hoping to influence the reader, that is not the case with Auden. As Deane explains, in spite of his claims which seem to reject "the possibility of effective 'edification' through poetry"-- including in "New Year Letter" itself-- and his wariness of putting too much emphasis on the instrumental functions of literature in general, Auden's beliefs figure so prominently in many of his postconversion poems because he *did* want to provide readers with some spiritual direction through his work (19).

Although they lost some of their early admirers who had been initially attracted to them because of the often incantatory strangeness of the early poems, with their shift towards more cohesive and direct verse Eliot and Auden hoped to gain a wider audience. Admittedly, Eliot argues otherwise in an interview with *Paris Review*. When asked whether the simplification of his language is indicative of "a general tendency in your work, even in your poems, to move from a narrower to a larger audience?" Eliot replied that writing for the stage had led him towards "a greater simplification of language and to speaking in a way which is more like conversing with your reader," which is why he claims *Four Quarters* is "much simpler and easier to understand" than a poem like *The Waste Land* (*Writers at Work* 104-5). According to Eliot:

> Sometimes the thing I'm trying to say, the subject matter, may be difficult, but it seems to me that I'm saying it in a simpler way. The other element that enters

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[2] Jarrell, for instance, calls the change in Auden's style a "*degeneration* into abstraction" [emphasis added] ("Changes of Attitude in Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry" 205).

> into it, I think, is just experience and maturity. I think that in early poems it was a question of not being able to-- of having more to say than one knew how to say, and having something one wanted to put into words and rhythm which one didn't have the command of words and rhythm to put in a way immediately apprehensible. That type of obscurity comes when the poet is still at the stage of learning how to use language. You have to say the thing the difficult way. The only alternative is not saying it at all, at that stage. (*Writers at Work* 105)

There may be some truth in this, but the obliqueness of *The Waste Land*, or Auden's *The Orators*, doesn't strike one as deriving from immaturity or relative incompetence. Perhaps rather there is an element of "showing off" in their early works which they dispensed with once their reputations were made. Despite Eliot's claim, however, a desire to reach a wider audience does seem to have affected his and Auden's change in style as well.

When he was an engaged poet in the 1930s, Auden didn't need to employ accessible verse because he was primarily addressing an elite audience which shared his avant-garde politics *and* artistic sensibilities. As McDonald explains, "The warmest admirers of the 1930s Auden felt themselves to be in a select club, where the poet was one of 'us'; in his later writing, Auden tried to speak to a somewhat different constituency" (*Serious Poetry* 112). For instance, Edmund Wilson states that with his *Collected Poetry* of 1945, Auden proves himself to be, not a poet that "could only be appreciated by a few," but one who is suited to being "printed and read in bulk" ("Auden" 58-59). This volume, in which Auden purged some of his earlier, more obscure poetry and included many of his new, more direct works, also reflects his

religious beliefs, and the accessibility of the verse allows him to express these beliefs with a clarity that would have been impossible in his earlier style. In "New Year Letter," he makes his desire to be read by a wide audience explicit when he asks that

> This private minute for a friend,
> Be the dispatch that I intend;
> Although addressed to Whitehall,
> Be under Flying Seal to all
> Who wish to read it anywhere,
> And if they open it, *En Clair*. (*DM* 25)

He invites everyone to read his poem, no longer speaking-- if only implicitly through the use of an oblique style-- to an elite audience. So, as with Eliot, his stylistic changes made his poetry accessible to more readers *and* allowed him to voice his beliefs, specifically his religious beliefs, more clearly to this larger audience.

Eliot also sought a wider audience, and not simply because he wanted more popularity for its own sake. Although he suggests the simplification of his language was due only to the requirements of writing for the stage, he doesn't mention that the reason he sought to work in the theatre in the first place was because, as will be discussed in Chapter Four, he was convinced that it was the most effective medium through which to exercise spiritual influence over a large group of people. In his postconversion poetry as well as drama, he employed relatively accessible language in the hopes of engaging and edifying a wide audience, a motivation particularly apparent in the Ariel poems. Gardner's claim that the Ariels "are simplicity itself" is an exaggeration, but they are certainly more straightforward than his preconversion poems, at least in part because of

his "impulse to write for a larger and more miscellaneous audience" (*Eliot* 122). The poems were written as part of Faber's "The Ariel Poems," "a series of illustrated Christmas greeting pamphlets priced at one shilling," thus meant to be very affordable (Southam 179). With Faber's permission, Eliot later used the "Ariel" title to group the poems he had written for the series, "Journey of the Magi" (1927), "A Song for Simeon" (1928), "Animula" (1929), and "Marina" (1930).[3] It's not a coincidence that these poems, in which Eliot for the first time reaches out to a wider audience, were written shortly after his conversion infused him with a sense of Christian duty. Their subjects as well as style testify to Eliot's desire to convey his beliefs through them, because the Christianity informing the poems tends to be explicit. Despite his call in "Religion and Literature" for "*un*consciously" Christian works, these poems are "deliberately and defiantly Christian" (*SE* 392). "Marina," which described the transformation of Pericles brought about by the seemingly miraculous return of his daughter, is the exception. Inspired by Shakespeare's *Pericles*, it is regarded as "the most beautiful" of the Ariel poems by critics like Gardner, who states that though it has no "specifically Christian phrase or symbol . . . the whole poem is penetrated with the Christian hope, the fulfillment of the promise 'Behold I make all things new'" (*Eliot* 123, 126). "Animula" is more heavy-handed, and, alluding to *Purgatorio*, emphasizes the necessity of disciplining the soul.[4] "Journey of the Magi" and "A Song for Simeon" can be seen as

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[3] He excluded two poems he had written for the series in this group: "A Cultivation of Christmas Trees" (1954), a poem written much later in his career and so chronologically distant from the other poems, and "Triumphal March" (1931). Eliot separated "Triumphal March" from the other Ariels because it didn't seem of a piece with the other poems, stylistically and otherwise, and because he envisioned it as part of a larger, four-part poem, Coriolan, inspired by Beethoven's "Coriolan Overture" as well as Shakespeare's play (Timmerman 154-55). In the end, Eliot only completed "Triumphal March" and the second part of the intended poem "Difficulties of a Statesman."

[4] The poem, whose title means "little soul" (Southam 187), traces the development of a soul, from "the simple soul" that, among other things, enjoys "the fragrant brilliance of the Christmas tree" to "[t]he heavy

"companion pieces and invite comparative analysis, as they reveal the reactions of the two eyewitnesses to the Christ Child" (Germer 19). These two poems, which are the most overtly Christian of the Ariels, are also the most straight-forward stylistically, so the religious content is clearly conveyed. It might seem natural that poems originally published as Christmas cards should meditate upon the significance of the Nativity, but in fact Eliot's poems were unlike most of the others included in Faber's Ariel series. Many well-known writers participated in the series, and their poems tend not to reference the Christmas season at all.[5] Some of the less prominent poets did focus on the Nativity, such as Sir Henry John Newbolt in "A child is born" (1930), but in general Eliot stood apart by writing so directly on a religious subject. When Faber resurrected the series in 1954, both Eliot and Auden, as well-known writers closely associated with the publisher, were invited to contribute. While Auden only submitted a rather playful poem called "Mountains" (*CP* 560-62), however, Eliot again contemplates the religious significance of the season in "The Cultivation of Christmas Trees."[6] So even when compared to a work by a co-religionist, Eliot's Ariel poems prove themselves to be unusually pious.

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burden of the growing soul" which struggles with "the imperatives of 'is and seems'" (*CPP* 107). It opens with an allusion to *Purgatorio* 16:85-88, a passage which enjoins the need for discipline to prevent the growing soul from going astray, and enacts the danger of the simple soul warping into something "Irresolute and selfish, misshapen, lame"(*CPP* 107) without this discipline and spiritual guidance. Timmerman, who thinks the poem is too didactic in general, complains, "Part four, in violation of Eliot's own testimony in 'Religion and Literature,' offers an overtly moralistic conclusion" in which prayer is sought for the notoriously mysterious Guiterriez, Boudin and Floret, and the Hail Mary is echoed in the last line: "Pray for us now and at the hour of our birth" (*CPP* 108).

[5] This is the case with De la Mare's "I Sit Alone" (1927), Sassoon's "To My Mother" (1928), Yeats's "Three Things" (1929), and D.H. Lawrence's "The Triumph of the Machine" (1930), to name a few.

[6] In Eliot's poem, the speaker requests that on one's last Christmas,

> The accumulated memories of annual emotion
> May be concentrated into a great joy
> Which shall be also a great fear, as on the occasion
> When fear came upon every soul:
> Because the beginning shall remind us of the end
> And the first coming of the second coming. (*CPP* 111)

As Richard Sylvia states, "Eliot's 'Cultivation of Christmas Trees,' perhaps itself a sermon, asks that we take Christ as we find Him and worship Him with all innocence" (42). Eliot "was not particularly satisfied

Although Eliot maintained some of his former elitism-- shown in his proposal to create a "Community of Christians," for example (*Christianity* 28)-- he does try to be less exclusionary, artistically and otherwise, than he once was, and reaches out to a wider audience in works like the Ariels in order to convey to them essential Christian truths. Eliot's and Auden's desire to serve in at least a small way the spiritual needs of their readers, rather than proudly addressing only a small group of the intelligentsia, is related to their desire to write with humility. Since, according to Eliot, "only in humility, charity and purity-- and most of all perhaps humility-- can we be prepared to receive the grace of God without which human operations are vain" (*Christianity* 75), a change from inaccessible to accessible and, ideally, edifying verse signals not only a shift in aesthetics but also a shift in their views regarding their proper relation to God and to their fellow man.

Their religious convictions led them to write in a more sincere as well as a more accessible manner as shown in these transitional poems. They testify to Eliot's and Auden's new insistence that a poet ought to subscribe to the philosophy which he employs in his work, and in fact a point of anxiety within these poems is the fear that they are not sincere *enough*. Readers were quick to notice the change in tone which accompanied this new respect for sincerity, especially since their earlier poetry was so famously characterized by ironic detachment. In the later poems, there is no longer the same distance between them and what they write, ideologically or otherwise. For example, in one of Auden's typical poems of the period, "In Memory of Ernest Toller" (1939), he "has abandoned the 'clinical detachment' so often praised by his early critics--

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with the poem" and wrote to a friend "that he did not consider it very well executed but that he thought the idea a right one" (Timmerman 135). So he didn't object to its overtly Christian subject but rather to his treatment of that subject.

or as he himself had recently put it, 'the surgeon's idea of pain.' He has arrived at a more reverent sensibility . . ." (Conniff "Answering Herod" 321). "New Year Letter" also points to the development of this "more reverent sensibility" since, as Mendelson relates, "Auden's sudden recognition of the absolute," partly through Kierkegaard's influence, led him to abandon the "joking" tone "he had toyed with in early drafts" (*Later Auden* 133). He not only wanted to express his beliefs sincerely, he also wanted his sincerity to be plainly apparent, signaling to readers that he took these beliefs seriously and asked them to as well. While Auden's postconversion poetry is more sincere than his early poetry, it is not without playfulness or devoid of flashes of his former irony. However, he no longer uses irony to undermine the validity of the beliefs expressed in his work, but rather, for the most part, to make fun of his own failings or those of mankind in general, especially in regards to the religious standards which he evokes.[7]

Eliot also wanted his readers to realize that he "means what he says" (*SE* 269), but the sincere tone of his transitional poetry is of a more unrelenting and somber cast than Auden's. In fact, the poet who helped to establish the ironic pose as an integral part of Modernist aesthetics became, from the perspective of many readers, dismayingly earnest. For instance, in a review of *Ash-Wednesday*, Frances Birrell remarked that "the ironic intent has completely vanished from the poems of Mr. Eliot, and with it perhaps the superficial qualities that made him appeal to the younger generation" (6). Some of Eliot's trademark irony is resurrected in later works, but not enough to satisfy many of the admirers of the early verse:

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[7] Spears remarks that Auden even began to develop what might be called "a kind of theological light verse" (*Auden* 197).

> Undoubtedly there were many, in 1942 or 1945, who preferred the wittily and impudently erudite young American of 1920 to the voice of the Establishment that spoke to us in the new poems of the 1940s. Let F. W. Bateson speak for them, wistfully honoring the scholarly and Laforgian impertinence of Eliot's youth: 'The scholarship, it was true, was only skin-deep, whereas the Anglo-Catholicism was devoted and sincere, but most of us--English and American--will continue to prefer 'The Hippopotamus' and its progeny to *The Rock* and its successors.' (Davie "Anglican Eliot" 188-89)

One of the reasons these readers may prefer the early to the later poems is not in spite of but rather because the religious beliefs in the postconversion poetry were so "devoted and sincere." Although Eliot probably adopted a sincere tone partly in the hopes of exerting more moral authority-- suggesting that the beliefs which he expressed were so important that they shouldn't be treated ironically-- this approach would be met with some resistance, at least initially, from many of those readers whom he himself had trained to relish irony. The sincerity of his verse, like its accessibility, likely relates to his desire for humility as well as for spiritual influence. Tate, who identifies only "a single ironic passage in *Ash Wednesday*"-- the opening stanza in which Eliot likens himself to an "agèd eagle"-- states that Eliot's transitional poems even give an impression of "humility" (24). The ironic early poetry, on the other hand, often had a superior air, essentially excluding those readers who were not attuned to his subversive strategies.

This collapse of irony affected the manner in which the poets employed allusions in their work as well. Discussing the use of allusions in *The Waste Land*, Menand states:

> We have become so skilled at deciphering modernist allusiveness, and so habituated to the strategies of quotation and appropriation in postmodernist literature and art, that we tend to forget what a difficult figure an allusion is-- that it is an affront to the idea of sincerity and that is implicates the text in a web of previous texts in a manner that makes a mockery of ordinary ways of talking about things like meaning and intention. (94)

This assertion may hold true for Eliot's and Auden's early poetry, but not their later works. In writing *The Waste Land*, Eliot drew upon a vast array of literary, philosophic and religious texts from many traditions. After he became a Christian, the range of his allusions narrowed and he referenced primarily figures like Lancelot Andrewes and Dante, as well as scripture and liturgy, causing Ozick to complain, "His reach, once broad enough to incorporate the *Upanishads*, shrank to extend no farther than the neighborhood sacristy . . ." (151). The change in Auden's allusive practices wasn't quite so drastic since he continued to reference a wide variety of sources. However, in his later poetry he does continually allude to the works of religious thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Pascal and Williams, certainly more so than to secular figures like Freud or Marx. The ways in which both poets reference various Christian texts in their later work undermines what Menand describes as the inherent insincerity of allusions, since they tend to be in accord with their sources. Unlike in the early verse, in which many of their allusions were clearly ironic, Eliot and Auden generally agree with the phrases and concepts which they appropriate, and believe that their sources "mean what they say" as well. So when Auden quotes from someone like Kierkegaard or Charles Williams in *New Year Letter*, for example, we can assume that, unless he were to indicate otherwise, he is thereby

expressing his own beliefs sincerely. In Eliot's later poetry, the shift in the way in which he treats allusions is especially dramatic. For instance, Gardner points out that in *Four Quartets* there are numerous "quotations and they are not made ironically, as are so many of the quotations in Eliot's earlier poetry," and that, with a few exceptions, when his use of a quotation is compared to its original passage, one sees that "Its sense has not been twisted and there is no clash between the original and the context in which Eliot has set it" (*Four Quartets* 30). Moreover, when he does occasionally cite from writers which he doesn't hold in particularly high esteem, like Tennyson or Shelley, he uses passages which he *does* admire, so their work is treated respectfully as well.[8] Also, when either poet alludes to Biblical scripture in their later poems, it has a different resonance than when they do so in their earlier works, in which they generally place scripture in a context that makes it seem at least inadequate if not actually ridiculous. Interestingly, Eliot occasionally uses quotation marks to set off his allusions in some of his post-conversion works, like "Journey of the Magi," "Animula," and *Coriolan*, whereas previously quotation marks were only used to denote dialogue. These quotation marks might seem to create an ironic distance by signaling that a certain line or passage is not in the poet's own voice, but they can also be viewed as a paradoxical gesture towards sincerity since they acknowledge the appropriation of another's words. Thus the recognition of the allusion as an allusion is not dependent on the reader's erudition,

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[8] Ricks states, for instance, that Eliot references Tennyson's *In Memoriam* at the end of the encounter with the "familiar compound ghost" in "Little Gidding" (*CPP* 195), and that "[u]nlike a great deal of allusion . . . this in no way disfigures Tennyson; what we hear is no kind of malediction" (258). Also, despite Eliot's general antipathy for Shelley, in *The Cocktail Party* (1949), he has Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly recite lines from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* without irony or disdain, but rather in a solemn and impressive manner (*CPP* 437). According to E. Martin Browne, some of the audience members found the lines "puzzling," "but their strange beauty assists in creating the right mood for what Reilly has to say" (230).

which is another way in which the poetry of his later period can be seen as more sincere *and* more accessible.

Poetry in a Personal Mode

As this evidence of increased directness and sincerity suggests, their poetry also became considerably more personal following their conversions. In *T. S. Eliot: The Pattern in the Carpet*, for example, Elisabeth Schneider states, "Dating from the time of his formal admission into the Church . . . a new and frankly personal tone enters into Eliot's poetry, and with the new tone comes once more a new style" (112-113). Eloise Knapp Hay agrees with Schneider that "in 'Ash-Wednesday' the last traces of 'dissembling' and 'doing' of voices are given up in favor of a voice that comes directly as the poet's own" (*Negative Way* 90). Eliot's poetry had become markedly personal even before *Ash-Wednesday*, however, as shown in the Ariels. Although Auden cautions against conflating a poet with his poetic personae (*DH* 287), the Ariel poems invite identification between them. While in the pre-Ariel poems, "[t]he narrators-- Sweeney, Prufrock, Gerontion, Tiresias-- are often disembodied spirits of the age they themselves behold" (Timmerman 25), in these more personal poems, "in spite of expressly named dramatic personae, the poet's voice is heard and clearly meant to be heard with a directness that is new" (Schneider 112-13). For instance, through the characters of the Magus and Simeon, the newly converted Eliot expresses his sense of upheaval as he is confronted with the Incarnation and all that it signifies. Even Pericles, the implied speaker of "Marina," seems to speak on Eliot's behalf, articulating "a dream of his own . . ." (G. Smith 133). Denis Donoghue contends that the poem's real subject is not Shakespeare's play but "Eliot's conversion to Christianity, his waking up to find himself

a Christian and wondering what to make of it all. The poem is his Recognition Scene as a Christian . . ." (*Words Alone* 180). In *Four Quartets*, his voice is even more "frankly personal," and in fact when he came to work for the theatre, he had become so habituated to writing in his own voice that he had to guard against putting his words into the mouths of his characters, as he had done in *The Rock* (*OPP* 91).[9]

Auden's postconversion verse also became increasingly personal in tone. Spender argues that Auden remains an essentially impersonal poet, who is outside his best poetry "in a way in which Eliot or Yeats is never outside his own poetry" ("Auden" 38), but other critics correctly assert that Auden's own voice begins to be heard more clearly in the later poems. For example, Samuel Hynes states that in "New Year Letter," unlike in earlier poems, there is "the revelation of a Self":

> [I]t is with this poem, I think, that Auden began to establish that self that so substantially and comfortably occupies the later poetry. The earlier poems, on the whole, don't have that kind of substantial presence: they are dramatic, mysterious, imperative: they create a world, but not a personal identity. But a letter implies a letter-writer, and in 'New Year Letter' there is a knowable 'I' who is doing the thinking and feeling, and whose expanding and coalescing understanding of the meaning of his personal situation is the content of the poem. (50)[10]

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[9] Some critics argue that even Eliot's early poetry was never really impersonal, despite his theoretical stance. Menand relays the opinion of these scholars when he says that Eliot was "preaching impersonality in his criticism while narcissistically casting himself over and over in his poetry as the victim of his own desires" (89). Such critics claim that he did not achieve that desired separation between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (*SE* 18), pointing, for example, to the unhappy couple in *The Waste Land*'s "A Game of Chess" (*CPP* 65) which, they argue, clearly represents Eliot and his first wife Vivienne. Regardless of the degree to which Eliot's early poetry was or was not impersonal, it is significant that in his later poetry he no longer strove for this kind of impersonality. Rather, his later poems are often avowedly personal.

[10] The impersonality in Eliot's and Auden's early verse may be one of the reasons why it was thought to express the voice of their respective generations. Since the speakers in Eliot's early poems "are often

For both Eliot and Auden, the shift towards more personal poetry may have resulted from their growing sense, as they began to accept Christianity, of the possibility of a unified personality. This development is perhaps to be expected since, as William James explains in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, conversion is ideally "the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities" (210). Accordingly, Timmerman suggests that with his conversion Eliot gained a "sense of personal ontology" when he became convinced of the existence of the soul, so that in the later verse we see, among other things, "the discovery of a unified poetic voice" (24). Similarly, Auden, when he became a Christian, was more willing to accept that the self could be unified, whereas previously he tended to view people, including himself, as either the sum of their neuroses--encouraged by his reading of Freud and Homer Lane[11]-- or shaped primarily by socio-economic forces, as Marx claimed. The existential aspect of Auden's theology may also have encouraged him to write in a more personal way because it led him to emphasize personal volition and privilege the individual. Further, since both Eliot and Auden believed that Christianity made the spiritual struggle of any individual a legitimate subject for literature,[12] it follows that they would regard their own spiritual struggles as a

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disembodied spirits of the age they themselves behold" (Timmerman 25) and Auden's early poems "create a world, but not a personal identity" (Hynes 50), readers might find it easier to map themselves unto these poems than they would in works where the poet's presence is more palpably felt, as in Eliot's and Auden's later poetry.

[11] Auden was attracted to Lane because, unlike Freud, he asserted that pleasures are good and should not be repressed. Lane even claimed that all diseases are caused by repression of some kind, an idea which informs some of Auden's early works, including *Paid on Both Sides* (Fuller 21).

[12] Eliot maintains that even secular readers should be able to appreciate works which deal with religious turmoil, like Herbert's *The Temple*:

> When I claim a place for Herbert among those poets whose work every lover of English poetry should read and every student of poetry should study, irrespective of religious belief or unbelief, I

suitable focus for their poetry. So their postconversion works are not only more personal in their general tone, but also in terms of subject matter as well, especially their transitional poetry since its deals so extensively with their conversions.

An artist like Eliot and Auden is "someone who is able to express his human development in a public medium" (Auden *Prose II* 125), so any alterations in their philosophical outlook would inevitably register in their poetry. However, in their transitional poems the dramatic change in their beliefs is featured much more prominently and dealt with at greater length than any previous ideological shifts. As Ricks explains, Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* (1930) and his Ariel poems are property regarded as transitional poems, "not only as transitions for Eliot, but as meditations on the nature of transitions" (208), specifically of a spiritual nature. These poems testify to Eliot's understanding of conversion as an ongoing, often painful process. A number of the speakers of these "between-poems" seem to have undergone an incomplete conversion, so that their suffering derives from their inability to either revert to their old values or to submit fully to their new beliefs, as it the case with the "irresolute" soul of "Animula" who is "Unable to fare forward or retreat" (*CPP* 107). The Magi and Simeon also cannot "fare forward or retreat" since the advent of Christ "has made the old dispensation impossible and overturned the values by which they had lived" (Gardner *Eliot* 123), but neither are they able to experience the fulfillment of the new dispensation. As the Magus recounts, "We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, / But no longer at ease here, in the

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> am not thinking primarily of the exquisite craftsmanship, the extraordinary metrical virtuosity, or the verbal felicities, but of the *content* of the poems which make up *The Temple.* These poems form a record of spiritual struggle which should touch the feeling, and enlarge the understanding of those readers also who hold no religious belief and find themselves unmoved by religious emotion. (*George Herbert* 21)

So, according to Eliot, Herbert's poems should appeal to even non-believing readers not despite their content but because of it. A difference in belief should, at least in this case, prove no barrier. Eliot no doubt hoped that people would feel the same way about the "record of spiritual struggle" in his own poetry.

old dispensation, / With an alien people clutching their gods" (*CPP* 104). Simeon is given a revelation of what is to come, but, like the Magi, he won't be a participant: "Not for me the martyrdom, the ecstasy of thought and prayer, / Not for me the ultimate vision" (*CPP* 105). *Ash-Wednesday*, "the culmination of the between-poems" (Ricks 222), most explicitly portrays what St. Augustine calls "the birthpangs of conversion"--the anguish that a new convert undergoes as he tries to renounce his old life, or "put off the old man and his deeds" (Col. 3:9), and accept the demands of his new one. Like the Ariel poems, *Ash-Wednesday* betrays Eliot's own anxiety after his conversion, when he felt alienated from his secular society without experiencing the compensatory assurance of faith. Therefore, like his speaker, he is "torn on the horn between season and season, time and time, between / Hour and hour, word and word, power and power" (*CPP* 96).[11] So Eliot expresses his main concerns during this period forcefully and repeatedly in his poems, which reveal that he did not embrace Christianity with the ease which his prose might suggest.

Auden's transitional poems, also to a large extent "meditations on the nature of transitions," are marked by two major events, his expatriation and his conversion. Like Eliot, Auden felt caught in "an odd, anxious time, between an ending and a beginning" (Hynes 31), and his tension is reflected in *The Double Man*, written shortly after his arrival in the United States and while he was on the cusp of conversion. During this "difficult transitional period" (Conniff "Answering Herod" 314), Auden shared with Eliot

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[11] In a chapter of *T.S. Eliot and Prejudice* entitled "Mediation," Ricks usefully points out, "*Ash-Wednesday* has constant recourse to the preposition which pulls two ways, 'between.' Twenty times, 'between' constitutes the relations within *Ash-Wednesday*. *Ash-Wednesday* is the only poem by Eliot which has a hyphen in its title: some of Eliot's best commentators have failed to transmit the hyphen, yet it matters because it is a quintessence of 'between,' at once joining and separating what it compounds" (211), thereby reflecting the speaker's ambivalence towards religious commitment.

a sense of "between-ness," as indicated, for example, by the title of his volume, which alludes to a phrase of Montaigne that Auden read in Williams's *The Descent of the Dove* and used as an epigraph: "We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn." Nicholas Jenkins's "Auden's *The Double Man*" asserts that the title "evokes a great many related ideas," such as "the Christian notion of man's dual nature, Marxist and Freudian analyses of consciousness, and the general problems of guilt and self-doubt" (441). Although Jenkins doesn't say so, the religious dimension of this "doubleness" is by far the most important, since Auden, somewhat like Eliot though to a lesser degree, uses his poem to convey some of the difficulties involved in Christian commitment.[13] In this volume, Auden's ideological transformation is revealed even more dramatically than Eliot's in his transitional poetry because Auden was in the process of converting *while* writing the poems.[14] It was shortly after beginning "New Year Letter" that Auden read *The Descent*

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[13] In England, the volume was published as *New Year Letter* (1941) because earlier Auden, in violation of his contract with Faber, seems to have promised Hogarth Press a book of prose reflections under the title *The Double Man*, which they subsequently advertised (Fuller 318). Although Auden never delivered the book (the posthumously published "The Prolific and the Devourer"), Faber didn't want him to use the same title for his new volume of poetry. As Fuller relates, Eliot even "took the liberty of removing Auden's only textual use of the phrase 'the Double Man' from the antepenultimate line of the 'Prologue' and substituting the phrase 'the invisible twin'" (319), a case of editorial high-handedness which Auden might well have resented.

[14] There is some disagreement over the time period of Auden's conversion in relation to the composition of *The Double Man*. Bahlke, for instance, claims that "his return to the Church would seem to have been completely effected by the time he wrote 'New Year Letter'" (24), which was written between January and April in 1940. Spears, on the other hand, states that "'New Year Letter' hesitates on the edge of belief" but "The 'Epilogue,' dated Autumn 1940, seems fully committed to Christianity..."(*Auden* 172). Spears acknowledges that while it is difficult to pin down exactly when Christian belief began to inform Auden's work, "there are no poems written after 1940 in which the possibility that Christianity is *not* true is entertained" (*Auden* 173). According to Kirsch, Auden wrote the Notes "as his formal religious commitment was crystallizing" (34). Auden himself told a friend in 1947, "*The Double Man*, written Jan.-Oct.1940, covers a period when I was beginning to think seriously about such things without committing myself" (qted. in Hynes 44). While his contention is supported by the fact that he began to attend church that October, shortly after finishing the volume, it seems to underemphasize the degree of commitment already apparent in the works. Incidentally, the letter of December 1940 in which Auden first told Eliot of his change in beliefs was sent to accompany a list of errata for *New Year Letter* (Mendelson *Later Auden* 158).

of the Dove, a work which had an immediate and powerful effect on him and his poetry. Williams wrote to his wife in March of 1940 that he had received "an extraordinarily moving note from W. H. Auden in America" and that "he just wanted to tell me how moved he was by the Dove (and he no Christian)" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 125). Unbeknownst to Williams, Auden's attitude towards Christianity had already begun to change in large part because of his book and the writings of other religious thinkers to which it had directed him, most notably those of Kierkegaard. Auden's immersion in the works of radical Protestants like Niebuhr and Tillich during this time also helped to shape *The Double Man*, as evidenced, for example, by his last-minute inclusion of a passage from Tillich's *The Interpretation of History* in the notes to "New Year Letter" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 150). So the poems written in these crucial months uniquely capture Auden's burgeoning religious beliefs. Hynes describes "New Year Letter," the "principal poem of this period," as the work that "stands most exactly at the point between the decades, between an ending and a beginning: in form and substance it repudiates the poetry that he had written during the thirties, and it points forward to all of the later work," and for that reason, "it is . . . important to our understanding of Auden" (45, 52).

Although Auden was still formulating his religious beliefs at the time, the theological content of "New Year Letter" seems to belie his status as a fledging Christian. In fact, it is one of the Prospero poet's *most* didactically religious poems, in which he lays out many of the concepts that he will develop further in later works.[15] "New Year Letter"

[15] The poem's didacticism extends into its eighty-five pages of "Notes," which contain poems, quotations and Auden's own reflections. Mendelson states that Auden wrote the notes because the poem "cannot contain his thought" (*Later Auden* 101) and Fuller states that if he had not shifted some of his meditations to the notes "the 'Letter' would be over-burdened" (321). Some critics have questioned their importance

reveals that Dante, as well as thinkers like Williams and Tillich, exerted considerable influence on this developing theology. Spears, who examines this influence at length in "The Divine Comedy of W. H. Auden," states that Auden's earlier poetry contains traces of Dante's work, but "his explicit references to Dante suggest that Auden at this time regarded him as associated with the past and with established and conventional religion, and hence of limited relevance" (56).[16] During this transitional period and after, however, he finds Dante "highly relevant" (56). "As Auden reexamines his beliefs in the

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however-- Babette Deutsch, for instance, claimed that they "are of doubtful value" (316)-- especially since Auden didn't include them when he reprinted "New Year Letter" in his *Collected Poems*. Bahlke states that this "suggests that the relationship between the notes and the poem is not an integral one," but he continues, "In any consideration of the development of Auden's ideas in this period...they are of considerable significance" (41). Auden certainly wasn't dismissive of the material in the notes, since he included a number of the poems, like "Luther" and "Montaigne," in *Collected Poems* under separate titles and used many of the same aphorisms and quotations elsewhere. The notes are frequently compared to those in *The Waste Land*, but Eliot's notes were "a distinct afterthought" unlike Auden's (Fuller 321). Since the notes to *The Waste Land* have long been read as a rather ironic and often misleading commentary on the poem, this comparison might seem to suggest that Auden's notes perform a similar function. While Bahlke does contend that some of the notes "comment ironically on the subject matter explored within the line or lines to which they are appended" (41), in general they strike the reader as much more sincere than Eliot's, in keeping with the overall greater sincerity of Auden's poem. For example, scholars tend to doubt Eliot's claim that "[n]ot only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance*" (50), or at least doubt the extent of this supposed indebtedness. Auden uses a similar formulation in the note that he appends to the line, "Where Freedom dwells because it must, / Necessity because it can...": "For this quotation and for the source of many ideas in the poem v. CHARLES WILLIAMS, *The Descent of the Dove*" (*DM* 153). Unlike Eliot's claim, however, Auden' is generally taken at face value, because we know that *The Descent of the Dove* did exert tremendous influence on him at this time and he clearly alludes to it throughout the work. Even Bahlke acknowledges. "Williams ideas represent a perceivable and significant influence on the poem..." (41). Williams himself, the center of all this attention, reviewed "New Year Letter," opening with the tentative statement, "The fact that Mr. Auden has included a reference to the present writer in his notes need not perhaps prevent this review" (321). As one might expect, it is a positive review, although he does think Auden is too critical of the Romantics in the poem. Williams writes that the notes themselves are "on the whole, unnecessary to the poem, which is as it should be, but they are fascinating in themselves" (321). He likely found some notes more fascinating than others.

[16] Auden's allusions to Dante in his early verse are often quite negative. In "Address for a Prize Day" in *The Orators*, for instance, *The Divine Comedy* is called a "very difficult but wonderful poem," but by a rather silly, muddled speaker so his assessment of Dante appears unreliable (*EA* 62). In the opening section of *The Ascent of F6* (1936), for which Auden rather than Isherwood was responsible, the hero Michael Ransom, reads from a volume of Dante and asks, "[W]ho was Dante, to speak of Virtue and Knowledge? It was not Virtue those lips, which involuntary privation had made so bitter, could pray for; it was not Knowledge; it was Power. Power to exact every snub, every headache, every unfallen beauty, an absolute revenge . . ." (*Plays* 295). While Ransom doesn't claim that *The Divine Comedy* is bad poetry, he does contend that Dante wrote it not for the exalted reasons he pretended but because he was motivated by the kinds of vices for which he condemned his enemies to literary hell. After Auden's conversion, he never again writes of Dante so slightingly.

shadow of approaching war and moves toward a new religious commitment, he invokes Dante's presence," and in "New Year Letter" he takes Dante as his guide" (56). Hecht likewise states, "In reading this 'letter,' we cannot fail to become conscious of Auden's explicit debt to Dante" (*Hidden Law* 212).

Eliot's lifelong devotion to Dante is well known, and his admiration only increased after his conversion. Cleo McNelly Kearns even claims, "The most important factor in Eliot's conversion as well as his art . . . was without a doubt the poetry of Dante, of which the influence of him was overwhelming . . ." ("Religion" 89). While Kearns's contention is debatable, since there were other important factors involved in Eliot's turn to Christianity, Dante did undoubtedly affect his religious beliefs as well as his poetics. Not surprisingly, therefore, *Ash-Wednesday*, like "New Year Letter," is clearly marked by Dante's influence. Eliot even revealed that the poem was "really a first attempt at a sketchy application of the philosophy of the *Vita Nuova* to modern life" (qted. in Schuchard *Dark Angel* 150). Tellingly, however, Eliot and Auden don't emphasize the same aspects of Dante's thought, but rather incorporate different elements from his writing in order to express their own developing theological views.

Encounters with Dante

Eliot's emphasis on the negative way is immediately apparent in his transitional poetry, and the Ariel poems tend to focus only on the suffering and sacrifices necessitated by conversion. He takes pains to remind readers that the gift of new life is bought with the death of the old. "Journey of the Magi," for instance, includes "a catalogue of miseries, none mentioned by Matthew"-- which Eliot took from Andrewes 1622 Nativity Sermon-- but doesn't speak of the "exceeding great joy" the Magi in Biblical account felt

as they approached Bethlehem (Matt 2:10). Reflecting on his experience of seeing the Christ child, the Magus says, "I had seen birth and death, / But had thought they were different; this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death" (*CPP* 104). The poem ends with his sigh, "I should be glad of another death" (*CPP* 104). Similarly, in contrast to the Lucan account, "Eliot turns the Biblical Simeon into a kind of Jeremiah" (Germer 21). As Germer explains in "'Journey of the Magi' in the Context of T. S. Eliot's Religious Development and Sensibility": "Like the Magus, Simeon apparently feels weariness and no joy" (21), and expresses a similar longing for death: "I am tired with my own life and the life of those after me, / I am dying in my own death and the death of those after me" (*CPP* 106). "Animula," which Grover Smith called "Eliot's most pessimistic poem" (127), speaks of "The pain of living and the drug of `dreams" (*CPP* 107). The once simple soul, after its turmoil, is said to "Liv[e] first in the silence after the viaticum" (*CPP* 107). Since the viaticum is the last sacrament of communion given to the dying, death is again figured as a welcome release. "Marina," on the other hand, is regarded by many readers as Eliot's "only purely joyous poem" (Drew 159), in which, according to Hay, "Eliot achieve[d] his first exuberant release into poetic vision of birth without agony, an emptiness completely filled" (*Negative Way* 89). However, Timmerman claims, "If, as numerous critics have proclaimed, 'Marina' is Eliot's most 'joyous' poem, it should be clear that the joy attained and the vision of new life are not separated from agony" (139). "Agony" is too strong a word, but certainly the tone is not one of unalloyed joy, and death and life are again intertwined. In this reconstruction of the recognition scene in *Pericles*, Shakespeare's "most Dantesque and purgatorial play," (Gervais 118), when the speaker is reunited with the daughter he

thought had drowned, he says, "let me / Resign my life for this life . . ." (*CPP* 110). Since Donoghue likens this encounter to Eliot coming to terms with himself as a Christian, we see he is again calling for the need to sacrifice one's old life in order to begin a new life in Christ.[17]

Ash-Wednesday is even more clearly penitential in tone, and in a way which is obviously meant to recall Dante's writings. The purgatorial nature of the poem is immediately conveyed by its title, since in the Christian calendar Ash-Wednesday commences Lent, the forty days of penance, self-denial and prayer that precede Easter. The abundant references to "turning" in the poem-- as in the opening line "Because I do not hope to turn again"-- allude to Lancelot Andrewes's Ash-Wednesday Sermon of 1619, in which he takes Joel 2:12-13 as his text:

> Therefore also, now (saith the Lord): Turne you unto Me, with all your heart, and with Fasting, and with Weeping, and with Mourning. And rend your heart, and not your clothes, and turne unto the Lord your God . . . *Repentance* it selfe is nothing els, but *redire ad principia*, a kind of circling: to returne to Him by *repentance*, from *whom*, by sinne, we have turned away. (122)

Throughout the poem, Eliot employs this scriptural use of "turning" as a spatial metaphor for spiritual change to emphasize the need for repentance and the danger of apostasy. The opening line also introduces the theme of exile that runs through the poem, since it is

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[17] Furthermore, the elation of the poem is somewhat undercut by its epigraph from Seneca's *Hercules Furens*. Eliot quotes the first words that Hercules utters as he emerges from his delusional state to discover that he has slaughtered his family: "*Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plaga*?" ("What is this place, what country, what region of the world?"). In a letter which accompanied the manuscript when he donated it to Cambridge University, Eliot explains, "I intend a crisscross between Pericles finding alive, and Hercules finding dead-- the two extremes of the recognition scene . . ." (qted. in Southam 246-47). So even in a poem that might be seen as presenting a positive conversion experience, Eliot deliberately introduces a tragic element to create a "tension between anguish (Hercules) and restoration (Pericles)" (Timmerman 141).

a translation of "*Perch'io non spero di tornar gia mai*" from the Provencal poet Guido Cavalcanti's "Ballata, written in exile at Saranza" (Southam 168). The suggestion that the speaker, like Cavalcanti, is in exile relates to the Ash-Wednesday theme as well since Lent commemorates the forty days that Jesus spent wandering in the wilderness, which in turn is interpreted by Christian exegetes as the antitype of the forty years that the Israelites spent in exile in the wilderness. There is a sense in which all Christians are in perpetual exile because of their otherworldly orientation, and should regard themselves, like the league of the faithful recorded in Hebrews, as "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Heb. 11:13). More specifically, however, the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday*, like Eliot himself, finds himself spiritually exiled because of the secular nature of his society, akin to the Magus who is "no longer at ease" amongst what have become "an alien people" (*CPP* 104).[18]

Like *Ash-Wednesday*'s speaker, the character "Dante" of *The Divine Comedy* is in a kind of exile as well, as he embarks on a long spiritual journey in order to attain salvation. Moreover, Dante, who himself was in exile literally as well as spiritually, had already obliquely referenced the Biblical wandering commemorated through Ash-Wednesday in his work, since, as Northrop Frye explains, "*Purgatorio* proper corresponds to the wandering in the wilderness, the labyrinthine element being

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[18] In 1931's "Thoughts after Lambeth," Eliot claimed that orthodox faith is in such decline that "any one who has been moving among intellectual circles and comes to the Church, may experience an odd and rather exhilarating feeling of isolation" (*SE* 369). Donald Davie, in "Anglican Eliot," thinks that he "found the condition less exhilarating as time went on" (190), but, even in this transitional period, poems like *Ash-Wednesday* suggest that he found this isolation more burdensome than he admitted in his essays. His perception of isolation was one of the reasons he was so annoyed at the suggestion that his conversion was only an attempt to become more comfortably ensconced in English society. As he told More, his entry into the Church actually prevented him from enjoying the kind of complacent lifestyle which his critics accused him of seeking: "It is rather trying to be supposed to have settled oneself in an easy chair, when one has just begun a long journey afoot" (qted. in Schuchard *Dark Angel* 160). From Eliot's perspective, he, like the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday*, was now committed to a life of exile.

conventionalized into a spiral climb up a mountain . . ." (*Words* 299-300). Although Eliot claimed that Dante's *Vita Nuova* served as a model of sorts for *Ash-Wednesday*, *Purgatorio* actually has a much stronger presence in this very purgatorial poem, particularly in Part III. This section has been called the one "most profoundly in keeping with the Ash Wednesday season" as well as the "most Dantesque" (Timmerman 100; Gardner *Eliot* 119). It features a saints' stair, strongly recalling Dante's Mount Purgatory, which Eliot's speaker wearily climbs: "Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair / Climbing the third stair" (*CPP* 93).[19] In both *Ash-Wednesday* and *Purgatorio*, this upward progression symbolizes the steps the penitent takes as he sheds his sins and ascends to God. Although, as will be demonstrated, Eliot adapts elements from *Purgatorio* in order to reveal his own particular anxieties about art, he does, like Dante, use this axis mundi imagery to portray the various kinds of temptations one must overcome in one's spiritual journey. In this section and throughout the poem, however, Eliot suggests that his speaker must not only renounce what would typically be regarded as sins-- according to Dante, for instance-- but anything which might possibly distract him from God. In Part VI, for example, the speaker looks through a "wide window towards the granite shore" where "The white sails still fly seaward, seaward flying / Unbroken wings" (CPP 98). The scene might seem harmless, but it is enough to threaten the speaker's religious commitment:

> And the lost heart stiffens and rejoices
> In the lost lilac and the lost sea voices
> And the weak spirit quickens to rebel

[19] Part III when it was originally published separately in 1929 was even titled "Som de l'Escalina," an allusion to Canto XXVI of *Purgatorio*, in which Arnaut Daniel tells Dante, "Now I beg you, in the name of that worth / Which guides you to the top of the stairway, / Be mindful in good time of my pain" (l. 145-47).

For the bent golden-rod and the lost sea smell . . . (*CPP* 98)

Since during this period Eliot tried to follow the *via negativa*, he seemed to regard nearly everything as an illicit temptation that could divert him from God, even the beauties of nature. Although the moment of rebellion passes, the sense remains that the world and all that it contains pose spiritual danger and must be resisted. So, in *Ash-Wednesday*, as in the Ariels, Eliot emphasizes the need to sacrifice all that one formerly valued and enjoyed in order to avoid any possible transgressions. As St. John of the Cross teaches, "the purgation of joy obliges the mystic to fix his rejoicing only upon the 'spiritual fruit' of serving God,'" and not upon any earthly object (G. Smith 142).

Auden acknowledged that there is a place for the negative way, and that suffering can be beneficial, as shown when the character Dante must pass through hell and purgatory in order to glimpse Paradise. However, he did not think it should be the only aspect of religious experience upon which one should focus, nor that the natural world should be rejected as evil. He criticized the inability of Christian writers like Eliot "to embody in their work a central belief of the Christianity they professed-- the belief that the natural and temporal world is an analogue of the eternal one" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 381), as demonstrated by Eliot's presentation of the beauty of nature in *Ash-Wednesday* as a temptation rather than a reflection of God's glory. Although he clearly admired *Ash-Wednesday*, Auden was likely made somewhat uncomfortable by Eliot's insistently purgatorial tone, since he felt that "it was a little odd" to make poetry "out of one's feelings of guilt and penitence before God" (*DH* 458). Therefore, when Auden appropriates elements from Dante's work-- and specifically from *Purgatorio*-- he turns them to a markedly different effect than Eliot had done. In a long section in Part III of

"New Year Letter," Auden even evokes Dante's Mount Purgatory: "The Purgatorial hill we climb / Where any skyline we attain / Reveals a higher ridge again" (*DM* 46). He draws upon the same *axis mundi* imagery that Eliot used in *Ash-Wednesday*, but the emphasis here is not on penitence but rather on affirmation. As Mendelson perceptively states, Auden, around the time of his conversion, often wrote poetry with "a style that owes something to Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*, but with a different tone of gratification and delight" (*Later Auden* 45). According to Spears, "Despite his emphasis on the *Purgatorio* Auden's work is rarely penitential in tone," unlike Eliot, "whose tone is penitential in most of his greatest poetry" ("Divine Comedy" 72). Whereas the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday* suffers torments as he undergoes purgation, in "New Year Letter," "the Hound of Heaven never barks, there is . . . no Hopkins-ish agony" (Hynes 51). Even when Auden isn't demonstrating any particular "gratification and delight," he shows at least a kind of amused acceptance of his situation, as when he writes "We have no cause to look dejected / When wakened from a dream of glory, / We find ourselves in Purgatory":

> To tell the truth, although we stifle
> The feeling, are we not a trifle
> Relieved to wake on its damp earth?
> It's been our residence since birth
> Its inconveniences are known.
> And we have made its flaws our own. (*DM* 46-47)

Unlike Eliot, Auden suggests that he is at home in his exile, "Back on the same old mountain side" (*DM* 46). So, for Auden, religious experience need not revolve around suffering.[20]

From Auden's perspective, Eliot, at least in his transitional poems, seems to suffer from the Manichaeism which he attributed to Kierkegaard: "Like all heretics, conscious or unconscious, he is a monist, who can hear with peculiar acuteness one theme in the New Testament--in his case, the theme of suffering and self-sacrifice--but is deaf to its rich polyphony" (*FA* 191). Auden here seems to be recalling the words of Bonhoeffer which he quotes in *A Certain World*:

> There is always a danger of intense love destroying what I might call the 'polyphony' of life. What I mean is that we should love God eternally with our whole hearts, but not so as to compromise or diminish our earthly affections, but as a kind of *cantus firmus* to which the other melodies of life provide the counterpoint. Earthly affection is one of these contrapuntal themes, a theme which enjoys an autonomy of its own. (175)

"Earthly affection" played a major role in Auden's developing theology. No doubt one of the reasons he was drawn to Williams was because "Williams's Christianity was romantic and erotic" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 126), and corrected the Manichaean tendencies in Kierkegaard's thought. For example, in *The Descent of the Dove*, Williams states that "without the body the soul cannot be consummated in God," a "secret of the universe" which he finds in Dante's *The Divine Comedy* and *Vita Nuova* (138). Although

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[20] Accordingly, in the "Quest" sonnet "The Adventurers," Auden describes the asceticism of the desert fathers in unflattering terms: "They went the Negative Way towards the Dry: / By empty caves beneath an empty sky / They emptied out their memories like slops..." (*DM* 182). He implies that their suffering is unnecessary and futile, as he would no doubt view the attempts of the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday* to divest himself from all earthly attachments.

Eliot claimed that he wanted to write a modern *Vita Nuova*, he doesn't exploit what is perhaps the central idea in this work, that earthly love can be transmuted into divine love, the transformation accomplished by Dante through the figure of Beatrice in both the *Vita Nuova* and *The Divine Comedy*. Like Williams, however, Auden came to see love at the center of Dante's thought, and, as stated in the introduction, felt he himself had made the journey from Eros to Agape after falling in love with Kallman, through whom he said "God has chosen to show me my beatitude" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 44). Therefore, Auden claims, in marked contrast to Eliot, that Dante actually points towards the Affirmative Way.

Auden's appropriations from Dante differ from Eliot's in other respects as well. Whereas Eliot uses Dante to show the importance of submitting to authority, Auden evokes him to expound his own budding existentialism-- facets of their thought which affect their views both on the individual and on society. For Eliot, the central message of *The Divine Comedy* is "*la sua voluntade è nostra pace*," "in his will is our peace," which Piccarda speaks to Dante in the third canto of *Paradiso*. Indeed, as stated in Chapter One, Eliot uses it to illustrate why he finds Richards's theory of pseudo-statements inadequate because this "statement of Dante seems to me literally true" (*SE* 270). He continues, "And I confess that it has more beauty for me now, when my own experience has deepened its meaning, than it did when I first read it" (*SE* 270). As works like *Ash-Wednesday* reveal, it began to have this deeper resonance for him after he became a Christian. Before Eliot decided not to title the sections, Part V was called "La Sua Voluntade" (Southam 203), and towards the end of Part VI, the speaker prays:

Teach us to care and not to care

Teach us to sit still

Even among these rocks

Our peace in His will . . . (*CPP* 98)

In "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" (1927), Eliot wrote that Dante's statement is "great poetry, and there is a great philosophy behind it" (*SE* 136), namely the orthodox Christianity he himself valued. Eliot's repeated use of the phrase highlights the importance he placed on Dante's orthodox emphasis on submission, to God and to external authority in general. As Piccarda teaches Dante:

It is indeed the essence of this life

That we keep ourselves within the divine will,

So that our wills may be made one with his:

So that, how we are at various thresholds

Throughout this kingdom, pleases the whole kingdom

As it does the king who rouses us to his will. (l. 79-84)

Eliot contends that not only in Paradise, but on earth as well does one's peace depend on aligning one's will with God's will, an important aspect of all of Eliot's postconversion works, including his drama.

In "New Year Letter," on the other hand, the emphasis is not on the importance of submitting to God's will but rather on the need to exercise free will. According to Auden, in Heaven our wills "Must lose the will to operate," but here "we're free to will / Ourselves up Purgatory still, / Consenting parties to our lives . . ." (*DM* 45-46). Eliot scorned those who claimed to be guided by their "inner voice" (*SE* 27) and felt that the

Church's guidance was essential, as reflected by the abundance of allusions to liturgy in *Ash-Wednesday.* Auden argues that we cannot depend on this kind of external authority, however, since "No route is truly orthodox" and we must proceed "With only guessing for our guide" (*DM* 46). For this reason, every individual must embark on his own spiritual quest. Later in Part III Auden states:

> For the machine has cried aloud
> And publicized among the crowd
> The secret that was always true
> But known once only to the few.
> Aloneness is man's real condition,
> That each must travel forth alone
> In search of the Essential Stone
> .....
> Each salesman now is the polite
> Adventurer, the landless knight
> GAWAINE-QUIXOTE, and his goal
> The *Frauendienst* of his weak soul;
> Each biggie in the Canning Ring
> An unrobust lone FISHER-KING . . . (*DM* 65-66)

The sonnet sequence "The Quest" also presents "modern man as an existential hero" (Fuller336), though in a more oblique manner.[21] Each sonnet focuses on "an individual

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[21] In the note to "An unrobust lone FISHER-KING," Auden quotes a passage from *The Waste Land,* another poem that uses the quest motif but to other ends. Unlike Auden, Eliot emphasizes man's helplessness in the face of forces he doesn't understand or control. This contrast in their use of the motif is accentuated in "The Quest," as Mendelson explains: "Auden was . . . making a pointed contrast with Eliot's version of the

example of a type," such as "The Traveller" or "The Average," to present "a unique person who faces an existential choice" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 135). While these questers are not completely without aid-- "The Lucky," for instance, succeeds not because of his own talents but because of the intervention of "Grace" (*DM* 179)-- Auden stresses the solitary nature of man's struggle. One of the reasons he was attracted to America was because he thought it revealed more than anywhere else that "Aloneness is man's real condition."[22] One couldn't deceive oneself in such a rootless, individualistic society: "More even than in Europe, here / The choice of patterns is made clear . . ." (*DM* 65). Living in New York, Auden felt able to make his own existential choices with clear eyes, leading him to remark, "For the first time I am leading a life which remotely approximates to the way I think I ought to live" (qted. in Mendelson *English Auden* xx). As Hines explains in "The Voice of Exile: Auden in 1940," "It was an extraordinary decision to make-- to go in quest of a life that would be a parable of the condition of Modern Man" (34). Moreover, Auden continued to live in a way that emphasized the rootlessness endemic in the modern world-- later shifting between America, Italy, and Austria, for example-- as he carried on with his existential quest.

In essays like "Catholicism and International Order" (1933), Eliot takes it upon himself to speak for all Christians when he says, "We are committed to what in the eyes of the world must be a desperate belief, that a Christian world-order, the Christian world-order, is ultimately the only one which, from any point of view, will work" (*Essays*

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grail quest in *The Waste Land.* Both poets portrayed the quest as a series of incidents without a single unifying hero, but where Eliot treated the episodes in terms of impersonal myth and ritual, of emotional states misunderstood by those who experienced them, Auden treated them as a set of parables about consciousness and decision" (*Later Auden* 135).

[22] For instance, in another note to "New Year Letter," Auden lists some key figures in American literature, including Eliot, and concludes, "It is a literature of lonely people" (*DM* 152), meaning that the loneliness of Americans is reflected in their writers.

Ancient 114). Accordingly, Eliot repeatedly called for the need to establish a Christian society. In "The Idea of a Christian Society," he states that for all except the "Community of Christians"-- the "consciously and thoughtfully practicing Christians, especially those of intellectual and spiritual superiority" (*Christianity* 28)-- Christianity would ideally be embedded in the culture to such a degree that it would principally be manifested in unconscious behavior. Eliot contended:

> [T]o be conscious, without remission, of a Christian and a non-Christian alternative at moments of choice, imposes a very great strain. The mass of the population, in a Christian society, should not be exposed to a way of life in which there is too sharp and frequent a conflict between what is easy for them or what their circumstances dictate and what is Christian. (*Christianity* 24)

Due to his emerging existentialism, revealed in his allusions to Dante, Auden would not have wanted to create a Christian society on Eliot's model even if he thought it were possible. Although like Eliot he acknowledged that a lack of shared tradition and belief makes conditions more difficult for the artist-- since he is not able to concentrate solely on craftsmanship (*Prose II* 387)-- Auden did not want an official Christian state like Eliot did precisely because the population would be too "unconscious" of their beliefs. Kierkegaard, after witnessing the effect of the Danish Church in his country, had taught Auden that in such circumstances, people are often complacent about their religion and don't undergo the rigorous spiritual self-examination demanded of them. The disintegration of shared values is thus ultimately beneficial. "New Year Letter" states that with the advent of the machine:

> No longer can we learn our good

From chances of a neighborhood

Or class or party, or refuse

As individuals to choose

Our loves, authorities and friends,

To judge our means and plan our ends. (*DM* 65)

So Auden found that in some ways "Modern Man and Christian Man were the same" (Hynes 44), because conditions necessitated that all must now make deliberate choices in how they will live and what they will believe. In "Tradition and Value" (1940), Auden even claims that he "welcomes the atomization of society . . . when the disintegration of tradition will be as final and universal for the masses as it is already for the artist, because it will be only when they fully realize their 'aloneness' and accept it, that men will be able to achieve a real unity through a common recognition of their diversity" (*Prose II* 53), and thus form communities in which no one is treated as a "faceless cypher" (*DH* 63).

Differing Views on Artistic Engagement

These theological differences, illuminated by their encounters with Dante, naturally influence their views on their responsibilities to society as artists. Although Auden shows an interest in using his poetry for edification and, as will be revealed, he is not always consistent in his position, in general he makes much more circumscribed claims for art during his transitional period than does Eliot. Whereas the Ariels implicitly testify to Eliot's anxiety "to re-engage the world" on behalf of the Church primarily through their accessibility and religious subject matter (Timmerman 177), *Ash-Wednesday* articulates this sense of religious obligation explicitly. When in the garden

with the Lady, or silent sister, who acts as a "heavenly kind of Muse" (Schneider 127), the speaker hears what Timmerman calls "The central message of the poem" (106):

> The new years walk, restoring
> Through a bright cloud of tears, the years, restoring
> With a new verse the ancient rhyme. Redeem
> The time. Redeem
> The unread vision in the higher dream
> While jeweled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse. (*CPP* 94)

For Eliot, "to redeem the time" meant to share Christian revelation and to help create a new Christian society, by encouraging people to submit to God's will for their own and their community's sake. In "Thoughts after Lambeth," written shortly after he completed *Ash-Wednesday*, he declared:

> The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time; so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization and save the World from suicide. (*SE* 387)

As Eliot wrote to a friend, he didn't turn to Christianity for comfort but rather "it had burdened his soul with a terrible and hitherto unrealized weight of moral responsibility" (qted. Ackroyd 208). In *Ash-Wednesday*, he lays this responsibility to redeem the time and rebuild society, which he felt so acutely, upon the speaker. Eliot emphasizes the importance of this call to action when he reiterates:

> . . . the fountain sprang up and the bird sang down

> Redeem the time, redeem the dream
>
> The token of the word unheard, unspoken
>
> Till the wind shake a thousand whispers from the yew
>
> And after this our exile. (*CPP* 95)

Tellingly, it's a "new verse" that restores "the ancient rhyme." So, as in the Choruses from *The Rock* (*CPP* 164-65), Eliot advocates using poetry for religious purposes within poetry itself. Even though he agreed with Maritain that "It is a mortal error to look to poetry for the supersubstantial food of man" (20), Eliot's post-conversion works like *Ash-Wednesday* "show a steady, if tormented, inclination to direct the reader toward that supersubstantial nourishment" (Hay *Negative Way* 84). So, as *Ash-Wednesday* reveals, "if Eliot did not cast himself as a theological apologist, there was certainly a strain of the evangelist in him" (Timmerman 170).

Whereas after converting Eliot wanted to transform society in order to establish an orthodox Christian state, Auden had lost faith in all such revolutionary schemes. During their voyage to America in January of 1939, Isherwood confessed to Auden, "You know, it just doesn't mean anything to me any more-- the Popular Front, the part line, the anti-Fascist struggle. I suppose they're okay but something's wrong with me. I simply cannot swallow another mouthful," to which Auden replied, "Neither can I" (qted. in Hynes 32-33). Auden, like his one-time collaborator, was disillusioned with politics and *art engagé*, particularly after witnessing the defeat of the Republicans in Spain and the rise of the Nazis. In "The Prolific and the Devourer" (written in 1939), he revealed:

> Few of the artists who round about 1931 began taking up politics as an exciting new subject to write about had the faintest idea what they were letting themselves

> in for. They have been carried along on a wave which is travelling too fast to let them think what they are doing or where they are going. But if they are neither to ruin themselves or to harm the political causes in which they believe, they must stop and consider their position again. Their follies of the last eight years will provide them with plenty of food for thought. (*Prose II* 420)

Auden himself certainly ruminated on the "follies" he had committed as a politically engaged writer. For instance, during his trip to Spain during the Civil War, he was "disturbed by the injustices committed by his own side and justified or concealed by propaganda" but did nothing "because he was certain that the opposing side was worse, and that a victory for the Spanish nationalists would be a triumph for Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany" (Mendelson *Later Auden* xvii). Though at the time he claimed that "'Political exigency can never justify lies" (qted. in Spender "Auden" 33),[23] he afterwards felt that he had helped to propagate such lies in poems like "Spain 1937" and "September 1,1939." While "Spain 1937" acknowledges the high cost of civil war-- "the inevitable increase in the chance of death: / The conscious acceptance of guilt in the fact of murder" (*EA* 212)-- it does sound a propagandistic note when "life" tells "the nations": "What's your proposal? To build the Just City? / . . . . / Very well, I accept, for / I am your choice, your decision: yes, I am Spain'" (*EA* 211). In "September 1, 1939," Auden writes "All I have is a voice / To undo the unfolded lie" (*EA* 246), but later deemed the poem itself "infected with an incurable dishonesty" (qted. in Hynes 35-36) because of such exhortations as "We must love one another or die" (*EA* 246). Because of the

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[23] For instance, Auden defended Gide's *Return from the U.S.S.R.* against those who were angered by its negative portrayal of the Soviet system because "the argument most frequently used against Gide was not that his book was untrue, but that it gave comfort to the enemies of the Soviet Union" (Spender "Auden" 33).

compromises he felt political engagement necessitated, and his fear that he wasn't able to accomplish anything even after making such compromises, Auden had "begun to find intolerable his public role as court poet to the left" (Mendelson *English Auden* xix), which was one of the main reasons why he decided to go to American where he felt "free to pursue more private and local projects," like his religious education (Jacobs "Public Poetry" 101).

"New Year Letter" explicitly testifies to this change in Auden's views on using art for instrumental purposes, and his disillusionment with plans to overturn society:

> We hoped, we waited for the day
> The State would wither clean away.
> Expecting the Millennium
> That theory promised us would come:
> It didn't. (*DM* 40)

Chastened after his flirtation with politics, Auden set more modest goals. Now that he believed "the individual life is of greater importance than the collective one" (Bahlke 27), he dismissed dreams of utopias and instead advocated individual change and the formation of communities "united by a tie of a common love" (Auden *Prose II* 492). Actually, as Spender points out, Auden always regarded love as "the Cure" but "his conception of the Cure . . . has changed":

> At one time Love, in the sense of Freudian release from inhibition; at another time a vaguer and more exalted idea of loving; at still another the Social Revolution; and at a yet later stage, Christianity. Essentially the direction of Auden's poetry has been towards the defining of the concept of Love. ("Auden" 28)

"New Year Letter" shows Auden in the process of adopting this Christian concept of transforming love, as again revealed by his allusions to Dante. In contrast to Eliot's reiteration of "*la sua voluntade è nostra pace*," Auden adopts a passage of a different tenor. In the note to "And love illuminates again / The city and the lion's den" (*DM* 71), he quotes Virgil's discourse on love in *Purgatorio*: "The more people on high who comprehend each other, the more there are to love well, and the more love is there, and like a mirror one giveth back to the other" (*DM* 158-59).[24] Throughout the poem, reciprocated love is presented as the only firm foundation for any society. In fact, Auden even interprets the statement of Dante's to which Eliot attaches so much importance in this light. According to Auden, the idea of "[a] perfect order, one in which the community united by the best love is embodied in the most self-sustaining society" would be best described by phrases like "'Here, love is the fulfilling of the law' or 'In His Will is our peace'" (*DH* 65). So their contrasting theological perspectives lead them to see different meanings even in the same statement: what for Eliot reveals the necessity of submission shows to Auden the importance of love. This emphasis on love might seem to undermine his existential position, specifically his contention that "Aloneness is man's real condition." According to Auden, however, we ought to love one another *because* of our individuality, our essential aloneness:

> We need to love all since we are
>
> Each a unique particular
>
> That is no giant, god, or dwarf,

---

[24] The importance of this passage to Auden is signified by the repeated allusions he makes to it in his poetry and prose. For example, in "Brothers & Others," he quotes it when discussing the use of usury as a metaphor for love, after stating, "It is well known that love and understanding breed love and understanding" (*DH* 230).

But one odd human isomorph. (*DM* 69)

Further, he argues that to love is a choice, so when we love we are necessarily exercising our free will. In "Revision and Power: The Example of W. H. Auden," Mendelson explains that Auden objected to his declaration in "September 1, 1939" that "We must love one another or die" because, while it "sounds unexceptionable enough," "Auden knew that he intended it to indicate that love is an instinctual drive like hunger, not a personal and moral choice" (110), that is, he falsely located love in the realm of necessity rather than freedom. Therefore, we must *choose* to "love the polis of our friends" (*DM* 48).

Auden's new focus on change at the individual and community level is reflected in the claims he made for art during this period. Unlike Eliot, he doesn't aspire to "Redeem / The Time" with "a new verse." Rather, he shows how art may help people form their own communities based on love. In Part I of "New Year Letter," he tells Elizabeth that "Though language may be useless, for / No words men write can stop the war," poetry can still offer some consolation:

May such heart and intelligence
As huddle now in conference
Whenever an impasse occurs
Use the Good Offices of verse;
May an Accord be reached, and may
This *aide-mémoire* on what they say,
This private minute for a friend.
Be the dispatch that I intend. (*DM* 25)

Even during a time of war, poetry allows him to commune with his own polis of friends and gives him a platform from which he may address a wider audience as well. Art may serve other important functions too. On the morning that Germany invaded Poland, Auden was at Elizabeth's cottage,

> Where BUXTEHUDE as we played
> One of his *passacaglias* made
> Our minds a *civitas* of sound
> Where nothing but assent was found.
> For art had set in order sense
> And feeling and intelligence
> And from its ideal order grew
> Our local understanding too.
> 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 . . . (*DM* 16-17)

Order is essential because Auden believed, "Disorder, lack of meaning, are spiritual not physical discomforts, order and sense spiritual not physical satisfactions" (*DH* 66). So art can bestow a spiritually nourishing sense of order that promotes this "local understanding" in the midst of turbulent times. Mendelson explains, "If art cannot recommend action, it can at least promote an atmosphere in which heart and mind can

choose their acts harmoniously" (*Later Auden* 108). The passage suggests that not only does art help to create such an atmosphere, it can also serve as a model for life outside art. In "The Virgin & The Dynamo," Auden contends, "Every poem . . . is an attempt to present an analogy to that paradisal state in which Freedom and Law, System and Order are united in harmony. Every good poem is very nearly a Utopia" (*DH* 71), a place of order and reconciliation. In Part III of "New Year Letter," art-- albeit music again, not poetry-- helps to create a community which itself is a model for an ideal society. In a passage that Fuller describes as "guardedly religious" (329), Auden transforms the Mayers' Christmas dinner into a wedding feast in which everyone is seated so that "Each felt the placement to be such, / That he was honoured overmuch":

> And SCHUBERT sang and MOZART played
> And GLUCK and food and friendship made
> Our privileged community
> That real republic which must be
> The State all politicians claim,
> Even the worst, to be their aim. (*DM* 43-44)

What he wasn't able to realize in the political sphere, he experiences on a smaller scale, a Utopian society "based on love" (Hynes 48). Certainly art isn't solely responsible for the blessedness the "privileged community" experiences, but it does play an integral role. Even as Auden makes such claims about the power of art, however, he immediately undercuts them.

Although he believed that "[b]oth in Life and Art the human task is to create a necessary order out of an arbitrary chaos" (*Prose II* 125) and, for that reason, art can

provide an analogy for the order sought in life, he emphasizes that it is *only* "an analogy, not an imitation; the harmony is possible and verbal only" (*DH* 71). Accordingly, after drawing a parallel between the search for order in "Art and Life," "New Year Letter" hastens to add:

> Art in intention is mimesis
>
> But, realized, the resemblance ceases;
>
> Art is not life and cannot be
>
> A midwife to society
>
> For art is a *fait accompli.* (*DM* 17)

The notes to this passage-- which were incorporated into "The Poet & The City" (*DH* 84-85) and other essays-- reveal that he is quick to point out the limits of the analogy because he believed it can mislead artists into thinking that since they have achieved order in their work, they are equipped to do the same in the political arena, when in truth, "Both their unique position in society and the unique nature of their work conspire to make artists less fitted for political thinking than most people" (*DM* 78). One reason they are not suited to politics is because "their natural interest is in singular individuals and personal relations, while politics and economics are concerned with large numbers of people, hence with the human average (the poet is bored to death by the idea of the Common Man)" (*DH* 84). Moreover, the artist "qua artist, i.e. in relation to what he does . . . is the only person who is really a dictator" since "[w]orks of art really are closed societies, and they are made . . . by the artist alone" (*DM* 79). An artist would be very dangerous if, on the basis of the analogy that society is like a work of art, he tried to exert

the same kind of control in the political sphere.[25] Also, Auden shows that while art may help to create a model society, although on a small scale, its effects are only temporary, creating a moment which has already passed:

> Warm in your house, Elizabeth,
>
> A week ago at the same hour
>
> I felt the unexpected power
>
> That drove our ragged egos in
>
> From the dead-ends of greed and sin
>
> To sit down at the wedding feast . . . (*DM* 43)

McDiarmid explains, "Auden does not undermine the validity of the wedding feast; he undermines its permanence" (*Apologies* 85). Though he is grateful for the experience of such a moment and heartened by its memory, it is only a "*détente*" (*DM* 43) and "does not have a permanent binding effect" (McDiarmid *Apologies* 85). So throughout "New Year Letter," Auden takes pains to show the limits of even the relatively modest powers that he ascribes to art.

Auden's views on engagement and the limits of poetry are actually much more unsettled than they sometimes appear, however, and in this transitional period he has a tendency to vacillate between his old assumptions and his new assertions regarding the

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[25] In "Squares and Oblongs," Auden contends that much suffering has already ensued because of this wrongheaded application of the analogical relation of art to life:

> The frightful falsehood which obsessed the Greeks and Romans and for which mankind has suffered ever since, was that government is a similar activity to art, that human beings are a medium like language out of which the gifted politician creates a good society as the gifted poet creates a good poem. A society which really was like a poem and embodied all the esthetic values of beauty, order, economy, subordination of detail to the whole effect, would be a nightmare of horror, based on selective breeding, extermination of the physically or mentally unfit, absolute obedience to its Director, and a large slave class kept out of sight in cellars. (*Prose II* 348)

Auden states that unsuccessful artists are particularly susceptible to this temptation to treat life as a work of art: "It is not surprising that Hitler began as a painter . . ." (*DM* 79-80).

role of art. "New Year Letter" in particular reveals his uncertainty over what purpose art should serve because so much of this "highly didactic" poem is focused on this very question. Part of the difficulty that Auden had in accepting the limits that he himself ascribed to art stems from his social conscience, [26] which led him to get involved in politics in the Thirties in the first place and also played an important role in his developing theology. So Auden may claim "Art is not life and cannot be / A midwife to society," but in the same poem he betrays his hope that his work *will* have a palpable effect on society, as he preaches about political and spiritual issues, which he now presents as intertwined. Although the poem does at times advocate wide scale change like *Ash-Wednesday*, Auden, in his engaged mode, differs from Eliot by calling attention to specific issues rather than only general spiritual conditions.

In *The Dyer's Hand*, Auden claimed, "The artist, the man who makes, is less important to mankind, for good or evil, than the apostle, the man with a message" (277). Elsewhere, however, he shows that an artist can, and in fact should, be a "man with a message" as well. He proclaims in a 1942 article, "W. H. Auden Speaks of Poetry and Total War," "If the poet, *qua* poet, has any other social function than to give pleasure, it is, in the words of the greatest poet produced by the last war," namely Wilfred Owen, "'to warn,' so that, in one sense, the serious poetry of any given moment is always at odds with the conscious ideas of the majority" (*Prose II* 153). In the same article, he even makes a rare, albeit indirect, defense of his political poetry of the 1930s on the grounds that it was performing this necessary function: "If artists during the last ten years

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[26] In a letter written in late 1939, he said that moving to America "has taught me the kind of writer I am, i.e. an introvert who can only develop by obeying his introversion" (qted. in Mendelson *English Auden* xx), and in the notes to "New Year Letter" he reveals, "It is the extrovert who is often without a social conscience. The introvert can never lose his" (*DM* 122).

turned themselves into journalists and committeemen for the Spanish or Chinese causes," and he was deeply involved with both, "it was because, however inefficient they might be, they saw that the fate of every individual was involved in these causes at a time when the politicians, the public, the efficient men of action, were still indifferent" (*Prose II* 152). Poets may thus legitimately take on a kind of prophetic role.[27] During World War II, he defended his absence from England and his decision not to fight on similar grounds. In answer to the harsh criticism directed against him, as well as Isherwood,[28] Auden wrote to a friend in September of 1939, "People have different functions. Mine is not to fight: so far as I know what mine is, I think it is to see clearly, to warn of excesses and crimes against humanity whoever commits them" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 60). Similarly, Auden gave a speech at Smith College in 1940, in which "he justified his existence as a poet and an intellectual in these words: 'To try to understand what has come upon us and why may not be the most heroic of the tasks required to save civilization, but it is indispensable'" (Hynes "Exiles" 52). So in spite of his claims to the contrary, Auden still believed that poets had important functions in society beyond their stewardship of language or roles as entertainers and that art *can* help to "save civilization," if only in a small way.

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[27] He believed one of the reasons poets can perform this function is because "[t]he social strains which later break out in political action are first experienced by artists as a feeling that the current modes of expression are no longer capable of dealing with their real concerns" (*DH* 367). So their prophetic ability is implicated in their artistic skills.

[28] For example, Hynes relates that in June 1940, the M. P. Major Sir Jocelyn Lucas spoke in the House of Commons of "the indignation caused by young men leaving the country and saying they will not fight" and asked "whether British citizens of military age, such as Mr. W. H. Auden and Mr. Christopher Isherwood, who have gone to the United States and expressed their determination not to return to this country until the war is over, will be summoned back for registration and calling up, in view of the fact that they are seeking refuge abroad?" (32). Auden did offer to return if there was a position in which he could be useful, but this did little to quell the sometimes vitriolic attacks. Incidentally, in the year of his conversion, Eliot also angered many of his countrymen, although not to the same degree, by taking out British citizenship.

While discussing the turbulent political situation in "New Year Letter," Auden comes before us explicitly in his role as poet, so questions about the responsibility of the artist *qua* artist are brought to the fore:

> Around me, pausing as I write,
> A tiny object in the night,
> Whichever way I look, I mark
> Importunate along the dark
> Horizon of immediacies
> The flares of desperation rise
> From signalers who justly plead
> Their cause is piteous indeed:
> Bewildered, how can I divine
> . . . . . .
> Which of these calls to conscience is
> For me the *casus fœderis* . . . (*DM* 47-48)

Fuller thinks this passage shows Auden's unwillingness to act (330), but he would not be so troubled by the importunity of these causes if he did not feel compelled to help. In fact, he wants "To serve mankind's *imperium*," although he doesn't know the best way in which to do so: "But why and where and when and how? / O none escape these questions now . . ." (*DM* 48).[29] One of the ways in which he serves is through writing this poem, in which he does "warn of excesses and crimes against humanity," as he said he would do (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 60). Showing his political roots, Auden does not utter

[29] In a slightly revised version for the *Collected Poetry*, Auden no longer even asks "why" he should serve, as though it were an imperative one could take for granted: "But where to serve and when and How? / O none escape these questions now" (*CP* 225).

rather vague calls to "Redeem the time," as Eliot does, but focuses on particular causes and injustices. For example, in this poem which, like *Ash-Wednesday*, centers on a day of reflection and transition, he writes:

> Who, thinking of the last ten years,
>
> Does not hear howling in his ears
>
> The Asiatic cry of pain,
>
> The shots of executing Spain,
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The Jew wrecked in the German cell.
>
> Flat Poland frozen into hell . . . (*DM* 23-24)

Nor are his concerns limited to the horrors of war. He laments, for instance, "The silent dumps of unemployed / Whose *arête* has been destroyed" (*DM* 24),[30] and sympathizes with the impoverished Okies in America (*DM* 64), much as he might have done in his political poems and plays.

Although he continues to speak out on many of the same issues that he addressed in the 1930s poems, Auden's sociological discourse now has a new dimension. "New Year Letter" demonstrates how his burgeoning religious beliefs begin to insinuate themselves into his political thought, largely due to the influence of Tillich and Niebuhr. While Williams's emphasis on love served as a correction to Kierkegaard's "Manichaeism," these radical Protestants compensated for another shortcoming in Kierkegaard's philosophy, from Auden's perspective:

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[30] In *The Rock* (1934), Eliot does address the problem of unemployment as well, leading Browne to remark, "I do not remember any work of the time in which this plight is portrayed more poignantly" (22). Usually, however, Eliot focuses on the spiritual health of society without addressing more seemingly topical issues--likely a reflection of the fact that he only became relatively engaged following his conversion, when religious issues were foremost in his mind.

> Their theology began, as Kierkegaard's did, by making a clear separation between divine judgment and human inadequacy. But unlike Kierkegaard, who said nothing about social questions, they found in the meaning of the Gospels an absolute command to serve divine justice by working toward an inevitably flawed and incomplete justice on earth. (Mendelson *Later Auden* 149)

Since social justice was an abiding concern for Auden, Mendelson contends that their theology, in which "the limits of human justice could not be excused by citing the infinitude of divine justice," played an important role in his decision to convert (*Later Auden* 150). In his developing theology, Auden deemed heretical a "Barthian exaggeration of God's transcendence which all too easily becomes an excuse for complacency about . . . the misfortunes of others" ("Religion and the Intellectual" 123), another heresy which he may have attributed to the more otherworldly Eliot. In comparison with Eliot's work, "Auden's work is concerned with the divine-- though with the divine as it appears in this world . . ." (Spears "Divine Comedy" 53), a position advocated by Tillich in the passage from *The Interpretation of History* that Auden added to the notes of *The Double Man*: "The fundamental Protestant attitude is to stand in nature, taking upon oneself the inevitable reality; not to flee from it, either into the world of ideal forms or into the related world of super-nature, but to make decisions in concrete" (*DM* 132). Auden repeatedly insists that it is a religious duty to take action in this "concrete reality," as when he states in a 1940 article, "Faith that neglects works degenerates into a lazy determinism" (*Prose II* 89). Similarly, in *A Certain World*, he implicitly agrees with Dag Hammarskjöld's assertion that "In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action" (331). Auden was attracted to radical

Protestantism not only because of its general emphasis on social justice, but also because it had "established itself even outside theological circles as a focus of intellectual resistance to Nazism" (*Later Auden* 149). Conniff, who also describes Auden's debt to these thinkers in some detail, states that they showed him how to "reconcile Christian faith and doctrine with the political realities, as he understood them, of the contemporary crisis" ("Answering Herod" 310), providing him with the new perspective that informs "New Year Letter."

"O all too easily we blame / The politicians for our shame" (*DM* 59), Auden declares in "New Year Letter." He preaches that everyone, not only politicians, is responsible for the current political disorder because it stems from widespread spiritual disorder:

> Day breaks upon the world we know
> Of war and wastefulness and woe;
> Ashamed citizens come to grief
> In brotherhoods without belief . . . (*DM* 67-68)

Throughout this period, Auden reiterates this belief that "societies come to grief when they have an inadequate metaphysics or none" (Hynes 43).[31] He doesn't accept ignorance as an excuse for this spiritual inadequacy either, for he claims that most people know

> Instinctively what ought to be
> The nature of society
> And how they'd live there if they could.

[31] Auden stated that "unless we realize that a collective political victory over Germany and Japan, and a personal victory over ourselves are mutually interdependent aspects of the same problem, our chances of winning either battle are small" (*Prose II* 148).

If it were easy to be good,

And cheap, and plain as evil how,

We all would be its members now . . . (*DM* 67)

Their failure to create this ideal society is ultimately attributed to a lack of love: "Of what can love's intentions do / If all his agents are untrue" (*DM* 60). Therefore, even the seemingly modest goal of fostering communities built upon love is shown to have wider implication, and we see that love would solve individual as well as societal problems.

Auden reinforces this notion that spiritual disorders are responsible for political disorders in the passage that begins, "The situation of our time / Surrounds us like a baffling crime" (*DM* 22). This detective story analogy might seem to point only to the immediate political context, but while Auden does allude to the rise of Hitler, he continues "our equipment all the time / Extends the area of the crime / Until the guilt is everywhere . . ." (*DM* 22-23). The "baffling crime," which causes "[u]biquitous" and "[v]ast spiritual disorders," is in fact original sin (*DM* 23). In his essay on detective novels, "The Guilty Vicarage," Auden confesses, "I suspect that the typical reader of detective stories is, like myself, a person who suffers from a sense of sin" (*DH* 157). For such people, "the magical satisfaction [they] provide (which makes them escape literature, not works of art) is the illusion of being dissociated from the murderer" (*DH* 158), when in actuality original sin implicates everyone.[32] As Auden writes in "New

[32] Auden employs this particular analogy in a number of other poems. In the earlier work, "Detective Story" (1936), guilt is again central but the source of this guilt is rather vague: "time is always guilty. Someone must pay for / Our loss of happiness, our happiness itself" (*CP* 152). Guilt is linked more clearly with original sin in "To T. S. Eliot on his Sixtieth Birthday" (1948), in which Auden credits Eliot with "finding the right language for thirst and fear" when on the tennis-court appeared "the bloody corpse," which seems to allude to the crucified body of Christ (*CP* 577-78). "It is the crime that counts, you will say" and the crime is original sin, on account of which no one "shall escape whipping" (*CP* 578). Like Auden, Eliot, who also indulged in detective novels, did place much emphasis on original sin in his work.

Year letter." "Ironic KIERKEGAARD stared long / And muttered 'All are in the wrong'" (*DM* 57). In fact, the necessity of acknowledging this sin is an essential part of the poem's message. As it draws to a close, Auden writes, "And all that we can always say / Is: true democracy begins / With free confession of our sins" (*DM* 68). From Auden's perspective, since all are "sinners in a single boat" (Gopnik 88), universal sinfulness creates a fundamental equality. If a person admits to his sinfulness and shortcomings, he is less likely to try to exalt himself over others, making communities based on love and mutual respect possible. Then we would truly live as if "Our life and death are with our neighbors" (*DM* 71). So throughout "New Year Letter," political and spiritual conditions are clearly linked.

Although Auden and Eliot often appear fully committed to the idea of artistic engagement, as they conceive it, their poetry reveals that they actually experienced considerable anxiety as they tried to define their roles following their conversions. Like many engaged artists, they have a fear of inefficacy, that their efforts to effect change will be largely ignored. For instance, Auden states that "prophets" like Baudelaire and Blake railed against the rise of "Empiric Economic Man" with "curses / And sermons and satiric verses," but "The World ignored them" (*DM* 56-57). Although they were later proven right when the age of Empiric Economic Man brought with it enormous misery, poverty and despair (*DM* 57-58), that seems little comfort to Auden as he rails against the evils of his own day. Moreover, a major reason for Auden's decision to turn from overtly political poetry was that he felt it had done little to alleviate societal problems or avert the catastrophe that was World War II. In *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot suggests that widespread

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Incidentally, Auden is reputed to be at least one of the models for Nigel Strangeways, the hero of Cecil Day-Lewis's detective novels.

secularism makes the need to "redeem the time" pressing, but it also makes it more unlikely that he will be heard. In Part V, the speaker finds that most people are unreceptive to his message: "Where shall the word be found where will the word / Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence" (*CPP* 96). As Timmerman points out, "In a sense, the narrator sets foot once again in the wasteland, pondering the presence and efficacy of the divine mandate to redeem the time to a people unmindful of the message" (106). Part II expresses a similar sense of frustration in a passage that alludes to the vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37. Although the speaker has not yet been called upon explicitly to redeem the time, he is give a prophetic role like Ezekiel. Whereas Ezekiel's prophecies revitalize the dry bones that represent "the kingdom of Israel" (Metzger 1107), however, the speaker is told to "Prophesy to the wind, to the wind only for only / The wind will listen" (*CPP* 91)-- implying that the people will not.[33] Like his speaker, Eliot found, "To take up the role of God's spokesman was . . . daunting in so secular an age" (Gordon *New Life* 39). While questions of efficacy remained an abiding concern for both writers, the *most* significant source of anxiety for them during this period is the fear that they will revert to their earlier positions. *Ash-Wednesday* reflects Eliot's temptation to abandon what he felt were his religious duties and revert to aestheticism, whereas "New Year Letter" shows that Auden had to resist the opposite

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[33] Eliot's concern that he won't be able to effect any real change is reflected in other poems of the period as well. For example, "Triumphal March"-- the "odd, final, and possibly failed Ariel" that became part of the unfinished *Coriolan* sequence-- features "a modern temple in need of cleansing" (Timmerman 151:162). Although they are offered the Messiah, the "[m]odern people" of the poem "simply ignore his presence" (Timmerman 163). For example, "young Cyril," who is taken to Church on Easter only because his family couldn't get away for a jaunt to the country, knows nothing of the significance of Communion (*CPP* 128). He assumes that the Communion bell just signals tea-time, and calls out "*crumpets*" (*CPP* 128). Also, in "Difficulties of a Statesman," the second part of the sequence, the speaker expresses his willingness to prophesy when he echoes Isaiah 40:6: "CRY what shall I cry?" (*CPP* 129). However, he is greeted only with a mob of voices telling him to "RESIGN RESIGN RESIGN" (*CPP* 130). Eliot himself doesn't "resign," but these poems show that he often felt discouraged in his attempts to restore a society largely deaf to his cry.

temptation and not allow himself to focus so intently upon the instrumental purposes of poetry that he undermines its integrity.

The Dangers of Aestheticism in *Ash-Wednesday*

Unlike the speakers of the Ariels, the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot's most "confessional" poem (Schneider 112), is commonly identified by critics as a poet,[34] and thus the poem offers a very revealing portrait of Eliot's own struggles during this period as he tried to define his role as a Christian artist. Since Eliot described *Ash-Wednesday* as a modern *Vita Nuova*, however, many critics, like Grover Smith, lay much emphasis on the Lady of the poem and mistakenly assume that the speaker's main challenge is to sublimate carnal love into divine love, as in Dante's work.[35] Eliot did claim that "Dante's treatise was of great importance in the struggle to discipline feeling," but he certainly didn't mean only romantic or erotic feelings. As he revealed in his letter to Stead, in *Ash-Wednesday* he wanted to convey *all* of man's "intenser human feelings in term of the divine goal" (qted. in Bush 131). Also, since Eliot was trying to follow the negative way, he would be more likely to regard earthly love as something to be purged rather than transmuted into heavenly love, unlike Auden or Williams. Despite the traditional readings of the poem, *Ash-Wednesday* actually centers on Eliot's anxiety over the place of poetry in his life following his conversion, and specifically that his devotion to art will lead him astray.[36]

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[34] These critics include Gardner, Kwan-Terry, E. Jones, Schneider, Timmerman, Traversi and Cuddy.
[35] There are some scholars who correctly assert that the sublimation of love isn't the sole concern of the poem, however. See, for example, Hay "Conversion" 12-13 and Schneider 126.
[36] In the Introduction to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1932), Eliot wrote, "If a poem of mine entitled *Ash-Wednesday* ever goes into a second edition, I have thought of prefixing to it the lines of Byron from *Don Juan*":

> Some have accused me of a strange design
> Against the creed and morals of the land.
> And trace it in this poem every line.

Bloom, while not Eliot's most sensitive reader, is one of the few critics who recognizes that Eliot's struggle with poetry itself is at the core of *Ash-Wednesday*. He states, "The poem's six movements are not a Dantesque *Vita Nuova*, despite Eliot's desires" but rather express his "partially repressed anxieties and . . . his poetic anxieties in particular" ("Eliot" 72). Occasionally, these poetic anxieties are displayed quite openly, as in the opening passage:

> Because I do not hope to turn again
>
> Because I do not hope
>
> Because I do not hope to turn
>
> Desiring this man's gift and that man's scope
>
> I no longer strive to strive for such things. (*CPP* 89)

The speaker is here referring to his poetic career, and "in the Shakespearean rejection of the desire for 'this man's gift and that man's scope,' we need not doubt that the men are precursor poets . . ." (Bloom "Eliot" 72). Many critics do acknowledge that this allusion to Shakespeare's "Sonnet 29," in which the speaker finds himself "Desiring this man's art and that man's scope" reveals an anxiety over poetry, but they tend to underestimate its importance or draw limited conclusions. Since the allusion is followed by the line "Why should the agèd eagle stretch its wings" (*CPP* 89), some critics claim that the passage only expresses the fear of an aging poet who cannot compete with illustrious artists of the

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> I don't pretend that I quite understand
> My own meaning when I would very fine:
> But the fact is that I have nothing planned
> Unless it were to be a moment merry. (*UPUC* 22)

Eliot is of course being facetious, but he nevertheless usefully points out that while knowing a poet's intentions can be enlightening, "there may be much more in a poem than the author was aware of" (*UPUC* 30-31). So it is even possible that he may not have been fully aware of the degree to which poetic anxiety permeates *Ash-Wednesday*.

past, like Shakespeare.[37] They imply that the anxiety expressed here is indistinguishable from that which any poet past his prime, Christian or otherwise, might experience. Bloom, for example, claims that *Ash-Wednesday*, like Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," reveals a fear of creative sterility: "Though Eliot employs the language of mysticism and Wordsworth the language of nature, the crisis for each is poetic rather than mystical or natural" (72). While the anxiety over poetry exhibited in the first section of *Ash-Wednesday* may be due in part to Eliot's fears over declining abilities, there is an important religious dimension to this anxiety that scholars like Bloom overlook.

The reference to the agèd eagle, for instance, is not simply the lament of a fading artist. As Partridge explains, "The 'agèd eagle' has nothing to do with the decline of the poet; symbolically, the unpurged soul was said to be *old*, the purged man was regarded as born anew" (193). So in calling himself an agèd eagle, the speaker refers to his spiritual state, specifically to his struggle to make all of the sacrifices he feels Christianity demands, especially for one following the *via negativa*. For the speaker, his new life necessitates that he resist the temptation to value art and his own achievements too highly and instead learn to worship God in humility. Partridge claims that the speaker "abandons *the vanished power of the usual reign* . . . suggesting the vanities of the worldly artist" (193), but actually he only "no longer strive[s] to strive for such things"--revealing that he is still vulnerable to such vanities. In fact, poetry, not love or carnal pleasure, poses the greatest danger to the speaker throughout the work. So *Ash-*

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[37] Auden, on the other hand, playfully references this line in *Letter to Lord Byron* to show how creatively vital Eliot remains. After itemizing many of England's flaws, he writes: "Cheer up! There're several singing birds that sing. / There's six feet six of Spender for a start; / Eliot has really stretched his eagle's wings . . ." (*Letters From Iceland* 233). It was also in this poem that he stated: "Eliot spoke the still spoken word; / For gasworks and dried tubers I forsook / The clock at Grantchester, the English rook" (*CP* 110), thus alluding to *Ash-Wednesday* twice.

Wednesday reflects Eliot's concern that his attachment to art might undermine his religious commitment, and that he must therefore find a way "to subjugate his poetry to his religion" (Bagchee 49).

The speaker's ordeal on the saints' stair of Part III, in which the "spiritual struggle of *Ash-Wednesday* has its center" (Schneider 118), in particular betrays Eliot's fear that poetry will lead to transgression. Unlike Dante's *Purgatorio*, in which the penitents shed mortal sins first and then venial sins, Eliot inverts this progression, and, as in *Murder in the Cathedral*, leaves the protagonist to face the greatest temptation last. The speaker has looked down upon the "devil of the stairs who wears / The deceitful face of hope and despair" (*CPP* 93) and climbed on in darkness when,

> At the first turning of the third stair
> Was a slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit
> And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene
> The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green
> Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.
> Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,
> Lilac and brown hair;
> Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over the
> third stair,
> Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair
> Climbing the third stair. (*CPP* 93)

Most critics assume that the "slotted window" discloses only the world of pleasure that the speaker must renounce, interpreting the flute as a phallic symbol, for instance. The

passage may show the speaker's susceptibility to sensual delights, but the more dangerous temptation that he encounters on the third stair is that posed by poetry.

For example, the long association between poetry and music, especially in the pastoral tradition, suggests that the allure of the "music of the flute" is really the allure of poetry. In *Dante and English Poetry*, Ellis posits that Eliot alludes here to the passage in *Purgatorio* in which Casella sings a love song at Dante's request. During the performance, Dante admits, "My master and I and those people / Who were with him seemed to be so content / That no other thing could touch their minds," including thoughts of ascending to the gates of Purgatorio and beginning their purification (2.115-17). Dante, like the others, is chided for his negligence, and finally tears himself from the music to begin the climb that will eventually lead him to Earthly Paradise and the Court of Heaven. The music is not inherently evil, but inordinate attention to it distracts Dante from his task. Ellis claims, "Eliot would have been very much aware here of the celebration of one type of love holding Dante back from the fuller experiencing of 'al som de l'escalina,'" and because Casella sings a love song, Ellis implies that the type of love Eliot is wary of, as a potential hindrance, is romantic love (*Dante* 216). Significantly, however, Casella sings "the first verse of Dante's *canzone* in *Convivio III*" (D. Higgins 576), so Dante is actually distracted by a rendition of his own verse. Therefore, Eliot's reference to "Distraction, music of the flute" may indicate a fear of being diverted from God by *his own poetry*. The type of love that Eliot is wary of may not be romantic love at all, but love of art, since it can distract one, as well as lead to idolatry and what John Ciardi calls "the pride of talent" (120).[38]

[38] Williams interprets this passage in *Purgatorio* in a more curious light. Since he, like Auden, sees love at the center of *The Divine Comedy*, Casella singing Dante's love song is considered a "moment of love" and

Like the flute, the "broadbacked figure drest in blue and green" is commonly, and mistakenly, seen as nothing more than a symbol of sensual pleasures. Critics routinely identify the figure, almost certainly the "garden god" of Part IV, as Pan or Priapus, statues of whom were placed in gardens to promote fertility. He actually appears to be a composite of Pan, Priapus and perhaps Marsyas, another satyr who, like Pan, plays the flute.[39] This collapsing of identity certainly wouldn't be unprecedented since, as Dorothy Baker explains in *Mythic Masks in Self-Reflexive Poetry*, twentieth century poets often conflated Pan with other satyrs or Latin fawns because of their similar appearance and characteristics (8). Though these characteristics include a tendency towards sexual incontinence, the temptation embodied by the broadbacked figure goes beyond the venial sin of lust. Notably, Pan and Marsyas represent a certain kind of artist. E. J. Kenney, in his notes to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, states explicitly that Marsyas is "both an artist and an inhabitant of the world of pastoral" (411), and Patricia Merivale in *Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times,* explains that, among other things, Pan is emblematic of "poetic creativity" (5). Moreover, in *Metamorphoses*, a work which Eliot knew well,

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a "lovely and intellectual exchange of gifts" (*Dove* 137). From his perspective, it is a positive event, strengthening those who are about to begin their ascent: "now from that lovely interchange of love . . . they skirr up the Mountain which is the cause and occasion of all joy . . ." (*Dove* 137).

[39] The critics who identify the "broadbacked figure" as Pan include: Cuddy (81), Timmerman (103), Hargrove (59), and Schuchard (157-58). Hay calls him "Pan like" (*Negative Way* 93), as does Schneider initially (119); Schneider repeatedly refers to him as "Pan" thereafter (121,124). The critics who call the "garden god" of Part IV Priapus include: Smith (152), Southam (231), V. Bell (11), and Slattery (150). Nearly all critics clearly identify the two figures (the broadbacked figure of Part III and the garden god of Part IV). For instance, Schuchard states that "Pan will return with his flute in Part 4" and, in a discussion of Part III, Bell speaks of "Priapus enchanting 'the may time' . . .' with an antique flute'"-- substituting "Priapus" for the "broadbacked figure." A few critics do seem to suggest that the figure[s] is to some degree a composite of Pan and Priapus. For instance, Schuchard sees a conjunction between Pan and Priapus in Part III: "On the third stair the penitent suddenly sees 'The broadbacked figure,' a figure known to him, a figure now in the image of Pan, playing on his 'antique flute'. . . .His presence again recalls the figure of 'Priapus in the shrubbery,' Eliot's earlier image of Bertrand Russell . . ." (in "Mr. Apollinax" [1917]) (157). There are some critics who don't attempt to identify the figure[s] at all. Bloom, for example, only comments on the Pre-Raphaelite imagery of the broadbacked figure (73) and Bush calls him "deliberately mysterious" (*Eliot* 145).

both Pan and Marsyas challenge Apollo to a music contest on separate occasions, which they subsequently lose. Although they are deities as well, their challenge of Apollo is viewed as impudent. In her study of Apollo and Marsyas, who is flayed for his presumption, Reynolds writes, "On one level Marsyas was a divine poetic figure; on another he was a *hubristes* who dared challenge the gods" (204). This charge applies equally to Pan, who "played / Light airs upon his pipes, and dared to boast / Apollo's music second to his own" (Ovid XI.154-65). Reynolds goes on to explain that in the Western Tradition, Apollo is frequently aligned with the religious artist and Marsyas with the pagan artist (210), and that often all poets were thought to be as irreligious as Marsyas:

> [I]n Plato's Republic Marsyas is the archetype of the pipe-playing poets expelled from the ideal republic. . . .Plato's apparent restrictions on poets in the *Republic* were cited as proof by critics of poetry from the earliest period of humanism that poets were non-Christian, anarchic, and dangerous to society. (203-04).

As mentioned in Chapter One, Steiner discusses at length this perception of poets as subversive god-rivalers, claiming that "The poet makes in dangerous similitude to the gods" since "his words have that power which, above all others, the gods would deny to man, the power to bestow enduring life" (37). He continues, "Gradually this ambivalence in the genius of language, this notion of god-rivaling, therefore potentially sacrilegious character of the act of the poet becomes one of the recurrent tropes in Western literature" (38), particularly among the Romantics.[40] The presence of a figure that evokes

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[40] For instance, in Shelley's "Hymn of Pan" (published posthumously in 1824), Pan tells Apollo that during their contest, all "Were silent with love, as you now, Apollo / With envy of my sweet pipings" (l. 23-24). Apollo is supposedly threatened by the subversive Pan, with whom Romantic poets frequently aligned themselves. In a somewhat similar vein, many Romantic poets were sympathetic to Milton's Satan, who

archetypal rebellious artists and god-rivalers is highly suggestive in a poem suffused with a poet's fears that his art will lead him astray. Pan and Marsyas represent all that the speaker, and by extension Eliot, must avoid if he's to learn to use his gifts in a divinely-sanctioned way: "Being, in the nature of his craft, a reacher, the poet must guard against becoming, in the Faustian term, an overreacher" (Steiner 39). So the broadbacked figure may represent the venial sin of lust, but more importantly he also represents what in Christian theology is the much more dangerous sin of pride, in the form of artistic hubris, and that's the chief temptation that the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday* must resist."[41] This temptation does seem to abate for a time, since the flute of the "garden god" is "breathless" in Part IV. However, the figure's continued presence, even in the blessed garden where the Lady walks, suggests that the speaker's spiritual progress is still threatened by all that he embodies. It's important to note that it is immediately after the ordeal of the stairs that the speaker is given the challenging mandate to "Redeem the time" (*CPP* 94), reflecting Eliot's understanding of how he should channel his artistic

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tries to rival God as Pan tries to rival Apollo: "A demonic fall, as Milton presents it, involves defiance of and rivalry with God rather than simple disobedience . . ." (Frye *Words* 272-73). Frye explains that Romantic poets identified with figures like Milton's Satan "on the ground that the moral conformity demanded by the sky-god deprives humanity of its essential creative energies" (*Words* 283). In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake claims, "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devils party without knowing it"-- meaning that Milton's Satan embodies the boldness and unrestrained life-force denied to the angels but essential to the poet. Bloom adopts a similar attitude and states in *The Anxiety of Influence* that Milton's Satan is the "archetype of the modern poet at his strongest" (19).

[41] The broadbacked figure may be significant to the penitent for another reason as well. While the flaying of Marsyas may serve only "as a warning of the bitter intimacies and necessary vengeances between God and the poet" (Steiner 38), it can also be interpreted as an act of purification. Edgar Wind states that in Western literature flaying was often figuratively viewed as "a tragic ordeal of purification by which the ugliness of the outward man was thrown off and the beauty of his inward self revealed" (qted. in Reynolds 204). In *Purgatorio*, for example, when Dante and company are distracted by Casella's singing, Cato exclaims, "What negligence, what dawdling is there here? / Run to the mountain and strip the outer skin. Which stops God being manifest to you" (2.121-23). Also, Dante references Marsyas explicitly in the invocation to Apollo that opens *Paradiso*: "Come into my heart, and so breathe / As you did when you extracted Marsyas / From the skin in which his limbs were enclosed" (1.19-21). So flaying can point to purification *and* to divine inspiration, both of which the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday* seeks.

powers in order to exercise a positive spiritual influence rather than allowing them to compromise his quest for salvation.

Resisting the Impulse to Preach: "New Year Letter" and Beyond

While *Ash-Wednesday* suggests that Eliot, at least in this transitional period, was unsure of his ability to resist the lures of irresponsible aestheticism, "New Year Letter" reveals that Auden was concerned that he would fall to the other extreme and allow his poetry to degenerate into propaganda. In the note to a passage that condemns those who do not use their free will "To serve, enlighten, and enrich / The total creation . . ." (*DM* 61), Auden again quotes a Virgilian discourse on love from *Purgatorio*:

> "Nor Creator nor creature, my son, was ever without love, either natural or rational; and this thou knowest. The natural is always without error; but the other may err through an evil object, or through too little or too much vigour. . . . Hence thou mayst understand that love must be the seed of every virtue in you, and of every deed that deserves punishment." (qted. in *DM* 141)

The love that inspires Auden to use his free will "To serve, enlighten, and enrich / The total creation," while certainly not objectionable from a Christian point of view, may lead him astray nevertheless. His desire to improve society and alleviate suffering, to build "the Just City" (*DM* 65), can cause him to commit the artistic sin of writing propagandistic poetry for noble causes. The "follies" of his political period made him acutely aware of the danger of abusing poetry in this way, but they also showed him just how vulnerable he was to such a temptation. Moreover, he seemed to have much more confidence in Christianity than he ever had in Socialism in regards to its ability to solve many individual and societal problems, so he would have been even more tempted to

extol its necessity in his work. A writer may prostitute his talent for money, but Auden admits "the integrity of a writer is more threatened by appeals to his social conscience, his political or religious convictions, than by appeals to his cupidity. It is morally less confusing to be goosed by a traveling salesman than by a bishop" (*DH* 19). In his case, he didn't even need the prodding of a bishop-- his own desire to do good was enough to threaten his artistic integrity.

While in *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot draws upon elements from Dante's *Purgatorio* to dramatize the speaker's ordeal on the saints' stair, Auden invokes Dante to portray a very different kind of trial, one which demonstrates his anxiety that he will allow instrumental concerns to overshadow aesthetic ones. In "New Year Letter," Auden stands before the "summary tribunal" which he says all poets must face, and Dante, Blake and Rimbaud are his judges (*DM* 19). McDiarmid states that these judges, as well as the witnesses such as Baudelaire, "are chosen because of the way they perceived values beyond those of literature" (*Apologies* 79). According to Auden, they are able to express their convictions in a profound way without compromising their poetry or placing an excessive importance on art. Reading his work before "that quiet attentive crowd," Auden describes himself as one of those who "Stammer, sit down and hang his head" (*DM* 20). Although there is an element of playfulness to this display of shamefacedness, the passage nevertheless reveals his real concern over the uses to which he has put his own poetry. As he confesses, he cannot help faltering before these judges,

> For 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 . . . (*DM* 22)[42]

Certainly, in "New Year Letter" itself Auden may be said to relapse into his crimes since, despite his own warnings, he takes it upon himself to lecture at length upon the spiritual and political ills of society. At times, he might even seem to employ "the purpler kind of diction" which colored some of his political poetry and which, he claims, the devil uses to manipulate people:

. . . none appreciate as he

Polysyllabic oratory.

All vague idealistic art

That coddles the uneasy heart

Is up his alley . . . (*DM* 34)

Didacticism is acceptable-- after all, Dante is one of those "Great masters" who "challenge, warn and witness" (*DM* 18-19)-- but Auden cannot allow himself to abuse "Polysyllabic oratory" or become a "demagogue who raves" (*DM* 48), even in the name of Christianity.

Since even "New Year Letter," which shows such an awareness of the danger of using poetry as only a rhetorical platform, "retains something of 'the preacher's loose dishonest tone' [sic] that Auden renounced at the start" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 123), it should not be surprising that other works of his transitional period can seem preachy as well. For example, in the "Epilogue" to *The Double Man*, he bluntly states, "The waste is

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[42] Hecht makes the interesting observation that the three judges "have in common the fact that they are 'experts' on Hell. Dante's credentials are well enough known; Blake wrote 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,' while Rimbaud wrote *Une Saison en Enfer*" (*Hidden Law* 219). If Auden were conscious of this connection, he may have exploited it to give the proceedings a weightier feel, as though these kinds of offenses warrant artistic damnation, as it were.

a suburb of prophets, / But few have seen Jesus and so many / Judas the Abyss" (*DM* 188-89).[43] In fact, when he finally "began going in a tentative and experimental way to church . . . there was little that was tentative or experimental about the display of theology and dogma in his poems" and even his "love poems tended to preach" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 148, 153). As Spears explains, "These are the years when Auden was most vulnerable, for he conducted much of his religious education and spiritual exploration in public . . . even to the extent of writing poems containing passages closely parallel to his reviews or his essays . . . and for these he has been sufficiently criticized" (*Auden* 179). For example, Auden states in his review of Niebuhr's *Christianity and Power Politics*, "Recent history is showing, I think . . . that man cannot live without a sense of the Unconditional"-- a term Williams frequently used for God-- but must "consciously walk in the fear of the Lord" (*Prose II* 109). In "Christmas 1940," one of his "pious pieces" (Beach 22), he echoes this review when he writes:

> We are reduced to our true nakedness:
>
> Either we serve the Unconditional.
>
> Or some Hitlerian monster will supply
>
> An iron convention to do evil by. (*CP* [1945] 120)

So in "Christmas 1940," Auden's beliefs are clearly *not* transmuted, or turned into art, but rather "bolted whole and never assimilated" as in Shelley's poetry (Eliot *UPUC* 92).[44] Although Auden generally wrote in a more accessible style following his conversion, sometimes his desire to grapple with theology in verse led him to write poems that could

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[43] Kirsch points out that this is the first time that Jesus is named in Auden's poetry (37).

[44] Mendelson even suggests that part of the reason for Auden's acute dislike of Shelley stems from his recognition that he is liable to fall into the same kinds of errors (*Early Auden* 201), as shown in the manner in which he wields his philosophy in poems like "Christmas 1940."

only be well understood by those readers already acquainted with the theological texts informing them. In "Kairos and Logos," for example, which Mendelson calls one of his "extended sermons in verse," Auden again borrows from Tillich's *The Interpretation of History*, but unlike the passage cited in the notes to "New Year Letter," here he takes from "the murkiest chapters . . . in which Tillich abandoned the issue of social justice for theological paradoxes about the ultimate identity of the eternal and the daemonic, of freedom and fate" (*Later Auden* 161). "Kairos and Logos" is not criticized to the same extend as "Christmas 1940," but its philosophy may also be considered untransmuted because the poem is difficult to understand outside the context of Tillich's study-- its autonomy is too compromised (Bahlke 28).[45] As well as declaiming to society at large in poems like "New Year Letter," Auden is also prone at times during this period to preach "pious religious . . . sermons to the faithful" (*Prose II* 87), those who already share his beliefs, much as he addressed the like-minded during his political period. In the "Note" to the prose piece "Depravity: A Sermon," Auden even states, "*I can only hope that this piece will seem meaningless to those who are not professing Christians . . .*" (*CP* [1945] 242). The "Sermon" describes the war in heaven and the subsequent fall of man when the defeated angels, "[i]mpotent to attack Him directly, sought to strike at God, through His creatures, to wound where it was most tender, His artist's love" (*CP* [1945] 245). Auden expresses the hope that when Christians, his designated audience, approach the

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[45] Even "Christmas 1940," so blunt in some respects, can seem exclusionary in a similar way, since its closing lines are "a labored metaphysical attempt to reconcile faith and works through paradoxes comprehensible only to readers who can spot arcane illusions to Kierkegaard" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 162):

> . . . neither depth nor height
> Nor any other creature can prevent
> Our reasonable and lively motions in
> This modern void where only Love has weight,
> And Fate by Faith is freely understood,
> And he who works shall find Fatherhood. (*CP* [1945] 121)

work they will remember that "*it is precisely in their religious life that the worst effects of the Fall are manifested . . .*" (*CP* [1945] 242). So, at least in this instance, the inaccessibility is deliberate. In such works, Auden seems to sacrifice aesthetic quality in order to expound his new beliefs.

His turn to Christianity also influenced his treatment of his earlier works. Auden may have claimed, "Just as a good man forgets his deed the moment he has done it, a genuine writer forgets a work as soon as he has completed it and starts to think about the next one" (*DH* 14), but that describes the process of a writer like Eliot better than his own. Auden continually revised or rejected poems when compiling new editions of his work, sometimes initially only changing or dropping a few lines or stanzas of a poem before finally deeming it unsalvageable, as was the case with "September 1, 1939." So although he accepted Valéry's dictum, "A poem is never finished, only abandoned," he added, "It must not be abandoned too soon" (qted. in Carpenter 330). In his Preface to 1966's *Collected Shorter Poems* (reprinted in the *Collected Poems*), Auden suggests that his revisions were made solely to improve the manner in which a poem's philosophy is conveyed, not to change the philosophy itself:

> Critics, I have observed, are apt to find revisions ideologically significant. . . .I can only say that I have never, consciously at any rate, attempted to revise my former thoughts or feelings, only the language in which they were first expressed when, on further consideration, it seemed to me inaccurate, lifeless, prolix or painful to the ear. (*CP* xxvi)

Following his conversion, Auden did revise some of his earlier works to reflect his change in beliefs, however, making them in essence *more* Christian. For example,

Carpenter states, "He altered the conclusion of the Commentary to his Chinese sonnets, which had formerly been humanist in tone, so that it now had a specifically Christian stamp . . ." (330). The 1938 version of the "Commentary" to "In Time of War," from the travelogue about China written with Isherwood, *Journey to a War*, ends with the "voice of Man" praying:

> *Clear from the head the masses of impressing rubbish;*
> *Rally the lost and trembling forces of the will,*
> *Gather them up and let them loose upon the earth,*
>
> *Till they construct at last a human justice,*
> *The contribution of our star, within the shadow*
> *Of which uplifting, loving, and constraining power*
> *All other reasons may rejoice and operate.* (*EA* 269-70)

As he revised the poem for the 1945 *Collected Poems*, he changed this last stanza in a way that seems to identify God with justice:

> *. . . as the contribution of our star, we follow*
> *The clear instructions of that Justice, in the shadow*
> *Of Whose uplifting, loving, and constraining power*
> *All human reasons do rejoice and operate.* (347)

By replacing "*human justice*" with this capitalized "*Justice*," Auden suggests that we cannot make "the contribution of our star" without the help of God, reflecting the theology he developed under the influence of Niebuhr and Tillich. "Depravity: A Sermon" was another revised work that reflected his Christianity. Before it appeared in

the *Collected Poetry* of 1945, it was delivered by the Vicar in *The Dog Beneath the Skin* in 1935.[46] In *The Making of the Auden Canon*, Joseph Warren Beach states that in the play it was "a satirical parody of ecclesiastical eloquence" and "a sneering Voltairean exposé of clerical hypocrisy," but in the "canonical volume" is "presented as a profound and edifying exposition of religious truth" (11): "What an ordinary reader cannot understand . . . is how the same elaborate prose discourse of some 1500 words can be, in 1935, a hilarious burlesque of ecclesiastical rhetoric, hypocrisy, and time-serving, and in 1945 a sober exposition of spiritual truth" (178). Beach's befuddlement arises from his misunderstanding of Auden's intentions, however. Auden never meant it as a "sober exposition of spiritual truth"-- quite the opposite. The prose piece is transformed in a way that reflects his new beliefs, however, specifically by the addition of the aforementioned "Note." Auden does not appropriate the Vicar's voice as his own, but rather uses the theatricality of the sermon to illustrate exactly how "*the worst effects of the Fall are manifested*" in one's "*religious life*" by showing the manner in which the speaker of the sermon succumbs to one of the main dangers facing Christians: "*the constant tendency of the spiritual life to degenerate into an aesthetic performance . . .*" (*CP* [1945] 24). Though the speaker expresses some of Auden's own views, his histrionic style is presented as suspect. Therefore the sermon's position in *The Dog Beneath the Skin* reinforces rather than undermines its thrust here, and Auden may even have hoped his audience would recall the overwrought state of the Vicar by the end of his speech, when "tears pour down his cheeks, saliva runs from his mouth: He has worked himself up into an hysterical frenzy" (*Plays* 575). There is an important distinction

[46] It was originally published as "Sermon by an Armament Manufacturer" in 1933 before Auden incorporated it into the play.

between the way in which the sermon operates in *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and in its later incarnation, however. In the Vicar's sermon, and the play as a whole, Auden ridicules the clergy, but he hopes that when Christians read "Depravity: A Sermon," they "*will not misinterpret it as simple anticlericalism which always implies a flattery of the laity*" (*CP* [1945] 242). In accordance with his new conviction that all are guilty, he now uses the sermon to show the tendency of everyone, clergy and laity, to allow their "*spiritual life to degenerate into an aesthetic performance.*" So Auden managed to express his new beliefs by contextualizing the original prose piece with the "Note," in which he delivers his own small sermon.

Therefore in a number of Auden's transitional works, "the reader constantly feels the heavy pressure of his disposition to teach and admonish" (Beach 28). However, he ultimately rejected strident works such as "Christmas 1940," "Kairos and Logos," and "Depravity: A Sermon," testifying to his determination to resist using "the preacher's loose immodest tone."[47] Auden might not be able to curb his propensity to preach, but he can correct his tendency to "misuse" literature in this way by continually reevaluating his work. Moreover, after the missteps of his political period, he is particularly wary of pontificating in his religious poetry. In fact, he discarded "more lines of verse from his religious poems than he did from his political ones" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 62). He likely rejected some of these religious works not only because they placed too much emphasis on his beliefs, but also because their preachiness gave the impression that he was more certain of these beliefs than he actually was, which was also a main reason why

[47] Towards the end of his life, Auden did reinstate "Kairos and Logos" in his *Collected Poetry*, however. Mendelson suggests, and probably correctly, that he salvaged it only for the "rough strengths" of the two inner stanzas, which are less preachy than the two "booming, idealizing, and mostly empty" outer stanzas (*Later Auden* 168).

he condemned many of his political poems. In the 1966 Preface to the *Collected Shorter Poems*, he claimed not to revise poems because of their ideology-- although he did occasionally, as in the "Commentary" to "In Time of War"-- but he did admit to rejecting poems that struck him as "dishonest": "A dishonest poem is one which expresses, no matter how well, feelings or beliefs which its author never felt or entertained" (*CP* xxv).[48] While he retained many of his earlier poems that embodied philosophies to which he could no longer subscribe, he rejected those poems that embodied philosophies to which he claimed he had never subscribed. In such cases, the Ariel element of a poem cannot excuse the false Prospero, since, according to Auden, ". . . abhorred in the Heav'ns are all self-proclaimed poets, who to wow an / audience, utter some resonant lie" (*CP* 811). So his decision to reject such works is part of his new emphasis on sincerity, and shows that he now demanded sincerity from all of his poems, early and late. He came to believe that the poet has an "obligation to speak no more and no less than the truth," but "each poet, according to his nature and the time in which he lives, has his own kind of temptation to lie" (*CR* 259). Auden himself is like Graves, who is especially tempted because of his "natural faculty for writing verse. Ask him to improvise a poem on any subject, and in ten minutes he can turn out something competent and mellifluous. This is a very valuable

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[48] As an example, he quotes from "Spain 1937" in which he 'shamefully" wrote: "History to the defeated / May say alas but cannot help nor pardon" (*CP* xxvi). According to Auden, "To say this is to equate goodness with success. It would have been bad enough if I had ever held this wicked doctrine, but that I should have stated it simply because it sounded to me rhetorically effective is quite inexcusable" (*CP* xxvi). Interestingly, Trotter contends, Eliot poses an "oblique rejoinder" to this notion of guilty victims "in the third section of 'Little Gidding'; he had after all seen *Another Time* through the press. Eliot suggested that if History cannot help or pardon the defeated, we can,

> Whatever we inherit from the fortunate
> We have taken from the defeated
> What they had to leave us-- a symbol:
> A symbol perfected in death. (*CPP* 123)

According to Trotter, Eliot "at least tried to meet the force of Auden's argument" (123). Auden often demonstrably writes in response to Eliot, but if Trotter is correct, this passage would be an example-- though certainly not the only one-- of the older poet responding to the younger.

gift . . . but it is a dangerous one, for the poet who possesses it can all too easily forsake the truth for verbal display" (*CR* 259).[49] While he did espouse Christianity-- as opposed to merely employing it as a useful subject for poetry-- his commitment and certainty over his faith were not always as steadfast as some of the poems he wrote during this period suggest. Mendelson implies that there is a degree of impersonation in a poem like "Christmas 1940":

> In 1932, while thinking in a tentative, experimental way about Communism, Auden had written a hectoring poem, 'Comrades, who when the sirens roar,' in the style he imagined a Communist might use. In 'Christmas 1940,' he wrote in the style he imagined might be used by a Christian. (*Later Auden* 162)

It may be argued that such poems succumb to the pious insincerity so feared by Eliot, since Auden wrote in the way he thought he should, rather than expressing the complexity of his own response to Christianity. He was increasingly wary of this kind of dishonesty, however, and after 1942, "never wrote a poem that he disowned after publication" (Mendelson *CP* xviii). One might assume that this change can be attributed to a certain relaxation of standards except that he continued to reject earlier works that dissatisfied him. More likely his devotion to sincerity made him more stringent during the writing process, at least in this respect, and ensured that he really believed what he was writing was "true" (*CP* 649).

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[49] Isherwood speaks of Auden's own "natural faculty for writing verse": "Auden is, and always has been, a most prolific writer. Problems of form and technique seem to bother him very little. You could say to him: 'Please write me a double ballade on the virtues of a certain brand of toothpaste, which also contains at least ten anagrams of the names of well-known politicians, and of which the refrain is as follows. . . .' Within twenty-four hours, your ballade would be ready-- and it would be good" ("Some Notes" 75). Therefore, like Graves, Auden must guard against exploiting his abundant gifts in the service of beliefs which he does not hold.

In spite of its moments of pontification and the fact that it was written before he even considered himself fully committed to Christianity, "New Year Letter" in general avoids the pious insincerity that seems to haunt some of his other transitional works because within the poem Auden admits to struggles with faith and shows less confidence in his prescriptions for the amelioration of society than in a work like "Christmas 1940." For example, he states that we must proceed with "Our faith well balanced by our doubt / Admitting every step we make / Will certainly be a mistake" (*DM* 47). The implication that his own emerging faith is tempered by doubt is reinforced by the note in the passage, which quotes from Pascal's *Pensées*: "Nier, croire, et douter bien, son à l'homme ce que le courir est au cheval" (*DM* 120)-- "To deny, to believe, and to doubt well, is to the man what the race is to the horse." Also, unlike those poems he ended up rejecting, in "New Year Letter" he undercuts some of his grander proclamations. He may claim "true democracy begins / With free confession of our sins," but concedes that there is little hope for this "true democracy" since "Democracy" is now "a ready-made / And noisy tradesman's slogan" usually only used to manipulate the masses (*DM* 68).

Eliot similarly exerted himself to evade charges of pious insincerity, in *Ash-Wednesday* and the Ariels. Like the growing soul in "Animula" who is "Unable to fare forward or retreat" (26), the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday* is one of those "children at the gate / Who will not go away and cannot pray" because they are "terrified and cannot surrender" (*CPP* 96). In fact, he must ask if "the veiled sister" will pray for those like him who "affirm before the world and deny between the rocks" (*CPP* 97). Eliot had been affirming in essays like "Thoughts after Lambeth," proclaiming the need to evangelize the world, but in his poetry-- which "can only deal with actuality" (*ASG* 30)-- he must

admit that he, like Auden, still contends with doubt and questions his ability to effect this kind of change. So, as Schneider states, in this passage Eliot "is deliberately confessing that his public avowals are not or not yet entirely matched by private conviction" (123). Eliot's implication that he "affirm[s] before the world and den[ies] between the rock" also shows his "fear of duplicity, of false humility, of appearing to deny the world in ways he can't bring himself to" (Donoghue *Words Alone* 152). Therefore, this admission of weakness and uncertainty can be viewed as an attempt to forestall the charge of pious insincerity and to prevent the work from being ghettoized as devotional poetry, "a variety of *minor* poetry" (*SE* 390). Similarly, the nearly relentless focus on the darker aspects of religious experience in the Ariels can be seen as part of his efforts to acknowledge his own doubts and avoid seeming insincere, an attempt which was for the most part successful. For instance, Germer states that in the Ariel poems "no 'pious insincerity' is involved. Eliot writes as he feels, not as he would like to feel. These poems have that 'peculiar honesty which, in a world too frightened to be honest, is peculiarly terrifying,' as Eliot put it in his essay on William Blake" (24). Lord David Cecil, who had complained of the falsity of most religious verse, states that Eliot's "Christianity is superficially a little rigid and joyless," but praises him for being "so courageous to confront the dark elements in experience (xxxiii). Eliot's emphasis on the negative aspects of conversion in these poems might seem to do a disservice to Christianity. After all, for the most part, they don't make such a radical change sound very appealing. It is important to note, however, that despite the painful upheavals some of the speakers suffer, they don't regret the experience. The Magus, for instance, recalls, "All this was a long time ago, I remember, / And I would do it again" (*CPP* 104). So, much as "New

Year Letter" directs readers to Christianity even while admitting to the difficulties and doubts which they will inevitably encounter en route, in Eliot's transitional poems, conversion is ultimately presented as an often agonizing but nevertheless necessary process.[50]

Even though both poets made a conscious effort to ensure that they sincerely expressed their beliefs, they nevertheless faced some criticism on this point. Ironically, although Auden rejected many of his poems because they struck him as insincere, critics routinely view his decision to delete these works as itself dishonest, as though he were trying "to purge or digest the heresies of his youth" (Ohmann 173). Mendelson, who remarks that "[m]ost of his revisions were improvements that no one noticed" (*Later Auden* 77), explains: "These revisions have been denounced almost unanimously by the critics and reviewers who mention them. But the nature of Auden's revisions make clear that, from Auden's perspective, his critics and reviewers were insisting on remaining deceived, while he insisted on undeceiving them" ("Revision and Power"109). Auden didn't want readers to be coddled by the vaguely uplifting but false sentiment of a poem like "September 1, 1939," but they were unsympathetic to his position. So these revisions undertaken for the sake of sincerity contributed to the perception of many critics that there was an "absence of what they sometimes call 'an underlying sincerity' in Auden's poetry," and that his "shift from atheistic liberalism to Christianity was not only facile, but that it has continued to vitiate his poetry" (Bahlke 22). Writing in 1970, Bahlke, like Mendelson, disagrees with this commonly held view-- asserting that

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[50] The Ariels might also help Eliot work on behalf of Christianity *because* of their dark element. Since he believed, "We have (whether we know it or not) a prejudice against beatitude as material for poetry" (*SE* 264)-- sincerely expressed or not-- he may have thought, on some level at least, that focusing on the hardships rather than the benefits of conversion would make his poetry appeal to more readers, and thus enable him to exercise more spiritual influence than if he had presented it in a positive light.

"Auden's reiterated allegiance to the Christian position . . . has the integrity which might be expected of the serious artist" (26)-- but discusses at some length those critics like Beach who do make such claims:

> Beach's conviction that Auden's work . . . is in a basic sense 'dishonest,' reflects a more or less general distrust of the apparent rapidity with which Auden changed from the workman's cap of the thirties to the 'lunatic' clergyman's panama, from a social, in part Marxian orientation, to a Christian existential outlook in the poetry following the publication of 'September 1, 1939.' (23)

Beach is frequently criticized for his overly harsh treatment of Auden in *The Making of the Auden Canon*, but many other critics also question Auden's sincerity because he made such a radical break with his political past and seemed to adopt Christianity so quickly in his work. As if anticipating such a reaction, Auden wrote in the notes to "New Year Letter":

> With what conviction the young man spoke
> When he thought his nonsense rather a joke;
> Now, when he doesn't doubt any more,
> No-one believes the booming old bore. (*DM* 122)

It's not quite true that Auden did not "doubt" anymore, as "New Year Letter" itself attests, but many readers did wonder if his emerging faith was genuine.

Although Eliot's transitional poetry struck many readers as patently sincere, there were some dissenters. For example, in a discussion of *Ash-Wednesday*, Edmund Wilson claimed: "We feel in contemporary writers like Eliot a desire to believe in religious revelation, a belief that it would be a good thing to believe, rather than a genuine

belief. . . .His moral principles seem to me stronger and more authentic than his religious mysticism-- and his relation to the Anglo-Catholic Church appears largely artificial" (*Axel's Castle* 126-7).[51] To such a critic, Eliot's admission of his spiritual struggles and reluctance to commit himself fully to the religious life may itself seem calculated, as though to give a veneer of sincerity. The rapid and dramatic way in which Christianity asserted itself in the works of both poets after their conversions makes it an extraordinarily interesting period to study, but no doubt also is responsible for the reluctance of many critics to believe that they were truly transformed men. Moreover, although in *Ash-Wednesday* Eliot, as part of his quest for sincerity, takes pains to portray a convert who is *not* "devoted, concentrated in purpose" (*CPP* 91) but rather "torn on the horn between season and season, time and time, between / Hour and hour, word and word, power and power" (*CPP* 96), his poem was still regarded by some as narrowly devotional. As Schuchard relates, he was exasperated with some of the "critical responses to the poem, writing to his friend and confessor William Force Stead: 'Some damned fool of a Cambridge paper referred to it as devotional poetry, which rather missed the point'" (*Dark Angel* 150). It would not occur to some readers to draw a distinction between devotional poetry and the sort of poetry Eliot and Auden aimed to write-- works profoundly informed by their beliefs which nevertheless transcend the traditional limitations of religious verse and allow them to treat a variety of subjects in a religious spirit, acknowledging the vicissitudes of their emotional response. For such readers, *any* poetry informed by Christianity is by definition "devotional," an increasingly common perception among secular readers-- illustrating another of the

[51] Edmund Wilson is also one of the critics who lamented Auden's revisions. Writing in 1956 of the 1945 *Collected Poetry*, he complained that "the poems that seemed to herald the British revolution-- including some very good ones-- have for the most part been pitilessly scrapped" ("Auden" 58).

barriers which Eliot and Auden faced as they tried to create a new kind of modern religious poetry.

After this transitional period, Eliot and Auden tended to seem more comfortable in their positions as Christian poets. The crisis over defining their new responsibilities had abated. In their major postconversion poems, they betray unease over the nature of language itself, but for the most part they don't exhibit the same intense anxiety regarding the purposes to which they put their poetry. As they begin to feel more settled in their roles and grounded in their faith, they felt confident enough to turn their attention in a more sustained way to certain aspects of their theology, particularly the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Chapter Three

In the Shadow of the Logos: the Incarnation in the Major Post-Conversion Poems

The Gospel of John describes the Incarnation of Christ as the embodiment of "the Word" that "was with God and . . . was God": ". . . the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we behind his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth" (1:1,14). In this Johannine identification of Christ with "the Word," we see an intersection of two essential concerns in the work of Eliot and Auden: the theological and historical significance of the Incarnation and the status of language in relation to the divine revelation embodied by Christ. Even for Christian poets, Eliot and Auden focused upon the Incarnation with unusual frequency and intensity, and it occupied much more of their attention than other aspects of Christian theology, such as the study of Christ's teachings or of ecclesiastical history. Discussing Auden's review of her husband's book, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Ursula Niebuhr relates, "Naturally what Wystan said was valuable to us, but even more interesting was what he found important. The book was a critique of secular and theological theories of human nature and history. Wystan however paid particular attention to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation" (108). In this review, "The Means of Grace" (1941), Auden declares, "The significance of the Incarnation is twofold. In the first place it asserts that at an actual moment in historical time, the Word was actually made Flesh, the possibility of the union of the finite with the infinite made a fact" (*Prose II* 133), which is what is traditionally meant when one refers to the Incarnation. "The second and," in some respects, "more important significance of the Incarnation is as an answer to the problem, not of the

'finiteness of man but of his sin,'" to quote Niebuhr, and addresses the question of "'how sinful man is to be reconciled to God'" (*Prose II* 133). So although Fuller claims that Auden "evidently . . . found the Incarnation a more intellectually entertaining proposition than the Atonement" (355), this passage demonstrates that he in fact subsumes the doctrine of the Atonement *under* the Incarnation. In *Poetry and Belief in the Work of T. S. Eliot*, Smidt similarly states that Eliot placed more "emphasis on the doctrine of the Incarnation" than on "the Atonement": "As far as Eliot is concerned there is, of course, no exclusion of the Atonement, either from his beliefs or from his poetry. . . .But it is true that the Incarnation seems to mean much more to him" (205). Christ's ontology was of particular interest to both Eliot and Auden, but in their treatment of the Incarnation they emphasized the connection between the Nativity and the Crucifixion, the beginning and the end of Christ's life on earth, more than these critics would lead one to believe. In fact, they conceived of the Incarnation in a very broad way and related it to all the key aspects of their postconversion thought. This mutual preoccupation is reflected in their transitional poetry, but their views on the doctrine of the Incarnation and its ramifications are most fully developed in their major postconversion poems, particularly Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1942) and Auden's *For the Time Being* (1942), *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944), and *Horae Canonicae* (1954).

McDiarmid claims that Eliot and Auden "'betrayed' the intellectual" in those works that make "tentative, quasi-activist judgments and proposals," but that "the great poems," such as *Four Quartets* and *For the Time Being*, "form a response to the more *engagé* moments of the essays, speeches and minor poems, and recant their 'treason'"

(*Saving Civilization* 91-92, xv).[1] These "great poems" do tend to be less blunt in their prescriptions for the amelioration of society and the individual than the transitional poetry, but they do not represent the retreat from engagement that McDiarmid suggests. Eliot and Auden continued to employ their religious beliefs in a manner which they hoped would allow them to exert a degree of spiritual influence. These poems at times present their beliefs less directly than the comparatively straightforward transitional poetry, but they nevertheless manage to convey the poets' religious views forcefully and in fact capture more of the subtleties of their theology. Also, as these later poems reveal, the poets' theology itself grew more nuanced as they spent more time contemplating the world through the prism of their faith. Rather than focusing so intently upon their own conversion experiences, they began to apply their religious understanding, and particularly their views on the Incarnation, more assiduously to subjects of interest to Christians and non-Christians alike, such as the nature of time and the shape of history. Whereas their transitional poetry highlights a number of the differences between them, their major postconversion poetry emphasizes many of their commonalities, since their positions on the Incarnation and its consequences-- featured so heavily in these works-- were remarkably similar, in part because of Eliot's influence on Auden. Of course, they were not in complete sympathy. Auden, for instance, regarded certain facets of the Incarnation from an existential perspective, but even when he diverges from Eliot, the older poet's presence is still palpable because Auden is so clearly reacting against him.

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[1] McDiarmid takes this idea of literary "treason" from Julien Benda, and uses a passage from his *The Treason of the Intellectual* as an epigraph to her chapter, "The Treason of the Clerks": "The modern 'clerk' is determined to have the soul of a citizen and to make vigorous use of it; he is proud of that soul; his literature is filled with his contempt for the man who shuts himself up with art or science and takes no interest in the passions of the State . . . Today the 'clerk' has made himself Minister of War" (qted. in *Saving Civilization* 91).

In other respects, however, they grew ideologically closer, since Eliot came under the influence of certain religious thinkers who had helped to form Auden's theological perspective. Consequently, like Auden, Eliot began to place more emphasis on the affirmative way and on grace, which dramatically affected his views on sin and specifically the Crucifixion. Even though there are fewer overt exhortations than in the transitional poetry, these various aspects of their theology are presented in their major postconversion poems more deliberately and unambiguously than McDiarmid implies.[2] Moreover, both poets take pains to emphasize the relevance of the Incarnation, in all its dimensions, to their readers, thereby implicitly promoting the relevance of their poetry as well, since it embodies these truths which, they contend, are of utmost importance to everyone.

Although their reiteration of the significance of the doctrine of the Incarnation in their poetry bespeaks a certain confidence in their ability to convey religious truth, their ruminations on the Incarnation ironically led them to doubt the power of their own words. Whereas in the transitional works, their anxiety is primarily focused on the manner in which they used their poetry-- the struggle between aesthetic and instrumental impulses-- in their major postconversion poems their anxiety stems from the limitations of language

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[2] In "Mimesis and Allegory" (1941), Auden states that the manner in which "art organizes attitudes . . . is not always obvious . . . because the works which we subject to analysis are usually very short. . . . [I]t is only when we approach a large work of art . . . that the problem of belief becomes acute" (*Prose II* 87). One may be able to evade the problem of belief in a short lyric but is unavoidably confronted with the philosophy informing long poems. With the exception of "Letter to Lord Byron" and "The Orators," Auden's long poems were written while he was converting to Christianity, "New Year Letter," or in the following decade, *For the Time Being*, *The Sea and the Mirror*, and *The Age of Anxiety* (1946). Thus, in these "four long poems that remain the astonishing heart of his work" (Gopnik 87), Auden's theology is embodied in a form which he thought forced readers to take belief seriously (*The Age of Anxiety* is primarily concerned with Jungian psychology, but it also has a theological dimension, particularly evident in its conclusion as Malin approaches Christian faith). His turn to long poems in the 1940s may have been motivated in part by a desire to experiment in a different genre, but his views on the correlation between a poem's length and the attention directed towards its beliefs strongly suggests that he also wanted readers to focus on his new theological views.

itself as compared to the Logos, the uncompromised embodiment of truth. Their unease over language is exacerbated precisely *because* they want to express to their readers the significance of the Incarnation, and it is in the realm of the numinous that the inadequacy of language becomes most pronounced. For this reason, the poets locate holiness in silence, but at the same time feel convicted by their own reliance on words to do so. In order to find a way out of this predicament, both poets, but especially Auden, increasingly resort to indirection, and exploit the inadequacy of their words to signify that which is beyond their words, the superior Logos.

According to Auden, "there has probably never been a time when it was more necessary for the layman to be theologically educated, to know what the dogmas of the Church are, and how they relate to his professional life" ("The Things that are Caesar's" [1950] 454). The first section of the chapter addresses Eliot's and Auden's understanding of these Church dogmas, specifically the doctrine of the Incarnation, and how they affect the modern world, and the second section discusses how their views on the Incarnation "relate to [their] professional life," an issue of utmost importance for the two writers.

Time and Timelessness

After moving to America, Auden became even more prolific, exclaiming, "I have never written nor read so much" (qted. in Hynes 36). This extreme productivity allowed him to develop very quickly as a Christian poet, so that although *For the Time Being* was written only two years after the transitional poems of *The Double Man*, it is "the fullest and most balanced expression of Auden's religious attitudes" (Spears *Auden* 206) and clearly reveals him "to be a fully committed Christian writer, theologically informed and alert to the nuances inherent in his newly adopted faith" (Lahey 426). In this nine-part

work, subtitled *A Christmas Oratorio*,[3] Auden conveys these beliefs by elaborating upon the Gospel accounts of the Nativity, much as Eliot had done in "Journey of the Magi" and "A Song for Simeon." Eliot's theology, embodied by the Ariel poems and *Ash-Wednesday*, evolved as well, as *Four Quartets* demonstrates. He regarded this sequence as his best work and felt that the individual quartets, "Burnt Norton" (1936), "East Coker" (1940), "The Dry Salvages" (1941), and "Little Gidding" (1942), "get better as they go on. The second is better than the first, the third is better than the second and the fourth is the best of all" (*Writers at Work* 105). Although not all critics would agree with his valuation, at least with the place it affords "The Dry Salvages,"[4] *Four Quartets* is acknowledged as Eliot's most important postconversion poem. Together, these two works make great strides in Auden's and Eliot's quest to rejuvenate Christian poetry by showing the continuing relevance of the Incarnation to a secular world. In a discussion

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[3]As this subtitle indicates, Auden originally intended *For the Time Being* to be set to music, and he submitted it to Benjamin Britten for this purpose. Hecht relates, "Britten, who had relocated to England, was apparently himself surprised upon receiving the text, and his friendship with Auden was greatly strained and tested by his ultimate refusal to undertake the project . . ." (*Hidden Law* 242). Mendelson claims that Britten may have been reluctant to collaborate because of some well-intentioned criticism Auden levied against his personal life, including, Britten thought, his relationship with Peter Pears. Britten did later set "Song for St. Celicia's Day" and two fragments of *For the Time Being* to music, but "he never asked Auden to write for him again . . . and repeatedly snubbed Auden's later attempts to resume their friendship" (*Later Auden* 199). At any rate, *For the Time Being* was much too long and intricate a text to serve as a libretto for an oratorio, and Auden didn't acquiesce to Britten's initial requests for cuts (Callan *Carnival* 184). An abridged version was eventually set by Martin Levy and performed at Carnegie Hall in 1959 (Fuller 347), but the work is better regarded as a long poem than a failed oratorio. Though *For the Time Being*, *The Sea and the Mirror*, and *The Age of Anxiety* all have dramatic elements, they can only be considered closet dramas at best, and for this reason aren't included in my discussion of works for the stage in Chapter Four.

[4]In a well-known essay, "T. S. Eliot: The End of an Era" (1956), Donald Davie lambasted "The Dry Salvages," claiming that it has "a tone which has indeed become a byword as a type of strident uncertainty in the speaker and of correspondingly acute embarrassment in the hearer," akin to that found in certain poems by Whitman (186). Davie even thought that he may have written it poorly on purpose-- Eliot had once claimed that in poetry, "Dissonance, even cacophony, has its place" (*OPP* 33)-- but Gardner argues that Eliot's opinion, expressed more than once, ""that 'The Dry Salvages' improves on its predecessors explodes" this theory (*Four Quartets* 4). Even those scholars who do view *Four Quartets* as a high achievement tend to describe "The Dry Salvages" quite rightfully as philosophically important to the work as a whole but less successful poetically than the other quartets. Many critics would also object to Eliot's appraisal of *Four Quartets* above *The Waste Land*, which might strike them as the wishful thinking of an aging poet not able to accept a decline in his powers. Regardless, no one disputes that *Four Quartets* is the major poem of Eliot's later career.

about "Preaching to the Non-Believer," Auden maintained that one of the few things a Christian can argue about with a non-Christian is "that Jesus existed" (*FA* 179). In these poems, Eliot and Auden assert just that.

The significance they accord to the Incarnation is most apparent in their treatment of time and history. In his illuminating discussion of *For the Time Being*, Hecht declares, "[W]e cannot address ourselves to a major modern religious poem without taking into account the presence and influence of T. S. Eliot. . . .It would have been virtually impossible to write a religious poem in English as though this monumental undertaking of Eliot's were not going on" (*Hidden Law* 247). Mendelson even suggests that there are "echoes of Eliot's *Four Quartets*" in some passages of *For the Time Being* which "seem to be Auden's disguised means of praising himself for joining Eliot in Christian belief" (*Later Auden* 213). Eliot's influence is clearly detectable in one of the "matters that figures so obsessively both in Eliot's quartets and in Auden's poem"-- time:

> Time, and the illusion of Time, figure as topics in a great deal of religious poetry. They have a bearing on our very notions of history; and it is a Christian commonplace that the miracle of Christ's birth, ministry, death, and resurrection, and the salvation it brought, all took place in historical time. . . .Time, its fusions and confusions, has been incorporated into Christian faith almost as one of its mysteries. (*Hidden Law* 248-9)

Mendelson points out that around the time of his conversion, "Auden had stopped writing poems about places, and turned his attention instead to time," as many of his titles, like "New Year Letter" and *For the Time Being*, indicate (*EA* xx). Eliot also began to focus more of his attention on time following his conversion, and was even considering using

this quotation from Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers* as an epigraph to the quartets: "What a rum thing time is, ain't it, Neddy?" (qted. in Gardner *Four Quartets* 28). The Christian conception of time evoked in both poems is rooted in the Incarnation, when "the Word was actually made Flesh, the possibility of the union of the finite with the infinite made a fact" (Auden *Prose II* 133). Eliot declares in "The Dry Salvages" that "to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint," but we may experience moments of illumination in which we better grasp the full meaning of "The hint half guessed, the gift half understood . . . Incarnation":

> Here the impossible union
>
> Of spheres of existence is actual,
>
> Here the past and future
>
> Are conquered and reconciled . . . (*CPP* 136)

Time itself, and our actions within time, are given significance, anchored by this intersection with the eternal God. Spears explains that the central theme of *For the Time Being* is also "the revelation of Time to Reality, of the entry of the Eternal into the world of Time as the center of history," a subject which Auden often explores "inevitably . . . in tones and images recalling its great modern master, Eliot," who had begun publishing the quartets in 1936 (*Auden* 207).[5] So both poets show that, while the Incarnation was "[a] moment in time," "time was made through that moment: for without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time gave the meaning" (Eliot *CPP* [*The Rock*] 160),

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[5]Spears, unlike most critics, considers *For the Time Being* Auden's "greatest single work" ("Poetic Justice" 482), but thinks it has been underappreciated precisely because it *does* bear so many similarities to Eliot's quartets: "Probably the fact that Eliot's *Four Quartets*, which embody many of the same themes . . . happened to appear shortly before it had much to do with the failure of the oratorio to impress the critics profoundly; comparison with Eliot's towering achievement is inevitable and the result is a foregone conclusion" (*Auden* 216-17).

or, as Auden more simply puts it, "By the event of this birth the true significance of all other events is defined" (*CP* 388).

As Eliot and Auden illustrate, this Christian conception of time was a radical departure from classical views. Eliot alludes to Heraclitus at various points in *Four Quartets*, beginning with the two fragments that serve as epigraph to "Burnt Norton," commonly translated as: "But although the Logos is common to all, the many live as though they had a private understanding" and "The way up and the way down are the same" (*CPP* 171). Heraclitus' perception of time as flux is implicitly contrasted to the Christian notion of time embodied in the quartets that follow. Morris Weitz explains in "T. S. Eliot: Time as a Mode of Salvation" that Eliot does borrow some elements of Heraclitus' philosophy but "transform[s] them into his own Christian philosophy" (174)-- as when he overlays Heraclitus' notion of Logos, a directive principle within the flux, with the Christian meaning of Logos-- and that contrary to the contention of some scholars, "Eliot's conception of time is . . . a repudiation of the Heraclitean with its insistence upon the ultimate character of time as flux" (174).[6] Eliot certainly acknowledges that there is an element of flux in our temporal experience, making attempts to impose a pattern futile because "the pattern is new in every moment / And every moment is new and shocking" (*CPP* 179). Despite this continual change, however, he repeatedly asserts that Christ is "At the still point of the turning world" (*CPP* 173), an axis "bisecting the world of time" (*CPP* 160), as he described it in *The Rock*, allowing for

[6] Eliot's references to Heraclitus and to certain Indian religious texts in *Four Quartets* marks a departure from his usual postconversion treatment of allusions, since he does place them in contexts which alter their original meaning in order to use them to explore Christian theology. When he alludes to Christian texts within the poem, however, their original meaning remains undistorted.

movement *and* stability. Because of this intervention, we may experience time not as flux but as kairos.[7]

Differences in classical and Christian conceptions of time are made explicit in *For the Time Being*. The Narrator, "whose voice and point of view shift . . . throughout the oratorio" (Hecht *Hidden Law* 253), initially articulates the typical classical view of time as cyclical. He speaks of such things as political instability, natural disasters and disease as "our familiar tribulations":

> And we have been through them all before, many, many times.
>
> As events which belong to the natural world where
>
> The occupation of space is the real and final fact
>
> And time turns round itself in an obedient circle,
>
> They occur again and again but only to pass
>
> Again and again into their formal opposites . . . (*CP* 351)

However, the Narrator realizes that with the Incarnation everything has changed. Of this "outrageous novelty," "We can only say that now It is there and that nothing / We learnt before It was there is now of the slightest use, / For nothing like It has happened before" (*CP* 352).[8] "[T]he world of space where events re-occur is still there, / Only now it's no longer real" (*CP* 352), and the real world ushered in by the birth of Christ is one in which

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[7] As Tillich explains, through the intervention of "the timeless Logos," time may be regarded as "all-decisive, not empty time, pure expiration: not the mere duration either, but rather qualitatively fulfilled time, the moment that is creation and fate. We call this fulfilled moment . . . *Kairos*" (129). Auden tried to convey this idea in "Kairos and Logos" but used such unremittingly dense theological language, derived from Tillich, that his views on time in the poem are not as clearly transmitted as they are in *For the Time Being*.

[8] Auden's discussion of the ancient world's view of time in "Balaam and His Ass" helps to explain the Narrator's difficulty in accepting the uniqueness of the Incarnation. Since the ancients believed that "all events recur," "there is no place for a notion of absolute novelty, of a unique event which occurs once and for all at a particular moment in time," especially because "[t]his latter notion cannot be derived from our objective experience of the outside world," marked by seasonal reoccurrence, for example (*DH* 140-1).

time advances and events matter.[9] Such a change might be thought to be advantageous, but the Narrator reacts with "melodramatic horror" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 188). Like Eliot's Gerontion, who declares, "In the juvenescence of the year / Came Christ the tiger," "Us he devours" (*CPP* 37-38), the Narrator sees the Incarnation as a thing of terror: "no nightmare / Of hostile objects could be as terrible as this Void. / This is the Abomination. This is the wrath of God" (*CP* 352).[10]

Although Herod in *For the Time Being* doesn't believe that God has actually taken the form of a man, even the rumor of the Incarnation is enough to torment him. Like the Narrator, he sees that such a story, if allowed to spread, would shake the foundation of his society, prompting him to complain, "O dear, Why couldn't this wretched infant be born somewhere else?" (*CP* 394). Herod doesn't subscribe to the Narrator's classical conception of time as cyclical, however. Rather, in this anachronistic

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[9]Although cyclical time has been made unreal, and only the Incarnation's "impossible union / Of spheres of existence is actual" ("Dry Salvages" *CPP* 190), people try to shield themselves from this reality, as the experience in the rose-garden of "Burnt Norton" demonstrates. Weitz explains, "Like the Christian 'Kairos,' the rose-garden symbolizes those moments that show, more than any others, the meeting of the Eternal and the temporal" (179). In this "timeless moment" within time, a drained pool is suddenly "filled with water out of sunlight, / And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly, / The surface glittered out of the heart of light" (*CPP* 172), and "Light" as *The Rock* tells us, is "The visible reminder of Invisible Light," the light of God (*CPP* 169). But then the vision passes as the speaker is told to "Go, go, go . . . human kind / Cannot bear very much reality" (*CPP* 172). In our ordinary existence, Eliot contends, the strain of living continuously with a conscious sense of this intersection of the finite with the infinite would be too great. This sentiment is repeated in *Murder in the Cathedral*, discarded fragments of which inspired "Burnt Norton," Thomas tells the Chorus that they will have a moment that "Shall pierce you with a sudden painful joy / When the figure of God's purpose is made complete" but it will only be a moment because "Human kind cannot bear much reality" (*CPP* 271). Incidentally, in his discussion of Williams's *Thomas Cranmer*, Auden references Eliot when he says that the *Figura Rerum* in Williams's play is "in a sense, the voice of the Holy Spirit, of the truth which forces upon our attention the reality which, as Eliot says, we cannot bear very much of . . ." (*SW* 29).

[10]The Narrator may shudder at "this Void," but to Auden the term had quite a positive connotation. It recalls "Tillich's notion of the 'sacred void,' the Christian's time of waiting" (Fuller 347), as well as suggesting the vastness and unfathomableness of God. Similarly, a related term, the "Abyss" may seem to have solely negative associations, as when the Chorus states, "The Pilgrim Way has led to the Abyss" (*CPP* 353), giving the impression that a search for God leads to destruction (and in "Christmas 1940", the "Abyss" is associated with Judas, not Christ [*DM* 188-89]). When the Chorus celebrates the birth with the Shepherds, however, it declares that the event shows "The Father Abyss / Is affectionate / To all its creatures" (*CPP* 379). "Abyss" is also used to illustrate the challenge posed by the Incarnation, as when Auden writes, "The bravest drew back on the brink of the Abyss," that is, from taking the leap of faith (*CPP* 387).

text, Auden turns Herod into a modern liberal humanist who takes a progressive view of history, much like Auden himself in the 1930s. Auden later rejected his belief in progress and adopted a position more like Eliot's,[11] once even remarking, "I have no idea what is going to happen before I die except that I am not going to like it" (*In Solitude* 136). Consequently, he satirizes Herod "with the mercilessness reserved for early opinions" (Corn 242), much to the annoyance of critics like Jarrell.[12] In the prose section, "The Massacre of the Innocents," Herod concedes that the province he governs is still largely benighted, but, thanks to his efforts, "Things are beginning to take shape": "Barges are unloading soil fertiliser at the river wharves. Soft drinks and sandwiches may be had in the inns at reasonable prices. . . .Yes, in twenty years I have managed to do a little" (*CP* 391). His self-satisfied tone is undercut by the ridiculousness of these tokens of so-called progress. Auden similarly exposes "the delusion inherent in such notional progress" (Fuller 350) in a later speech by the Narrator. Now speaking on Auden's behalf, as he does for the most part after his initial hysteria, the Narrator ironically intones:

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[11] In "Thoughts after Lambeth," for example, Eliot had repudiated the progressive view of history when he urged his fellow Christians to continue "redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us," which, he argued, will inevitably follow the modern world's doomed attempt "to form a civilized but non-Christian" society (*SE* 387).

[12] In "Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden's Ideology," Jarrell exclaims incredulously, "Herod-- hitherto represented by everybody as an . . . ogre, Freud's Father of the Primal Horde-- is presented in *For the Time Being* as the Humane, Secular, Liberal Auden" of the thirties, which "explains the fervid rudeness of the attack: Auden is attempting to get rid of a sloughed-off self by hacking it up and dropping the pieces into a bathtub full of lye" ("Freud to Paul" 441-42). Jarrell links this characterization of Herod to Auden's extensive revisions of his early poetry, which, like some other critics, he regarded as part of Auden's attempt to remove all traces of his former self. Incidentally, Conniff points to *For the Time Being* as proof of Auden's rejection of Eliot's example as a Christian poet, because Herod, in possible parody of *Ash-Wednesday*, declares, "Because I am bewildered, because I must decide" ("Answering Herod" 303). However, as has been shown, Auden had great respect for Eliot as a Christian poet in general and for *Ash-Wednesday* in particular, even though he wasn't in sympathy with many of the theological tenets expressed therein. In fact, this Eliotic echo may be taken as an indication of how deeply Eliot's verse insinuated itself into Auden's mind, rather than as a repudiation of Eliot-- particularly since Auden uses Herod, indirectly, to convey theological notions about the Incarnation which bear the mark of Eliot's considerable influence.

These are stirring times for the editors of newspapers:
History is in the making; Mankind is on the march,
The longest aqueduct in the world is already
Under construction; the Committees on Fen-Drainage
And Soil-Conservation will issue very shortly
Their Joint Report . . . . (*CP* 373)

In a more sober tone, the Narrator states that, despite what the newspapers claim and what we would like to believe-- that we are advancing towards the "Perfect State" (*CP* 374)-- our societal ills can never be solved because they spring from our essential sinfulness.[13] In a later section of the oratorio, Auden reinforces this idea by showing that everyone is inevitably and immediately marked with original sin from the embryonic state:

. . . even in
The germ-cell's primary division
Innocence is lost and sin,
Already given as a fact,
Once more issues as an act. (*CP* 366)

As in "New Year Letter," therefore, Auden links spiritual and societal disorder. As a rationalist, Herod doesn't agree that there is a connection between the two, and doesn't even acknowledge that he *is* sinful. Rather, he emphasizes his virtue: "I've tried to be good. I brush my teeth every night. I haven't had sex for a month" (*CP* 394). Auden

[13]Hecht, normally so perceptive, misreads this passage when he fails to register the Narrator's irony. He argues that the Narrator is a "shameless jingoistic spokesman" who promotes this notion of progress, but then part way through the speech suddenly takes the opposing view (*Hidden Law* 269). Hecht would make the Narrator appear even more inconsistent than he really is.

presents Herod's progressive view of history as dangerous as well as illusory, since it has led him to crush what he sees as outdated beliefs and superstitions "at the cost of heaven knows how much grief and bloodshed" (*CP* 392). As the title of the section indicates, he is prepared to resort to violence again in order to prevent the cultural regression he thinks a widespread belief in Christ would represent: "Civilization must be saved even if it means sending for the military, as I suppose it does" (*CP* 394). This section, and Rachel's lamentation of the Massacre of the Innocents that follows,[14] would have had a chilling resonance for Auden's wartime audience, since:

> The Innocents are not . . . simply those spoken of in Jeremiah, nor those massacred by Herod, nor even both together, for they surely must include, in view of what was going on in the world at the time Auden was writing, the Jewish victims of genocide throughout the Nazi realm. . . .By 1941 the Nazi policy regarding the Jews was so thoroughly established and so notoriously effective that the introduction of a mourning Rachel into a 'Christmas oratorio' was certainly meant as a clear reference to what lay right before the eyes of a watching and horrified world. (Hecht *Hidden Law* 287) [15]

So as well as "depicting Herod as a parody of the modern liberal politician . . . 'a representative of those attitudes which have no ultimate sanction against a Hitler'" (Lahey 425), Auden aligns him with those dictators *like* Hitler who massacre the innocent

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[14]The New Testament states that, after Herod ordered the massacre of all the children in Judea under two years of age, "Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying, In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not" (Matt 2:17-18). The Old Testament prophecy can be found in Jeremiah 31:15.

[15] In a poem written shortly before his conversion, "Blessed Event" (1939), Auden again links the Nativity and the modern crisis. Of the "Four voices just audible in the hush of any Christmas," Auden writes, the last says, "*I smell blood and an era of prominent madmen*" (*CP* 305), which refers to the Massacre of the Innocents following the Nativity as well as the persecution by "prominent madmen" like Hitler. The poem also suggests that this "blood" is the blood of the Crucifixion, to which the Nativity looks ahead.

because they believe it a necessary step in their march towards the "Perfect State."[16] By exposing what he regards as ancient *and* current historical fallacies-- the former regarding history as cyclical and the later regarding history as progressive-- Auden shows that only belief in the Incarnation provides one with the proper orientation to avoid delusion and destruction. In fact, Auden's conviction that the Christian historical perspective is the only valid one seems to have played a considerable role in his conversion since he stated in 1940, when he was first embracing Christianity, "Jesus convinces me that he was right because what he taught has become consistently more and more the necessary and natural attitude for man as society has developed the way it has, i.e. he forecast our historical evolution correctly. If we reject the Gospels, we must reject modern life" (*Prose II* 429). As Malin states in *The Age of Anxiety*, "His Truth makes our theories historical sins" (535).

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[16]Hecht claims that Auden's inclusion of Rachel is also meant to recall Eliot's "Rachel *née* Rabinovitch" who "Tears at grapes with murderous paws" in "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" (1920), often pointed to as an example of his anti-Semitism (*Hidden Law* 287). While Auden *may* be implicitly condemning anti-Semitism, and specifically Eliot's anti-Semitism, through his sympathetic evocation of Rachel, Hecht's contention is complicated by Auden's later identification of Eliot and Rachel. In his 1949 review of "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," Auden states that by the end of the treatise, Eliot has largely abandoned argument and his voice becomes like "a voice in Ramah, weeping, that will not be comforted" ("Port and Nuts" 97). Auden does clearly allude to Eliot in a passage in *For the Time Being* which addresses the same issue, however. In his list of the various marks of progress trumpeted by the newspapers, the Narrator sardonically states, "the recent restrictions / Upon alien and free-thinking Jews are beginning / To have a salutary effect upon public morale" (*CP* 373), parroting Eliot's notorious remark in *After Strange Gods* on the undesirability of "any large number of free-thinking Jews" (20). As stated in the Introduction, Auden objected to *After Strange Gods*, and Eliot's comment on "free-thinking Jews" was no doubt one of the statements which he said "rather shocked me" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 150). Fuller claims that the oratorio's reference to this remark is only a way of "mak[ing] the numbering at Bethlehem vivid for the modern reader" (351), presumably by drawing a parallel between it and the numbering of Jewish populations in countries under German control, as well as recalling the debate over quotas on immigration that raged since the mass exodus of Jews fleeing persecution began, a debate to which Eliot, by making such a remark, can be said to have contributed. This explanation for Auden's allusion seems a bit toothless, however, given the particular position Eliot took in a period when Nazi Germany was on the rise: "Under the circumstances, Eliot's remark about 'free-thinking Jews' and the error of 'excessive tolerance' seems, at the very best, in shockingly bad taste, if not actually grotesque" (Hecht *Hidden Law* 269). Auden's inclusion of this infamous phrase, whatever other functions it may perform, seems to serve as a rebuke to Eliot for ever holding such views. Although Eliot expressed regret for having written *After Strange Gods* and refused to allow it to be republished, "Auden told [Alan] Ansen in May 1947 that Eliot had not been annoyed by the reference" (Fuller 351). Regardless of what he told Auden, one assumes Eliot would have preferred that the allusion had never been made.

The Incarnation and Contemporary History

As his portrait of Herod demonstrates, Auden juxtaposes the ancient and the modern in *For the Time Being* in order to emphasize that "the religious point of the story is always contemporary and that contemporary events are most fully understood in its terms" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 183-4). This point is made most forcefully in the last section of the work, in which Auden suddenly shifts the scene from Egypt, where the Holy Family has fled, to the aftermath of a present-day Christmas: "Now we must dismantle the tree / Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes-- / Some have got broken-- and carrying them up to the attic" (*CP* 399). This recognizably modern setting, complete with well-observed, prosaic details that would be familiar to the audience, illustrates that the events described in the oratorio did not only occur two thousand years ago, but that "Christ is born every day at Christmas" (Hecht *Hidden Law* 248), a belief which Eliot also affirms, stating in Becket's sermon in *Murder in the Cathedral* that with every Christmas shall "the Son of Man be born again" (*CPP* 240). So although neither poet adheres to a cyclical view of history, they paradoxically present "the Incarnation . . . as a recurring as well as a unique event" (Spears *Auden* 206). Moreover, they contend that the Incarnation is *continually* reenacted, not only during the Christmas season. Writing to his father about *For the Time Being*, Auden explains, "Perhaps you were expecting a purely historical account as one might give of the battle of Waterloo, whereas I was trying to treat it as a religious event which eternally recurs every time it is accepted" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 186). "I am not the first to treat the Christian data this way," he continues, "until the 18th Cent. it was always done. . . .It is only in the last two centuries that religion has been 'humanized,' and therefore treated

historically as something that happened a long time ago" (186). In the modern era, this juxtaposition of past and present was more common in secular literature. Auden had already used it in some of his earlier works, such as *The Dance of Death* (1933), and Eliot provides perhaps the most famous example in *The Waste Land.* As Auden pointed out, however, most contemporary religious literature did not take advantage of this technique, despite its effectiveness in revealing the continuing relevance of Biblical events. For example, Eliot also wanted to show his contemporaries the perennial significance of the Incarnation in "Journey of the Magi" and "A Song for Simeon," but, like most modern Nativity poems, he set them in their historical context and thus seems to limit their resonance with a contemporary audience in a way which Auden's oratorio avoids. Even *Ash-Wednesday*, whose treatment of the Incarnation includes oblique references to the infant Christ as "the Word with no speech" (*CPP* 92), does not contain "unabashed 20th-century *realia* such as chorus-girls and pressed pants" like Auden's poem, which has a "mostly unprecedented mingling of religious tradition and brash contemporaneity" (Corn 237-38). Kirsch relates that in a manuscript note about *For the Time Being*,[17] Auden had maintained:

> 'Anyone who attempts to use' a sacred historical event 'as a theme for a work of art . . . has to do justice both to the historicity of the event and to its contemporary relevance. This is not easy. If, in treating the Christmas story, he writes as a secular historian would, ie, he makes the clothes, the architecture, the dialogue as nearly what they actually were in Palestine during the reign of Augustus as scholarship can bring them, his piece will, for a twentieth century audience, be

[17] Kirsch states that this note "was probably intended to be a commentary for the broadcast of parts of 'For the Time Being' on Austrian television in 1967" (41).

> simply an archeological curiosity.' On the other hand, if 'he makes all his properties and imagery contemporary, the story cease to be one which the audience are required to believe really happened, and becomes an entertaining myth. (41-42)

By using modern and ancient elements, Auden avoids both dangers-- rooting his story too fixedly in the past as well as uprooting it too completely from the past-- and, while the audience is not thereby actually "*required* to believe" [emphasis added] that the event depicted really occurred, it is *encouraged* to do so.

Auden situates his Nativity poem in everyday reality in other ways as well. In contrast to the visionary quality of *Ash-Wednesday*'s call to "Redeem / The Time. Redeem / The unread vision in the higher dream / While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse" (*CPP* 94), *For the Time Being*'s Narrator employs a more quotidian language:

> In the meantime
> There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
> Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
> From insignificance. (*CP* 400)

By placing the injunction to redeem the time alongside these mundane tasks of contemporary life, Auden makes it seem both less overwhelming and more imperative than does Eliot, whose elevated Dantean imagery may tempt readers to think his exhortation, with its heavy burden of responsibility, doesn't apply to them. Auden makes it clear that everyone must "refrain from seeking escape in past or future . . . and

instead . . . try to manifest Agape in the everyday world" (Spears *Auden* 193), as well as strive to keep the central truths of Christianity alive, as he does here. So, through his anachronistic treatment of the Nativity, Auden "generally succeeds in keeping the reader simultaneously aware" of three levels of meanings:

> [F]irst, the unique historical event of the Incarnation; second, the collective, seasonal aspect of Christmas in its place in the Christian year, with its annual attempt to make it possible for Christ to be re-born, so to speak; and finally, the moment-to-moment effort of the individual to redeem everyday life from insignificance, to manifest the Incarnation in himself, to be a Christian. (Spears *Auden* 217)

In this respect, Auden can be seen to improve upon Eliot's transitional poems and make the story of the Nativity more clearly vital and pertinent to contemporary readers, thus advancing their project of creating a viable Christian poetics for the modern age.

Without employing the time-shifting technique of Auden's Nativity poem, *Four Quartets* does manage to transmit the abiding importance of the Incarnation and its continual recurrence more effectively than Eliot's earlier works. For example, *Ash-Wednesday* bears no marks that would date or place it, but *Four Quartets* is plainly set in the present and, like *For the Time Being*, makes numerous references to everyday activities, such as riding the tube (*CPP* 180), which serve to ground its theological dimension in a recognizable reality. The case for the relevance of this theological dimension is also forcefully made in such statements as "Little Gidding"'s "Here, the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere" (*CPP* 192), showing Eliot's audience that the experience of these timeless moments, in which their temporal

existence merges with the eternal ("nowhere"), is made available to them through the Incarnation. Moreover, he states that "history is a pattern / Of timeless moments" (*CPP* 197), so that "[p]ast and present are fused by the event of the Incarnation, which lies like a heart in the center of it all, the event that redeems past and present" (Timmerman 64). Whereas before his conversion, Eliot extolled the "mythical method" as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (*SP* 177-78), he now sees the Incarnation as providing this "shape and . . . significance," this pattern. Like Auden, he doesn't only regard "this moment in history as the starting point of a meaningful historical movement," but "sees the moment as needing to be repeated, over and over again, in order to redeem the chaos of historical time" (Kwan-Terry 139). So while the poets' theories of history differ in particulars,[18] they agree that the Incarnation defines the past as well as the present. *Four Quartets* and *For the Time Being* also illustrate their belief that, while the Incarnation acts as a bridge between the past and present,[19] it

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[18]Recall, for example, in his review of "Notes Towards the Definition of Culture," Auden states that Eliot "is only partly right . . .in asserting that in the past the role of transmission [of culture] was played by a class or by classes. For many centuries, it was transmitted by the Church . . ." ("Port and Nuts" 96). Mendelson describes the review as "largely a polite argument against Eliot's view of history" (*Later Auden* 302).

[19]The structure of *For the Time Being* makes the connection between the presence and the past via the Incarnation transparent, but it is also demonstrated in *Four Quartets*, particularly "East Coker." In this quartet, Eliot explores the continuing presence of the past, as in the passage claiming that if you come upon a certain "open field, / If you do not come too close," you may observe a scene of medieval dancing, described in medieval language: "Two and two, necessarye coniunction, / Holding eche other by the hand or arm / Whiche betokeneth concorde" (*CPP* 177-78). He also ponders his own history. Gardner explains in her essential *The Composition of the Four Quartets*, "It was from East Coker that the distant ancestor of the Eliot family, Andrew Eliot, left England around 1669 in search of religious freedom in the New World. In its churchyard Eliot saw 'old stones that cannot be deciphered,' marking of graves of those who may have been his long-dead and forgotten ancestors" (42). Commenting upon "The Dry Salvages", which recalls his more recent history, Eliot states: "You will notice . . . that this poem begins where I began, with the Mississippi; and that it ends, where I and my wife expect to end, at the parish church of a tiny village in Somerset," among those graves of his ancestors described in the previous quartet, where, incidentally, he was buried (qtd. in Gardner *Four Quartets* 47). This personal history is reflected quite literally in "East Coker's *idée fixe*: "In my beginning is my end," "a translation and inversion of Mary Stuart's motto '*En ma fin est mon commencement*'" (Gardner *Four Quartets* 42). This motif, and the circularity of the Quartets as

releases us from the bondage to the past entailed in cyclical history. We need Christ "That our future may be freed from the past" (Auden *CP* 398), so "History may be servitude, / History may be freedom," depending upon whether one rejects or accepts his Incarnation (Eliot *CPP* 195). As Brett states in his chapter on the quartets, "The only hope of escape from . . . slavery to time is through the apprehension of the eternal in 'the moment in and out of time'" (200). Furthermore, "We can redeem the time because God has redeemed time itself; if we live on the eternal side of things we obtain a freedom from the tyranny of events" (Brett 202). Paradoxically, this "apprehension of the eternal" allows one to live more fully in the present because each moment is recognized as important, redeemed through its concourse with divinity. Auden explains that the most important temporal categories to the Christian are "the present instant and eternity" ("The Things that are Caesar's" 454), and consequently he is "to act now, with an eye fixed, neither nostalgically on the past nor dreamily on some ideal future, but on eternity-- 'redeeming the time'-- in the words of Sydney Smith, he is to 'trust in God and take short views'" (*Prose II* 231).[20] Because of their temporal orientation, Christian poets in at least

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a whole, with its obsession with beginnings and endings, may seem to suggest that one cannot escape the cycle of history. Eliot shows, however, that the Incarnation redeems history from *meaningless* recurrence. As he states in "The Dry Salvages," initially "We had the experience but missed the meaning" but the meaning can be recovered (*CPP* 186). In turn, "approach to the meaning restores the experience" and "the past experience revived in the meaning / Is not the experience of one life only / But of many generations," including that of his own ancestors (*CPP* 186-87). "Little Gidding," which circles back to each of the preceding quartets, declares:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time. (*CPP* 197)

So there is a return, but a return with a difference. *Four Quartets* therefore describes not a barren cycle but a completed pilgrimage.

[20]Sydney Smith was an Anglican clergyman whom Auden greatly admired for his sanguine and reasonable approach to theology and to life in general. In an essay on Smith, "Portrait of a Whig," Auden quotes from an 1820 letter to a parishioner in which Smith gives twenty suggestions for happiness, including taking "Short views of human life-- not further than dinner or tea" (*FA* 153). Auden often repeated this bit of

one respect have an advantage over many of their secular peers, because, according to Auden, "the great poet" is "[e]ndowed with a gift to see the temporal situation under the aspect of eternity" ("Cornelia Street" [1953] 98)-- which is what he and Eliot argue is required of all Christians. So both poets assert that Christianity doesn't allow a retreat into otherworldly isolation but forces one to engage with the present, as they do in their transitional poems and major postconversion poems. While they contend that an understanding of the proper relation of time to eternity better equips one for such a task, they concede that it is difficult nonetheless, especially in turbulent times such as war.

As *For the Time Being* concludes, the Narrator reveals that the greatest challenge arises after "we have seen the actual Vision," when Christmas "is already a fading memory": "To those who have seen / The Child, however dimly, however incredulously, / The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all" (*CP* 399). In 1942, when Germany still seemed nearly invincible, Auden's readers no doubt considered "The Time Being" particularly trying. Mendelson claims that Auden "was so intent on treating the Incarnation as an event that can be experienced at any time that he made no connection between it and the specific events of the present" (*Later Auden* 188), but it would be more accurate to say that he did not *limit* the significance of the Incarnation to these specific events. As mentioned above, Auden does draw parallels between the circumstances surrounding Christ's birth and the then current conflict.[21] Moreover, the

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advice in his prose and poetry, for example ending his playful Phi Beta Kappa poem "Under Which Lyre" with: "Read *The New Yorker*, trust in God; / And take short views" (*CP* 339).

[21]For example, as well as adding a topical dimension to his depiction of Herod and the Massacre of the Innocents, Auden likens the Holy Family to wartime refugees, fleeing for safety, "or, as they had come to be called in those days, DPs, 'displaced persons'" (Hecht *Hidden Law* 287). Also, the order to return to one's place of birth for registration is issued in contemporary bureaucratic language ("WILFUL FAILURE TO COMPLY WITH THIS ORDER IS PUNISHABLE BY CONFISCATION OF GOODS AND LOSS OF CIVIL RIGHTS"), after which we are told: "You have been listening to the voice of Caesar" (*CP* 371), a formulation from radio, a

Narrator, in that theatrical opening speech, states that because of the Incarnation and the demands it makes upon us,

> . . . we despair; that is why we would welcome
> The nursery bogey or the winecellar ghost, why even
> The violent howling of winter and war has become
> Like a jukebox tone that we dare not stop. (*CP* 352)

Auden implies that the war "howling" around them now also stems from this desire to evade God, to remain so distracted that one doesn't have to consider Him at all. The terror of the ancient world evoked by the "outrageous novelty" still reverberates today to disastrous effect.

Of course, the war also makes its presence felt in many of Auden's other poems, including "New Year Letter," *The Age of Anxiety*, and pre-conversion works like "September 1, 1939." Commenting upon this last poem, Hecht states that he values it despite its defects because:

> No one else took it upon him- or herself to address directly and unequivocally the massive crisis that was inevitably to become the Second World War. There were, in the course of time, some other war poets, some of them very good; but either they wrote about personal experience with warfare, or they wrote with a deliberate metaphoric distancing, as Eliot did in his quartets. (*Hidden Law* 152)

Like Auden, however, Eliot did address the war "directly and unequivocally," in "Defense of the Islands" (1941) and "A Note on War Poetry" (1942), a poem which proclaims that war cannot "be ignored" (*CPP* 202). Accordingly, even in *Four Quartets*,

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medium heavily exploited by both sides during the war and also one which the Nazis often used to transmit such commands.

Eliot's treatment of the conflict is more explicit and involved than Hecht suggests. For instance, phrases like "History is now and England" (145) help to express "his sense of identification with England at one of the darkest moments in her history" (Gardner *Four Quartets* 58).[22] Eliot himself said that the last three quartets, those written after the war began, were "primarily patriotic poems" (qted. in Ellis *English Eliot* 165).[23] Although this display of patriotism is no doubt sincere, it does serve a larger purpose. By showing solidarity with his adopted country during this time of hardship, Eliot appears to speak as one of them, and consequently such statements as "the intersection of the timeless moment / Is England and nowhere," which reflect his theology, seem imbued with more authority than they might otherwise. Also, the encounter with the "familiar compound ghost" in "Little Gidding" is "a hallucinated scene after an air-raid" in London (Eliot *TCTC* 128), so it is "set in a context of recent experiences, experiences shared by many of Eliot's fellow-citizens" (Gardner *Four Quartets* 58). Furthermore, Eliot very skillfully incorporates his religious beliefs into this portrait of England at war through the "dark dove" which "descending breaks the air" (*CPP* 193, 196), simultaneously the Holy Ghost, delivering "The one discharge from sin and error" (*CPP* 196), and a German

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[22] Cooper implies that the quartets retreat from the current turmoil into history, and that the poems were embraced because they consequently offered "reassurance" to Eliot's main readership (193), "the mandarinate," English intellectuals and "obedient servant[s] of power" (23). Eliot is not actually evading current events, however, only striving to contextualize them, historically and, more importantly, spiritually.

[23] They were immediately recognized as such upon publication. Gardner relates, for instance, that the first of these poems, "East Coker," "made an enormous impression, coming as it did at the dreariest moment of the war" (*Four Quartets* 17). Ellis takes issue with the fact that "the Quartets have appealed, and still do appeal, to readers for whom the very mention of England-- as in 'History is now and England'-- is an immediate trigger for nostalgic reverie . . ." (*English Eliot* 165). For example, he notes that this phrase "is the very last line in the very last piece chosen by Kenneth Baker for his anthology *The Faber Book of English History in Verse* . . . as if Eliot upholds the entire patriotic tradition" (181-82). Ellis correctly maintains that Eliot's patriotism is not a strident nationalism, and that the "'Little-England' outlook" some readers attribute to him only reflects their own attitudes (182). Eliot had hoped that *The Criterion* would promote a sense of European, not narrowly English, culture, for example. Moreover, in 1941 Eliot told his fellow Christians that "patriotism is a loyalty which requires to be balanced by other loyalties," and that "the greatest and most binding of loyalties" is to Christendom itself (*Idea of a Christian Society* 125).

bomber. He thereby invigorates the traditional symbol of the Holy Ghost, albeit by giving it an edge of menace, and makes it appear more vivid to his readers. The Holy Ghost is not just an element of outdated theology but something that affects them personally. So in these poems which extol the theological importance of the present moment, Auden and Eliot themselves demonstrate this importance through their treatment of the dominant events of their day. Thus, *For the Time Being* and *Four Quartets* reflect their own attempt to redeem "the Time Being." Therefore, much as Mendelson and Hecht underestimate the poets' involvement in current events, McDiarmid is misleading when she asserts that in these major poems "the historical moment itself [has] receded into the background" (*Saving Civilization* xv-xvi). Because of their Christian perspective, however, the war itself is never their foremost or exclusive interest. As Auden wrote in a 1942 article, "Whether their overt subject matter be air-raids, love, or shepherds in Arcadia, whether their forms be strict or free, it may well be that it is with the search for the true and the unconditional that the serious poets of today will with greatest profit be concerned" (*Prose II* 153). Despite his tentative phrasing, Auden as well as Eliot clearly subscribed to this view, as their extended meditations on the significance of the Incarnate God, *the* Unconditional, reveal.

Existentialism in *For the Time Being*

Besides its anachronistic treatment of the Nativity, Auden's *For the Time Being* differs from Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" and "A Song for Simeon" in other important respects. There is an abundance of relatively modern poems that take the Nativity as their subject, such as Yeats's "The Magi" (1913), often in order to explore Christianity itself:

> In English poetic tradition since the Enlightenment, poems debating Christian belief or coming to accept it are often associated with evocations of the Nativity or with the modern Christmas holiday. The longest and best known instance is *In Memoriam*, but Browning's 'Christmas-Eve' and Hardy's lyric 'The Oxen' should also be included in the list. (Corn 237)

In his oratorio, Auden seems to be responding to Eliot in particular, though, especially through his portrayals of the Wise Men and Simeon. According to Spears, for instance, he had "the special problem of avoiding . . . the powerful influence of Eliot's 'Magi'" when he came to give voice to his own Wise Men (*Auden* 210). Auden reveals the older poet's influence nevertheless by so clearly contrasting his figures to those in Eliot's Ariels, and in such a way that assumes that his audience realizes what he is writing against. Hecht contends:

> Given the subject matter itself, one cannot fail to notice the pains that Auden has taken not to draw any parallels or possibilities of comparison with Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi.' Auden's figures are comics, allegorical, clownish, and keep up their spirits during the difficult trek with what they themselves characterize as 'a silly song.' The difference could not be more pronounced. Joining together in a trio, they sing, 'At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners, / That this journey is much too long, and that we want our dinners.' This is not merely different from Eliot; it seems a repudiation of his speaker's solemnity and lack of good humor. Auden's Magi make light of their discomforts and exhibit a cheerful (or perhaps mindless) stoicism Eliot's speaker never entertains. (*Hidden Law* 266)

While Hecht exaggerates the comical quality of Auden's Wise Men, who, as intellectuals, have pensive moments as well, Auden does largely divest them of the "solemn impressiveness" with which Eliot endows his Magi (Spears *Auden* 210), whose regret for "The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces, / And the silken girls bringing sherbet" (*CPP* 103) is even expressed in a somber tone. Also, while Eliot's Magus speaks primarily of the disruption and torment caused by the Incarnation, Auden's Magi focus on the blessings it will bestow. The Third Wise Man, for instance, states, "To discover how to be loving now / Is the reason I follow this star" (*CP* 369). This contrast in approach highlights the poets' theological differences as demonstrated throughout their respective works, particularly Eliot's pursuit of the negative way-- doggedly pursued in his transitional period-- and Auden's acceptance of the affirmative way. Moreover, Auden's *For the Time Being* distinguishes itself from Eliot's Ariel poems through its existential perspective. In fact, as Callen points out, "it is unparalleled in the tradition of Nativity literature principally because he chose to make it a vehicle for the theories of existential theologians" (*Carnival* 184).

Auden articulates this Christian existentialism principally through the figure of Simeon, so that in a work which Auden called "very theological" (qted. in Fuller 345), "The Meditation of Simeon" is the *most* theological section. As with the Magi, Spears and Hecht concur that Auden's Simeon bears "no resemblance whatever" to Eliot's prophet (Spears *Auden* 213). Hecht states that "once again, Auden seems to have taken deliberate pains to avoid any suggestion of similarity" with Eliot's poem, which expresses "no deep gratitude or sense of revelation" (*Hidden Law* 278). Auden's Simeon, as well as being less mournful, strays more from the Gospel account than does

Eliot's. Auden makes him a modern theologian, the counterpart to Herod, "presenting the Incarnation as a correction of liberal humanism and exploring and expounding its full significance as the focal point of the historical process" (Lahey 422). Spears calls the "Meditation" "probably the best brief exposition of Auden's religious position" (*Auden* 213). Because his Simeon speaks in prose and at greater length, Auden is able to convey his beliefs with more clarity, and more extensively, than Eliot could in "A Song for Simeon." For this reason, Hecht declares Auden's Simeon "the triumphant Christian apologist" (*Hidden Law* 281). Not all critics admire the dominance of Auden's theology in this section, however. In his article on *For the Time Being*, Corn states that "The Meditation of Simeon" is "perhaps the least successful section of the poem" because "so close are Simeon's opinions to Auden's that Simeon fails . . . to materialize as a character," unlike Herod for example (242). Fuller remarks that "his meditation becomes much more like a sermon" and is "an example of that weakening tendency to abstraction . . . which almost seems to make the Nativity drama an excuse and not an end in itself" (352), suggesting that Auden's beliefs have not been woven into the text sufficiently enough to please some critics. The "Meditation" is not quite the aesthetic failure that these critics claim, however. It is undeniably didactic, but Simeon's speech often has a pleasing cadence and is "interspersed with one-line alliterative comments by the chorus, which render emotionally what Simeon has been saying in prose" (Spears *Auden* 213). Still, the responses of those like Corn and Fuller show that, although Auden's juxtaposition of ancient and modern serves his oratorio well, he has obviously not solved all of the problems faced by a Christian poet. He wants to incorporate his theology into his work, but the more he articulates this theology, the greater the resistance

of some readers will be. Even if one grants that in this particular case Corn and Fuller are correct, that the beliefs in the "Meditation" are *not* successfully transmuted into art, in other cases reception may be compromised solely by a prejudice against the particular beliefs expressed or against didacticism in general. Despite the considerable advances that Auden and Eliot made in the field of religion and literature, therefore, these reactions to the "Meditation" are a reminder that "the problem of belief is very complicated and probably quite insoluble" for the writer as well as the reader (Eliot *SE* 138).

Regardless of their opinion on the artistic merits of "The Meditation of Simeon," critics agree that it is valuable "for its ability to illuminate other writings of Auden's," including other sections of the oratorio itself, because it encapsulates the key elements of his theology, particularly his understanding of the Incarnation (Fuller 352). As Kirsch reveals, in this "central prose section" of the oratorio, "Auden explores the theological meaning of the Incarnation in detail. He wrote to his father that Simeon's meditation 'gives a theological interpretation of why the Incarnation took place historically when it did, and what difference it makes to our feeling and thinking'" (47). Accordingly, Simeon begins by detailing the conditions required "Before the Infinite could manifest Itself in the finite" (*CP* 386). He states, for example, "Before the Unconditional could manifest Itself under the conditions of existence, it was necessary that man should first have reached the ultimate frontier of consciousness, the secular limit of memory beyond which there remained but one thing for him to know, his Original Sin . . ." (*CP* 387). Civilization had to evolve enough for mankind to realize that the intractable flaws remaining in society do not stem from its lack of intellectual or psychological development or from forces outside its control. As the Narrator pronounces in his rebuke

to progressivists: "We are not unlucky but evil" (*CP* 374). This awareness of sin is essential for societal and personal redemption since Simeon "shows that only when man's sense of sin is complete can the Word be made Flesh," in which, again, "the double sense of the Incarnation as a historical event and as a continual discovery of the individual is clearly intended" (Fuller 352). So the "Meditation" expands on those notions about original sin introduced in "New Year Letter," and its assertions about the "baffling crime" (*DM* 23) in the context of the Incarnation helps to clarify why the "free confession of our sins" (*DM* 68) is so important. Similarly, in Simeon's meditation, Auden reiterates the belief expressed in "New Year Letter," as well as "The Quest" sonnets, that free will makes each person accountable for his own spiritual welfare: "Every invalid is Roland defending the narrow pass against hopeless odds, every stenographer Brünnhilde refusing to renounce her lover's ring . . ." (*CP* 389). While "[t]he distinctive mark of classical thought is that it gives no positive value to freedom, and identifies the divine with the necessary or the legal" (Auden *Prose II* 227), Simeon proclaims that the Christian God insists that we make the "choices through which our freedom is realized or prevented . . ." (*CP* 388). So although the heavy responsibility imposed by free will can lead to angst,[24] "The distresses of choice are our chance to be blessed" (*CP* 388)-- as

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[24]Herod, for instance, shows the anxiety that can accompany free will, as well as the harm which the exercise of free will can cause. In the opening passage of "The Massacre of the Innocents," which Conniff thinks parodies *Ash-Wednesday* ("Answering Herod" 303), Herod exclaims, "Because I am bewildered, because I must decide" (*CP* 390). He is bewildered and later outraged-- "How dare He allow me to decide?" (*CP* 394)-- at the position in which God has put him if the Incarnation is in fact real: "[I]t would mean that God had given me the power to destroy Himself" (*CP* 394). Of course, Herod eventually does decide to try to kill the rumored Christ, and although he fails to do so, God does not prevent his slaughter. His free will is untrammeled. The dangers of free will are also explored in Auden's "Friday's Child" (1958), which begins:

> He told us we were free to choose
> But, children, as we were, we thought--
> 'Paternal Love will only use
> Force in the last resort

Mary demonstrates. Although she is chosen by God, Gabriel insists that "Love's will requires your own," that God will not impinge upon her freedom: "it lies, / Within your power of choosing to / Conceive the Child who chooses you" (*CP* 359-60). This freedom extends to her child as well, whom she asks: "In your first few hours of life here, O have you / Chosen already what death must be your own?" (*CP* 380), a point reinforced in *The Age of Anxiety* when Malin realizes that Christ "from no necessity / Condescended to exist and to suffer death . . ." (*CP* 535). As Auden's spokesman, Simeon expounds these and other elements of his theology that are discussed in less detail in works like "New Year Letter," and helps to elucidate the meaning of the oratorio as a whole.

An important aspect of Auden's existentialism not emphasized in "New Year Letter" but central to *For the Time Being* is the absurdity of faith, beginning with faith in the Incarnation. Simeon declares:

> From the beginning until now God spoke through his prophets. The Word aroused the comprehending depths of their flesh to a witnessing fury, and their witness was this: that the Word should be made Flesh. Yet their witness could only be received as long as it was vaguely misunderstood, as long as it seemed either to be neither impossible nor necessary, or necessary but not impossible, or impossible but not necessary; and the prophecy could not therefore be fulfilled. For it could only be fulfilled when it was no longer possible to receive, because it was clearly understood as absurd. (*CP* 387)

> On those too bumptious to repent.'--
> Accustomed to religious dread,
> It never crossed our minds He meant
> Exactly what he said. (*CP* 675)

Fear of the wrath of God may lead some to think that He will force obedience, but ultimately the fact that He will not override our free will can be more frightening. He will allow one to choose damnation. So Auden shows that free will requires one to live without a spiritual safety net.

This passage explains what Auden meant in an earlier recitative when he wrote, "The Real is what will strike you as really absurd" (*CP* 354). For this reason, one cannot depend on logic or rationality to discern Christian truth, only faith. Thus, from the existential perspective, the modern objection to Christianity that "belief in God is irrational and unscientific" (Auden *Prose II* 132) is invalid, because Christianity transcends rational discourse. Therefore, the Three Wise Men, who, although often clownish, represent types of intellectuals-- a scientist, a philosopher, and a sociologist (Fuller 350)-- must abandon their reliance on reason in order to follow the Star of the Nativity, which declares:

> Beware. All those who follow me are led
> Onto the Glassy Mountain where are no
> Footholds for logic, to that Bridge of Dread
> Where knowledge but increases vertigo. (*CP* 368)

These Wise Men gain humility, learn that "Love is more serious than Philosophy" (*CP* 383), and join in song with the uneducated Shepherds, illustrating Christianity's inversion of traditional hierarchies.[25] So this devaluation of reason serves to foster humility by asserting the incommensurable distance between God and man: "Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (I Cor. 1: 25).[26]

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[25] As Jesus stated after a confrontation with the Pharisees, God "hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Matt 11: 25). Similarly, Paul proclaimed that "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise," "That no flesh should glory in his presence" (I Cor. 1:27,29).

[26] Although Auden's emphasis on the inability of reason to deal with metaphysics derives primarily from Kierkegaard's influence, Eliot takes a similar position as demonstrated by his use of paradox. Eliot often resorts to paradox when discussing theological concepts, as when he describes the "End of the endless / Journey to no end" in *Ash-Wednesday* (*CPP* 92), or states in "East Coker":

> In order to arrive at what you are not
> You must go through the way in which you are not.
> And what you do not know is the only thing you know

As Malin comes to realize in *The Age of Anxiety*, truth isn't "Where Reason could rout it out," but is "reserved for the eyes of faith to find" (*CPP* 534).

Since Christian revelation transcends rationality, Herod is right when he exclaims in exasperation, "Why can't they see that the notion of a finite God is absurd? Because it is" (*CP* 394). In fact, many of Herod's objections to Christianity seem sound, and he accurately foresees much that will happen if the Incarnation is accepted as true: "Reason will be replaced by Revelation. Instead of Rational Law . . . Knowledge will degenerate into a riot of subjective visions . . ." (*CP* 393). Already, Simeon accepts the very Kierkegaardian notion that, while there is an objective truth, one can only approach it subjectively, a situation which he, unlike Herod, welcomes: "For Truth is indeed One, without which is no salvation, but the possibilities of real knowledge are as many as are the creatures in the very real and most exciting universe that God creates with and for his love . . ." (*CP* 389).[27] So Herod, while at times ridiculous, is not a complete straw man.

> And what you own is what you do not own
> And where you are is where you are not. (*CPP* 181)

Eliot's penchant for paradoxical statement may have influenced Auden's Christian poetry. For example, in *For the Time Being* he writes: Unless you are certain you are dreaming, it is certainly a dream of your own / Unless you exclaim-- 'There must be some mistake'-- you must be mistaken" (354). Hecht says of this passage: "To be sure, Christian theology abounds in paradox . . . but these lines, while they are unassailably within the Christian tradition, sound familiarly like the litany of paradoxes in Eliot's 'East Coker'" (*Hidden Law* 255), quoted above. Hecht also argues that a speech by the Narrator in "The Temptation of St. Joseph" is "not without its Eliotic paradoxes," such as "The Exceptional is always usual / And the Usual exceptional" (*Hidden Law* 263). Auden didn't need Eliot to teach him that Christianity is a religion of paradox-- after all, he stated that "[f]aith for a Christian means the power to endure the paradox that Jesus, the individual historical man was and is, as He claimed, Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father" (*Prose II* 171)-- but he may have found in Eliot's poetry a useful model for manifesting Christianity's paradoxical nature through these kinds of formulations.

[27]Herod also sees the absurdity of the burden laid upon Christians. If God has come to earth and lives a sinless life, "it could only mean this: that once having shown them how, God would expect every man, whatever his fortune, to lead a sinless life in the flesh and on earth. Then indeed would the human race be plunged into madness and despair" (*CP* 394). Auden agrees that the attempt to lead a sinless life is absurd, but rather than despair because of this inadequacy, the Christian is to think of himself as a comic figure:

> The man who takes seriously the command of Christ to take up his cross and follow Him must, if he is serious, see himself as a comic figure, for he is not the Christ, only an ordinary man, yet he believes that the command, Be ye perfect,' is seriously addressed to himself. Worldly 'sanity' says, 'I am not Christ, only an ordinary man. For me to think that I can become perfect would be

As Spears concedes, "His speech is witty, amusing, and highly persuasive on its own premises" (*Auden* 214). Thus, Auden exploits the oratorio's dramatic potential to present two dueling points of view, Herod's and Simeon's. They are the only two characters who speak in prose, which, as well as helping them articulate their positions, puts them more clearly in opposition to one another. Since Auden wanted Herod to "express the intellectual's eternal objection to Christianity" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 186), his arguments had to be cogent. Otherwise, the debate would be plainly skewed towards Simeon, and Auden's secular audience would find the work neither compelling nor relevant. Of course, *For the Time Being* is ultimately intended to be an affirmation of faith, so Auden does give Simeon the advantage. According to Brett, "Herod is a brilliantly drawn picture of a liberal and sophisticated personality, but carries little conviction in the context in which the story places him" (218). Likewise, Bahlke contends that Herod's soliloquy

> must follow Simeon's meditation so that Herod's argument will be undercut at every point by the reader's knowledge that he is seeing only a part of the situation. Although Herod foresees with terrifying accuracy some of the consequences of Christianity, he does not know, or will not accept, the truth which gives all his arguments a peripheral quality. (127)

> madness. . . .The other can only say, 'It is madness for me to attempt to obey the command, for it seems impossible; nevertheless, since I believe it is addressed to me, I must believe that it is possible'; in proportion as he takes the command seriously, that is, he will see himself as a comic figure. (*DH* 135)

As seen here and elsewhere, Auden endows Herod with an unrealistic degree of insight into Christianity in order to express facets of his own theology, although indirectly.

Bahlke also claims that the more elevated diction of the "Meditation" works "to reinforce our imputation of greater value to the point of view expressed there" (127). By these and other means, Auden implicitly presents Simeon's faith as superior to Herod's reason.[28]

The triumph of Simeon's faith over Herod's rationalism is also implicit in the earlier section, "The Temptation of St. Joseph." Here one finds the "unabashed 20th-century *realia* such as chorus-girls and pressed pants" described by Corn (238), which helps Auden convey his theology to a modern audience. Moreover, "The Temptation of St. Joseph" shows that Auden, like Kierkegaard, "has the talent, invaluable in a preacher to the Greeks, of making Christianity sound bohemian" (Auden *Canterbury* 41-42), by giving his Nativity story a gay subtext, for example. In this heavily autobiographical section, Joseph's fear that Mary has been unfaithful reflects Auden's jealousy and torment after Kallman's infidelities. As Auden told Alan Ansen, "Joseph is me" (qted. in Fuller 349). Also, in the Christmas letter of 1941, he draws twelve parallels between the Nativity story and his relationship with Kallman, a procedure "at once impious . . . and earnest" (Caserio 100), in which he links Kallman to Mary: "Because mothers have much to do with your queerness and mine, because we have both lost ours, and because Mary is a camp name; As this morning I think of Mary I think of you" (qted. in Mendelson *Later*

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[28]Although Hecht calls Simeon "the triumphant Christian apologist," he is troubled by the fact that in his meditation, "the nonrational, or suprarational, is being affirmed in a highly organized and meticulously rational argument" (*Hidden Law* 280). Simeon's use of "carefully deployed and systematized argument" (Hecht *Hidden Law* 278) may seem to undermine the whole thrust of his speech by aligning him with Herod. As Fuller states, "Auden's Simeon is not a weary old man like Eliot's Simeon (whose peace was granted through his intuition of the Incarnation) but an earnest theologian whose conversion must be insistently and rationally explained" (352). However, Simeon himself shows that Christianity doesn't completely reject reason, only dismisses it from its position of primacy. In accordance with Aquinas's contention that faith completes reason, Simeon states that because of the Incarnation, reason may be "redeemed from incestuous fixation on her own Logic . . ." (*CP* 389). So Simeon's, and Auden's, use of rational argument for suprarational matters is justified.

Auden 182).[29] However, even if readers did not pick up on clues to the work's homosexual subtext, Auden's treatment of Joseph may still strike them as quite audacious. Due to its translation of sexual jealousy into religious doubt, "'For the Time Being' is a rare twentieth- century instance of the tradition in which the erotic and religious elements of a work of art cast light on each other" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 180).[30] This conjunction of the erotic and the religious works particularly well since the issue for Joseph is whether Mary's child is divinely conceived:

> *Joseph, you have heard*
>
> *What Mary says occurred;*
>
> *Yes, it may be so.*
>
> *Is it likely? No.* (*CP* 362)

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[29]This Christmas letter "provokes a creative confusion between the Incarnation and his relation with Kallman of much greater daring" than *For the Time Being* (Fuller 349), as when Auden writes, "Because in the eyes of our bohemian friends our relationship is absurd; As this morning I think of the Paradox of the Incarnation, I think of you" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 183). Among other parallels, Auden likens himself to Joseph-- "Because, suffering on your account the torment of sexual jealousy . . . As this morning, I think of Joseph, I think of you"-- and to Herod-- "Because, on account of you, I have been, in intention, and almost in act, a murderer; As this morning I think of Herod, I think of you"-- referring to the night he nearly strangled Kallman upon learning of his affair (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 182).

[30]Erotic and religious elements also dominate Auden's "The Love Feast" (1948), in which a gathering is held in "an upper room" which recalls the Last Supper (*CP* 613), and whose title alludes "to the *agape* or love-feast of the early Christians" (Fuller 412). At this gathering, however,

> Lou is telling Anne what Molly
> Said to Mark behind his back;
> Jack likes Jill who worships George
> Who has the hots for Jack. (*CP* 613)

After eyeing a "Miss Number in the corner," the speaker ends by saying "I am sorry I'm not sorry . . . / Make me chaste, Lord, but not yet" (*CP* 614). Spears states, "This is, and is intended to be, a shocking poem, and some people have found it offensive" (*Auden* 194) because of its use of religious imagery in an erotic context. However, the poem's celebration of erotic love, and what Spears regards as its complacency towards carnal sins, is indicative of Auden's aforementioned impatience with what he considered "a revival of the Manichean heresy," in which "the notion of love as eros . . . and the notion of love as agape" are seen as "incompatible opposites" (qted. in Fuller 412). "The Love Feast" also show that "Auden's Christianity could never conform to conventional piety" (Corn 237). Whereas after his conversion, Eliot ceased writing poems like "The Hippopotamus" (1920) or "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" (1920) in which he used religious subjects and imagery in shocking ways, Auden continued to write poems that some might regard as blasphemous. So although the elder poet expressed a wish to write all kinds of poems, "proper and improper" (*Writers at Work* 100-01), Auden was more successful in actually doing so.

As well as showing that doubt is an integral part of belief, Joseph's turmoil at this point illustrates "the Kierkegaardian dictum that 'the quest for faith begins in anxiety'" (Hecht *Hidden Law* 242-3). In order to escape this anxiety, which stems from one's sense of sin and need for God, Auden contends that one must make a leap of faith. Like Herod, however, Joseph is "an example of someone who needs to have a demonstrable reason for believing . . . someone who is unwilling to take the leap of faith" (Fuller 349):

> All I ask is one
>
> Important and elegant proof
>
> That what my Love had done
>
> Was really at your will
>
> And that your will is Love. (*CP* 364)

To which Gabriel responds: "No, you must believe; / Be silent and sit still" (*CP* 364),[31] which, Hecht and Bahlke point out, echoes Eliot's prayer in *Ash-Wednesday*: "Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still" (*CPP* 98). The Narrator then instructs Joseph on the requirements of this new faith, in which he must "behave as if this were not strange at all": "To choose what is difficult all one's days / As if it were easy, that is faith. Joseph, praise" (*CP* 365). So even before we encounter Simeon or Herod, we already see the defeat of rationalism by faith dramatized by Joseph. The importance of

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[31]This rebuff of Joseph's request for "one / Important and elegant proof" recalls Jesus' rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees who wanted a sign that he was the Messiah: "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign" (Matt.12:39). The "evilness" of seeking a sign is implied in other poems by Auden and Eliot. For the faithless in Eliot's "Gerontion," "Signs are taken for wonders, 'We would see a sign!'" (*CPP* 37). In Auden's "The Shield of Achilles" (1952), Thetis looks on a world without "ritual pieties" and sees "An unintelligible multitude / . . . . / Without expression, waiting for a sign" (*CP* 597). Although the Chorus in *For the Time Being* cries,

> How could the Eternal do a temporal act,
> The Infinite become a finite fact?
> Nothing can save us that is possible:
> We who must die demand a miracle (*CP* 353)

Auden suggests that the Incarnation itself is the miracle that should satisfy them.

accepting the Incarnation on faith is further reinforced by the oratorio's conclusion, in which the Chorus proclaims, "He is the Way", "He is the Truth," "He is the Life" (*CP* 400), after which, Auden had suggested to Britten, "you might want some *Amens*" (qted. in Fuller 355).

Eliot's Evolution

Due to Eliot's slower writing pace, *Four Quartets*, begun in 1935, was only completed in 1942, the same year that Auden published *For the Time Being*. The quartets thus seem to narrow the chronological gap between the two poets. More importantly, they narrow the ideological gap because they signal Eliot's adoption of certain tenets of Auden's theology. As Brett reveals, this can be attributed in part to Eliot's burgeoning interest in two thinkers who informed so much of Auden's beliefs: Niebuhr and Williams. Eliot came to know Niebuhr during 1937's Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State, and both were contributors to *The Christian News-Letter* (established in 1939), of which Eliot was also an editor (Brett 202; Carpenter 257).[32] During this time, Eliot realized that "the liberal American Protestantism he disliked so much had met its most radical criticism not in the revival of medieval scholasticism by Catholic theologians," but in Niebuhr's writings, which dismissed "the optimistic promises of social progress" of liberal denominations and "rejected the possibilities of accommodating the Christian notion of selfhood to the Idealist philosophies" of those like Bradley (Brett 202-03). Instead, Niebuhr, like Eliot, stressed

[32]When he traveled to New York in 1948, Eliot visited with the Niebuhrs, considering them by that time old friends (Carpenter 288). It was during this trip to New York than Eliot also visited Auden, and wrote to the Niebuhrs upon his return: "I should like you to know what a comfort it has been to know that you have taken such an interest in Wystan Auden. Wystan is one of the youngest poets of whom I have the highest hopes, and with whom I feel the closest sympathy" (qted. in Ursula Niebuhr 114). His discussion of Auden's development continues in this paternal vein.

the inherent sinfulness of man, a commonality which made Eliot more receptive to other elements of his theology, particularly his teaching on grace, which, as will be demonstrated, influenced Eliot's theological position in the quartets.[33] Williams's presence in *Four Quartets* is even more marked. Already an admirer of his novels, Eliot immediately read Williams's theological works *He Came Down from Heaven* (1938) and *The Descent of the Dove* (1939) when they were published, and his study of Dante, *The Figure of Beatrice* (1943), in manuscript (Brett 201). In his 1939 review of *The Descent of the Dove*, "A Lay Theologian," Eliot praises this "valuable book" which demonstrates "Mr. Williams's perceptiveness . . . his tendency to be balanced and just," and even calls Williams an "extraordinary . . . spiritual acrobat" (865-66).[34] As with Niebuhr, who didn't have an appreciable effect on Eliot until the late 1930s, Williams's influence on Eliot truly began with the publication of his theological works, principally *The Descent of the Dove*, after "Burnt Norton" had already been written. Therefore, much as "New Year Letter" captures Auden's developing theology as he was in the process of absorbing new

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[33] Niebuhr's influence may also be discernible in Eliot's increased attention to current events. Although *Ash-Wednesday* enjoins one to redeem the time, in general "Eliot's interest in mysticism had given him an other-worldly disregard of the temporal" (Brett 202). However, *Four Quartet*'s treatment of history, and of the war in particular, demonstrates that he began "to give greater importance to God's purpose in human history," a subject which Niebuhr explored in works like *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941). The war might very well have entered Eliot's poetry without Niebuhr's help, but the theologian's conviction that Christians must not retreat into otherworldliness by ignoring contemporary history, and his staunch anti-pacifist stance, likely affected Eliot as well Auden.

[34] He prized *The Descent of the Dove* so highly that he had Faber publish a new edition of it in 1950. Faber also republished Williams's *He Came Down from Heaven* and *The Forgiveness of Sins* (1942) together in a volume in 1950, no doubt under Eliot's aegis. Also, he wrote an introduction to Williams's novel *All Hallows' Eve* in 1948, three years after his death, in which he expressed great regard for Williams's character and his work. Eliot described him as "modest and unassuming to the point of humility: that unconscious humility . . . was in him a natural quality, one he possessed to a degree which made one, in time, feel very humble oneself in his presence" (ix). His impressions of Williams are similar to those of Auden, who wrote to Ursula Niebuhr:

> Our meetings were few and on business, yet I count them among my most unforgettable and precious experiences. I have met great and good men in whose presence one was conscious of one's own littleness; Charles Williams' effect on me and on others with whom I have spoken was quite different: In his company one felt as intelligent and infinitely nicer than out of it one knew oneself to be. (qted in U. Niebuhr 112)

influences, the quartets chart the gradual infiltration of ideas from some of the same sources. In particular, Williams and Niebuhr helped to modify Eliot's multi-dimensional views on the Incarnation.

Williams's work chiefly helped to orient Eliot more towards the positive way, which affected how he regarded the Incarnation. In "Burnt Norton," Eliot clearly espouses the negative way when he instructs us to:

> Descend lower, descend only
> Into the world of perpetual solitude,
> World not world, but that which is not world,
> Internal darkness, deprivation,
> And destitution of property,
> Desiccation of the world of sense . . . (*CPP* 174)

In *The Descent of the Dove*, however, Williams warns of the danger of placing too much emphasis on negativity: "if the whole of Christendom had taken to the desert and lived among the lions" it would have been akin to "'Blasphemously inveighing against the creation'" (57). He explains:

> Rejection was to be rejection but not denial, as reception was to be reception but not subservience. Both methods, the Affirmative Way and the Negative Way, were to co-exist; one might almost say, to co-inhere, since each was to be the key of the other. . . .No Affirmation could be so complete as not to need definition, discipline, and refusal; no Rejection so absolute as not to leave necessary (literally and metaphorically) beans and a wild beast's skin and a little water. (57-58)

There are still negative elements in the quartets that follow "Burnt Norton"[35] and Eliot reveals his abiding attraction to negative theology in his plays, but he is now more inclined to acknowledge the validity of the affirmative way as well, like the "balanced and just" Williams. For instance, in a passage from "Little Gidding," Eliot intones:

> There are three conditions which often look alike
> Yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
> Attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
> From self and from things and from people; and, growing between
> them, indifference
> Which resembles the others as death resembles life. (*CPP* 195)

As Williams taught, Eliot now suggests that the affirmative and negative way, unlike indifference, are both acceptable approaches to life and to God. Not only did Eliot concede the theological legitimacy of the affirmative way, he also began to adhere to it somewhat himself, as the quartets bear witness. So as well as taking a similar perspective on time and history, Eliot's and Auden's religious thought converges in this crucial respect since Eliot begins to appreciate the affirmative theology so central to Auden's Christianity. As Brett affirms, "[t]his change" in Eliot's outlook "was almost certainly influenced by Eliot's reading of Charles Williams's study of Dante and his *Dove*" (201).

Williams, like the two poets, "counted Dante as a poetic and spiritual guide" (Phelan 29). In his introduction to Williams's *All Hallows' Eve*, Eliot states that, "as readers of his study of Dante . . . will know," Williams's mysticism "is a mysticism, not of curiosity, or of the lust for power, but of Love" (xvii). As discussed in Chapter Two,

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[35] In "East Coker," for example, Eliot advocates purgation when he tells his soul to "wait without hope / For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love / For love would be love of the wrong thing" (*CPP* 180).

Auden, while not a mystic, shared Williams's belief that love is at the center of Dante's thought, as his allusions to Dante's discourses on love in "New Year Letter" demonstrate. Eliot's transitional poems, on the other hand, focus on the penitential element in the *Divine Comedy*. As the quartets show, however, Eliot began to respond to this other aspect of Dante embraced by Auden and Williams, likely due at least in part to his study of the latter. For example, whereas the speakers in *Ash-Wednesday* and the Ariels see the Incarnation primarily as a necessary but disruptive event that causes great suffering, *Four Quartets* takes pains to emphasize that it is motivated by love. Much as Dante identifies God as "the love which moves the sun and the other stars" (*Paradiso* 33.145), Eliot writes that "Love is itself unmoving, / Only the cause and end of movement" (*CPP* 175). In effect, he equates Christ, "the still point," with "Love," as Auden had in *For the Time Being,* when the Shepherds exclaim, "*Let us run to Love*" (*CP* 378), and in his description of the Incarnation in "Kairos and Logos": "when predestined love / Fell like a daring meteor into time" (*CP* [1945] 12). Although, as Eliot shows in the Ariels, the Incarnation may cause suffering by compelling one to purge one's old self, it is ultimately an act of love. As John 3:16-17 declares: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." Even when speaking of purgation, Eliot now evokes this notion of God as love:

> Who then devised the torment? Love.
> Love is the unfamiliar Name
> Behind the hands that wove

The intolerable shirt of flame

Which human power cannot remove. (*CPP* 196)

Citing this passage, R. A. Malagi in "*Four Quartets* and *Paradiso*," states, "'Prufrock' never gave one the impression that Eliot would develop as a writer of love poetry. His other poems also cheat the reader of any such hope. But *Four Quartets* compel one to revise one's opinion" (139). Similarly, in a discussion of "Agapé, the Beloved Republic," Auden declares that "concerning that republic, I cannot conclude more fittingly than with closing lines from the most recent poem of the greatest poet now living," and proceeds to quote from the end of "Little Gidding," beginning at the line: "With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling" (*Prose II* 182). So by the time Eliot wrote this last quartet, his turn towards the affirmative way was so noticeable that Auden could use his verse to epitomize agape, divine love.

Earthly love as well as divine love is given more prominence in the later quartets than in the transitional poems. In "Little Gidding," for example, Eliot calls for "not less of love but expanding / Of love," so that "The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them" may "become renewed, transfigured . . ." (*CPP* 195), signaling the kind of transmutation of love which Dante describes. In fact, as Malagi explains, "The pattern of the integration of physical love into the luminous love of God, the emancipation of the love that binds into the freedom of love that liberates, is uniquely Dantean" (141). Williams no doubt played a significant role in this shift in Eliot's poetry because, as Mendelson explained, Williams's Christianity was "romantic and erotic" (*Later Auden* 126). In his review of *The Descent of the Dove*, Eliot himself pointed to the importance of love, carnal and divine, in Williams's thought. According to Eliot, even

He Came Down from Heaven, a work which deals primarily with the Crucifixion, "contains some profound remarks on Romantic Love and the *Vita Nuova*" (865), the work to which *Ash-Wednesday* supposedly aspired but whose central theme of love it did not adopt. Williams likely also influenced Eliot's new attitude towards the body, since he believed that "without the body the soul cannot be consummated in God" (*Dove* 138). Eliot's greater acceptance of the body and sexuality in these later poems suggests that he is more willing to subscribe to the idea that the body was redeemed when "the Word was made flesh" and therefore need not be denied. As Mendelson explains, "God feels no shame or diminution in occupying a body that is no less susceptible to suffering and death than the bodies occupied by everyone who experiences erotic love. Because of the Incarnation, the body is honored by orthodoxy . . ." (*Later Auden* 181). Auden clearly subscribed to this view. In his oratorio, Gabriel tells Mary that Eve "turned the flesh Love knew so well" to sin through her disobedience, but "What her negation wounded, may / Your affirmation heal to-day" that "in / The flesh whose love you do not know, / Love's knowledge into flesh may grow" (*CP* 359). So the Fall corrupted the body, but the Incarnation restores it. For this reason, Auden can proclaim, "Love Him in the World of the Flesh," not only in the spirit (*CP* 400). Although earlier poems, both written before and after his conversion, betray Eliot's revulsion for the body, *Four Quartets* reveals that he "eventually learned to temper his self-mortification with moderation . . . and his aversion to the body with acceptance, indeed an affirmation of human sexuality and physicality" (Kearns "Religion" 90). These poems therefore present the body as "a meeting point of flesh and spirit," a reflection of the "miraculous union" in Christ (Cook 88). His greater acceptance of sexuality and the body is reflected in "East Coker," for

example, when he describes the people "dancing around the bonfire / The association of man and woman / In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie," which he calls "A dignified and commodious sacrament" (*CPP* 177-78).[36] The importance the later quartets place on love and their acceptance of corporeality also paved way for the later poem, "A Dedication to my Wife"[37]:

> To whom I owe the leaping delight
> That quickens my senses in our wakingtime
> And the rhythm that governs the response of our sleepingtime,
> The breathing in unison
>
> Of lovers whose bodies smell of each other . . . (*CPP* 206)[38]

The poem portrays a physical and a spiritual union of lovers "Who think the same thoughts without need of speech" (*CPP* 206), and reveals that he is increasingly drawn to Auden's affirmative way, with its "Attachment to self and to things and to persons" (*CPP* 195). So although Auden claimed that a writer like "T. S. Eliot or Graham Greene" may intellectually assent "that the temporal world is an analogue of the eternal . . . but it is

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[36] Moreover, human sexuality is presented as a healthy part of the natural order of things:

> Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
> As in their living in the living seasons
> The time of the seasons and the constellations
> The time of milking and the time of harvest
> The time of coupling of man and woman . . . . (*CPP* 178)

[37] Originally serving as the dedication to *The Elder Statesman* (1953), the poem was altered slightly for the *Collected Poems and Plays*.

[38] Here we also see a greater acceptance of the female body than in Eliot's earlier poems. For example, in "Whispers of Immortality" (1920), he writes of the "Uncorseted" Grishkin in her maisonnette:

> The sleek Brazilian jaguar
> Does not in its arboreal gloom
> Distil so rank a feline smell
> As Grishkin in a drawing-room. (*CPP* 52-53)

Eliot now, however, identifies himself with his wife's scent-- it is not used to denote disgust at female otherness but rather is a marker of their union.

very difficult for him to imagine what he believes, to portray, for instance, a temporal relationship like marriage as anything but sordid and corrupting" (*Armada* foreword), Eliot's later poems reveal that this is no longer true in his case. He may not exalt love and sexuality as consistently or extensively as Auden does, but he does present these aspects of the affirmative way much more positively in his later poems.

In conjunction with his greater acceptance of the body and sexuality, Eliot's views on the natural world also changed considerably from his transitional period. Sea imagery is celebrated in "Marina," but "the granite shore" and "white sails" are seen as a worldly temptation in *Ash-Wednesday*, where "the weak spirit quickens to rebel / For the bent golden rod and the lost sea smell" (*CPP* 98). "The Dry Salvages," however, testifies that "Some things now he refuses to relinquish and, oddly enough, they are the very things he indicated in *Ash-Wednesday* that he had to give up, or so he thought then. . . . The imagery of daring sailors and scenes along New England's granite shore are common to both poems, a cross-reference that Eliot surely intended" (Hay "Conversion" 16). As Cornelia Cook explains, "The emphasis in *The Dry Salvages* on Incarnation validates the physical in nature and the human body" (95), so these images from the Massachusetts coast, and from the Missouri of his boyhood, no longer need to be rejected. This new outlook also allowed Eliot to appreciate the poetry of someone like Hopkins, who sees God in the beauty of nature. Although "this poetical validation by Hopkins of the distinct but nearly coeval status of the phenomenal world and its creator" was once "his greatest stumbling block" (Bagchee 49), by 1940 Eliot was able to say this of Hopkins's "passionate love of nature":

> In this love of nature he is extremely English, in the tradition from Wordsworth. But in Hopkins the nature-worship of the Romantics is taken up into something higher and reaches its consummation by being re-integrated into an orthodox Christian view of life. To have accomplished this is a great achievement" (qted. in L. Higgins 301)

Eliot also successfully integrated nature-worship and orthodox Christianity, in "The Dry Salvages" and in his series of "Landscapes" (1934-35), poems which "strikingly anticipate the themes of *Four Quartets*" (Gardner *Four Quartets* 34). Bagchee remarks, "The Eliot who speaks in the 'Landscape' poems has a voice quite unlike anything we have heard before," and he even resembles Hopkins in poems like "Cape Ann" (53-54), which begins: "O quick quick quick, quick hear the song-sparrow, / Swamp-sparrow, fox-sparrow, vesper-sparrow / At dawn and dusk . . ." (*CPP* 142). So Ellis's contention that "throughout Eliot's work there is no approach to the Creator through His creation, or if there is it is only in those visionary intrusions of the supernatural into the natural which act as reminders of the negligibility of the latter" (*English Eliot* 125) underestimates the value the poet now placed on nature and the change that Eliot had undergone. Nature is not equal with the spiritual world, but it is certainly not negligible. In fact, in an essay on Kipling (1941), Eliot declared, "It is not a Christian vision, but it is at least a pagan vision-- a contradiction of the materialistic view: it is the insight into a harmony with nature which must be re-established if the truly Christian imagination is to be recovered by Christians" (*OPP* 250). For a Christian writer, understanding the connection between the natural and spiritual realm is essential. Therefore, Eliot can declare with Auden,

sounding very Hopkinsesque himself, "God bless this green world temporal" (Auden *CP* 642).[39]

The Problem of Sin and the Promise of Mercy

As part of Eliot's shift towards affirmative theology, he also began to underline the power of grace. While he had always stressed man's sinfulness-- for which Auden

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[39] Another way in which Eliot evolved following his transitional period is in his return to the more inclusive practices of *The Waste Land*, particularly regarding his treatment of other religions. As his comment on Kipling's paganism suggests, Eliot demonstrates more tolerance of non-Christian traditions, seen, for example, in his reference to a pagan river god in "The Dry Salvages" (*CPP* 184). In *Four Quartets*, Eliot also draws upon Eastern religions, as with the image of the lotos in "Burnt Norton," an important symbol in Buddhism and Hinduism (*CPP* 172). More significantly, he engages in a dialogue with Hinduism in "The Dry Salvages" when he alludes to the *Bhagavad Gita*:

> I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant--
> Among other things-- or one way of putting of same thing:
> That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or a lavender spray
> Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret . . . (*CPP* 187)

A number of critics contend that the negative philosophy informing *Ash-Wednesday* was influenced by Eastern thought, particularly Buddhism, in conjunction with the Christian mysticism practiced by St. John of the Cross. Hay relates that Eliot himself "wondered if, in writing 'Ash-Wednesday,' he had not been unconsciously influenced by some aspect of Indian philosophy" (*Negative Way* 93). Nevertheless, *Ash-Wednesday* makes no overt reference to Eastern religions, akin to the allusions to the *Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad* or to the Buddha's Fire Sermon in *The Waste Land*, as "The Dry Salvages" does. So although Ozick complained, "His reach, once broad enough to incorporate the *Upanishads*, shrank to extend no farther than the neighborhood sacristy" (151), we see that Eliot has again grown more expansive. His renewed interest in Eastern religions does not mean that he thought they have the same claims to divine revelation as Christianity, however. In a revealing 1936 lecture, Eliot regrets Yeats's "wanderings among oriental philosophies and dubious mysticisms, journeys unsafe for any but the Christian, and which the Christian informed about the historical wealth of his Faith has least need to make" ("Tradition and the Practice of Poetry" 873). So his freedom to explore these "oriental philosophies" is safeguarded by his Christianity. Although he expressed gratitude "for having had the opportunity to study the *Bhagavad Gita* and the religious beliefs . . . with which the *Bhagavad Gita* is informed," Eliot asserts that these beliefs are very "different from his own" (*George Herbert* 24). So despite these allusions to the *Gita*, the quartets still display orthodox Christianity. Moreover, as Vinod Sena explains, Eliot "characteristically . . . turns Krishna's words to his own purposes and quite away from their original intent," so the greater interest "is not what Eliot borrows from Krishna but what he manages to derive from the latter's words to suit his own purpose" (183-84). In this respect, his treatment of Eastern religions is somewhat akin to his treatment of Heraclitus. Eliot's assertion that "the way up is the way down" (CPP 189), which suggests, among other things, that humility and abasement are required for spiritual elevation, is an example of how he takes Heraclitus' ideas and "transform[s] them into his own Christian philosophy" (Weitz 174). One may say that when he makes allusions to Eastern religions, he similarly "penetrate[s] them with Christian meaning without quite obliterating their original import" (Storman 103). Even though Eliot may seem to manipulate the material in order to express his own beliefs-- or at least allow the context to imbue it with a meaning not originally intended-- the mere fact that the quartets allude to such different traditions gives the impression of greater inclusiveness than a poem like *Ash-Wednesday*. Also, his treatment of the *Gita* strikes one as quite respectful, whereas in *The Waste Land* all sacred texts seem undermined because of the manner in which they are garbled together, implying that in a world without faith one is as powerless as the other. So his engagement with Eastern religions may actually help to bridge the problem of belief in poetry, since he shows some understanding of these different faiths and indicates that there are areas in which they overlap with Christianity, making his poetry seem more relevant to non-Christians.

had defended him-- he now began to emphasize God's mercifulness as well, much like the younger poet. Williams likely influenced this aspect of Eliot's thought as well, since his works like *The Descent of the Dove* and *The Forgiveness of Sins* spoke at length of man's need to rely on grace. In fact, Auden sometimes described the benefits of living under grace with a phrase coined by Williams, "total gain," which Mendelson calls "a shorthand phrase for the Christian themes of redemption and love offered in a sinful world" (*Later Auden* 426). "Little Gidding," as well as showing most clearly Eliot's changed attitude towards love and affirmation in general, provides the best demonstration of his new reliance of grace. While some earlier poems "find him still traversing the desert or, as with Dante, lost in a thick wood, 'Little Gidding' gives us a vision of man's redemption and a glimpse of the City of God," which, Brett asserts, is a reflection of Williams's influence (201). As Brett acknowledges, however, "it is likely that Niebuhr played a part" as well in the change in Eliot's mindset through his teachings on grace, and consequently "[t]he reader feels that the burden of perfectionism has been lifted from Eliot's shoulders and that he is now ready to accept grace as an unconditional gift of God which does not have to be earned; that instead of searching for a vision of God he is conscious of God's initiative in love" (203). Therefore, the tone of "Little Gidding," and the later quartets in general, is less fraught than that of Eliot's transitional poems such as *Ash-Wednesday*, in which the speaker feels he must struggle to escape sin and worldliness, or "*strive*" not "to strive towards such things" [emphasis added] (*CPP* 89).[40]

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[40] Of course, these developments in Eliot aren't solely due to his encounters with Williams and Niebuhr. For example, his more affirmative position may have resulted in part from an increased sense of security in his faith after the tumultuous years of his conversion, in which his spiritual trials were exacerbated by the collapse of his troubled marriage. Also, "Marina" shows that even during his dark transitional period his vision was not unmitigatedly bleak. However, these two thinkers do seem to have played an important part in forming Eliot's new theological perspective, a perspective which gave him a greater sense of serenity, even in the midst of a war, than he had experienced before.

Auden was also attuned to this important element of Niebuhr's theology, as the title of his aforementioned review of Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* indicates, "The Means of Grace." In describing the aspect of the Incarnation concerned not with the "finiteness of man but of his sin," Auden agrees with Niebuhr's assertion that "the content of the revelation" of "how sinful man is to be reconciled to God" is "an act of reconciliation in which the sin of man becomes the more sharply revealed by the knowledge that God is Himself the victim of man's sin and pride" (qted. in Auden *Prose II* 133). Like Niebuhr, Eliot and Auden highlight the sinfulness of man, especially in their treatment of the Crucifixion. Moreover, both poets, but especially Auden, present the Crucifixion as well as the Incarnation proper-- which, from their perspective, should not actually be regarded as discrete events[41]-- as continually recurring and thus relevant to the modern world. Although man's sin is "more sharply revealed" through the

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[41] Auden frequently highlighted the intertwinement of the Nativity and the Crucifixion, as when he states in the Christmas Letter to Kallman: "As this morning I think of the Good Friday and the Easter Sunday already implicit in Christmas Day, I think of you" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 183). Similarly, as *For the Time Being* concludes, the Narrator remarks:

> The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
> And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
> Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
> Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
> Be very far off. . . (*CP 399*)

As Bahlke explains, the oratorio ends in the "'time being' . . . intervening between Christmas and Good Friday, between the birth of Christ and the hope which that birth holds out to man, and His death, the sacrifice the knowledge of which man attempts to suppress" (*Auden* 131). The Nativity derives its significance not only from its intersection of time and timelessness, but from this promise of the Crucifixion and its attendant guilt. Eliot also underlines the connection between the Nativity and the Crucifixion, through, for example, his allusions to the Crucifixion in the Ariels. In "Journey of the Magi," the Magus sees on his journey "three trees on the low sky" (*CPP* 103), which unbeknownst to him, figures the death of the child he has come to worship. Simeon alludes to the Crucifixion when, holding the Christ child, he speaks of "the certain hour of maternal sorrow, during which, he tells Mary, "a sword shall pierce thy heart, / Thine also" (*CPP* 105-06). More explicitly, Thomas states in his Christmas sermon in *Murder in the Cathedral*: ". . . at this same time of all the year . . . we celebrate at once the Birth of Our Lord and His Passion and Death upon the Cross. Beloved, as the World sees, this is to behave in a strange fashion. For who in the World will both mourn and rejoice at once and for the same reason? . . . . so it is only in these our Christian mysteries that we can rejoice and mourn at once for the same reason" (*CPP* 260). The joy over the birth of the Christ Child is not undermined but rather qualified by the knowledge of the nature of his death. So both poets argued that the Incarnation proper and the Atonement can only be understood in relation to each other.

Crucifixion, the poets also affirm that, as Niebuhr declares, "the final word is not one of judgment but of mercy and forgiveness" (qted. in Auden *Prose II* 133). This emphasis on man's sin *and* God's grace features prominently in Eliot's "East Coker" and "Little Gidding" and Auden's sequence *Horae Canonicae* (1949-54).

Despite Auden's professed wariness towards "all works of art which make overt Christian references" (*DH* 458) and his claim that *For the Time Being* would be "the only direct treatment of sacred subjects I shall ever attempt" (qted. in Hecht *Hidden Law* 243), *Horae Canonicae* centers on the events of Good Friday.[42] In 1939, he had contended that "Good Friday, like Auschwitz" is not a suitable subject for poetry because "the reality is so terrible," and that "poems about Good Friday have, of course, been written, but none of them will do" (*Certain World* 168-9). When he came to write about it himself, however, he seemed better pleased with the results, and in "later editions of his poems . . . consistently placed 'Horae Canonicae' in a position that emphasized its importance" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 335).[43] Although the sequence has received less critical

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[42]The seven poems that compose the sequence are: "Prime" (1949), "Terce" (1953), "Sext" (1954), "Nones" (1950), "Vespers" (1954), "Compline" (1954), and "Lauds" (1952). "Nones" and "Prime" were originally published together in a volume called *Nones* in 1951.

[43]Actually, before *Horae Canonicae*, and even before he became a Christian, Auden wrote a number of Easter poems: "April is here but when will Easter come?" (1923), "Stop fingering your tie; walk slower" (1926), "Spring, a toy trumpet at her lips" (1927), "It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens" (1929), and "Get there if you can and see the land you once were proud to own" (1930). For the most part, these poems addressed the Crucifixion obliquely, if at all. In "It was Easter as I walked in the public gardens," however, Auden remembers

> . . . all of those whose death
> Is necessary condition of the season's setting forth,
> Who sorry in this time look only back
> To Christmas intimacy . . . (*EA* 37)

Fuller says of this passage, which also draws a connection between Easter and Christmas, "it is inescapable that he has the Christian story in mind" (60). In fact, he contends that Auden, even after he left the faith of his childhood, "had probably never ceased to be affected by the Crucifixion," for example heading a letter dated Good Friday 1928 with "Jesus died today" (458). Moreover, Auden claimed that "he was never able to work beyond mid-afternoon, but only came to understand the reason for this when he had become a convinced Christian, because he then realized that three p.m. is the canonical hour of the Crucifixion" (Hecht *Hidden Law* 342).

attention than many of Auden's other poems, Mendelson considers it "arguably his greatest work and certainly the one that occupied his attention longer than any other" (*Later Auden* 308). As in *For the Time Being*, these poems shows that, while "the events which redeem history have already occurred once and for all" (Auden "The Things that are Caesar's" 449), in another sense they continually recur. This notion of uniqueness and recurrence is reinforced by Auden's decision to structure the sequence around the divine hours. As Jan Curtis explains in "W. H. Auden's Theology of History in *Horae Canonicae*: 'Prime', 'Terce' and 'Sext'":

> In the Divine Office salvation history is not only recognized, but continues in the present. The Office is not a recollection of the past as past, but a re-presentation. Each day, in the liturgical cycle of the canonical hours, humanity falls, like Adam, into unfreedom and disorder, and each day participates in the redemptive work of the Spirit which acts in and through history. (50)

As Auden progresses through his sequence, he too presents the "historical events of salvation" as occurring "again and again in perpetual anamnesis" (Curtis "Theology of History" 49, 64).

The anamnesis of these salvific events within the canonical hours is made possible because they "have at the centre the Eucharist," which itself "commemorates the Crucifixion" (Brett 225). Therefore, Eliot's reference to the Eucharist in "East Coker" also implicitly asserts that the Crucifixion is continually repeated:

> The dripping blood our only drink,
> The bloody flesh our only food:
> In spite of which we like to think

That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood--

Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good. (*CPP* 182)

Because "in the Eucharist the Sacrifice is perpetually re-enacted," Frank Burch Brown states, Eliot's "use of Eucharistic imagery" provides theological support for "East Coker"'s representation of the Atonement as "not something confined to a single moment in history but . . . rather-- like Incarnation in the other 'quartets'-- a principle forever at work in the structure of things" (36-37). As Eliot wrote in *The Rock*, "the Son of Man was not crucified once for all, / . . . . / But the Son of Man is crucified always" (*CPP* 159). So Auden's and Eliot's treatment of the Crucifixion, like their treatment of the Incarnation, emphasizes its continuing relevance. These events cannot be relegated to ancient history.

The Crucifixion is not only reenacted in the canonical hours or the Eucharist, however. Hebrews 6:6 states that those who sin after embracing the Gospel "crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame." Auden shows that *anyone* who commits a wrong, even "any apparently trivial act you may do that harms another when you did not consciously intend to do harm," is also crucifying God afresh (Mendelson *Later Auden* 332). Thereby he contends that everyone is guilty of this act, including his readers, a notion which he reinforces by going a step beyond *For the Time Being* and setting the action of *Horae Canonicae* entirely in the modern world (with the exception of a few anachronistic elements, such as the hangman [*CP* 628]). Because of its contemporaneity and its focus on the damage wrought by all misdeeds, "the sequence's emotional and moral force can be felt by a reader who has no interest in religion" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 332), or at least has a better chance of doing so than if

Auden had given the Crucifixion a more traditional treatment, as in those Good Friday poems which he found so unsatisfying.

Auden's portrayal of every day as Good Friday begins in "Prime" where the speaker, still waking from sleep, is in an essentially prelapsarian state: "Still the day is intact, and I / The Adam sinless in our beginning, / Adam still previous to any act" (*CP* 627). With the act of drawing breath, however, the fall is reenacted and "Paradise" is "Lost of course and myself owing a death" (*CP* 628), his own death, due to his sin, and Christ's death, which will redeem him from this sin. Although his participation in the Crucifixion, like everyone else's, is an act of free will, it is also presented as the inevitable fulfillment of prophecy. As "Terce" declares, "by sundown / We shall have had a good Friday" (*CP* 629).[44] The Crucifixion itself takes place in "Nones":

> We are surprised
>
> At the ease and speed of our deed

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[44]The tension between free will and prophecy is also suggested when Auden writes that "our victim" already knows what the day holds: "(that is what / We can never forgive. If he knows the answers, / Then why are we here, why is there even dust?)" (*CP* 629). Fuller explains that responsibility for the act is "firmly with man, even though the Christian paradox of God's omnipotence and man's free-will is briefly raised in parenthesis" (459). Auden would no doubt agree with Milton that God's foreknowledge is not the same as predestination, however, and that his omnipotence includes the ability to cede some control to his creatures. Further, Auden implies that free will is unimpinged by prophecy because people tend to either ignore or misinterpret prophetic utterance:

> What we know to be not possible,
> Though time after time foretold
> By wild hermits, by shaman and sybil
> Gibbering in their trances
> Or revealed to a child in some chance rhyme
> Like *will* or *kill*, comes to pass
> Before we realize it. (*CP* 634)

Similarly, as Simeon states, the witness of the prophets regarding the Incarnation "could only be received as long as it was vaguely misunderstood, as long as it seemed either to be neither impossible nor necessary, or necessary but not impossible, or impossible but not necessary; and the prophecy could not therefore be fulfilled. For it could only be fulfilled when it was no longer possible to receive, because it was clearly understood as absurd" (*CP* 387). Free will is protected in a sense by the riddling nature of much prophecy, which cloaks its meaning. So usually people *unwittingly* fulfill prophecy as they exercise their free will, rather than consciously act in such a way as to bring about a foretold event. Nevertheless, we are left with the paradox that "we are responsible for sin that is defined as inevitable" (Curtis "History of Theology" 53).

And uneasy: It is barely three,

Mid-afternoon, yet the blood

Of our sacrifice is already

Dry on the grass . . . . (*CP* 634)

Afterwards, however, everyone attempts to deny their involvement, as when they seek forgetfulness in sleep:

Not one

Of these who in the shade of walls and trees

Lies sprawling now, calmly sleeping,

Harmless as sheep, can remember why

He shouted or what about

So loudly in the sunshine this morning;

All if challenged would reply

'It was a monster with one red eye,

A crowd that saw him die, not I.' (*CP* 634)

"[W]e have time / To misrepresent, excuse, deny, / Mythify,"[45] but nevertheless, "its meaning / Waits for our lives" (*CP* 635). We cannot evade the import of the Crucifixion

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[45]Hecht explains that to "mythify" Christ's death "is a way of equating the Crucifixion with the death of Adonis or Attis or any of Frazer's sacrificial gods, or the 'hanged god' of the tarot pack" (*Hidden Law* 346), as Eliot does in *The Waste Land.* Auden insists on Christ's essential difference from all such mythical figures, however. In "Augustus to Augustine" (1944), he states that Augustine opposes "the classical apotheosis of the Man-God" to "the Christian belief in Jesus Christ, the God-Man":

> The former is a Hercules who compels recognition by the great deeds he does in establishing for the common people the law, order and prosperity they cannot establish for themselves, by his manifestation of superior power; the latter reveals to fallen man that God is love by suffering, i.e. by refusing to compel recognition, choosing instead to be a victim of man's self-love. The idea of a sacrificial victim is not new; but that it should be the victim who chooses to be sacrificed, and the sacrificers who deny that any sacrifice has been made, is very new. (*Prose II* 230)

Therefore, when the Semi-chorus in the beginning of *For the Time Being* asks, "Can great Hercules keep his / extraordinary promise / To reinvigorate the Empire?" (*CP* 349), Auden's implied answer is that Hercules cannot, Christ is the only source of renewal. So although Christ may be called "Abel, Remus,

or our responsibility forever. Nor should we want to, since, as Bonhoeffer explains, "under this sign of death, the cross, men are now to continue to live, to their own condemnation if they despise it, but to their own salvation if they give it its due" (qted. in Walker 76-77). Since all attempts to ignore the cross are doomed to fail-- eventually we "shall know exactly what happened / Today between noon and three" (*CP* 641)-- one does better to acknowledge one's own guilt and thereby gain spiritual freedom.

This spiritual freedom is not without cost, however. Auden states that "while ultimately the Christian message is the good news . . . 'Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you': it is proximately to man's self-love the worst possible news-- 'Take up thy cross and follow me" (qted. in Conniff "Prospero's Island" 91). Accepting the burden of the cross necessitates suffering, as Eliot demonstrates in "East Coker":

> The wounded surgeon plies the steel
>
> That questions the distempered part;
>
> Beneath the bleeding hands we feel

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whom you will" he is still the "one Sin Offering" (*CP* 639). Christ is also distinguished from mythic heroes by the particular nature of his death, which Williams described as "an obscene thing" ("What the Cross Means to Me" 171). As Auden wrote in "Friday's Child" (1958), the Messiah suffered "A death reserved for slaves" (*CP* 676). This "scandalous dimension" (Burch Brown 36) of the Passion is captured in "East Coker"'s description of Christ's "dripping blood" and "bloody flesh" (*CPP* 182). In a passage in "Vespers" which employs "notably Eliotic terms" (Fuller 460), Auden too speaks of "This mutilated flesh, our victim" (*CP* 635). So, as Curtis explains, "The offense of Christianity is that ultimate fulfillment depends on the degradation of Golgotha . . ." ("Vespers" 211). In "The Cave of Making," Auden writes, "I should like to become, if possible, / a minor atlantic Goethe" but "without his silliness / re the Cross" (*CP* 693), elsewhere remarking that "Goethe thought the Cross in such bad taste" (*Prose II* 319). From his point of view, Goethe's rejection of the "humiliating death" of the cross was unacceptable because Auden "insisted that if any religious meaning is possible, it must accommodate the violent degradation that, in the Christian story, divinity accepted for itself when an incarnate god was crucified by human powers . . ." (Mendelson *Later Auden* 430). Since Auden agreed with Kierkegaard that Christian apologetics should show the non-believer "that Christ cannot be a man-made God because in every respect he is offensive to the natural man" (Auden *FA* 180), he and Eliot can be said to assert the claims of Christianity through their presentations of the degradation of the cross, which is so "offensive to the natural man," as Goethe's reaction demonstrates.

The sharp compassion of the healer's art

Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.

Our only health is the disease

If we obey the dying nurse

Whose constant care is not to please

But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,

And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse. (*CPP* 181)

In order to be redeemed from original sin, our inheritance from Adam, "the ruined millionaire" (*CPP* 181),[46] we must confront the extent of our fallenness and accept purgation at the hands of "the suffering Christ who shows us that suffering can bring spiritual health," which is "the message of Good Friday" (Brett 199). As Eliot wrote in a passage later excised from "Little Gidding," perhaps because it expressed these sentiments *too* bluntly, "Water from the side of Christ wash them / Fire from the heart of Christ incinerate them" (qted. in Gardner *Four Quartets* 230).

A sinner's redemption depends not only upon suffering, however. Both poets show that sin itself is necessary, for salvation and for civilization in general. In "Vespers," an Arcadian aesthete and his anti-type, a Utopian dreaming of creating a socialist society, meet at a crossroads. Auden describes the differences in their outlooks with often amusing details: "In my Eden," says the Utopian, "a person who likes Bellini has the good manners not to get born: In his New Jerusalem a person who dislikes work will be very sorry he was born" (*CP* 638). Although they seem to have no common

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[46]Oddly, Gardner thinks "the ruined millionaire," like the "wounded surgeon" and "dying nurse," is another type of Christ, even though Eliot himself identified him as Adam (*Four Quartets* 44).

ground, "We, as fellow-witnesses of the death of Christ, know that the one 'experience' certainly shared by these two is *the experience of this day*" (Loney 481). They come to see "their own guilt as accomplices in the murder more clearly than they see the wrongness of the opposing philosophy" (Loney 481) and each serves "to remind the other . . . of that half of their secret which he would most like to forget, / forcing us both, for a fraction of a second, to remember our victim (but for him I could forget the blood, but for me he could forget the innocence), / on whose immolation . . . arcadias, utopias, our dear old bag of a democracy are alike founded" (*CP* 639). "Vespers" concludes: "For without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand" (*CP* 639). Mendelson explains, "Among the themes of the poem are the real virtues and comforts of urban civilization . . . and the exclusion, injustice, and violence, the 'cement of blood,' which every civilization denies or misrepresents but which sustains them all, even the least unjust" (*Later Auden* 333). So this cement of blood derives from all victims, not only Christ, supporting Auden's contention that the Crucifixion is reenacted every time one person harms another. In this he agreed with Williams, who considered Crucifixion "a part of, indeed a function of, an ordered society": "At the price of such things we live" (qted. in Walker 65).[47]

Auden's main focus is not on these numberless victims, however, but on the particular ramifications of Christ's sacrifice, since his death made the forgiveness of sins possible: for "without the shedding of blood is no remission" of sin (Hebrews 9:22). Thus, "Vespers," and *Horae Canonicae* as a whole, calls attention to "the peculiar

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[47] As Mendelson states, "Someone always gains from the death of an innocent in Auden's poems, and Auden insisted on his guilty complicity" (*Later Auden* 214).

paradox that the Christian *felix culpa* embodies" (Fuller 461).[48] Much as Milton's fallen Adam, upon hearing of the Atonement to come, rejoices in God's "goodness infinite . . . / That all this good of evil shall produce, / And evil turn to good" (*Riverside Milton* 704), Auden stresses that the sin of the Crucifixion is turned to our salvation: "It is we who, by our guilt, have required the sacrifice that is made to repair our sinful natures; and that guilt is strangely increased by responsibility for the murder itself," but "both guilts, we are assured, will be assuaged by the sacrifice . . ." (Hecht *Hidden Law* 343). So the Incarnate Christ redeems the sin which he requires. For this reason, Eliot called Easter "a season of hope" (qted. in Schuchard 157), and Auden regarded his look forward to the Passion in *For the Time Being* as a "sweeter note" after his portrayal of the trials of the "time being" (qted. in Fuller 355). So although the poets seem to treat the "goodness" of "Good Friday" ironically in those passages describing man's guilt (Eliot *CPP* 182; Auden *CP* 182), they in fact take a position akin to that of Williams, who believed "evil is the agent of God in history and used by God to bring about man's salvation. The Crucifixion is the supreme example of this; man's worst crime paradoxically brings about his salvation and the marriage between the eternal and the temporal recovers what was lost at the Fall" (Brett 217). God's grace transforms man's sin into his redemption and defeat into victory. As the epigraph to *Horae Canonicae* declares, "*Immolatus vicerit*"--"having been sacrificed, the victory will have been his" (Fuller 458).

This notion of "felix culpa" is treated even more directly in "Little Gidding." Alluding to the medieval Christian mystic Julian of Norwich, Eliot declares: "Sin is

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[48]Fuller also points out that "'O felix culpa! O necessarium peccatum Adae!' is part of the liturgy of Easter Saturday" (61).

Behovely, but / All shall be well, and / All manner of thing shall be well" (*CPP* 195).[49] Sin is necessary in that it is inevitable-- "behovely" according to fourteenth century usage-- *and* because God uses it to redeem mankind. Julian of Norwich contended that "Adam's sin was the most harm that was ever done" but Christ made the "glorious Satisfaction," and "this Amends-making is more pleasing to God and more worshipful, without comparison, than ever was the sin of Adam harmful" (qted. in Sweeney 477). So, as E. I. Watkin explains,

> She sees sin as God's scourge for our discipline. It humbles us and increases our knowledge of His Love. For redeemed humanity sin is also an occasion of greater good. 'Sin is behovely,' that is, it has its part in the Divine economy of good . . . God will bestow on redeemed mankind a better gift than we should have enjoyed had man never fallen. (qted. in Sweeney 477)

The fact that Eliot shares her belief that sin ultimately works for the good is reinforced by his repetition of the phrase, "And all shall be well, and / All manner of thing shall be well," as in the final lines of this final quartet (*CPP* 198). Auden had quoted approvingly

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[49] Auden also alluded to Julian of Norwich in an epigraph to "Memorial for the City" (1949): "In the self-same point that our soul is made sensual, in the self-same point is the City of God ordained to him from without beginning" (*CP* 591). According to Cooper, the poem, "by quoting Juliana of Norwich in its epigraph," effectively "begins with the compulsory nod to *Four Quartets* as the period's master text" (189). Fuller points out that "this quotation, immensely useful to a Christian poet who was always suspicious of the Manichaean heresy," and quoted by Williams in *The Descent of the Dove*, underlines the need for "an acceptance of the idea of both body and community" (417). In "Memorial for a City," "Our Weakness," which represents our vulnerabilities in general and our body in particular, declares: "Without me Adam would have fallen irrevocably with Lucifer; he / would never have been able to cry *O felix culpa*" (*CP* 595). Much as Milton claims that God can forgive Adam and Eve, unlike the fallen angels, because they were deceived, Auden suggests that our physical and spiritual inferiority to the angels is an extenuating circumstance making salvation possible. The body also plays a useful role in *Horae Canonicae*, since it is instrumental in the speaker coming to terms with his complicity in the Crucifixion: "My heart is confessing her part / In what happened to us from noon till three" (*CP* 640). As with the speaker in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," his own body betrays his guilt. Incidentally, Eliot's reference from Julian of Norwich is not in quotation marks, unlike some of the allusions in the transitional poems, but he did ask Hayward whether he should use "inverted commas" and in fact inserted them in a draft version (Gardner *Four Quartets* 204). Under Hayward's advice, however, Eliot took them out, perhaps assuming that the archaic diction was enough to show readers that he was appropriating someone else's words.

from this passage when he praised the portrayal of Agapé in *Four Quartets* (*Prose II* 182), but interestingly he seeks to qualify it somewhat in "Under Sirius" (1949). He clearly seems to allude to "Little Gidding" when he writes, "It is natural to hope and pious, of course, to believe / That all in the end shall be well" (*CP* 546). Auden then adds, however, "But first of all, remember, / So the Sacred Books foretell, / The rotten fruit shall be shaken" (*CP* 546). Hecht contends that in "Little Gidding," Eliot's assertions that "all shall be well"

> take on a quality that comes rather near to complacency, and thereby touches upon an unavoidable Christian quandary. To abandon all hope in salvation is to deny the mercy and loving-kindness, as well as the power, of God; to count upon that salvation with a careless confidence is to sin and to risk perdition. (*Hidden Law* 337)

Therefore, Auden's reminder that judgment, when "The rotten fruit shall be shaken," precedes the complete fulfillment of God's will on earth "is as much a chiding to the complacency of Eliot as it is to . . . Auden himself, or to any serious believer . . ." (Hecht *Hidden Law* 337). Perhaps because of the influence of Niebuhr and Williams, Eliot expresses so great a reliance on grace in *Four Quartets* that even Auden, often judged overly complacent himself, felt the need to highlight the role of judgment and personal responsibility in Christian life.[50] Nevertheless, Auden, like Eliot, still subscribes to

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[50] As Hecht asserts, Auden *is* truly chiding himself as well. Ironically, given Auden's existential leanings, some people saw his utter reliance on God's grace as an abdication of responsibility for his own behaviour and as conducive to a certain complacency regarding sin, a danger of which he was aware. Carpenter alleges that "though he often stressed the significance of sin and guilt . . . his own personal sense of sin sometimes seemed (as Stephen Spender noticed) to be 'curiously theoretical' and not deeply felt," and he relays G. S. Fraser's assertion, "The trouble about such a type of Christianity is that to the outside observer it might appear to make no practical difference" (299, 300). Auden's cautions against the over-reliance on grace within his work testifies to his awareness of his own susceptibility on this point. For example, in choosing the epigraph to *For the Time Being*-- "What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that

Niebuhr's view that the Atonement proves God's "final word is not one of judgment but of mercy and forgiveness" (qted. in Auden *Prose II* 133).

According to both poets, divine grace continues to be demonstrated after the Atonement by the intervention of the Holy Ghost in history, the focus of Williams's *The Descent of the Dove*, subtitled, "A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church." As Eliot stated in his review, Williams's intention "is to chronicle the points of crisis and decision, at which the Church (in its widest sense) has been guided by the Holy Spirit" (866). He traces the "operation of the Holy Ghost" in history to show that it is always working towards "the regeneration of mankind": "The visible beginning of the Church is at Pentecost, but that is only a result of its actual beginning-- and ending-- in heaven. In fact, all the external world, as we know it, is always a result" of this divine intervention (*Dove* 1-3). Although the history of mankind may seem to be "a mass of contending unrelated effects" (*Dove* 1), Williams maintains that the Holy Ghost is always working upon history to lead men to redemption. No doubt reflecting Williams's influence, Auden also spoke of "the ever-incomplete history of the acts of the Holy Spirit in this world" (*Prose II* 247), and, as Oliver Sacks, whom Auden befriended towards the end of his life, relates, "In the world as Wystan saw it, there was great aspectuality, and alternatives . . . but never any hint of arbitrariness or accident; history was a series of

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grace may abound? God forbid" (Romans 6:1-2)-- Auden seems to take for granted that his audience already accepts the greatness of God's forgiveness and so focuses instead on the danger of trying to abuse this grace. He also has Herod, with his somewhat unrealistic grasp of certain aspects of Christian theology, call attention to the error of those who would try to take advantage of grace: "Every crook will argue: 'I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged'" (*CP* 394). Similarly, in Auden's "Song of the Devil" (1963), the devil reveals:

> I can recall when, to win the more
> Obstinate round,
> The best bet was to say to them: 'Sin the more
> That Grace may abound.' (*CP* 782)

The devil quotes only part of Paul's rebuff in order to make it appear a sanction for sin. So Auden shows that, while sin has served God's purpose in the past, one should nevertheless strive to imitate Christ, "to lead a sinless life in the flesh and on earth" (*CP* 394), although not despair over the inevitable setbacks.

significant moments-- the union, the unison, of harmony and destiny" (190). Similarly, Eliot's introduction of the Holy Ghost in "Little Gidding," "The dove descending breaks the air" (*CPP* 196), suggests he had Williams's study in mind as well as the New Testament sources.[51] "The war probably played its part in encouraging Eliot to write *Little Gidding*, for at the time many were lead to consider the collective guilt which had brought it about and to meditate on the mystery of God's purposes in history" (Brett 201), and consequently the quartet reflects Williams's sense of "the ulterior working of spirit in a characteristically benighted world" under the cloud of war (Cook 98). Further, "Little Gidding" is set in "Midwinter Spring," the season in which Pentecost is celebrated, when the disciples were gathered and "suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing might wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost . . ." (Acts 2:2-4). In his quartet, Eliot writes that a "glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier, / Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind but pentecostal fire / In the dark time of the year" (*CPP* 191). This "pentecostal fire" is

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[51]The dove is used as a symbol of the Holy Ghost because when John baptized Jesus, "the heaven was opened, And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him" (Luke 3:21-22). Before their conversions, Eliot and Auden ironically allude to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism in their poetry. For example, in Auden's "Spain 1937," "the Nations" ask "Life" to "'Intervene. O descend as a dove or / A furious papa or a mild engineer: but descend'" (*EA* 211), which is "quite clearly a parody of the Trinity (holy spirit, angry Jehovah and mercifully creating Logos)" (Fuller 285). Eliot also references the Trinity in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service":

> A painter of the Umbrian school
> Designed upon a gesso ground
> The nimbus of the Baptized God.
> The wilderness is cracked and browned
>
> But through the water pale and thin
> Still shine the unoffending feet
> And there above the painter set
> The Father and the Paraclete. (*CPP* 54)

John 1:5 declares that Jesus was the Light that "shineth in darkness," but Eliot makes the baptism of Christ comical by focusing on his feet, which "shine" instead. Naturally, after Auden and Eliot accepted Christianity, their allusions to scripture regarding Jesus' baptism and the descent of the Holy Ghost are much more respectful.

associated with purgation and baptism, as in the New Testament when John the Baptist declared, "I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire" (Luke 3:16), which was accomplished when he sent the Paraclete at Pentecost. Eliot presents baptism by pentecostal fire as essential for individual and societal redemption:

> The only hope, or else despair
> Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre--
> To be redeemed from fire by fire.
> . . . . . .
> We only live, only suspire
> Consumed by either fire or fire. (*CPP* 196)

Malagi explicates, "The first fire is the fire that is a torment," but "the other is the fire that refines and transforms and that is the fire by which we live everlastingly" (141).[52] In the quartets, therefore, Eliot transforms Heraclitean fire into the cleansing fire of God. As Cook states in "Fire and Spirit: Scripture's Shaping Presence in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*,"

> The significant revelation in these poems is not a new heaven, but the Incarnation. The significant intervention is not an end to history but the manifestation of the

[52]Eliot participates in a long tradition of associating fire with both punishment *and* purgation. In *The Divine Comedy*, for instance, fire is used to torture Count Guido da Montefeltro in the *Inferno* (27.61-6), but to purify Arnaut Daniel in *Purgatorio* (26.139-48). Frye explains that "as with water," another baptismal element, "there is a fire of life and a fire of death. The fire of life burns without burning up: there is light and heat but no pain or destruction" (*Great Code* 161). In "Little Gidding," redeeming fire and destructive fire are juxtaposed: "descending fire from the flames of the Holy Spirit and ascending fire on the funeral pyre of Hercules, set over against a demonic parody of fire bombs falling in London and fires breaking out of the streets in response" (Frye *Great Code* 162). Auden also evokes the idea of refining fire in *For the Time Being*, when Mary declares, "My flesh in terror and fire / Rejoices . . ." (*CP* 360).

> Spirit in the world. *Four Quartets* invokes the framing scriptural images of baptismal and Pentecostal descents of the Holy Spirit to shape an argument in which motifs of retribution are transfigured in a theology of redemption. (86)

The ramifications of Pentecost are not limited to these interventions, however. The "descent of the dove" was also a decisive moment for language, a subject of particular interest to both poets since, as Auden prescribed, each applied himself to understanding how the Incarnation and its aftereffects "relate to his professional life" ("The Things that are Caesar's" 454) and each drew very similar conclusions. Although at times they contend that the Incarnation gave their words legitimacy, more often they express frustration over their inability to convey their meaning with the same completeness as the incarnate Word.

Language and the Logos

When the Holy Ghost descended upon the apostles, they "began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" and "the multitude . . . were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language" (Acts 2:4-6). As Auden explains in "Words and the Word," "an imposing summing up of all he knew about language," (Mendelson *Later Auden* 489), "What happened at Pentecost was . . . a miracle of instantaneous translation: 'Behold are not all these which speak Galileans. And now hear we every man in his own tongue wherein we were born . . . the wonderful works of God'" (*SW* 122). So "the curse of Babel, the disintegration of shared speech into the mutually incomprehensible languages of division," was, in a sense, "undone (as the Venerable Bede was the first to notice) by the miracle of Pentecost" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 431). Consequently, in "The Twelve" (1964), which describes the apostles

spreading the Word "as the Spirit bid," Auden can declare: "Holy still is Speech, but there is no sacred tongue: / the Truth may be told in all" (*CP* 815-16), or, one might say, holy *again* is speech. Similarly, "Whitsunday in Kirchstetten" (1962), which Auden explained addresses the question "What, to a Christian, is the significance of Pentecost?" (*In Solitude* 232), states:

> The Holy Ghost
>
> does not abhor a golfer's jargon,
>
> a Lower-Austrian accent, the cadences even
>
> of my own little anglo-american
>
> musico-literary set . . . (*CP* 744)

Much as fallen man is redeemed, fallen language is redeemed, at least to a considerable degree, and even the diversity of languages can be seen in a positive light.[53] *Four Quartets*, with its "marked awareness of the Pentecost of Acts, which crucially associates language and spirit" (Cook 86), also signals a partial reversal of Babel. In *The Waste Land*, we see "the Babel theme of the confusion of tongues . . . especially in the final lines" (Frye *Words* 162), and in other early poems "there is a persistent crackle and static of the exasperatedly foreign," but, like *Ash-Wednesday*, there are few foreign phrases in

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[53]Echoing the language of "The Twelve," Auden contends in "Words and the Word" that this reversal of Babel was actually initiated at the Incarnation: "It is significant that when the Word was made flesh, it spoke a little-known and little esteemed tongue, Aramaic. There is, that is to say, no sacred tongue: the truth can be told in all" (*SW* 117). Auden, however, seems to contradict these frequent assertions that every language can express religious truth by his insistence that the liturgy ought to remain in Latin. He disliked modern translations on aesthetic grounds and because he thought only Latin could convey a sense of the history of Christianity: "To the obvious objection that the early Christians has not used an ancient language in their worship, he had a considered reply: 'The first Christians had no linguistic problems because they expected the Parousia to occur in their lifetime; with us it is different. We are conscious of nearly two thousand years of Christian tradition behind us which it is our duty to transmit to future generations'" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 519). This issue was so important to him that he left his Protestant church and began to attend a Greek Orthodox Church in New York solely to hear the liturgy in Latin (Carpenter 433).

the quartets and "none of them is an irruption" (Ricks 267).[54] In the quartets, when foreign languages are used they reinforce rather than disorient meaning.

According to Eliot and Auden, the Incarnation, as well as making possible the linguistically restorative experience of Pentecost, can legitimize art as a whole, particularly literature. They both even describe the act of writing explicitly in terms of the Incarnation. For example, in "Poetry and Propaganda," Eliot writes, "For poetry . . . is not the assertion that something is true, but the making of that truth more fully real to us; it is the creation of a sensuous embodiment. It is making the Word Flesh, if we remember that for poetry there are various qualities of Word and various qualities of Flesh" (37). Auden similarly links writing to the Incarnation in "Criticism in a Mass Society (1941) when in a discussion of belief in literature he affirms that there is an "interdependence of belief and expression of belief, the Word and the Flesh" (*Prose II* 96). He also suggests that the embodiment of the Word provides a template for creative activity in *For the Time Being*, when Simeon explains: "Because in Him the Flesh is united to the Word without magical transformation, Imagination is redeemed from promiscuous fornication with her own images" and so "by Him is the perpetual recurrence of Art assured" (*CP* 388-89). Christ provides the necessary orientation for art as well as history. Moreover, Auden had asserted that "it was Christianity and the Bible which raised Western literature from the dead" precisely because of the Incarnation:

> A faith which held that the Son of God was born in a manger, associated himself with persons of humble station in an unimportant Province, and died a slave's

[54] For example, Eliot calls Mary "Figlia del tuo figlio, / Queen of Heaven" in "The Dry Salvages" (*CPP* 189), but this allusion to *Paradiso* is neatly integrated into the passage, and even if readers didn't know that "Figlia del tuo figlio" meant "Daughter of your son," they would certainly realize from the context that it refers to Mary.

> death, yet did this to redeem all men, rich and poor, freemen and slaves, citizens and barbarians, required a completely new way of looking at human beings; if all are children of God and equally capable of salvation, then all, irrespective of status or talent, vice or virtue, merit the serious attention of the poet, the novelist and the historian. (*In Solitude* 130)

As well as opening up the possibilities for art, Christ also helps to prevent one from overvaluing art and succumbing to pride and idolatry, of which Auden's Wise Men seem to have been guilty: "Child, at whose birth we would do obsequy / For our tall errors of imagination, / Redeem our talents with your little cry" (*CP* 383). A writer's close attention to language also seems warranted by its place within Christianity, in which salvation is wrought by the Word and "both the Old and New Testament define the activities of God as Creator and His relations to men in terms of human speech" (Auden *SW* 116). Further, Eliot and Auden draw parallels between human and divine creativity. In *The Rock*, for example, "Eliot attempted to identify in his creative activity the Spirit of Jehovah who hovered over the formless and empty and performed His great creative works (Genesis 1:1-31)" (Kim 84): "LORD, shall we not bring these gifts to Your service? / . . . . / The LORD who created must wish us to create / And employ our creation again in His service" (*CPP* 164-65). Similarly, Auden states that the Great Artist created man "as a culture-making creature, endowed with imagination . . . and capable of artistic fabrication" (*SW* 120), so art is acceptable to God: "Each with his gift according to his kind / Bringing this child his body and his mind" (*CP* 382). They concede that God's words are of a different order than our words, but both logocentric poets assert that there is a connection between them-- that there *is* a transcendental signified which ultimately

grounds meaning-- so that, despite its flaws, human language can convey religious truth, albeit imperfectly:

> Though written by Thy children with
>
> A smudged and crooked line,
>
> Thy Word is ever legible,
>
> Thy meaning unequivocal. (Auden *CP* 374)

Eliot and Auden do not always regard their vocation in such a sanguine manner, however. Despite all the ways in which the Incarnation seems to justify literature, as seen in the preceding chapters the two poets nevertheless exhibit profound ambivalence towards writing. Moreover, this ambivalence arises in part *because* of the Incarnation, since the Word shows just how inadequate human language is compared to divine revelation.

Eliot and Auden, like many writers, expressed an element of unease over the limitations of language from their earliest works, so clearly a dissatisfaction with language need not stem from religious convictions. In their case, however, their conversions intensified their anxiety since they now judged their words in the light of the perfect Word. For example, in "Postscript: Christianity & Art," Auden admits, "A poet who calls himself a Christian cannot but feel uncomfortable when he realizes that the New Testament contains no verse . . . only prose" (*DH* 459). He elaborates by quoting from the German philosopher and critic, Rudolf Kassner:

> 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 their being a gulf between them? . . .That the God-man did not write down his words himself or show the slightest concern that they should be written

> down in letters, brings us back to the Word made Flesh. Over against the metrical structures of the poets stand the Gospel parables in prose, over against magic a freedom which finds its limits within itself, over against poetic fiction (*Dichtung*), pointing to an interpreting fact (*Deutung*). (qted. in *DH* 459)

To which Auden responds, "I hope there is an answer to this objection, but I don't know what it is" (*DH* 459). Kassner sets Christianity in opposition to poetry because, as Mendelson explains, "When, according to Christian theology, the Word was made flesh, it had no need for the shaping artifice of poetic metre because its incarnate form was complete in itself" (*Later Auden* 368). Poetry, on the other hand, needs artifice as a supplement, thus revealing its deficiency. Elsewhere, Auden takes a position akin to Kassner's when he contends:

> Since the Word was made flesh, it is impossible to imagine God as speaking in anything but the most sober prose. If Blake was right in saying that Milton was of the Devil's party without knowing it, this is because while it is perfectly credible that Lucifer should speak in a High style, to give God admirable speeches to deliver is to turn him into a Zeus without Zeus' vices. (*SW* 119)

According to Auden, Milton's God may not have spoken in Lucifer's High style, but he still did not speak plainly enough, since the plainness of God's speech is one of the ways in which he is distinguished from anthropomorphic classical gods, whose vices and virtues are exaggerations of those found among men. Therefore, poets who adopt "a High style" may seem to emulate Lucifer, or pagan figures like Zeus, rather than God. Moreover, to those who believe that "the imagination . . . is identified with the divine," Auden states, "The coming of Christ in the form of a servant who cannot be recognized

by the eye of flesh and blood, only by the eye of faith, puts an end to all such claims. The imagination is to be regarded as a natural faculty," in the realm of the frivolous, with all the limitations that implies (*SW* 120-21). So, according to Auden, "If the Fall made man conscious of the difference between good and evil, then the Incarnation made him conscious of the difference between seriousness and frivolity and exorcised the world" (*Prose II* 345). However, as shown in Chapter One, "Auden's notions about the 'frivolity of art'"-- which Hecht correctly states "derived in part from views he shared with Byron and Eliot, and was later strengthened by the doctrines of Kierkegaard" ("Hawk" 139)-- often themselves provoked a sense of guilt because he believed that "[s]ince Art and Science are human activities," that is, one of "Caesar's things," "there is always an element of sin, the sin of idolatry, in our creation and enjoyment of either" (Auden *Prose II* 169). So "Auden's doubts about his art are Christian doubts" (Kirsch 70), and he comes to the conclusion that "Christ calls all art into question" (*SW* 120).[55]

The gap between human language and the Word to which Kassner referred figures prominently in *Four Quartets*. In his early poetry, Eliot had frequently underlined the inadequacy of language, as when a frustrated Prufrock exclaims, "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (*CPP* 16) and Sweeney of *Sweeney Agonistes* expresses annoyance at having to use language at all: "I gotta use words when I talk to you" (*CPP* 125). What he describes as our "perpetual compromise with words" is especially taxing for a poet, as he explains in "Scylla and Charybdis" (1952): "It is supposed that the poet, if anybody, is one engaged in perpetual pursuit of *the right word.* My own experience would be more accurately described as the attempt to avoid the wrong word. For as to the right word, I am not convinced it is anything but a mirage" (9, 6). The difficulty of avoiding the

[55] As Lavinia de Veritas famously declared in her retraction, "It is all a horror. It is all unneedful."

wrong word is exacerbated when one tries to express the numinous, so, as the quartets testify, Eliot's frustration with language is only increased following his conversion when he is driven to attempt to convey religious truth, not only the conditions of earthly life. In these poems, he seems to have shed much of his anxiety that poetry is inherently transgressive, a fear which permeates *Ash-Wednesday*, but now obsessively probes his ability, or rather inability, to use poetry to convey truth, particularly of a religious nature: "He dares to hope that his poetry may be a religious vocation and that mystical contemplation and art may become united in the service of God, but realizes that language cannot express the inexpressible" (Brett 198), or at least not to his satisfaction. Although Eliot claimed that the "greater simplification of language" in his later poetry derives from his improved "command of words" (*Writers at Work* 104-05), his struggle with language is still ongoing, as explicitly shown in all of the quartets except "The Dry Salvages."[56] For example, "Burnt Norton" complains:

> Words strain,
>
> Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,

---

[56]"The Dry Salvages" doesn't contain a lengthy passage about Eliot's poetic travails, but in 1952's "Scylla and Charybdis" he describes some of his difficulties in writing it: "In one of my poems, 'The Dry Salvages,' I had occasion to describe the sort of debris found on a sea beach, and among it the shells of a particular kind of crab. On re-reading the poem some time after the final text had been published, I was horrified to observe that I had referred to the wrong kind of crab" (7). He had meant the horseshoe crab not the hermit crab, but felt the former did not sound right and "if the word makes the wrong noise, the surface of the poem is defaced," but "if it has the wrong meaning, the poem will not stand examination" (6). "In such a dilemma, there was only one choice: to put in the right crab, and sacrifice the right sound" (7), which Eliot accordingly did. So the challenge of avoiding the wrong word is even greater for a poet like Eliot who is concerned with truthfulness as well as aesthetics. Eliot pokes fun at his fastidious with language in one of the "Five-Finger Exercises," in which he writes, "How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!" with

> . . . his brow so grim
> And his mouth so prim
> And his conversation, so nicely
> Restricted to What Precisely
> And If and Perhaps and But. (*CPP* 136-37)

Although such carefulness and qualification would seem common among writers, Eliot often gave the impression of being more scrupulous than most, a sense which Auden conveys in "A Happy New Year" (1932): "Unhappy Eliot choosing his words" (*EA* 448).

Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,

Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,

Will not stay still. (*CPP* 175)

In "East Coker," Eliot points to a passage he deems "not very satisfactory" to show that he is left "still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" (*CPP* 179). Despite his "twenty years" of "Trying to learn to use words . . . every attempt / Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure":

And so each venture

Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate

With shabby equipment always deteriorating

In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,

Undisciplined squads of emotion. (*CPP* 182)

Such "shabby equipment" makes it difficult to describe the mundane, never mind things of the spirit. Even if one manages to approach the poetic ideal described in "Little Gidding," "where every word is at home, / Taking its place to support the others / . . . . / The complete consort dancing together" (*CPP* 197), the effect is nevertheless short-lived, as the Yeatsian ghost explains:

Last season's fruit is eaten

And the fullfed beast shall kick the empty pail.

For last year's words belong to last year's language

And next year's words belong to last year's language. (*CPP* 194)[57]

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[57]Regarding the identity of the "familiar compound ghost" (*CPP* 193), Gardner relates: "Eliot was justified in telling Hayward that, although some readers would identify the 'visionary figure' with Yeats, he did not mean 'anything so precise as that'; but the drafts make it clear that he began with Yeats in mind and worked towards a greater generality" (*Four Quartets* 67). For example, to Kristian Smidt's inquiry about

So although "his creative enterprise is to bridge the gap between temporal words and the timeless Word" (Kim 79), the quartets reveal that the words of a poet can never achieve the wholeness or permanence of the Logos, "The Word in the desert" (*CPP* 175).

The Sacredness of Silence

According to both poets, the difficulty of using words to describe religious experience is compounded because spiritual reality is located in the realm of silence. In an article on Auden, Daphne Turner explains that the "sense that silence is the mode in which we experience ultimate truth is familiar in the mystical traditions of both Western and Eastern religions," as seen in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, for example:

> [T]he higher we soar in contemplation the more limited become our expressions of that which is purely intelligible; even as now, when plunging into the Darkness which is above the intellect, we pass not merely into brevity of speech, but even into absolute silence, of thoughts as well as of words. (103)

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the ghost, Eliot had written that he "was thinking primarily of William Yeats, . . . the body on the foreign shore was William Yeats's" (qted. in Gardner *Four Quartets* 67). In *Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Auden*, Ellmann states that "though not named, and though, as Eliot said later, the figure blends various writers . . . it is primarily and recognizably Yeats," which is "particularly admirable" after their long years of mutual antagonism: "True friendship was only possible after Yeats was dead, and could be sifted down to those elements which Eliot found congenial" (94-95). Contrary to Ellmann's assertion, Eliot actually began to feel less antagonistic to Yeats before his death, during their work together with the Group Theatre in the 1930s. This passage also bears the mark of Dante since Eliot employs his form, unrhymed tercets with alternating masculine and feminine endings, creating what Auden calls "the best imitation of Dante in English" (*Prose II* 324). Originally, Eliot's reference to Dante, like his evocation of Yeats, was more explicit. In the early drafts, "the 'dead master' or 'familiar compound ghost' is greeted with the cry 'Are you here, Ser Brunetto?', translating Dante's cry on recognizing his old master in hell: *Siete voi quis, Ser Brunetto?*' (Gardner *Four Quartets* 64). As Eliot told Hayward, he decided to take out the allusion to the damned Brunetto (replacing it with "What! are *you* here?") because he intended the passage to have a purgatorial not infernal tone and, interestingly, because he didn't want to seem to compound Brunetto and Yeats: "the visionary figure has now become somewhat more definite and will no doubt be identified by some readers with Yeats . . . I do not wish to take the responsibility of putting Yeats or anybody else into Hell and I do not wish to impute to him the particular vice which took Brunetto there," that is, sexual perversion (qted. in Gardner *Four Quartets* 64-65). Deleting the reference to Brunetto also reinforces the ghost's message, since Brunetto advocates striving for literary immortality, instructing Dante on "how man may be eternal" (*Inferno* 15.85). Eliot's ghost, however, in speaking of the impermanence of the poet's message, remarks: "I am not eager to rehearse / My thoughts and theory which you have forgotten. / These things have served their purpose: let them be" (*CPP* 194). Like the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday*, who says "As I am forgotten / And would be forgotten, so I would forget" (*CPP* 91), the ghost rejects Brunetto's "illusory eternity of earthly renown" (D. Higgins 533).

Steiner, in "Silence and the Poet," rejoices in language's inadequacy precisely because it points to all that is transcendent:

> It is just because we can go no further, because speech so marvelously fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours. What lies beyond man's word is eloquent of God. That is the joyously defeated recognition expressed in the poems of St. John of the Cross and of the mystic tradition. (39)

Some poets, including Eliot and Auden, find the primacy of silence more problematic, however, as it forces them to write "poetry which represents an attempt . . . to express the inexpressible" (Eliot *OPP* 169). As McDonald remarks, "For a poem to gesture beyond its own capacities, and beyond its own language, is a trope which (with Eliot lending his authority) passes into the mainstream of British poetry" (*Serious Poetry* 9), and, as with comments on the general inadequacy of language, such gestures are not restricted to religious poets. For example, in an article written years before he became a Christian, Eliot speaks of "that intensity at which language strives to become silence" ("Poetic Drama" 636). In tandem with their increasing emphasis on the deficiencies of language, however, he and Auden began placing more and more importance on silence after their conversions, because that is where they believed the true Word resides. There is a problem, however, since if they are to continue as poets, they cannot retreat into this needful silence, only write about it. Therefore, Eliot and Auden often make the claim that the wordiness of poetry is not only incapable of expressing the Word but can actually undermine it.

The tension between language and silence is palpable in many of Eliot's postconversion works. Although "Burnt Norton" states that "Words, after speech, reach / Into the silence" (*CPP* 175), Eliot usually presents all such attempts by language to evoke silence, and thereby the religious sphere, as ultimately doomed. He "loves to play with the word/Word relationship" (Cook 88), which may seem to illustrate the connection between human speech and the "Word of no speech" (*CPP* 92), but in fact he often indulges in this "wordplay" to show the conflict between them. *The Rock*, for instance, declares that people have "Knowledge of speech, but not of silence; / Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word" (*CPP* 147), a state of affairs for which artists are partially to blame. Although *The Rock* grants that artists may use their works to praise God, it asserts that more often they create to glorify themselves and to avoid the silence needed for spiritual growth: "they write innumerable books; being too vain and distracted for silence: seeking every one after his own elevation, and dodging his emptiness" (*CPP* 158). Writers can threaten the spiritual development of their audience as well since their art can be a dangerous distraction, like the music of the flute in *Ash-Wednesday*. In *The Idea of a Christian Society*, Eliot states, "If this is a world in which I, and the majority of my fellow-beings, live in that *perpetual distraction* from God which exposes us to the one great peril, that of final and complete alienation from God after death, there is some wrong that I must try to help to put right" [emphasis added] (*Christianity* 75). His poetry may be part of the machinery that distracts people from God, however: "Much is your reading, but not the Word of GOD" (*CPP* 154). Poetry contributes to the noise that drowns out the Word. It may seem to be no more than "palaver."[58] In *Ash-Wednesday*,

[58] As "The Word of the LORD" pronounces in *The Rock*, "I have given you speech, for endless palaver" (*CPP* 154). Significantly, the last line of "Cape Ann," separated from the rest of the text and thereby given

as in *The Rock*, "silence as the condition of spiritual events has been stressed throughout" (E. Jones 60). Consequently, the speaker, "the pilgrim/prophet who seeks to translate the Logos into their words" (Timmerman 106), denounces those "who walk among noise and deny the voice," asking: "Where shall the word be found, where will the word / Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence" (*CPP* 96). Again, however, Eliot suggests that his poetry is one of the reasons why "there is not enough silence" for one to encounter the Word. As Marylu Hill points out in "Learning to Sit Still: The Confrontation of Human Language and Divine Silence in 'Ash Wednesday,'" the speaker prays, "Teach us to sit still" (*CPP* 98),

> But, since stillness demands the cessation of language, the poem . . . represents the moment of confrontation between Eliot the poet and Eliot the spiritual questor. Human language, the tool of the poet, is pitted against the Word unheard and unspoken, and the questor must choose between the language of the world and the silence in which the Word eternally resides. (85)

Although Hill contends that the speaker "ultimately chooses silence" (85), signalled by the end of the poem, Eliot cannot do so if he is to continue as a poet. Therefore, *Ash-Wednesday* testifies to the "conflict between noise and silence, a conflict for which there does not yet appear to be a poetic solution" (Hill 87). *Four Quartets* reveals that Eliot is still troubled by the notion that poetry, even when used for edification, may be merely noise that distracts people from God:

> Distracted from distraction by distraction
>
> Filled with fancies and empty of meaning

---

additional emphasis, is "The palaver is finished" (*CPP* 142), which gives the impression that the poem itself is palaver.

Tumid apathy with no concentration

Men and bits of paper . . . (*CPP* 174)

Prayer may seem to bridge the gap between words and the Word, since it is "the language beyond poetry which marks the farthest possible reach of words" (Edgerton 476), but it is perhaps too closely aligned to the realm of silence to help Eliot out of his predicament. "The Dry Salvages" speaks of "the unprayable" and "barely prayable / Prayer" (*CPP* 185-86), and "Little Gidding" affirms that "prayer is more / Than an ordering of words" (*CPP* 192), so for Eliot to articulate prayers in his poems-- which *are* so concerned with the "ordering of words"-- seems counter to the nature of prayer, which ideally embodies that which cannot be articulated. Therefore, "like 'Ash Wednesday,' *Four Quartets* is about . . . a man whose discursive thought about God yields only intermittently to the contemplative experience of God. Indeed, the motion of his words seems to lead him further and further away from the Unmoved Mover, the Word itself" (DeLamotte 349), or at least threatens to do so.

The numinous is also signified by silence in Auden's postconversion poems. In *For the Time Being*, for example, the Narrator, when still dreading the Incarnation, says "We are afraid / Of pain but more afraid of silence," which forces them to confront the deity (*CP* 352), and with the coming of the Christ child, "The general loquacious Public / . . . . / Have been puzzled and struck dumb" (*CP* 361). The Public does not remain silent for long, however. As Auden writes, "Needing above all / silence and warmth, we produce / brutal cold and noise" (*CPP* 787). Like Eliot, he claims that this noise is an attempt to evade God, an attempt in which writers are complicit. According to Auden, "the characteristic vice of the writer of to-day is overproduction" (*DM* 89), and

the glut of books tempts people to "read far too much," engrossing themselves in the words of others rather than tending more assiduously to their own development, spiritual and otherwise (*Prose II* 61). In "Words and the Word," Auden does suggest that writers, despite their "noise," can allude to the truth embodied by silence, albeit in a limited way: "One might say that for Truth the word 'silence' is the least inadequate metaphor, and that words can bear witness to silence only as shadows bear witness to light. Sooner or later every poet discovers the truth of Max Picard's remark: 'The language of the child is silence transformed into sound: the language of the adult is sound that seeks for silence'" (*SW* 119). As a child, one desires the articulation of language, but when one sees its inadequacy, one desires the wholeness of silence.

Auden does use poetry to extol silence, as Eliot does, but the gestures that poetry can make towards silence do not ultimately satisfy him, as "Homage to Clio" (1955) demonstrates. Clio is the Muse of History, and the poem does ponder the nature of history and history-makers, but, as Auden told Tolkien, it is "really . . . a hymn to our Lady" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 396). Akin to *Ash-Wednesday*'s "Lady of Silences" or "silent sister" (Eliot *CPP* 91, 94), who also evokes the Virgin Mary, Auden's "Clio" is called the "Madonna of silences," whose "silence already is there / Between us and any magical centre," as she "defend[s] with silence / Some world of your beholding" (*CP* 611-12). By describing Clio thus Auden maintains that the most significant historical events are those which go unrecorded *and* that the religious sphere which Mary represents is swathed in silence. Consequently, the speaker must ask her to "forgive our noises" (*CP* 613). From this perspective, the mere act of writing involves transgression, a view reinforced in the last stanza:

. . . Approachable as you seem,

I dare not ask you if you bless the poets,

For you do not look as if you ever read them,

Nor can I see a reason why you should. (*CP* 613)

Mendelson claims that "Clio does not merely ignore poetry, but refuses it her blessing" (*Later Auden* 398), and while that is only the speaker's assumption, it reveals Auden's sense that poetry and silence, with all that it entails, may be irreconcilable.[59] Many of his postconversion poems assert that "poets were in perpetual need of intercession" (McDiarmid *Apologies* 8), but "Homage to Clio" goes so far as to doubt that such intercession is even possible.

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[59]Similarly, in the garden of the Marion "silent sister" in *Ash-Wednesday*, "the fiddles and the flutes" are borne away and "the garden god" is reduced to silence (*CPP* 94), suggesting that art is out of place in the religious realm. Silence is not always figured positively, however. For example, in *For the Time Being*, before Mary receives Gabriel's message, "The garden is unchanged, the silence unbroken," signaling the "sleep of childhood" from which she must awake in order to receive religious revelation (*CP* 358). Usually, however, silence is presented as a condition necessary for contemplation and revelation. Incidentally, the Catholicity of the two poets is revealed by the frequency of their allusions to Mary. For instance, in accordance with the gospel account, Eliot's Simeon addresses Mary when he prophecies, "And a sword shall pierce thy heart, / Thine also" (*CPP* 106). In the second section of *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot includes his own version of the Litany to the Blessed Virgin Mary, in which Mary is described as a rose: "Rose of memory / Rose of forgetfulness / Exhausted and life-giving . . ." (*CPP* 91). Further, prayer is requested from Mary in *Ash-Wednesday* (*CPP* 99) and "The Dry Salvages": "Lady, whose shrine stands on the promontory, / Pray for all those who are in ships . . ." (*CPP* 189). In this last instance, Eliot is willing to court inaccuracy in order to include a reference to Mary. He told a correspondent that there actually wasn't a statue of Mary on the particular promontory he describes, "But I thought that there *ought* to be a shrine of the B.V.M. [Blessed Virgin Mary] at the harbour mouth of a fishing port" (qted. in Gardner *Four Quartets* 34). Barbara Everett contends that Eliot gave such prominence to Mary in his poetry that it can seem like he's edging towards "a theology of the Four Persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Ghost and Virgin Mary)" (12). As well as Auden's portrayal of Mary in *For the Time Being* and "Homage to Clio," he refers to the Madonna in poems like "The Ballad of Barnaby" (1968), in which Barnaby tumbles in her honour and asks her "To intercede with Thy Son for me!" (*CP* 826). Regarding "Homage to Clio," Auden sent a copy to Ursula Niebuhr, remarking, "you were so much in my mind while I was writing it, as the only person I know who will understand my Anglican problem: -- Can one write a hymn to the Blessed Virgin Mary without being 'pi'? The Prots don't like her and the Romans want bleeding hearts and sobbing tenors" (qted. in Fuller 465). Recall also that Auden was speaking of "Homage to Clio" when he told Tolkien he was trying "to write a 'Christian' piece of literature without making it obvious or 'pi'" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 396). By partially disguising Mary as Clio, Auden certainly makes the Christianity of his work less obvious than much religious poetry and, if his treatment of Mary does not satisfy those Catholics who "want bleeding hearts," at least it is not likely to annoy Protestant readers. As Mendelson explains, "in the early 1950s . . . his poems began sketching a theology of the Madonna, although with an allusiveness and tact that spared his Protestant friends from feeling scandalized" (*Later Auden* 280).

Auden's most profound exploration of the conflict between art and religion, words and silence, is found in what is often regarded as his masterpiece, *The Sea and The Mirror,* subtitled "A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" (1944).[60] Hecht contends that *The Sea and The Mirror*, unlike *For the Time Being*, is "secular" because of its focus on aesthetics (*Hidden Law* 244), but in fact it is "really about the Christian conception of Art" (Auden qted. in U. Niebuhr 11). Auden called it "my Ars Poetica, in the same way I believe *The Tempest* to be Shakespeare's, i.e., I am attempting, which in a way is absurd, to show, in a work of art, the limitations of art" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 205). In "Delight and Truth: Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*," Daphne Turner explains, "Like *The Tempest* in being self-reflexive, Auden's poem raises the question of relationships between truth, the writer, his art, the work, the audience, the performance, and the inassimilable," but "his is an overtly Christian stance, in a way that Shakespeare's is not" (97). Auden begins his poem after the end of Shakespeare's play, and one reason for doing so is "the implication in Prospero's 'Epilogue' (sometimes read as Shakespeare's abjuration of art) that the artistic life could be incompatible with spiritual values" (Callan *Carnival* 191):

> . . . my ending is despair;
> Unless I be relieved by prayer,
> Which pierces so that it assaults
> Mercy itself and frees all faults.
> As you from crimes would pardoned be,

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[60] Spears thinks that *For the Time Being*, as well as being overshadowed by *Four Quartets*, "has also suffered from the equally inevitable comparison with the other work that originally appeared in the same volume with it, *The Sea and the Mirror*, which has seemed to most critics more brilliant, novel, and provocative, and therefore has the lion's share of their attention" (*Auden* 217).

Let your indulgence set me free. (14-20)

Fuller remarks, "Prospero's words are, of course, a kind of pun, an actor's appeal for applause, but for Auden their suggestion that the artist as a maker of illusions is in need of supernatural grace when his belief in these illusions has been shattered, is a powerful one" (357). In *The Sea and The Mirror*, the contrast between illusory art and religious truth is established from the Preface, "*The* STAGE MANAGER *to the Critics*":

Well, who in his own backyard
Has not opened his heart to the smiling
Secret he cannot quote?
Which goes to show that the Bard
Was sober when he wrote
That this world of fact we love
Is unsubstantial stuff:
All the rest is silence
On the other side of the wall;
And the silence ripeness,
And the ripeness all. (*CPP* 403-4)

The "world of fact" is also the world of words and of art, whereas Auden, alluding to *King Lear*, asserts that what exists in "the silence" is more essential. "In the end, the religious sense has no need for art ('the smiling/Secret he cannot quote')" (Fuller358), which is why Auden's Prospero, like Shakespeare's, feels impelled to give up his art.

In "Prospero to Ariel," the first of three sections, Prospero is on the point of dismissing Ariel, "the poem's personification of art itself" (Mendelson *Prose II* xxv),

because he realizes that art has spiritually hindered him. He regrets substituting "magic" for life, "giving a city / Common warmth and touching substance, for a gift / In dealing with shadows" (*CP* 405). Auden suggests that all artists do this to some extent, and that such a choice can not only lead to a less fulfilling life, but to sin. As Kierkegaard stated, "From the Christian point of view and in spite of all aesthetics, any poet's existence is a sin, viz., the sin that one is writing poetry instead of living; that one occupies oneself with God and truth only in one's imagination," if at all, "instead of aiming at experiencing both existentially" (qted. in Hecht *Hidden Law* 444). Since it helps one evade these existential encounters, art can be dangerously delusive. For example, Prospero tells Ariel, "Now our partnership is dissolved, I feel so peculiar: / As if I had been on a drunk since I was born / And suddenly now, and for the first time, am cold sober," and that "I am glad I have freed you, / at last I can believe I shall die. / For under your influence death is inconceivable" (*CP* 409; 404).[61] Only with this clear-sightedness that forces him to confront death can he attain the otherworldly orientation that religious faith demands. Prospero concedes that art can disillusion as well, however, and "books can teach one" that "most desires end up in stinking ponds" (*CP* 405). Consequently, he tells Ariel, "hold up your mirror, boy" (*CP* 406), alluding to Shakespeare's claim in Hamlet that the purpose of drama is "to hold . . . the mirror up to nature" (3.2.24-25). Later in the poem, however, Caliban calls Shakespeare's phrase "misleading in its aphoristic sweep . . ."

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[61] Some of these lines were originally written for Simeon in *For the Time Being,* who declared, for example, that with the Incarnation, "I can believe I can really die" (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 212). However, Mendelson states that "the poet-Simeon . . . is concerned more with his gift and its interesting limits than with the vision the Biblical Simeon was unselfconsciously grateful to receive," as when he responds to the Incarnation by saying he is "glad that for the first time in my life, I have seen / Something I could not imagine for myself" (212). Mendelson continues, "When he replaced Simeon-as-poet with Simeon-as-theologian, Auden did not abandon Simeon's poem, but reused much of it to make an acid rebuke to his own vanity in posing as Simeon in the first place," by inserting some of the poet-Simeon's lines, albeit rather insubstantial ones, into Herod's speech, and by giving others to Prospero, who admits that after much error he is just beginning to take his first steps toward faith (213).

(*CP* 428), and elsewhere Auden remarks that art "is the mirror held up to nature. Shakespeare says it is. But, of course, only to certain aspects of nature" (*Prose II* 490). If poetry can't completely capture the natural, it certainly can't do so for the supernatural. So while Auden cites in the epigraph to *The Dyer's Hand* Nietzsche's claim that "We have Art in order that we may not perish from Truth," he also agrees with Nietzsche that "Art is not enough" (qted. in Callan *Carnival* 199).

In accordance with the Stage Manager, Prospero envisions the spiritual quest that he will undertake following this renunciation of art as a journey into silence:

> . . . all these heavy books are no use to me any more, for
>
> Where I go, words carry no weight; it is best,
>
> Then, I surrender their fascinating counsel
>
> To the silent dissolution of the sea . . . (*CP* 404)[62]

The emphasis here on the inability of art to guide one in spiritual matters and the consequent need to turn to silence is very Eliotic, as McDonald reveals. "While 'The Sea and the Mirror' is obviously a work whose explicit literary relations are with Shakespeare and *The Tempest*," it is also influenced by Eliot, "and in particular the Eliot of *Four Quartets*" (McDonald *Serious Poetry* 111-12). Not only is "Prospero's verbal world . . . markedly Eliotic, rather than Shakespearean in tone" (113),[63] "Eliot's presence" is "an important one" as "Prospero . . . is engaged in finding the eloquence for a farewell to eloquence, a wordy and rhetorically self-aware style of elaboration which indicates--with

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[62] Although Auden is never entirely consistent in his use of symbols, this line, and Gonzalo's description of the wake of the ship as lingering on "Sea and silence" (*CP* 413), suggests that he uses the sea to signify silence and the mirror to signify art, showing that the tension between them is central to the poem.

[63] As one example, McDonald points out that Prospero's statement, "we have only to learn to sit still" (*CP* 405), similar to Gabriel's injunction to Joseph (*CP* 364), echoes Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday*: "Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still" (*Serious Poetry* 113).

whatever degree of sorrow-- the ultimate inadequacy and inauthenticity of words for the higher purposes of the spirit" (113). For example, foreseeing his return to Milan, when he will be treated "like other old men," Prospero wonders:

> . . . shall I ever be able
> To stop myself from telling them what I am doing,--
> Sailing alone, out over seventy thousand fathoms--?
> Yet if I speak, I shall sink without a sound
> Into unmeaning abysses. Can I learn to suffer
> Without saying something ironic or funny
> On suffering? I never suspected the way of truth
> Was a way of silence . . . (*CP* 409)[64]

The very verbosity of this praise of silence, like that in Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* or *Four Quartets*, may lead one to doubt Prospero will be able to follow his own prescription and give up his garrulous art.

In the poem's second section, "The Supporting Cast, Sotto voce," an unrepentant Antonio scorns Prospero's attempt to forswear 'magic": "Break your wand in half, / The fragments will join; burn your books or lose / Them in the sea, they will soon reappear" (*CP* 411). He portrays Prospero as an inveterate puppeteer, who cannot prevent himself

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[64] Auden's reference to "seventy thousand fathoms" alludes to Kierkegaard, who "often speaks figuratively as sailing alone over seventy thousand fathoms: '. . . the martyrdom of being against the understanding, the peril of lying upon the deep, the seventy thousand fathoms, in order to find God'" (Callan *Carnival* 183). (The phrase may also recall Ariel's song to Ferdinand in *The Tempest*, which begins, "Full fathom five thy father lies" [1.2.397], a song which, incidentally, Eliot alludes to in *The Waste Land* when he writes, "Those are pearls that were his eyes" [*CPP* 62].) Auden also employs similar imagery in an earlier poem, "Leap before You Look" (1940), in which he urges Kallman to take a Kierkegaardian leap of faith:

> A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
> Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear:
> Although I love you, you will have to leap;
> Our dream of safety has to disappear. (*CP* 314)

from using his art to manipulate others. Even now, Antonio alleges, Prospero's art is evident in the careful arrangement of the characters on the ship: "Yes, Brother Prospero, your grouping could / Not be more effective" (*CP* 411).[65] Antonio is given some grounds for his skepticism that Prospero can renounce art because even while Prospero speaks of the need for silence on his spiritual journey, he asks Ariel to sing for him. McDiarmid states that he accepts that "silence that is the source of ultimate spiritual truths . . . But Prospero's last order to Ariel-- whom he has ostensibly freed-- asks for sound to fill the silence. What Prospero really wants is a lullaby to comfort and distract him from the disagreeable 'way of truth' he has chosen" (*Auden's Apologies* 103-4). Consequently, she thinks "Auden has created in Prospero an unpleasant, supercilious, and limited character, who claims a religious awareness he does not possess" (104). This judgment is too harsh, however. Rather, in his portrayal of Prospero, which, like Shakespeare's, "is, on one level, a self-portrait" (McDonald 112). Auden reveals his own struggle to reconcile his desire for spiritual development and his love for art. Although, like Eliot, Auden thinks silence is essential for faith, he is not able to submit fully to it himself.

The Value of Indirection

Through Caliban, however, Auden suggests another way in which to regard the relation between art and religion, one in which the renunciation of poetry becomes

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[65] Fuller suggests that Antonio's characterization of Prospero may have been inspired by a poem of Rilke's that Auden admired, "Ariel" (356), in which the eponymous speaker quakes:

> . . . I look on,
> terrified by this man who has become
> a duke again. How easily he draws
> the wire through his head and hangs himself
> up with the other puppets. (125)

Although Rilke's Ariel portrays Prospero as a puppet as well, he is nevertheless able to control the other puppets. Like Auden's Antonio, Rilke's Ariel asserts that Prospero will not be able to cede his power just because he's leaving the island. Moreover, they both portray Prospero as an artist who practices what Auden routinely calls "magic," art that is intended to manipulate others. So "magic" in *The Sea and The Mirror* does not always refer to art in general. In certain contexts, as when Antonio employs it, it refers to a propagandistic kind of art.

unnecessary. "Caliban to the Audience," the poem's third and longest section, was "one of Auden's favourite pieces of work" (Fuller 363). Auden wrote in "Balaam and His Ass," "Over against Caliban, the embodiment of the natural, stands the invisible spirit of imagination, Ariel" (*DH* 132), an opposition which holds true in Auden's poem as well as Shakespeare's play.[66] Like Simeon and Herod in *For the Time Being*, Caliban speaks in prose, which allows him to expound his position in great detail. Mendelson relates that Auden had been unsure of how to proceed with Caliban until he "'got the James idea; it seemed blindingly right.' What was blindingly right to him was his realization that (as he explained later) 'since Caliban is inarticulate, he has to borrow, from Ariel, the most artificial style possible, i.e. that of Henry James'" (*Later Auden* 210). Using James's highly polished, artful voice, the brutish Caliban presumes to speak for others. Initially, he takes the audience's part and harangues Shakespeare for allowing him, the "real," to intrude into a work of art, then he speaks on behalf of Shakespeare, detailing the progress of the artist, before finally speaking for himself and Ariel. As Spears explains:

> Within the light framework the argument is, of course, intensely serious; but Auden needs the complicated system of masks, the double irony, to enable him to speak seriously. His innovation consists in preparing the reader for ironic argument by creating a faintly ridiculous style and fantastic masks, and then

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[66] As discussed in chapter One, Auden draws a distinction between Prospero poets, who are primarily concerned with truth, and Ariel poets, primarily concerned with beauty (*DH* 337-41; *FA* 385-91). In *The Sea and the Mirror*, however, the chief dichotomy is between Ariel and Caliban, with Prospero being somewhat pulled between them. Theirs is not an antagonistic relationship, however. For example, in the charming "Postscript," Ariel sings to Caliban, declaring himself:

> Helplessly in love with you,
> Elegance, art, fascination,
> Fascinated by
> Drab mortality. (*CP* 445)

Rather than asserting superiority over Caliban, Ariel "is a 'shadow,' longing to be made a whole by the drabness and humiliation of the flesh, 'perfection' though he is" (Turner 102).

> making the argument not ironic; the technique is what William Empson might term 'the Fool speaks truth.' (*Auden* 229-30)

Although Auden's treatment of Caliban may seem to make any discussion of sincerity moot, since neither he nor Caliban speak in their own voice, Spears is right to imply that Auden does endorse Caliban's argument, convoluted as it may be. He had even written to a friend that he was "extremely pleased and surprised . . . to find that at least one reader feels that the section written in the pastiche of James is more me than the sections written in my own style . . ." (qted. in Mendelson *Later Auden* 231). In fact, the artificiality of the style reinforces his message.

Caliban exhibits even less confidence in the power of art to reflect reality than Prospero. He asserts that art can be said to act as a mirror not because it reflects a true picture of reality, but because it shows a "reversal of value," a "sinisterly biassed image" which signifies its absolute otherness from real life (*CP* 428-29).[67] Caliban concedes that the great artist may be able to convey the truth to some degree, but even so he cannot show people the truth and their distance from the truth at the same time. The artist "who, in representing to you your condition of estrangement from the truth," meaning primarily religious truth, as will be clear,

> [I]s doomed to fail the more he succeeds, for the more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly can he indicate the truth from which it is estranged, the brighter his revelation of the truth in its order, its justice, its joy, the fainter shows his picture of your actual condition in all its drabness and sham, and, worse still, the more sharply he defines the estrangement itself . . . the more he must

[67] So although, according to Caliban, the audience finds his intrusion into Shakespeare's play scandalous because he represents "everything that is not artifice" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 230), reality can in fact never enter a work of art. Caliban is just as fictitious as Ariel.

> strengthen your delusion that an awareness of the gap is in itself a bridge . . . (*CP* 442)

So within this speech of Caliban's, Auden "subtly and brilliantly expose[s] the contradictions that govern both art and life" (Fuller 367). He also shows that artificiality is not limited to art. Our lives are corrupted by staginess, too, resembling "the greatest grandest opera rendered by a very provincial touring company indeed" (*CP* 443). Acknowledging that we are "inveterate actors" can work to our benefit, however, since "it is at this moment that for the first time in our lives we hear . . . the real Word which is our only *raison d'être*" (*CP* 444).[68] Here he makes clear that "the truth" to which he had earlier referred is actually embodied by "the real Word," the Logos. So the audience's estrangement from the truth is their estrangement from Him, but, as Jacobs explains, they can "come to see God precisely in their distance from Him" ("Local Culture" 567). Caliban contends that this encounter with the Logos does not completely change us, "our shame, our fear, our incorrigible staginess . . . are still, and more intensely than ever, all we have,"

> Only now it is not in spite of them but with them that we are blessed by that Wholly Other Life from which we are separated by an essential emphatic gulf of Which our contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch-- we understand

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[68] The religious dimension of Caliban's speech has already been suggested when, for example, he asks "ultimately, what other aim and justification" has the artist "if not to make you unforgettably conscious of the ungarnished offending gap between what you so questionably are and what you are commanded without any question to become . . . ?" (*CP* 442). His assertion recalls Auden's view, expressed through Herod and elsewhere, that because of the Incarnation we must confront the extent of our fallenness-- that which we "so questionably are"-- and accept our duty to try to imitate Christ-- that which we are "commanded without any question to become." So it can be argued that Caliban implicitly describes an artist's obligation in religious terms. Towards the end of his speech, the religious thrust is made even more apparent.

> them at last-- are feebly figurative signs . . . it is just here, among the ruins and the bones, that we may rejoice in the perfected work which is not ours. (*CP* 444)[69]

Therefore, art, "our contrived fissures of mirror," is valuable because it can reveal its unbridgeable distance from reality and from religious truth. Even if Prospero renounces art, he is still separated from the "Wholly Other Life" by his own artificiality and weakness, yet if he regards art in the proper way it can direct him to that "perfected Work which is not ours" and which is beyond art (*CP* 444): "[W]hen we have come to realize the limitations of art . . . religious faith gives us a glimpse of the perfect work created by the divine will. . . " (Brett 220). In the poems which Auden wrote after *The Sea and the Mirror*, "the gulf between human words and 'the real Word . . .' remained emphatic" (McDiarmid *Apologies* 38), but rather than lament this gulf he decided to exploit it.

Although Eliot calls attention to his poetry in the self-reflexive passages of *Four Quartets*, in an unpublished 1933 lecture he describes his ideal as

> Poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not on the poetry, this seems to me the thing to try for. To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music*. (qted. in Matthiessen 90)

Despite his awareness of language's deficiencies, he aspires "to go beyond poetry, to speak the everlasting truth, the Word, not words" (Kim 82). As Auden's Caliban would argue, however, even if Eliot managed to approach this goal, the effect would only be to delude the audience, and perhaps himself, into thinking that the gap between words and

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[69] Mendelson explains that Auden's reference to "that Wholly Other Life" alludes to "the *ganz andere*, as Rudolf Otto named the holy, in a phrase echoed throughout the theology of Barth, Niebuhr, and Tillich" (*Later Auden* 236).

the Word had been bridged. To avoid this danger, Auden takes another route and, unlike in his transitional verse, he begins to emphasize the artificiality of his poems. For example, each character in *The Sea and the Mirror* is given a different, often highly complex, verse form, demonstrating Auden's virtuosity in a very self-conscious way, and the subtitle of *The Age of Anxiety*, "A Baroque Eclogue," points to its "extravagance of form" (Spears *Auden* 231). Auden advocates calling attention to a poem's artifice explicitly in the playful "'The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning'" (1953), urging poets to "Be subtle, various, ornamental, clever" (*CP* 619).[70] Moreover, he tells poets how to lie in idealizing love poetry, because "From such ingenuous fibs are poems born," as well as how to write insincere political poetry if needed to "save your skin" (*CP* 620-21). Although such advice seems to run counter to Auden's repeated calls for sincerity, he came to feel that poetry can never tell the entire truth anyway because of its distance from the Logos and because of our own dishonesty, so lying openly is paradoxically the most sincere course. As Caliban preached, recognition of our "incorrigible staginess," in life and in art, prevents a delusive identification with the Word, and reminds man-- "imago Dei who forgot his station"-- that he is "The only creature ever made who fakes" (*CP* 621). Nevertheless, poetry can actually help us see what the truth is, despite its artificiality:

> What but tall tales, the luck of verbal playing,
>
> Can trick his lying nature into saying

[70] Shakespeare played a role in this poem as well since the title alludes to a passage in *As You Like It*. When Touchstone tells Aubrey he wishes she were poetical, she says, "I do not know what 'poetical' is. Is it honest in deed and word? Is it a true thing?" to which he responds, "No, truly; for the truest poetry is the most feigning; and lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear in poetry may be said as lovers they do feign" (3.3.17-22). Fuller explains that the remark is "a kind of inverted syllogism naively betraying his own doubtful motives in wooing her: poetry is the language of lovers, and what lovers swear in poetry they feign, thus poetry is most typical ('truest' in that sense) when it is most feigning" (452), which is also Auden's point in the poem.

That love, or truth in and serious sense,

Like orthodoxy, is a reticence? (*CP* 621)[71]

By embodying falsehood, poetry paradoxically reveals that the truth is what it is not. Auden again praises silence, but now he shows a way in which poetry can indicate silence without falling silent itself. Mendelson writes that Auden came to feel that "the falsehoods of language could now he forgiven by the truths they indicate . . . and poetic fictions no longer needed an apology-- or at least seemed not to need one. The fictions Caliban derides as 'indescribably inexcusably awful' are the same ones Auden justified a few years later" in "'The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning'" (*Later Auden* 315). As Auden explained elsewhere, "Wooziness that knows it is woozy / May tell truths . . ." (*CP* 787). Although "in the many versions of Auden's defense of poetry through a defense of feigning, he sometimes seems to have pretended to be more single-minded than he was" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 369), this new attitude towards poetry helped to bolster his confidence that his work could express some facet of the truth, even if only indirectly and negatively.

Eliot does not routinely emphasize the artifice in his poems as Auden prescribes, but he does agree that the inadequacies of poetry can be used to convey religious truth indirectly. In an article on religious communication, John Tinsley, the former Bishop of Bristol, points out that the fact that "T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden both sought to cultivate indirection" is in keeping with Christianity, since "an essential part of the gospel is its disclosure of the divine pedagogy of indirection" (404). Quoting Emily Dickinson's "Tell all the truth but tell it slant / Success in circuit lies," Tinsley contends that "'Telling

[71] Auden frequently remarked that "Orthodoxy is reticence," a phrase which he tended to attribute either to an unnamed Anglican bishop or to "Anonymous" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 369).

it slant' is more than an appropriate form of the gospel: it is its essential content, a manner incumbent upon the Christian communicator by the very nature of the gospel. The gospel is not only what is said, but how it is said" (399). Because divine revelation is incommensurable with human speech, Jesus' sermons and parables needed to employ "indirect or paradoxical language," and anyone who would follow in his footsteps and try to impart Christian truth must follow the same procedure (403). Tinsley calls Kierkegaard "the apostle of indirect communication," who, he argues, influenced Eliot-- although only through his reading of Williams and Niebuhr-- and, to a greater degree, Auden (400). Jacobs agrees that in Auden's contemplation of the problem of how to convey truth through poetry, he "gained insight from Kierkegaard; he found especially useful the Danish thinker's notion of 'indirect communication'" ("Limits of Poetry" 28). In *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,[72] Kierkegaard momentarily breaks with his use of indirect communication in order to explain how it operates in his work. He believed we can only approach knowledge subjectively, and such subjective knowledge "does not lend itself to direct utterance": "Hence when anyone proposes to communicate such truth directly, he proves his stupidity; and if anyone else demands this of him, he too shows his stupidity" (73). Therefore, one must employ an "elusive and artistic communication of truth" (73), which Kierkegaard usually does by employing personae to express different points of view and allowing the reader to see which is most sound, rather than pontificating to them. Even these personae don't give direct answers, however. Jacobs explains that "many of Kierkegaard's works-- in fact, all of his most famous ones-- are

[72] Auden undoubtedly knew this work of Kierkegaard's well. While teaching at Swarthmore in the early 1940s, he told Ursula Niebuhr, "My seminar on Romanticism starts tomorrow. Poor things, they have no idea of what they have let themselves in for-- Reinhold and Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*" (qted. in U. Niebuhr 112).

not explicitly Christian," and often while "these works approach the questions with which Christianity is most concerned, . . . they do not offer Christian answers to those questions; indeed, their failure to produce compelling responses is just what leads the reader toward the Christian faith that alone can provide what we need" ("Limits of Poetry" 28).

While Auden and Eliot are never so indirect in their approach as Kierkegaard,[73] after their conversions they do begin to use their poetry to point the reader outside the text. Auden values poetry despite its inadequacies because it can "allud[e] to the value it cannot contain" (McDiarmid *Apologies* 12). For example, akin to his contention in "'The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning'" that the garrulousness of poetry helps us to recognize the superiority of that which is guarded by reticence, Auden writes in "The Cave of Making" that literature can act as "a shadow echoing / the silent light" and "bear witness / to the Truth it is not" (*CP* 693). Therefore, from Auden's perspective, "The only witness to the living God . . . which poetry can bear is indirect and negative" (*SW* 119-20). Similarly, in a discussion of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Eliot maintains that "the task of the poet" is "in making people comprehend the incomprehensible" (*TCTC* 134), particularly religious truth. The fact that "Words, after speech" must "reach / Into the silence" (*CPP* 175) shows that the poet is forced to proceed indirectly, however, by merely suggesting this numinous silence which it can never fully express. In accordance with Kierkegaard's principles, though, Eliot contends that the limitations of art serve to show us our need to go beyond art, and can therefore point us towards the realm of faith. As he puts it, the function of art is "to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness, reconciliation; and then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where

[73] In fact, both poets speak very directly about Christianity at times, as has been shown, but they do tend to be better satisfied with their more "elusive" efforts. Eliot praised *Four Quartets* over *The Rock*, for example, and Auden prided himself on *The Sea and the Mirror* but disowned "Christmas 1940."

that guide can avail us no longer" (*OPP* 87). Accordingly, as Cooper explains, in *Four Quartets*, "Eliot's programme . . . is to lead secularized consciousness through the aesthetic towards the religious awareness which lies beyond it, towards the doctrinal treasure of the whole sequence" (154-55). Although the quartets demonstrate their "aesthetic power," towards the end of the sequence, "in order to make room for the 'real' work of divine grace, the poem-as-superlative-artifact steps back from itself, simply and unpretensiously and asserts the need to recognize the limits of that power and, finally, to renounce it" (Cooper 136). In *The Sea and The Mirror*, although Prospero, when speaking of his intention to undertake a spiritual journey, remarks to Ariel, "I see you starting to fidget. I forgot. To you / That doesn't matter" (*CP* 410), Auden has just demonstrated how art, embodied by Ariel, can play host to such religious meditations. Similarly, Eliot asserts that "The poetry does not matter" (*CPP* 179), but nevertheless is able to use it to discuss those things that do matter. In fact, as this chapter has shown, both poets must rely on their art, inadequate though it is, in order to persuade their readers of the continuing and multifaceted importance of the Incarnation. So, as McDonald summarizes, "if we want a final paradox, we might assemble it like this: poetry is capable of saving us; the poetry does not matter" (*Serious Poetry* 137).

As with their discussions of the limits of art in general, therefore, we see that Eliot and Auden offer very useful and sensible approaches to the problem of literature's inability to articulate religious revelation. Moreover, they demonstrate again the need for humility, since only by humbly recognizing poetry's failings can it be used to gesture towards this transcendent meaning. As Edward Lobb says of Eliot's statement that "humility is endless" (*CPP* 179), "humility-- the acceptance of limitations-- enables one

to go beyond limitations" (26). Despite their seeming acceptance of poetry's inadequacies, however, Eliot and Auden still at times seem shamefaced about the great distance between their words and *the* Word and about the inescapable frivolity of their work. As McDiarmid says of Auden, they both felt that "poetry is justified" *only* when "it undermines its own importance" and shows its distance from "less frivolous realms" (*Apologies* xii). Repeatedly, however, they confessed to wanting a greater role in these less frivolous realms, and to have the ability to affect people more forcefully. As Auden told a friend, "Miss God appears to have decided that I am to be a writer, but that I am to have no fun, and no talent for making others as happy as I would like them to be" (qted. in Carpenter 316). In the conclusion to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot claimed that "poetry is not a career, but a mug's game. No honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what he has written: he may have wasted his time and messed up his life for nothing" (147-48). He continues, "All the better, then, if he could have at least the satisfaction of having a part to play in society as worthy as that of the music-hall comedian" (148). Chapter Four shows how their shared desire to transcend the limitations of their vocation and have more social utility led them to turn to the theatre. Even while they strive to entertain like "the music-hall comedian," however, they continue to assert the truth claims of Christianity and endeavour to provide spiritual sustenance for their audience.

Chapter Four

Enacting Belief: Works for the Stage

Throughout their careers, much of Eliot's and Auden's critical and creative energies were directed towards dramatic works. Long before he began writing plays himself, Eliot revealed his fascination with drama in essay after essay, leading him to remark in 1957:

> Reviewing my critical output for the last thirty-odd years, I am surprised to find how constantly I have returned to the drama, whether by examining the work of the contemporaries of Shakespeare, or by reflecting on the possibilities of the future. It may even be that people are weary of hearing me on this subject. (*OPP* 72)

Further, he acknowledged that "it may be, as I have read, that there is a dramatic element in much of my early work. It may be from the beginning I aspired unconsciously to the theatre-- or, unfriendly critics might say, to Shaftesbury Avenue and Broadway" (*OPP* 90). Auden, who was "stimulated by T. S. Eliot's acute interest in dramatic poetry" (Sidnell 62), was not as slow as Eliot to put his ideas about drama into practice, and his early fame rested in part upon his dramatic achievements. In fact, it was his first play *Paid on Both Sides* (1928) that originally led Eliot to champion him, declaring it "quite a brilliant piece of work . . . This fellow is about the best poet I have discovered in years" (qted. in Fuller 18). Both Eliot and Auden seemed to have been initially attracted to drama primarily, if not exclusively, for aesthetic reasons. For example, Auden's interest in experimenting with dramatic form is revealed in *Paid on Both Sides* itself, an avant-

garde work which employs elements from German expressionism and the medieval Mummers' play, and in later works such as *The Orators* (1931), which he described as "abstract drama-- all the action implied" (qted. in Fuller 85). Eliot was similarly drawn to the artistic possibilities of drama, as revealed in his first assay into the theatre, the innovative *Sweeney Agonistes* (1923-24), subtitled "Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama." Also, Eliot's theatrical impulse is indicated by his use of the dramatic monologue in poems like "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Portrait of a Lady," and "Gerontion," which, along with the multi-vocality of *The Waste Land*, suggests he welcomed the opportunity to speak in different voices.[1] Even when his poetry took a more personal turn in his transitional period and he began to speak more clearly in his own voice, he did not abandon theatrical techniques entirely, for example, expressing himself through dramatic personae in the Ariels. During the Thirties, however, both poets became increasingly interested in the instrumental as well as aesthetic possibilities of drama. They were not alone in this respect, since many writers, confronted with the economic depression, vast unemployment, and rising political turmoil of the era, felt compelled to try to use the stage to contribute to the alleviation of social ills. In Eliot's case, any general pricking of the conscience was coupled with his new sense of responsibility as a Christian writer to "redeem the time," and he thought drama would be the ideal medium through which to do so. Unlike many other contemporary dramatists, he and Auden choose to write verse rather than prose drama to promote their views.

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[1] This predilection is reflected in the title Eliot originally proposed for *The Waste Land*, an allusion to Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*: "He Do the Police in Different Voices." In Dickens's novel, Betty Higden exclaims, "I do love a newspaper . . . You mightn't think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of the newspaper. He do the Police in different voices" (qted. in V. Eliot *Waste Land* 125). With this title, Eliot would have been impersonating Dickens, who was impersonating the lower-class in order to create a character who in turn impersonates "the Police," laying the ground for the vocal appropriations and mimicry heard throughout the poem.

Although they sought to advance different causes-- Eliot served the Church while Auden promoted Socialist politics-- they employed similar theatrical innovations and techniques, and their plays of the period show the marks of mutual influence. Responding to each other in this way, they helped to resuscitate verse drama in England during the Thirties.

Following Auden's conversion, however, the two writers went in different directions. Shortly after he emigrated to America, Auden's growing ambivalence towards *art engagé* contributed to his decision to abandon his politically charged verse dramas and turn instead to opera. Since generally more importance is placed on the music than the libretto, Auden believed that opera limited his ability to preach to the audience. Eliot embraced a new genre as well, leaving behind more experimental drama for his version of the drawing room comedy, but he did so because he thought it would ultimately be *more* effective in transmitting his beliefs. In fact, his work in the theatre brought out his most evangelistic impulses. Therefore, as Christian dramatists, the poets trace a similar trajectory to that described in Chapter Two: Eliot sought to exercise more influence through his work, while Auden retreated somewhat from his engaged position. Although Auden's convictions, now religious as opposed to political, continued to find dramatic expression, in general his libretti avoid the heavy-handed didacticism of Eliot's plays. Also, while the focus on the Incarnation in their major postconversion poetry highlights the similarities in their theology, their postconversion dramatic works, like their transitional poems, tend to underline their ongoing religious differences, such as their positions on the importance of free will and the relative value of the *via negativa.* Their dramatic works also point to some of their artistic differences of opinion, specifically about questions regarding what constitutes a suitable subject for drama and

the mimetic limits of art. This chapter will first examine the often notably similar theories and methods at work in their earliest dramatic productions, and then look at how their later divergent paths, in which Auden embraced the highly artificial world of opera and Eliot adopted the conventions of the drawing room comedy, reflected their religious beliefs and affected the way in which those beliefs were transmitted to the audience.

In Search of an Audience

Eliot's and Auden's deep investment in drama in the Thirties reflected their desire for a wider audience, which would enable them to exercise more social utility. Eliot's prose in particular reveals this motivating factor behind his entrance into the theatre. At the start of his career, he seemed to pride himself on his literary elitism-- no doubt agreeing with Pound that *The Waste Land*, for example, was "for the elect, or the remnant, or the select few or the superior guys, or any other word you may choose, for the small numbers of readers that it is certain to have" (qted. in Southam 93)-- but like many Modernist writers, including Pound, later on he was increasingly driven to reach out to others beyond this "select few." Especially with the mounting social pressures of the Thirties, for a writer to address only an elite group, a closed circuit of sorts, seemed to doom him to irrelevancy. For Eliot, his growing unease over what appeared to be exclusionary tactics in his poetry, such as the heavy deployment of foreign languages, stemmed at least in part from his religious convictions, since he now felt obliged to promote the truth-claims of Christianity through his work. The Ariels were his first attempt to speak to a wider readership, but he placed much more hope in the theatre as the medium through which he would find the audience he sought.

In his introduction to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), Eliot averred, "[T]here is no doubt that a poet wishes to give pleasure, to entertain or divert people; and he should be glad to be able to feel that the entertainment or diversion is enjoyed by as large and various a number of people as possible"; In short, "the poet aspires to the condition of the music-hall comedian" (22). Eliot felt that drama provided the best opportunity for a poet to experience "the satisfaction of having a part to play in society as worthy as that of the music-hall comedian" because through it one could "convey the pleasures of poetry, not only to a larger audience, but to larger groups of people collectively" (*UPUC* 148). He hoped that the theatre would allow the poet to commune with his audience in the manner of the music-hall star Marie Lloyd, whose "audiences were invariably sympathetic" because they sensed "her understanding of the people and sympathy with them" ("Marie Lloyd" [1951] *SE* 456, 458). Audience and artist were united. In a chapter of *Saving Civilization* called "The Living Voice of the Thirties," McDiarmid describes how during this period Eliot and Auden, following in the footsteps of Yeats in particular, sought to counteract the "alienation of poet from audience" wrought by the printed word and create a "living social unity of performer and audience," such as they imagined was enjoyed in bardic culture (62-63). Mendelson concurs that the three poets had a similar mission and that "[l]ike Yeats and Eliot before him, Auden went to the stage to recover for poetry an audience and a social function" and "to reunite the private world of the poet with the public world of the theatre" (*Early Auden* 260). Ideally, they would thus create a sense of community through their work which would have a ripple effect in the culture at large, helping to unify an increasingly fragmented society. As Margaret Moan Rowe remarks in "Engaging an Audience:

Auden as Playwright," the reason Auden desired a receptive live audience becomes clear "when one realizes that he so often links the artist's 'wish to communicate' with the idea of community" (188). In seeking to reclaim what they regarded as the poet's traditional role, as the voice of this community, Yeats, Eliot and Auden gravitated towards what they regarded as poetry's most public form, the verse drama.

"It is to Mr. William Butler Yeats, more than to anyone else, that we owe the revival of poetic drama in our time," Eliot maintained. "I am thinking of Mr. Yeats as a whole: his own plays; his encouragement of other writers, such as J. M. Synge; and his work for the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, which kept poetic drama alive when it was almost extinct elsewhere" ("The Need for Poetic Drama" [1936] 991). Elsewhere, he remarked that "the Abbey Theatre kept poetry in the theatre. . . .If there is ever a dramatic revival in England in our time, it will owe a great deal to what was done in Dublin, however different may be the material, the ideas and the style" ("A Commentary" [1935] 611-12). As though taking up Yeats's mantle, Eliot fashioned himself as the great defender of verse drama, first through his criticism and then through his example, arguably contributing to its resuscitation even more than the elder poet. While he claimed not to want "to exaggerate the avidity of the appetite for verse plays," Eliot often appeared to do just that, as when he asserted that the audience for verse drama "could be enlarged almost indefinitely" and that "the current demand for such plays is considerable" ("The Future of Poetic Drama" [1938] 20). In truth, whatever "appetite for verse plays" there was-- and it was never so keen as Eliot seemed to imagine, nor so enduring-- largely resulted from his own insistent and enthusiastic endorsement of the medium.[2]

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[2] Eliot did sometimes sound a more pessimistic note regarding the audience for poetic drama, however. For example, in "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" (1920), he claimed, "The Elizabethan drama was

As an advocate for verse drama, Eliot took it upon himself to argue for its superiority over prose drama, particularly the realistic prose drama which most of his contemporaries were writing. Although "most people regard plays in verse as a necessary evil, like examinations . . . something of a strain on the mind even when they are not actually boring," he contended that "poetry is the natural and complete medium for drama; that the prose play is a kind of abstraction capable of giving you only a part of what the theatre can give; and that the verse play is capable of something much more intense and exciting" ("The Need for Poetic Drama" [1936] 991). Elaborating in a much later essay, "Poetry and Drama" (1957), Eliot writes:

> It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action-- the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express-- there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action. (*OPP* 87)

Only poetic drama "at its moments of greatest intensity" can express "[t]his peculiar range of sensibility . . . At such moments, we touch the border of those feelings which only music can express" (*OPP* 87). Unlike music, however, verse drama allows a degree of articulation as it captures these liminal sensations beyond the reach of prose drama.

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aimed at a public which wanted *entertainment* of a crude sort, but would *stand* a good deal of poetry; our problem should be to take a form of entertainment, and subject it to the process that would leave it a form of art" (*Sacred Wood* [1950] 70), suggesting that audiences will endure rather than embrace poetry and do so only if the work remains tolerably entertaining. As Mendelson points out (*Early Auden* 262), Auden is clearly responding to Eliot when, in a 1934 review, he declares that if a verse dramatist were to experiment with the form rather than follow worn-out conventions, "he may be agreeably surprised to find that after all the public will stand, nay even enjoy, a good deal of poetry" (*Prose I* 70). Auden may even have been trying to encourage the poet who had so encouraged him.

Eliot may have insisted that all language is inadequate when compared to the Logos, but, in this respect at least, poetry is less inadequate than prose, and therefore should be exploited in the theatre.

Eliot thought that poetry could achieve this "peculiar range of sensibility" at least partially because it evoked a subconscious response, particularly through its rhythm. He argued that this effect is enhanced in ritualistic verse drama. In an early essay, "Dramatis Personae" (1923), Eliot links drama to its beginnings in Greek religious rites and declares that "the stage-- not only in its remote origins, but always-- is a ritual, and the failure of the contemporary stage to satisfy the craving for ritual is one of the reasons why it is not a living art," but that the drama of the future will be "unhuman, impersonal, and abstract" (305-06). Ritual was very important in both Eliot's and Auden's drama, as in Yeats's Noh-inspired plays. Auden was drawn to ritualistic action from the beginning, and it was no doubt the ritualistic tenor of *Paid on Both Sides* that Eliot was responding to when he praised it so effusively. Writing in 1937, Isherwood says of his collaborator, "As a child, he enjoyed a high Anglican upbringing . . . The Anglicanism has evaporated, leaving only the height: he is still very much preoccupied with ritual in all its forms" ("Some Notes" 74). Perhaps because of drama's origin in religious rites-- from which the ritualistic aspects in Auden's work seem to have sprung-- the early Eliot at times seemed to conflate ritualistic drama with religious experience. For example, he claims, "Dramatic form may occur at various points along a line the termini of which are liturgy and realism" but ideally gravitates towards liturgy because then it can evoke a response akin to that which results from religious rites: "The play, like a religious service, should be a stimulant to make life more tolerable and augment our ability to live; it should stimulate

partly by the action of vocal rhythms on what, in our ignorance, we call the nervous system" (*Savonarola* [1926] x, xi-xii). After his conversion, however, Eliot maintained that, much as one should not treat the Mass as theatre, one should not treat the theatre as Mass (*SE* 48-49). Nevertheless, he continued to advocate the use of ritual in the theatre as long as one realized the distinction to be drawn between religion and drama. Moreover, he held to his belief that ritualistic drama had the ability to "stimulate partly by the action of vocal rhythms on what, in our ignorance, we call the nervous system," and therefore could tap deeper into the audience than prose drama. While prose drama continued to be culturally dominant, Eliot's insistence on the value of verse drama in his essays helped to increase its profile considerably and led many poets to enter the theatre for the first time.

Of course, Eliot's plays as well as his criticism contributed to the rise of verse drama during the Thirties. Much as he had done with his work in modern religious poetry-- which he had described as toiling in "a very important field still very unexplored by modern poets" (qted. in Bush 131)-- Eliot presented himself as a pioneer in contemporary verse drama, encouraging others to learn from him. In "Poetry and Drama," as he prepares "to comment on my intentions, failures, and partial successes, in my own plays," he remarks, "I do this in the belief that any explorer or experimenter in new territory may, by putting on record a kind of journal of his explorations, say something of use to those who follow him into the same regions and who will perhaps go farther" (*OPP* 78). Enough poets did venture into verse drama, encouraged at least in part by his essays and his example-- as well as by Auden's plays-- that in December 1935 *New Verse* felt obliged to dedicate an issue to "Poets and the Theatre." In his editorial

note, Grigson explains: "The occasion for this number . . . is the queer case in which poets in England now find themselves if they are interested in writing plays. Such an interest comes, largely, out of pronouncements of Mr. Eliot, who is the father, or god-father, of such plays as there have been" (2). Although Grigson was often critical of the later Eliot, he had to acknowledge the poet's influential role in the increasing presence of verse in the theatre. As well as soliciting a contribution from Eliot himself, Grigson included an article by Rupert Doone, who founded London's Group Theatre in 1932 with the painter Robert Medley. The Group Theatre, which may not even have come into existence had not Eliot helped to create a vogue for verse drama, played a major role in defining English theatre of the pre-war period, as Michael J. Sidnell demonstrates in his important study, *Dances of Death: The Group Theatre of London in the Thirties*. Sidnell details Eliot's and Auden's involvement in the Group, where they both sat on the board and contributed to the productions of their work.[3] So even before they began to work in an essentially collaborative manner to unravel some of the problems associated with religion and literature, they had joined forces in this shared enterprise to revitalize verse drama, drawing them close in a way which likely made them more receptive and responsive to each other later on. Eliot did not share the Left-leaning Group's politics, but he "remained a consistent, though cautious, supporter" (Sidnell 99) because, as well as providing him with an opportunity to gain more experience in the theatre, it explicitly advocated cultivating the kind of communion with the audience that both he and Auden desired. Doone, for instance, declared, "The printed page is private, and while the poet remains private he detracts from his own importance and from the social importance of

[3] Medley, who had originally invited Auden to participate in the Group, had also prompted him to write poetry in the first place by suggesting he give it a try when they were at school together (Kirsch xii-xiii). He thus twice played a major part in Auden's artistic development.

poetry," and therefore should go to the theatre, which alone can be "dynamic and communal" (9), reflecting the pressures on artists of the time to be socially responsible. As Auden wrote in a Group Theatre manifesto, included in the program for the 1935 production of his *The Dance of Death* and Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*, "Drama began as the act of a whole community. Ideally there would be no spectators. In practice every member of the audience should feel like an understudy" (*Prose I* 128).

Some critics like Grigson found the Group Theatre "too amateurish" and "not good enough . . . for the poets it is trying to train in dramatic sense" (2), but its success in promoting verse drama, and Eliot's and Auden's role in that success, is shown by the attention it received both in England and on the Continent, and particularly by the fact that it attracted Yeats's interest. Learning of Eliot's and Auden's participation in the Group, Yeats met with Doone in October 1934 and proposed the "Poet's Theatre," a season of verse plays by the three poets to be staged at the Mercury Theatre. Yeats generally found what he called the "Auden, Eliot school" uncongenial, but was eager to be staged alongside them to show that his plays were as engaging and ambitious as their works-- characterized by, as he says of Eliot, "modernness in language and metaphor"-- and thereby capture some of their audience (*Dancer* 35, 27). As he told the actress Margot Ruddock, "I want Eliot for the Mercury because he represents a movement that has grown all over the world and is strong at the Universities" (*Dancer* 27). Although the plans for the proposed season, which was to have included the premiere of Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, fell through,[4] Yeats's desire to yoke himself to Eliot and Auden

[4] When the scheme failed, in part because of Yeats's long absences from London which made planning more difficult, *Murder in the Cathedral* premiered instead at the Canterbury Festival, for which it had been commissioned anyway, and was then staged by Ashley Dukes at the Mercury (Sidnell 356-57). Although Dukes was involved with the Group Theatre, it was not a Group Theatre production. Yeats likely found

in order to reach a wider audience bespeaks their dominance in English verse drama during this period.

Preaching from the Stage

Although their interest in the social functions of drama may seem limited to its ability to create a sense of community, Eliot and Auden were also aware of the possibilities of using the theatre for more pointedly ideological purposes. In fact, the sense of cohesion engendered by drama could be exploited to promote particular agendas. As Eliot, sounding rather sinister, said of Marie Lloyd, it was by gaining the sympathy of her audience "that she controlled them" (*SE* [1951] 456). Although he no doubt only meant that her empathy allowed her to guide their emotional response throughout the performance, dramatists may strive to control their audiences in other respects. For instance, Yeats valued "the theatre as an organ for the expression of the consciousness of a people" (Eliot *SP* 256) because he wanted to use it to promote Irish Nationalism. His plays, replete with figures from Irish mythology, and his support of Irish writers at the Abbey Theatre were intended to reflect and bolster Irish identity, and thereby, perhaps, politicize the audience. As Yeats's case demonstrates, an ideology may be served by exploiting the communality of drama, and, if the audience embraces this ideology as well, the union between the artist and audience is in turn strengthened, resulting in a kind of circular reinforcement. For this reason, Eliot argues that a "common cause" between dramatist and audience is actually desirable:

Murder's long-running success at the Mercury galling because Dukes, it seems, had planned to produce a play of his after Eliot's play finished its run (*Dancer* 53), plans which were necessarily postponed. His irritation may be glimpsed in his advice to Ruddock, who was waiting impatiently for a new role, ideally one in a play by Yeats: "Don't let the Mercury Theatre forget you. I suppose *Murder in the Cathedral* will sooner or later come to an end, and some new play go on there" (*Dancer* 74). Rather than having Eliot's work staged with his, as Yeats wished, it was staged instead of his. In this instance, he appeared trumped by the "Auden, Eliot school."

> The best opportunity that presents itself seems to be the opportunity to appeal to those who are interested in a common cause which the poet and dramatist can also serve. Only a cause can give the bond, the common assumptions between author and audience, which the serious dramatist needs. . . .There are only two causes now of sufficient seriousness, and they are mutually exclusive: the Church and Communism. ("Religious Drama and the Church" [1934] 4)

In their verse plays, Eliot and Auden forged a bond with their audience by serving these two causes respectively. Eliot aligned himself with the Church in *The Rock* (1934) and *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), whereas Auden associated himself, albeit loosely, with Communism in *The Dance of Death* (1933) and in the plays written with Isherwood, *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935), *The Ascent of F6* (1936), and *On the Frontier* (1937-38). As Trotter explains, Eliot and Auden, in their search for an audience, "began to make use of social and political alignments which would do the work of identification" and "spoke to an audience already to some extent segregated by religious or political tendency" (126-27). Even when Eliot and Auden couldn't enjoy this common bond, or "assume some moral attitude in common with their audience" (Eliot *SE* 45),[5] however, they still valued the stage because it provided them with a forum from which to preach to the unconverted: "For what is the point of a story without an audience, or of a sermon without a congregation" (Eliot *OPP* 96). Moreover, as Auden had asserted, when there *is* a gulf between the artist and his audience, the artist may emphasize his beliefs even more because "realizing that he cannot assume them in his audience, he is tempted to underline them in his work and to become a preacher of pious religious or political sermons . . ."

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[5] As when, for instance, *Murder in the Cathedral* was staged for a largely secular audience at the Mercury after its premiere among predominantly like-minded Christians at Canterbury Cathedral.

(*Prose II* 87). In large part because of Auden's and Eliot's influential work on behalf of what Eliot considered their "mutually exclusive" causes ("Religious Drama and the Church" 4), whether in drama aimed at a sympathetic audience or not, Ashley Dukes was able to declare in 1949 that "[b]oth the secular and the religious tendencies in our new dramatic poetry had declared themselves already before 1935" ("T. S. Eliot in the Theatre" 112), meaning that English theatre was to a considerable degree polarized between Socialist and Christian drama. In his lecture, "The Future of English Poetic Drama" (1938), Auden himself noted the prevalence of dramatists who "have become interested in subjects either religious or political" (*Plays* 515), a state of affairs for which he shares responsibility with Eliot.[6] Further, Sidnell explains that works like "Auden's equivocally Marxist *The Dance of Death* and Eliot's unequivocally Christian *The Rock* were bracketed together as products of a new school of playwrights" since, "Confusingly, political and religious drama often had much in common in motive and techniques" (35). Therefore, examining the manner in which the two poets served their causes, and how they borrowed from and corrected each other in the process, is an instructive way to approach their drama of this period.

After abandoning his *Sweeney Agonistes* fragments, Eliot did not return to dramatic writing until he received the commission for *The Rock*, but once he began to write for the theatre again he was reluctant to stop. Even the most celebrated poem of his postconversion career, *Four Quartets*, was in a sense a by-product of this theatrical activity. "Burnt Norton," recall, originally sprang from a discarded passage in *Murder in*

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[6] Auden demonstrates the increased appetite for such ideologically laden plays by pointing to "the success, for example, of Mr Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, which, if one compares it with the *Becket* of Tennyson, on the same subject, does show a change in the attitude of the public. There are a number of people now who welcome a different kind of drama" than the "conventional drawing-room comedy" (*Plays* 515), because of the efforts of Eliot as well as himself.

the Cathedral, and the rest of the quartets likely would not have been written had not the outbreak of war severely limited his opportunities to work in the theatre. As Eliot revealed in a 1953 interview, "'Burnt Norton' might have remained by itself if it hadn't been for the war, because I had become very much absorbed in the problems of writing for the stage and might have gone straight on from 'The Family Reunion' to another play" ("The Drive to Create" 5).[7] Eliot was determined to write drama not only because of the artistic challenges it presented-- though that certainly played a role-- but because he was convinced that "The ideal medium for poetry . . . and the most direct means of social 'usefulness' for poetry, is the theatre" (*UPUC* [1933] 146). As indicated above, this potential "social 'usefulness'" entailed more than improving society's cohesion, although such a function was undoubtedly important to one like Eliot who sought cultural homogenization. As he makes clear in his essays as well as through the kinds of plays he chose to write, Eliot believed that drama's *greatest* value lay in the service it could render to Christianity. He may claim that the poet should not "meddle with the tasks of the theologian, the preacher, the economist, the sociologist or anybody else; that he should do anything but write poetry" (*UPUC* 147), but in "Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" (1937) he declares that for Christians "to abandon the task of evangelization, would be abnegation of an essential duty" (13). Eliot's strenuous call for modern religious drama after his conversion testifies to his conviction that dramatists must

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[7] Eliot was still writing *The Family Reunion* in 1938 when the political situation deteriorated. In her diary, Virginia Woolf recalls, "When the crisis came, his only thought was annoyance that now his play would not be acted. And he hurried up the revision" (192). While he originally hoped to begin a new play after finishing *The Family Reunion*, the war "changed all of his plans; there would be no audience for a new play, and certainly no opportunity for it to be staged, while the conflict continued" (Ackroyd 254). After completing the quartets, and looking ahead to the end of the war, Eliot told Browne, "I don't think I shall want to write any more poems in the immediate future and therefore my next attempt at anything interesting to myself will probably be a play" (qted. in Browne 157). So despite the cessation of dramatic writing during the war, he remained committed to writing for the theatre.

contribute to this evangelization mission and "be able to provide a drama which will be really useful to the Church" ("Religious Drama and the Church" [1934] 4). Moreover, Christianity will in turn revitalize theatre, because, according to Eliot, an "essentially religious craving is latent in all serious lovers of drama"-- perhaps springing from drama's roots in religious ritual-- which secular drama cannot satisfy ("Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" 12). Therefore, one might even say that "it is not so much that the Christian Faith needs the drama (for its evangelizing possibilities) but that the drama needs the Christian Faith" ("Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" 10). Although he does not think that "the future of the drama in England is to be looked for *only* in churches" [emphasis added] ("Religious Drama and the Church" 5),[8] he contends that for the benefit of the theatre *and* the Church, "we want the whole of serious drama to have a religious background and to be informed with religious principles" ("Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" 11). So Eliot's decision to turn to the theatre following his conversion was not coincidental. Although he was long fascinated by drama from an aesthetic perspective, he was increasingly drawn to it when he realized that it could serve the Church. As Carol Smith contends, "Eliot's whole intellectual movement toward a social mission for himself as a poet," specifically a Christian poet, "is . . . the most important single fact in explanation of why he turned to the writing of plays" (24). He may have dabbled in drama with *Sweeney Agonistes*, but was only galvanized into the

[8] Eliot does hope that the Church will play a visible and important role in English theatre, however. He closes his "Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" by sharing his dream that "our cathedrals may become centres, each of its own characteristic dramatic activity" and that "at some time in the future every cathedral will have its own permanent company of amateurs and its own cycle of modern religious plays," such as his *Murder in the Cathedral*, "and that they will rival each other in perfection of production" (16-17).

theatre when he became convinced that he too must bear some responsibility for the evangelization of the world.

Eliot's choice of projects makes his commitment to serve the Church through the theatre abundantly clear. Although Auden warns, "The integrity of a writer is more threatened by appeals to his social conscience, his political or religious convictions, than by appeals to his cupidity. It is morally less confusing to be goosed by a traveling salesman than by a bishop" (*DH* 19), Eliot, apparently without fear that his artistic integrity *would* be compromised, eagerly accepted two commissions from the Church to write *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral*. He believed that these works were well suited for his apprenticeship in the theatre because "[i]n writing plays for religious occasions" a Christian dramatist "can be learning his craft-- though a very weary process it is-- and at the same time feel that he is doing something that has a use to others, and is not *merely* a part of his own education towards some eventual popular success" ("Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" 16). The pageant play *The Rock*, which recounts the history of the Church in England, was written with the express goal of raising money to build forty-five new churches in and around London (Browne 3). In his essential *The Making of T. S. Eliot's Plays* (1969), E. Martin Browne, who was to become Eliot's long-time collaborator, relates that he had recommended that the famous poet write the pageant because "only Eliot could sound the notes which would evoke a strong response" (6), because of his abilities but also likely because of his pre-existent reputation. Since his involvement did bring the fund-raising pageant more notice than it would have otherwise received, including reviews in major publications, Eliot did "provide a drama which will be really useful to the Church" such as he prescribed, in

practical ways as well as through whatever spiritual influence he exerted thereby.[9] *Murder in the Cathedral*, commissioned for the Canterbury Festival by the Bishop of Chichester George Bell, likewise features an explicitly Christian subject, the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. One might argue that the religious nature of these works is to be expected since they were commissions for the Church and therefore don't necessarily reflect Eliot's own intentions for the theatre, but it is also important to note that he did not have to accept these commissions. Moreover, while he was grateful to be offered *The Rock*, which spurred him into writing during a period of creative sterility (*OPP* 91), when the request from Bell arrived he was already at work planning another play, which the Group Theatre hoped to produce (Sidnell 323). After the offer from the Canterbury Festival arrived, however, he put these plans aside and "accepted George Bell's invitation" not because it was his only opportunity to continue to work in the theatre, but "because he really wanted to see the Church and the Arts return to a closer alliance" (Browne 37). Eliot made significant progress towards this goal since "poetic drama and

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[9] Eliot at times seemed to downplay both his role in creating *The Rock* and the propagandistic elements in it, however. In the Preface to the published edition, he wrote, "I cannot consider myself the author of the 'play', but only of the words which are printed here," which were written to fit a scenario by Browne, and "[o]f only one scene am I literally the author." Although such statements may suggest that Eliot had little input into the production, they are really meant only to recognize the nature of such enterprises in which so many people must contribute, including musicians, stage designers and the actors themselves. His contributions were actually considerable, including "the words for the prose dialogue" and the choruses, "the content of which was left to my own devices: except for the reasonable stipulation that all the choruses were expected to have some relevance to the purpose of the pageant . . ." (Eliot *OPP* 91). Moreover, he agreed to use Browne's scenario in the first place only because "he felt himself in sympathy with it" (Browne 7). Despite his sympathy with a scenario that openly advocates for the Church, and his confessed desire to use drama for religious purposes, Eliot was wary of having *The Rock* labeled as propaganda. In response to a favorable review in the *Spectator* which called it "official apologia," Eliot claimed that "to consider *The Rock* as an 'official apologia' for church-building is to lay a weight upon it which this rock was never intended to bear. . . .If I had meant to write an apologia . . . I should have written a prose pamphlet" ("Letter to the Editor" 887). This defensive stance may have sprung from concern that people would think he *had* been "goosed . . . by a bishop," exploited by the Church, when he regarded himself as an unimpeached artist who created something of aesthetic as well as religious value. Although Eliot let *The Rock* "go out of print, as an occasional piece," "the choruses are preserved in the *Collected Poems*" (Browne x), revealing that he thought the choruses-- which at the time "exceed[ed] in length any of his previous poetry" (Anon. "Pageant Play" 289)-- had enduring importance and deserved a place in his oeuvre.

Christian apologetics became inextricably linked in England" in large part as a result of *Murder in the* Cathedral: "Religious drama arrived at its apogee after the war when plays by Eliot and Fry received full-scale production in the West End, but the 1935 production of *Murder in the Cathedral* was the first significant advance from the sanctuary to the commercial theatre" (Sidnell 36).

Eliot may even have hoped to promote Christianity in the staging of his early fragments, *Sweeney Agonistes*. While he admired Doone's production, "Eliot was at pains to point out on a number of occasions that Doone's *Sweeney* was 'entirely alien'" to his own interpretation (Sidnell 325), which gives some indication of how questions regarding a work's belief are inevitably complicated by all such collaborations.[10] "What he had actually meant was not discernible, or at least not producible, from the fragments as they stood," but Sidnell suggests the play which Eliot was planning to write before receiving the Canterbury commission may provide a clue as to his intentions (325). In February 1934, Eliot told a friend, "I cannot tell you when or whether there will be more of *Sweeney* but in any case I hope to begin something new of the same kind . . ." (qted. in Sidnell 323). Sidnell convincingly shows that Eliot here refers to *The Superior Landlord*, a work that would have expanded upon and transformed the Sweeney material much as Auden's early, unstaged plays fed into his later works like *The Dog Beneath the*

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[10] Eliot generally tried to work with like-minded people, such as his main collaborator Browne, who shared his Christian faith. Even Doone, who brought him into the Group Theatre, was drawn to Christianity and nearly converted under Eliot's influence (Sidnell 325). Nevertheless, a complete identification of beliefs between any collaborators is unlikely, if not impossible, so theatrical performances are necessarily a commingling of more or less different ideologies. Although Eliot's contribution to *The Rock* bears Browne's fingerprints, and he solicited advice from numerous people while writing all of his plays (as he had done when writing his poetry), for the most part the texts of the plays may be taken as expressing his beliefs in a more unadulterated form. Eliot enjoyed the cooperation required by theatre, but likely found the consequent compromise of ideological purity regrettable since he was so invested in conveying his beliefs to a live audience, who might be more receptive than readers because of the nature of the theatrical experience.

Skin. Eliot likely wanted the production of *Sweeney Agonistes* to have "included, as *The Superior Landlord* did, an intimation of the transcendence of mortal life and death" (Sidnell 107). That this "intimation of transcendence" in *The Superior Landlord* would have had a specifically, albeit obliquely, Christian meaning for Eliot is indicated, for example, by his inclusion of the murder and resurrection of one of the characters. Although he uses the theme of death and resurrection in early works (as when he employs the myth of the Fisher-King in *The Waste Land*), and may even have intended to do so in his original plan for *Sweeney Agonistes*, following his conversion any reference to resurrection would inevitably be intended to convey the continuing significance of Christ's resurrection, and to instill an otherworldly perspective in his audience. Perhaps because Eliot felt that the staging of *Sweeney Agonistes* didn't capitalize on the latent spiritual possibilities of the fragments, he was determined to transform the material to express his new convictions.[11]

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[11] Eliot's fascination with Sweeney is revealed by the frequency with which he and the figures of Doris, Dusty and Mrs. Porter turn up in the poetry. Besides "Sweeney Erect" (1920) and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" (1929), Sweeney makes an appearance in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" (1920) and *The Waste Land*'s "Fire Sermon," in which Sweeney is once again among the nightingales as he visits Mrs. Porter and her prostituted daughters (*CPP* 67). Also, two parts of "The Hollow Men" were originally published as "Doris's Dream Songs." Eliot likely used Sweeney, who represents all that is most animalistic, violent and base in human nature, as a critique of his own overly intellectualizing and neurotic tendencies. Much as in "Whispers of Immortality" (1920), Grishkin, despite her rather unsympathetic portrayal, reveals the inadequacies of "our lot" which "crawls between dry ribs / To keep our metaphysics warm" (*CPP* 53), Sweeney can make sensitive intellectuals seem ridiculous by contrast. In "Sweeney Erect," for instance, Eliot writes:

> (The lengthened shadow of a man
> Is history, said Emerson
> Who had not seen the silhouette
> Of Sweeney straddled in the sun.) (*CPP* 43)

Emerson's rather lofty observation is undermined by the sudden introduction of this proof of Sweeney's physicality and sexual potency. Again, the juxtaposition of the very embodied Sweeney with thinkers who operate in a primarily verbal world is at play in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service":

> Sweeney shifts from ham to ham
> Stirring the waters in his bath.
> The masters of the subtle schools
> Are controversial, polymath. (*CPP* 55)

Rather than articulating his position in prose, as Eliot had done, Auden revealed his conviction that the theatre may be used to further specific causes primarily through his plays themselves. Like much of his poetry at this time, all of the plays he wrote during the Thirties have an unmistakable and didactic political bent, beginning with the "revolutionary playlet," *The Dance of Death* (Mendelson *Early Auden* 258), a *danse macabre* in which the Dancer symbolizes "the bourgeois death-wish" (Fuller 124). In fact, this work is largely responsible for giving the Group Theatre its Leftist reputation. Although many of the people involved were already so politically inclined,

> the Group Theatre and its audience were in some manner politicized by *The Dance of Death*, having been implicated in an event that had the air of fellow-travelling, if not of professing Communism. The performance made the Group Theatre appear politically *engagé* and this new look was welcome to it since it proclaimed a keen sense of contemporary awareness, at least. (Sidnell 87)

Auden was not as doctrinaire as he appeared however, and whatever commitment he had to Communism was always rather ambivalent. For instance, *The Dance of Death* may have taken as its subject the death of the middle class and ostensible rise of the proletariat, but at the same time Auden managed to undermine the claims of Communism, as through his presentation of Karl Marx. As the chorus sings the ridiculously inappropriate "Wedding March" of Mendelssohn, Marx enters and pronounces of the now dead dancer: "The instruments of production have been too much for him. / He is liquidated" (*Plays* 107). Auden shows the limitations of the material perspective by this attempt to explain even death in reductive economic terms. He

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Although before his conversion Eliot used Sweeney to attack the Church-- his target here is theologians-- if Sidnell is correct *The Superior Landlord* would have given this material that had absorbed him for so long a Christian resonance.

clearly condemns the corruption of the middle class but doesn't pretend that Communism is a panacea either. As Auden was later to scrawl in a copy of the play, "The Communists never spotted that this was a nihilist leg-pull" (qted. in Fuller 125). Despite such instances in all of his plays, in which he seems to undercut his own position, the perception of Auden-- and one which he largely helped to foster-- was of a committed Leftist writer, and it was because of this perception that he was able to play such an central role in the rise of political drama in England.[12] Moreover, plays like *The Dance of Death* gave at least a credible enough appearance as Leftist propaganda that Eliot felt compelled to combat them with his own drama. For example, Sidnell states that "*The Superior Landlord* might be described as an attempt to find a theatrical form answering Auden's *The Dance of Death* in which to express spiritual desolation and renewal" (101). This claim is supported by the scenario's end, which has "a hymeneal procession led by Sweeney and Mrs. Porter. This allegorical reunion of body and soul is accompanied by Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March,' a seemingly deliberate allusion to the end of *The Dance of Death*"-- which Eliot had recently watched-- "where the same music is used for the entrance of Karl Marx" (101). Whereas Auden had used this music to comment ironically on the death of the middle class, Eliot would likely have employed it to assert, albeit indirectly, Christian dogma regarding the importance of the soul and the transcendence of the body-- showing Auden that death is not the end, nor is Socialism the answer to society's problems. So Eliot, in his plans to serve Christianity through this

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[12] Although Auden claimed that Communists didn't grasp the play's ambivalence, many no doubt would have "suspected that Communism was being made a game of" and strongly disapproved (Sidnell 69). As Eliot remarks, when advising the Church "not [to] tolerate the promulgation of unsound doctrine by great poets, or even by poets of great reputation," "The Bolsheviks, who apparently take a keen interest in literature, ask no less in the matter of orthodoxy" ("Religious Drama and the Church" 5). Auden's questioning of his own sincerity in these plays may have contributed to his decision to turn away from verse drama, since he claimed to reject those works which expressed beliefs, not that he had once held, but that he had never held.

work, may have been actively challenging Auden, whose ideology of this period he found so objectionable.

In some respects, Auden seemed only to exploit Communism for its theatrical possibilities, but, as Eliot picked up on, he did sincerely hope to advance the cause. Despite his misgivings, he supported the Communists, in Spain and elsewhere, because of his conviction that only they could stop the spread of fascism in Europe, ideally without resorting to war. Isherwood shared Auden's commitment to the fight against fascism,[13] and since the writer's duty is "to warn" (Auden *Prose II* 153), the plays they wrote together testify to hypocrisy and corruption in England itself as well as the to the particularly volatile conditions on the Continent. In *On the Frontier*, for example, "a

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[13] During this period, Auden's and Isherwood's ideologies were roughly comparable, as were those of the majority of the Group Theatre's collaborators. Most of them would have "found it difficult to say where play ended and political commitment began" but "it was something that really mattered only to those who admired the dramaturgy but had no sympathy at all for the politics," like Eliot (Sidnell 87). As with Eliot and Browne, however, this ideologically compatibility is not enough to occlude the difficulties that spring from discussions of belief in such collaborations, and in a sense all drama is syncretic in nature. In the case of Auden and Isherwood, the work tended to be clearly divided, as laid out in Mendelson's textual notes in the volume of plays. According to Auden, though,

> In a literary collaboration, if it is to be successful, the partners in it must surrender the selves they would be if they were writing separately and become one new author; though, obviously, any given passage must be written by one of them, the censor-critic who decides what will or will not do is this corporate personality. (*DH* 483)

Despite this "corporate personality," Auden seems to have been the dominant partner in many respects. In interviews later, Isherwood recalled, "The whole collaboration really amounted to this: here was Auden, who was obviously already a major poet, and all I felt I was doing was perhaps providing a slightly firmer framework on which these poems could be presented" (qted. in Mason 572), and even this role was somewhat usurped by Auden when he became more experienced with dramaturgy (Isherwood "A Conversation" 51). Moreover, much of the material derives from Auden. Although he and Isherwood cooperated on *The Enemies of a Bishop* (1929), Auden continued to work on the general plot in *The Fronny* (1930) and *The Chase* (1934), elements from all of which were incorporated into *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1935). *The Ascent of F6* reflects Auden's fascination with mountain climbing, which MacNeice thought an "an obviously 'right' choice of subject for him . . . since he had already made a poetic scenario in which mountain-climbing was fraught with psychological and political implications" (Sidnell 184). Finally, Isherwood said that "there's more of Auden's work in *On the Frontier* than any of the plays, because he not only wrote all of the poetry but also a big share of the prose" ("A Conversation" 51). Nevertheless, issues of belief and sincerity remain tangled by the realities of collaboration since the two planned the works together and often edited each other's contributions. So the discussion of these plays will proceed on the assumption that Auden at least tolerated if not sympathized with all of the beliefs expressed therein, unless otherwise stated. When relevant, ascriptions of responsibility will be made, although one must keep these various complications in mind.

propaganda work, against war and fascism" (Spears *Auden* 102), they dramatized the destruction wrought when Westland, a fascist regime, goes to war against Ostnia, a repressive monarchy. Although the focus of Auden's and Isherwood's plays was unlike that of Eliot's, the writers did use many similar techniques to advance their separate causes. Eliot had helped shape Auden's theories on drama, but "[w]hen Eliot began writing plays again in the 1930s, he borrowed much of his dramatic method from Auden" (Mendelson *Plays* xxii). Auden, in turn, was influenced by Eliot's experiments in drama, as he had earlier been influenced by his theory. Consequently, as Sidnell remarks, "It is fascinating to observe, through the thirties, Auden converging on Eliot, Eliot borrowing from Auden, Auden and Isherwood attempting to finesse Eliot's new Christian dramaturgy, and Yeats, at once point, offering to join the dance" (38).[14] Eliot and Auden, with Isherwood, influenced one another most notably through their use of popular culture, the chorus, and topical references. In the case of *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Ascent of F6*, there is also some thematic similarity, although their treatments of a related subject reveal their considerable ideological differences, as well as their conflicting views on what can be portrayed dramatically. Intriguingly, however, *The Ascent of F6*, even as it critiques Eliot's play, suggests that in some respects Auden may

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[14] The borrowings of this period were not exclusively dramatic either. For example, Barbara Everett suggests that the opening of "Burnt Norton" owes something to a choral passage in *The Dog Beneath the Skin*:

> So, under the local images your blood has conjured,
> We show you man caught in the trap of his terror, destroying himself.
> From his favourite pool between the yew-hedge and the roses, it is no
> fairy-tale his line catches. (*Plays* 379)

Although Fuller assumes this is a reference to "Burnt Norton"-- with its pool and yews and roses-- Everett contends that Eliot had not yet written the quartet and in fact the influence flows the other way. Eliot had read *The Dog Beneath the Skin* in draft at Faber and may have referenced it when he came to write "Burnt Norton": "Auden had in his time learned so much and borrowed so much from, and been so much inspired by the elder poet . . . Eliot conceivably borrowed a little back" (14).

have been growing increasingly sympathetic to the religious point of view, perhaps laying the ground for his later conversion.

Ways and Means

Eliot and Auden aimed to entertain as well as to educate, and so strove to capture some of the liveliness of popular culture through "total theatre," incorporating, for example, songs, dance, and elements from the music hall. This goal guided all Group Theatre productions, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, works like Eliot's *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral* which influenced and were influenced by such productions. As Doone pronounced in *New Verse*:

> Only . . . by co-operating with the essentially popular art of the theatre . . . by using and making his own its essentially popular forms, as W. H. Auden has already started to use the Musical Comedy form to present serious satire, will the poet give the drama that dynamic content it needs, and make poetry once more a social force, not the rarefied preserve of a privileged minority. (10)

Although Sidnell contends that the Group's attempts at total theatre are "largely attributable to Doone" (260), Doone's aspirations were hardly unprecedented. Most notably, the revolutionary effects of Brecht's collaborations with Weill reverberated in English theatre, largely through Auden's importation of some of their methods. He became familiar with Brecht while living in Germany in the late 1920s, and even attended the premiere of *The Threepenny Opera*. Brecht's presence is most felt in *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, whose shaggy plot involves the search for a lost heir (disguised as a dog), and which overflows with song and dance. Nevertheless, Sidnell contends-- and with justification-- that "it was Eliot, not Brecht, who dominated the attempts to revive

poetry on the English stage. Under Eliot's influence, 'poetic drama' . . . acquired utterly un-Brechtian connotations and an odour of sanctity" (151). Eliot and Brecht were not entirely dissimilar, however, since Eliot too wanted to see demotic art forms in a previously elitist genre.[15] Not surprisingly, the poet who had so extravagantly praised Marie Lloyd for her ability to connect to her audience advocated using her tools. Since "our problem should be to take a form of entertainment, and subject it to the process which would leave it art," he suggests, "Perhaps the music-hall comedian is the best material" (*Sacred Wood* 70). As well as revitalizing a stale genre, an influx of popular culture would help verse drama escape from under the shadow of Shakespeare, whose influence, Eliot believed, had led nineteenth century dramatists to write faux-Elizabethan disasters. In order to avoid the potentially pernicious influence of Shakespeare, he also argued that "we have to make use of suggestions from remote drama, too remote for there to be any danger of imitation, such as 'Everyman' and the late medieval morality and mystery plays, and the great Greek dramatists" ("The Need for Poetic Drama" 994-95).[16]

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[15] Brecht even praised *Sweeney Agonistes* after he saw its final performance, telling Doone that it was "'the best thing he had seen for a long time and by far the best thing in London' and he offered the Group a play" (Sidnell 103).

[16] Similarly, Eliot developed a new prosody for his verse dramas in order to avoid using Shakespearean blank verse. He argued, "If we wrote in the dramatic form and in the versification of Shakespeare we should only succeed in making rather poor imitations of Shakespeare: we should not be contributing anything to the life of our own time. The problem for us, therefore, is to get away from Shakespeare. That is not so easy," because without vigilance one might easily find oneself "writing bad Shakespearean blank verse" ("The Need for Poetic Drama" 994). So a new verse form is essential if modern drama is to have any life of its own. Since "I was persuaded that the primary failure of nineteenth-century poets when they wrote for the theatre . . . was not of their theatrical technique, but in their dramatic language," he employed a new verse form: "What I worked out is substantially what I have continued to employ: a line of varying length and varying number of syllables, with a caesura and three stresses" (*OPP* 80, 83). In a later interview, he confessed, "I should like-- my ambition would have been-- to start a prosody which would be . . . useful to other dramatists-- poetic dramatists coming after me" ("A Conversation" [1958] 101). In essence, he wanted his prosody to replace Shakespearian blank verse for succeeding generations of verse dramatists. As his tone reveals, however, this ambition was not to be fulfilled. Eliot seems to betray an anxiety of influence in all of his discussions of Shakespeare and the modern theatre, perhaps because contemporary verse dramatists were so often compared disfavorably to the great master (see Humphrey Jennings's "Eliot and Auden and Shakespeare" in the *New Verse* theatre issue, for example).

Thus, he proposed drawing from many sources in order to enrich contemporary verse drama and distinguish it from its immediate precursors.

This amalgam of different genres, a celebration of anti-realism, also helped to distinguish verse drama from realistic prose drama, the dominant theatrical mode with which verse drama was trying to compete. Auden shared Eliot's quarrel with realism and his contention that verse drama must reach beyond its traditional borders. He "took up Eliot's suggestion that the music hall could be a source of dramatic technique" (Mendelson *Early Auden* 261), and often sounds very Eliotic in his prescriptions for the theatre: "The Music Hall, the Christmas Pantomime, and the Country House Charade, are the most living drama of today" (*EA* 273). Somewhat facetiously, Isherwood remarked that Auden had become convinced that "the only remaining traces of theatrical art were to be found on the music-hall stage: the whole of music realistic drama since Tchekhov had got to go; later, perhaps, something might be done with puppets" (qted. in Fuller 123). As a review of *The Dance of Death* and *Sweeney Agonistes* called "Theatre at Last!" proclaimed: "Here is theatre springing from the rhythms and idiom of your own life . . . with its slang and jazz heightened into poetry" (Sayers 152). Drawing these various elements into their drama not only gave it a sense of vitality but had the added advantage of increasing the likelihood that the audience would be receptive to the beliefs expressed thereby.

As Eliot wrote in the colorful "Five Points on Dramatic Writing" (1938) which he addressed to Pound, "You got to keep the audience's attention all the time. . . .IF you can keep the bloody audience's attention engaged, then you can perform any monkey tricks you like when they ain't looking . . ." (qted. in C. Smith 53). Although he wasn't

necessarily referring to social utility here, he *was* convinced that even religious drama must entertain the audience if it is to have any effect, much as religious literature must first be appreciated *as* literature before it can edify. He cautions that while

> a theatre of mere amusement can never satisfy-- so that the audiences are always wanting something better, though they may not know it-- we must remember that there is an important aspect in which the lowest things are the most necessary. The element of amusement is indispensable; if a play does not amuse people it can do nothing for them. ("Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" 12)

Many spectators did seem to find their drama entertaining-- as typified by the review cited above-- and Auden in particular, in *The Dance of Death* and in his plays with Isherwood, exploited the possibilities of total theatre in order to amuse the audience.[17] Auden's and Isherwood's giddy theatricality peaked in *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, which even included a cabaret within the play, perhaps as a nod to Brecht. Its many moments of silliness were not seen to detract from its serious intent, however, including its implicit condemnation of fascism.[18] A contemporary reviewer effuses:

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[17] The entertaining aspect of these plays is less apparent on the page, however, which highlights one of the limitations in treating these works as texts. For example, Sidnell notes, "The festiveness of *The Dance of Death*, immediately clear in the theatre, was hard for *readers* to comprehend" (72). As with any performance, aspects such as the stage design and the very physicality of the actors which would have affected the theatrical experience are lost in the text. In works such as those produced by the Group Theatre, these difficulties are compounded because of the added emphasis on extraliterary elements, especially dance and music: "Since the plays are now known merely by their published texts it is easy to overlook the essential role of music in them. It is even easier to forget that dance was part of the conception itself of all the Group Theatre productions except [Spender's] *Trial of a Judge*" (Sidnell 260). For this reason, one must depend to a degree on contemporary accounts of a production in order to have an idea of its total effect on the audience. The essential bareness of text is even more apparent in Auden's libretti since music is their *raison d'être*, although there at least the text may be supplemented by recordings of the operas.

[18] When Alan and Francis, disguised as a dog, are thrown into an asylum in Westland, for example, the portrayal of the inmates-- whose "Westland salute" parodies that of the Nazis (*Plays* 225)-- is intended to demonstrate the insanity of all fascist regimes.

> Didacticism and entertainment have here become perfect bed-fellows. . . . And if Mr. Auden has achieved a fusion of form no less has he reduced to dramatic service two aspects of his own temperament. Here is the play-boy of compelling charm, entertaining and irresponsible; and the man of deep thinking indignation, limitless goodwill, and sincere purpose. The one has illuminated the other, so that didacticism loses its dreariness, and entertainment its futility of passing escape. (Garrett 689)

The more boisterous aspects of the play which might have seemed frivolous actually helped to make the message palatable to the audience.

In general, Eliot's dramas aren't as lively as Auden's, but in *The Rock*, as in the earlier *Sweeney Agonistes*, he incorporated elements like humour and song in order to keep the "the bloody audience's attention engaged." The chorus in *The Rock*, in keeping with Eliot's interest in stylized acting, was costumed in "stiff robes of Hessian draped in statuesque folds, and given masks" but according to Browne "the severity of the dressing did not at all inhibit the audience from enjoying the sallies of wit which issued from these impassive faces" (29). He emphasizes, however, that "their barbs, however amusingly sharp, are pointed in order to call the attention back and back again to the main theme: the purpose of God with the Church" (21).[19] Although Browne seems to overestimate the quality of some of the work's humour, it did help the pageant approach the condition of those medieval religious plays which had "the advantage of being entertainment as well as an expression of piety" (Eliot "Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" 10). A reviewer acknowledged that there are "bits of sermons" in the drama, but continues,

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[19] For instance, the passage which apparently provided the biggest laugh condemns the emptiness of a godless society and the consequent need to revive the church: "Here were decent godless people: / Their only monument the asphalt road / And a thousand lost golf balls" (Browne 30).

"Early moralities authorize comic relief to the most serious intentions" and praises Eliot's use of "the music-hall and pantomime we know" ("Mr Eliot's Pageant Play" 287-88). Also, though there are songs in *Sweeney Agonistes* and his earlier poetry, Eliot used music more extensively in *The Rock*, emboldened perhaps by Auden's music-laden *The Dance of Death*. Like the comedy elements, the music was undoubtedly intended to reinforce the pageant's meaning, and it seems to have succeeded. A review in *The Times* remarks, "The players were uneven and certain scenes overlong, but the points, aided by the music, were always made" (qted. in Browne 32). As well as compensating for any deficiencies in the performers or the dramaturgy, music may have seemed to perform another important function to Eliot: compensating for the inadequacy in language itself, such as he lamented in *Four Quartets*. He may not have felt his words could provide the adequate spiritual uplift or foreboding, as the case required, but music could come to his aid. He also wanted to use music to achieve that communion with the audience that Marie Lloyd fostered in her performances. Browne relates, "It had been planned from the first that the revue should have a theme-song, to be introduced at various points during the show and, it was hoped, to be widely sung in London" (30). Eliot was wholly in sympathy with the scheme, which ideally would have given a song he had composed the same kind of cultural currency as those he appropriated in *The Waste Land*. Moreover, the song so embraced would be explicitly Christian, as shown by the refrain: "A Church for us all and work for us all and God's world for us all even until this last." Although the song did not catch on in London as hoped, "quite a proportion of the audience picked up his tune well enough to join the cast and singers" (Browne 31). This turn of events must have gratified Eliot enormously since it seemed to capture the spirit of one of Marie

Lloyd's performances, in which the artist and her audience were unified: "The working man who went to the music-hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the chorus was himself performing part of the act; he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art" (*SE* 371). Also, since the audience was comprised of "bishops. aldermen, church workers, school children and 'general public,' most of whom are probably unfamiliar with his other works," the fact that they "should be able to join in anything written by him as they do in the last chorus" is all the more surprising (Anon. reviewer *Listener* 286). In some sense, the conclusion of the performance may have felt like a culminating event for Eliot, since he managed, however temporarily, to create a sense of unity among a diverse audience in support of a shared cause.

In keeping with the anti-realism inherent in total theatre, Eliot and Auden both placed much importance on the chorus. As well as offering suggestive possibilities both rhetorically and structurally, a chorus, by harking back to Greek drama, safely distances one from the Shakespearean model. Eliot even claimed that his main theatrical aim in *The Rock*, technically speaking, "was to show that there is a possible *rôle* for the Chorus" ("Letter to the Editor" 887). As in Eliot's two religious dramas, the chorus features heavily in all of Auden's plays, those written with and without Isherwood. As with the ritualistic aspects of their work in general and especially their use of liturgical elements,[20]

[20] Not surprisingly given their conflicting belief systems, they often use liturgy in diametrically opposed ways. *The Rock*, for instance, presents an extended scene in which Knight Templars preparing to leave for the Crusade go through a ceremony of blessing, all in Latin (61-64). The scene is meant to reinforce the notion that the truths expressed in the liturgy throughout the history of the Church are eternal and, through the somber presentation, to invoke the Church's spiritual grandeur. In *The Dance of Death*, on the other hand, the liturgy is parodied by the repetition of "Alma Mater, ave salve" in a farcical chant (*Plays* 105-07). More pointedly, in *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, a ritualistic execution in the kingdom of Ostnia is accompanied by a bastardized, martial version of the "Kyrie eleison" (*Plays* 214-15), which gives the impression that the Church is complicit in such unjust executions. Auden and Isherwood may have been

the manner in which they deployed the chorus testifies to their divergent ideologies. Although ritualized verse drama may appear to be at a disadvantage in terms of social utility when compared to realistic prose drama-- which, for example, seems to offer more opportunities for speechifying as well as allowing one to present social ills in a more direct way-- the chorus helped Eliot and Auden overcome some of the instrumental limitations of their genre. In fact, the chorus became a major tool, perhaps *the* major tool, in their efforts to construct a viable didactic theatre in verse.

Eliot, for example, relays that in *Murder in the Cathedral*, "I wanted to concentrate on death and martyrdom" (*OPP* 81), as opposed to covering more of the life of Becket, as Charles Williams had done in his historical drama *Thomas Cranmer*. Given this limited scope, "The introduction of a chorus of excited and sometimes hysterical women, reflecting in their emotion the significance of the action, helped wonderfully" by providing a way to narrow in on his subject without compromising dramatic interest (*OPP* 81). Through relying "so heavily upon the assistance of the chorus" (*OPP* 80), he was able to make martyrdom the unrivalled focus of the play, justifying, for instance, his inclusion of the sermon mentioned in Chapter Three which expounds upon the religious import of martyrdom and includes a lengthy exposition on the Crucifixion.[21] The chorus thus indirectly allowed him to elaborate on an essential aspect of his theology and also later reinforces what he has preached regarding "the redemptive meaning of the death of Christ" (Kojecký 106). He and Auden also used the chorus to convey their beliefs to the

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commenting on the Church's lack of response to political barbarity throughout Europe. So Auden's Anglican background certainly informed his use of ritual, but in general he did not treat it with the same reverence as Eliot but rather tended to use it ironically.

[21] Moreover, Eliot hoped that it would be received as a sermon, and not as a theatrical performance. He explains that, despite his investment in verse drama, the sermon was one of the passages in the play that "could not have been written in verse": "A sermon cast in verse is too unusual an experience for even the most regular churchgoers: nobody could have responded to it as a sermon at all" (*OPP* 81).

audience in very explicit ways. The chorus can help the dramatist connect to the audience because it "has an intermediate position between the characters of the play and their plot and the audience" (Eliot "The Need for Poetic Drama" 995). Eliot continues, "It may be nearer to the action of the play, and so taking part in it. For instance, in one of W. H. Auden's plays, 'The Dog Beneath the Skin', the chorus," which was performed by two Witnesses, "is almost an interlude addressing the audience" (995). Amusingly, Eliot, the dispenser of Jeremiads, told Doone that he disliked being "preached at" by these Witnesses (qted. in Sidnell 161). As he admits, however, he is also guilty of using the chorus to sermonize. Although "the personage on the stage must not give the impression of being merely a mouthpiece for the author," in the choruses in *The Rock*, "it was the second voice, that of myself addressing-- indeed haranguing-- an audience, that was most distinctly audible. Its members were speaking for me, not uttering words that really represented any supposed character of their own" (*OPP* 91). Therefore, in *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and *The Rock*, as in Yeats's "Three Marching Songs" (1934), "As speech itself . . . becomes more histrionic, the mask of the persona disappears, and the poet himself seems to address a contemporary audience in a flow of imperatives and exhortations" (McDiarmid *Saving Civilization* 74). The chorus is not the only way in which they address the audience directly, however. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, for example, Eliot uses the speeches of the four Knights who killed Thomas "to shock the audience out of their complacency" (*OPP* 81). The Knights show that the audience is deeply implicated in their action: "We have served your interests; we merit your applause; and if there is any guilt whatever in the matter, you must share it with us" (*CPP* 279). Thus, their speeches reinforce Thomas's earlier indictment of universal sinfulness:

"for every evil, every sacrilege, /. . . . / Indifference, exploitation, you and you, / And you, must all be punished. So must you" (*CPP* 259). So despite a certain dependency on the chorus, Eliot, like Auden, did not restrict himself to it when attempting to preach to the audience.

In their dramatic pronouncements, Eliot and Auden comment very directly upon the political situation, and although they locate a common enemy in fascism, they differ in other respects. Notably, Eliot borrows some of Auden's techniques in order to condemn the Communist ideals which Auden had supported. Interestingly, they both showed how oratory, such as they themselves used, was being exploited to promote political positions they found abhorrent. In *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and *On the Frontier*, for instance, the fascist Westland Leader evokes tears and hysterical emotion among those who listen to his speeches over the radio, often shown in Auden to be a medium co-opted by corrupt authority. Auden's awareness of the sinister potential of rhetoric, central to his early work *The Orators* (1931), is particularly evident in his last play. The amoral leader of industry, Valerian, recounts how "When the fat placid housewives attend his meetings, and see him rave and wring his hands, and tremble and weep, they shake their heads in their motherly way, and murmur, 'Poor Leader-- he is going through all this for *us*'" (*Plays* 371). This portrait is intended of course to remind the audience of Hitler, who like the Leader rose from humble origins to political power largely on the strength of his oratorical abilities. As the increasingly insane Leader recounts, "I stood on a platform in a village hall or a table in a little restaurant-- when I began to speak, people listened. More and more people. It was like a dream. I was proud of my power" (*Plays* 395). Despite his sympathy with its condemnation of

fascism, Eliot told Woolf that he thought that "there are flaws in the new play that are congenital, inalterable" (*Diary* 192). Like many others, he may have found the play *too* topical because "its very political awareness (its direct exposure of leader-worship, senseless preparation for war and the impotence of the man in the street) . . . makes it less suggestive than their previous work," and even Auden later admitted, "I do not like this" (Fuller 245). Furthermore, when it was staged, "many people thought that the play had been overtaken and dwarfed by real events" (Sidnell 239). Mendelson notes that Hitler had already revealed enough of his bellicose ambitions by that time that "the play's evenhanded apportionment of blame between its combatants," Westland and Ostnia, which represents a typically corrupt European country, "seemed irrelevant and embarrassing" (*Plays* xxviii). The reception of *On the Frontier* showed Auden some of limitations of politically didactic theatre, specifically that if a work is too closely linked to its own time, without any lasting historical or mythic resonance, it very soon becomes irrelevant. He also later became convinced that while the secondary world of a work of art must have "something significant to say . . . about our present life," it is usually advisable not to use a contemporary setting because "The factuality of the present is too strong to imagine as other that it is, too strong, at least, if the present situation involves strong emotions and suffering . . ." (*SW* 83), such as it did during *On the Frontier*'s premiere.

Although politics aren't so central to Eliot's drama as to Auden's, he did take the opportunity to share his views on the contemporary situation with his audience, particularly in *The Rock.* As well as giving his work an air of relevance, the political dimension allowed him to show how secular forces try to undermine the Church, a

motive Auden certainly did not share in his political plays. Despite their ideological differences, Eliot found a useful model in Auden for the scene in *The Rock* for which he is wholly responsible, or "literally the author" as he puts it in the Prefatory Note. Browne states that this scene "makes use of the methods of the German Expressionists of the 'twenties, reminding one of the earlier plays of W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood who were influenced by them" (10), but Sidnell goes further, claiming "*any* reminiscence of Expressionism that does not derive from Auden is indiscernible" [emphasis added] (96).[22] As in Auden's plays, Eliot uses the scene to condemn fascism as well, represented by the Blackshirts who enter in a military formation and declare their refusal to be "obedient to the Law of God" or to "reverence the Temple" (44).[23] However, unlike Auden, Eliot puts the fascists on the same level as the communists, the Redshirts. In fact, *The Rock* presents Communism as the Church's *main* enemy, reflecting the position Eliot takes in his polemics. The Redshirts "laugh at God!" but any possibility that theirs is the right way is dismissed by the chorus: "Alas! there is no help here. / . . . . / O Jesus, Saviour of Man, preserve us / From Man, the Saviour of Man" (43). Elsewhere, the builders constructing the church criticize Russia for "trying to make do without religion" and claim its attempt to establish an atheist state is doomed because people are drawn to Christianity: "you can't keep 'em off religion . . . by tellin 'em it's so old-fashioned they oughtn't to want it" (15). A communist "Agitator" enters and tries to "convert" the builders through his fervent speeches, another example of corrupt rhetoric like that

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[22] For example, the Plutocrat bearing the golden calf, who tempts the audience with material wealth and worldly power, "is a close equivalent of Auden's Theatre Manager with his hamper of nostalgia" in *The Dance of Death* (Sidnell 96).

[23] In this scene, Eliot also explicitly condemns anti-Semitism, which critics like Julius try to downplay (197). The reviled Blackshirts won't "reverence the Temple" because they "*firmly refuse / To descent to palaver with anthropoid Jews*" (44). Eliot here seems to exert himself to counter the impression of anti-Semitism he gave in *After Strange Gods*.

practiced by the Redshirts, Blackshirts and Plutocrat. The Agitator is portrayed as a ridiculous straw man, however, and his arguments easily demolished by one of the builders who is "too artful for 'im" (66). So, as he likely would have done in *The Superior Landlord*, Eliot serves his cause in *The Rock* by consciously attacking the cause embraced, however ambivalently, by Auden, whose theatrical techniques he had found so useful.

Many critics found Eliot's political commentary in *The Rock* wanting, however, claiming that rather than suggesting solutions he only denounces his ideological foes. Some argued that, as in his sociological tracts, Eliot seems only to "reiterate, sometimes with an inflection like that of any curate, his faith in the enduring primacy of God's kingdom," without indicating which "ways of reorganizing the mechanisms of this world" should be followed (Van Doren 37). The implicit political dimension in *Murder in the Cathedral* came under similar criticism. The politically motivated murder and the way in which the Knights were portrayed suggested to many viewers "fascist parallels," a notion which Browne supports (36). For instance, Dukes points out that "Hitler had been long enough in power to ensure that the four knightly murderers of Becket would be recognized as figures of the day, four perfect Nazis defending their act on the most orthodox totalitarian grounds" (114). Although drawing this parallel was part of his attempt "to establish a religious beach-head" against fascism (Sidnell 183), "The playwright's attempts to make the situation meaningful to the contemporary world were to some degree artificial" (C. Smith 116). For example, Isherwood claimed that the Knights with their "brisk 1935 microphone-manner . . . belong, rather, to the world of Mr. W. H. Auden" (*Listener* review [June 1935] 1110). He continues on to say that Eliot

seems unsure of how to handle his "highly topical theme" introduced by these ultra-modern Knights: "The topical aspect of the murder, with its numerous counterparts in present-day Europe, at once interests and repels him. He toys with anachronisms, but so gingerly that they merely startle us" (1110). Moreover, as Sidnell explains, "In terms of the *historical* setting of the play the consolation for political repression is 'another saint in Canterbury' but how this apolitical 'answer' bears on the *contemporary* problems that are alluded to is by no means clear" (187). "Faced with the 'Fascist'-- as it unmistakably is-- power of the Knights, the Women and Priests of fifteenth-century Canterbury are vouchsafed Thomas," but their present day counterparts are offered no comparable compensation (187). Although *The Ascent of F6* is thematically similar to *Murder in the Cathedral*, Auden and Isherwood attempted to be less evasive than Eliot by acknowledging the intransigence of the political problems faced in the modern world and their often devastating effect on individuals: "*F6* was, in fact, a riposte to the cunning ambivalences of Eliot's Christian polity" (187). More importantly, these two plays, which take as their subject the question of their hero's motivation, reveal an abiding conflict between Eliot and Auden, even after the latter's conversion. Whereas Eliot in his plays repeatedly tried to portray his characters' spiritual journeys, Auden, as discussed in Chapter One, insisted that "man's inner life" cannot "be made manifest on stage" but can be "fully known only to God" (*SW* 24). Auden does at times focus on the internal struggles of his characters, particularly in *The Ascent of F6*, but he makes more effort than Eliot to externalize these struggles so that they *can* be dramatized. Therefore, in his play with Isherwood, Auden seems to try to correct what he regards as Eliot's political naïveté as well as his approach to presenting inner reality.[24]

[24] The collaborators also seemed to be motivated partly by a sense of rivalry with Eliot, since, as Sidnell

Since Eliot planned to focus on Thomas's martyrdom, he needed to find a way to present the various spiritual temptations faced by the would-be saint. Browne suggested the idea of using figures from Thomas's past who would try to lure him away from the true path. It was Doone, however, who "provided the solution" and proposed that the Tempters be projections "embodying the conflicts in his own mind" (Browne 43). Doone thus likely strengthened *Murder in the Cathedral* considerably because "Eliot rewrote the scenes in this way, and gained from it the chance to create the Fourth Tempter, in whose scene the play advances into a new territory" (Browne 43). As in Part III of *Ash-Wednesday*, the greatest temptation is saved for last, so that while the first three tempters are easily withstood as they try to convince Thomas to abandon his present course for the sake of pleasure or political power, with the Fourth Tempter "the battle . . . is not, like the others, already in the past but is raging in Becket's soul as the death he has foreseen draws nearer: it is the conflict of motive" (Browne 43). The Tempter, articulating Thomas's innermost desires, makes him face the possibility that he is actively seeking martyrdom in order to gain spiritual power: "King is forgotten, when another shall come: / Saint and Martyr rule from the tomb" (*CPP* 254). In a passage that would have had particular resonance during the play's premiere in Canterbury Cathedral, the site of the martyrdom, he urges Thomas to envision the

> pilgrims, standing in line
>
> Before the glittering jeweled shrine,

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points out, "Auden and Isherwood had not yet equaled" the commercial success Eliot achieved with *Murder in the Cathedral*, but hoped that they might with *The Ascent of F6*, if it "received a good production and good management" (172). Nevertheless, Auden's and Eliot's relations remained cordial throughout this period, and Eliot was markedly solicitous of the younger poet. For example, when Yeats's "Poet's Theatre" season fell through, Eliot wrote to Doone, "I'm sorriest on account of Auden, and I hope that you will be able to make arrangements with the Westminster Theatre to give him a show in the autumn," which he did (qted. in Browne 39-40).

From generation to generation

Bending the knee in supplication . . . (*CPP* 254).

To which Thomas responds, "I have thought of these things" (*CPP* 254). As Thomas understands, however, this temptation is the most dangerous and if he were to succumb the spiritual pride manifested thereby would mean damnation: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: / To do the right thing for the wrong reason" (*CPP* 258).

Criticism of *Murder in the Cathedral* tends to center on whether or not Thomas did succumb to the Fourth Tempter. Auden weighs in on the debate in "The Martyr as Dramatic Hero," one of his T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures. Regarding "the question of motive-- did he die for the truth or out of spiritual pride and ambition?" he contends:

> [W]hat his motive was cannot be dramatically manifested. . . . In the case of the fourth all we know for certain is that he is aware of the temptation in himself: when the curtain falls we cannot know beyond all doubt whether he has really rejected or really yielded to it, since the manifest event we have witnessed, his death, would be the same in either case. (*SW* 20-21)

Since, according to Auden, "man's inner life" cannot "be made manifest on a stage," Thomas's spiritual state upon his death must remain indeterminate. Browne suggests that Eliot welcomed the perceived ambiguity of the ending because it reminds the audience that the quest for spiritual purity is never-ending, requiring constant vigilance until death (44). However, Eliot *does* seem to want the audience to assume that Thomas withstood the Fourth Tempter and died a true martyr. For example, the sermon on martyrdom that immediately follows his encounter with the Fourth Tempter seems to express "the peace to which he had attained through the temptations, and his surrender to the will of God"

(Browne 46), without betraying any anxiety on his own behalf. Moreover, one so orthodox as Eliot would be unlikely to insinuate that the Church mistakenly beatified a man guilty of monstrous pride, particularly to a primarily religious audience in a Church-sponsored drama. Auden remained dissatisfied, however, because in this and later plays, like *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot focuses on spiritual struggles which, he contended, aren't well suited to the stage, as shown by the degree of uncertainty hovering over Thomas's fate. Consequently, Eliot "can only hope against hope that his audience will have the moral sophistication to sense what, as a dramatist . . . he is unable to say" (*SW* 40).[25]

When Auden and Isherwood came to write their own play focused on the central character's inner turmoil, they took a different approach from Eliot, although his play certainly influenced theirs. Eliot's conception of the Knights may have owed something to Auden-- as Isherwood alleged-- but Eliot's portrayal of Becket had an even more pronounced effect on the depiction of the hero of *The Ascent of F6*, the mountaineer Michael Ransom. The similarities between *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Ascent of F6* were so striking that F. R. Leavis calls the latter a "heavily parasitic" play in which we are most aware of "Mr. Eliot's gifts" (224). As well as possibly stimulating their decision to write an unBrechtian drama which had "one interest throughout, not merely a succession of interest" (Eliot "Audiences, Producers, Plays, Poets" [1935] 3-4),[26] Eliot inspired their choice of subject:

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[25] Auden returns to this issue in a 1949 article on *Don Quixote*, in which he classifies different kinds of heroes, including, to name a view, the ironic hero, the tragic hero, and the Christian saint. In his discussion of the difficulty of portraying saints, he uses *Murder in the Cathedral* as an example: "The virtues produced by pride cannot be distinguished objectively from the virtues produced by faith. When Becket . . . is assailed by the fourth tempter, who suggests that he be martyred for self-glorification, it is impossible for Eliot to prove to us that Becket resists the temptation; he can only state that it exists" (*Prose II* 379).

[26] Sidnell claims, plausibly, "Although Eliot did not name *Dog*, it was clearly in his mind as a play that comprised 'a succession of interests,'" as he put it in his *New Verse* article, and that "Auden and Isherwood had apparently heeded" his advice to use "one interest throughout," because *The Ascent of F6* is so

> 'We wanted to contrast mountain-climbing for climbing's sake and mountain-climbing used for political ends,' said Isherwood, but the theme of the play was rather grander than he suggested. In *F6*, the alternative to political manipulation is not merely 'climbing for climbing's sake' but the quest for spiritual salvation. And for this theme the authors were very heavily indebted to Eliot. It was *Murder in the Cathedral* that gave them a starting point and a structure for the dramatization of Michael Ransom's attempt to save himself and redeem others. (Sidnell 186)

Although spiritual salvation in this case is not Christian, involving rather maintaining one's purity of purpose, Ransom parallels Becket in his struggle to stand against the temptation that would be his downfall. Sidnell is somewhat misleading here, however, because the desire to "redeem others" is actually the temptation which Ransom must resist. In a passage written by Auden, the Abbot at a Buddhist-like monastery in Sudoland, where the fame mountain is located, tells him: "Your temptation, Mr Ransom, is written in your face. . . .You could ask the world to follow you and it would serve you with blind obedience . . . yours is the nature to which those are always attracted in whom the desire for devotion and self-immolation is strongest" (*Plays* 327). Therefore, if he wishes he could become a demagogue like the Westland Leader. The issue is complicated, however, because unlike the Leader, Ransom "would do them much good" (*Plays* 327), much as the Second Tempter tells Thomas he could retain the Chancellorship and "Rule for the good of the better cause" (*CPP* 249). In both instances, however, the exercise of this power would doom them, because it would divert them from

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different in this respect than their earlier works: "Isherwood himself considered *F6* 'much maturer' than its predecessor [Dog] and 'more of an unity'" (201-02).

their proper calling and subject them to corruption. As the Abbot tells Ransom, "[W]oe to the governors, for, by the very operation of their duty, however excellent, they themselves are destroyed" (*Plays* 249). In Ransom's case, his tempters are the politicians, including his brother, who have asked him to climb the mountain in order to further their imperialistic ambitions, reflecting the tangled politics of the era.[27] They claim if he does so he will become a national hero. Ransom must determine if his desire to climb F6 is another possible case of what Thomas called "do[ing] the right thing," fulfilling his long held ambition to climb F6, "for the wrong reasons," serving propaganda seeking politicians and succumbing to his own lust for power.

Although the two heroes are faced with a similar dilemma, Ransom's inner state, unlike Thomas's, is revealed through his choices and his final fate is made clear. Whereas with a potential martyr like Thomas, "we cannot know beyond all doubt whether he has really rejected or really yielded" to the final temptation "since the manifest event we have witnessed, his death, would be the same in either case" (Auden *SW* 20-21), with a mountaineer like Ransom, his actions *can* reveal whether or not he yields to temptation. In fact, Auden and Isherwood are able to track Ransom's spiritual degeneration by his physical ascent. For instance, the fact that Ransom is at the Monastery at all, located on F6, reveals that he has already taken the first step in succumbing to his will to power and to the manipulation of others. Although he had initially withstood the politicians' entreaties, he acquiesces, with considerable misgivings, when his mother joins their appeal. She had withheld affection from him and

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[27] The people of Sudoland, which is divided between England and Ostnia, believe that the first white man who reaches the peak of F6 "will be lord over both the Sudolands, with his descendants, for a thousand years" (*Plays* 302). The politicians do not subscribe to this legend, but realize that whichever nation is able to send a team to the summit first will be accorded more local authority: "If the Ostnians get to the top of F6, your natives are going to make big trouble" (*Plays* 302).

favored his brother in order to make him the perfectly independent Truly Strong Man (*Plays* 313), but the failure of her plan is shown in his very act of submitting to her since if he were "truly strong" he would stick to the course of action which he had already determined was more honorable-- to decline the expedition. As well as being attracted to the power he would gain if he were successful, he wants to prove to her that he *is* the bold figure she wanted him to be.[28] Another stage of Ransom's spiritual descent is marked when he is on the mountain and, realizing the extent of his mistake, contemplates returning. However, at the urging of his fellow-climbers, and particularly Gunn, for whom he seems to have a repressed homosexual attraction, he again submits to the will of others and proceeds, knowing already that "I have failed" (*Plays* 330). When he finally reaches the summit, a "veiled figure" takes the shape of his mother, "the private reason for all this," whose coldness made him susceptible to this compensatory desire for power in the first place (*Plays* 346, 353). So, like Thomas's tempters, Mrs. Ransom becomes a projection from the recesses of Ransom's own mind (Sidnell 191). However, in place of Thomas's somewhat ambiguous victory over his tempters, Ransom clearly dies in defeat when he falls at the feet of this vision. Consequently, "In place of Eliot's Christian idealism, *The Ascent of F6* offers Freudian 'realism'. The hero fails because he is inescapably a traumatized son of woman" (Sidnell 188), which had made him vulnerable to political exploitation. So *The Ascent of F6*, as well as addressing the era's political complexities and compromises more fully than Eliot's play, externalizes their hero's inner turmoil so that it is more dramatic and there is no indeterminacy regarding his fate.

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[28] As Auden and Isherwood wrote in their earlier manifesto, "Preliminary Statement" (1929): "Hunt the lion, climb the peak / No one guesses you are weak" (*Plays* 461).

Despite the ways in which *The Ascent of F6* may seem to have corrected what Auden regarded as the flaws of Eliot's play, Auden remained somewhat dissatisfied with it. He seemed to feel that he gave Ransom no escape. In the monastery, when he proposes abandoning the mountain and going back to England to lead a simple life, the Abbot tells him "You have gone too far for that" (*Plays* 327). The only alternative he offers Ransom is to "make the complete abnegation of the will" (*Plays* 328), but as Fuller points out "how can he be certain that renunciation of the will is not itself an act of the will . . .?" (198). Therefore, Ransom suffers from "what is essentially religious despair" (Fuller 198), as revealed in one of Auden's "woozy" passages: "Oh You who are the history and the creator of all these forms in which we are condemned to suffer . . . . Save us, save us from the destructive element of our will, for all we do is evil" (*Plays* 329). Auden himself wrote in a copy of the play, "The end . . . is all wrong because, as I now see it, it required, and I refused it, a Christian solution" (Fuller 198). Unfortunately, he doesn't say what this solution would have entailed, and his comment might seem to reveal not so much the latent religious dimension of the play as the dominance of Christianity in his later thought, leading him to read an earlier work from that perspective. Nonetheless, his criticism is suggestive, particularly since his early drama, more so than his poetry, seems to indicate at times that he felt drawn to religion, despite his secular, Socialist position. Isherwood wrote in 1927, shortly after they had completed *The Ascent of F6*, "When we collaborate, I have to keep a sharp eye on him-- or down flop the characters on their knees (see *F6 passim*)" ("Some Notes" 74). He implies, and probably correctly, that this religious impulse stems from the high Anglicanism of Auden's childhood, memories of which the ritualistic nature of their drama seemed to

access. According to Isherwood, "If Auden had his way, he would turn every play into a cross between grand opera and high mass" (74). As Carpenter relates, Isherwood began to suspect Auden of certain "Christian leanings" because of the nature of his contributions to their plays (237). Auden may have started to feel at least a degree of sympathy with Eliot's beliefs even before *The Ascent of F6*, as suggested by his portrayal of the curate in *The Dog Beneath the Skin*. Although the vicar in the play is presented "as pro-fascist and as a pathological case," "his curate . . . is a sympathetic character" (Spears *Auden* 100). Mendelson states that the curate, Auden's particular contribution, is a calming presence among the play's competing factions, and "stands proleptically for Auden's later Christianity" (*Early Auden* 178). Some critics even identify the curate with Eliot. As Sidnell relates, "The Vicar's Curate, caught between the atheist Left and the vicious Right, was thought, plausibly, to resemble T. S. Eliot"; T. R. Barnes, for example, "assumed that the Curate represented 'Anglo-Catholicism in general and Mr Eliot in particular'" (147; 333). Whether or not this is the case, the plays do suggest that, if Auden wasn't actually turning to Christianity, he was at least turning from the Socialist politics he had been supporting. In particular, he came to feel that, like Ransom, he was misusing his gift in the service of these politics, vainly hoping to save the world. Mendelson reveals that Auden's portrayal of Ransom, who "is destroyed by his messianic fantasies," is in fact "a private warning to himself" (*Plays* xxvi). Even though he went on to write *On the Frontier*, his commitment to political theatre was already beginning to wane. He later recounted that "he recognized while writing *The Ascent of F6* that he must eventually leave England and that, if he stayed, he would inevitably become part of the British establishment" (Mendelson *Plays* xxvi), exploited and destroyed like his hero.

Diverging Paths

As the Thirties wore on, Auden and Eliot were both becoming increasingly disillusioned about this kind of overtly didactic drama. The methods which they employed helped to reinvigorate verse drama, but the poets only had limited success in achieving their other goals. Despite their desire to cut across class lines and unify a diverse audience, in actuality their audience was always essentially bourgeois. Although it advanced socialist ideas, the Group Theatre really only catered to the middle class and works like *The Dance of Death* were "quite unlike the workers' theatre that influenced it. The allusions that the overt simplicity of language and form slyly concealed were decidedly highbrow" (Sidnell 70). Even during the performance of *The Rock*, when the audience *was* comprised of a broader spectrum of society, the desired union with the audience wasn't complete because the cultural elite, who by and large were not invested in the common cause, felt somewhat left out. Ackroyd relays that some of "the devotees of Eliot sat uneasily at Sadler's Wells with the charabanc parties from the various London churches-- 'the public' who at the end joined in singing his choruses" (214-25). Eliot and Auden seemed to realize that there would always be an element of elitism attached to the theatre, since unlike a medieval or Renaissance audience, the modern public tended to seek their entertainment in media perceived as less challenging, like the cinema. So while their appropriation of elements from popular culture did enliven their works, it was apparently not enough to provide a foundation upon which to create socially cohesive drama. Perhaps if they had aimed only at "expressing the soul of the people" as Marie Lloyd did (Eliot *SE* 458), instead of trying to convert it, they might have been more

successful in forming a community through drama.[29] Their goals of social unity and didacticism often seemed at cross purposes, since their strongly conveyed views could so easily polarize an audience.

Auden and to a lesser degree Eliot were also growing wary of the manner in which they were promoting their beliefs. McDiarmid states that in their desire to spread their message they often succumbed to the "poisoned rhetoric" they themselves denounced, and consequently "the audience was lectured at but not unified" (*Saving Civilization* 73). In drama like *The Rock* and *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, "the poets tend to sound like political orators, indulging in exhortations and slogans," demonstrating the ease with which dramatist and audience can "turn into dictator and army. A temporary order is imposed, but a community is not formed" (xv-xvi, 76). Except when addressing the like-minded, the poets would no doubt have repelled many audience members by these sorts of bullying exhortations. Speaking of Yeats, Eliot, and Auden, McDiarmid states, "Although the poets had remarkably similar notions of the 'living voice' and its social utility, with each successive generation there is an increasing self-consciousness and wariness about voices as a method of saving [civilization]. Eliot more than Yeats, Auden more than Eliot, becomes aware of the dangerous likeness of the poet's voice to that other voice of the thirties, the dictator's" (68). This contention certainly holds true for the two younger poets. Eliot, who admitted to "haranguing" the audience in *The Rock* (*OPP* 91), worried that he had "an inherited disposition to rhetoric" (Gordon *New Life* 40), but Auden was particularly anxious over his oratorical tendencies, especially because of his political past. In March 1939, he had given a speech to a group supporting

[29] As Dennis Ryan states in an article on Marie Lloyd, "Her art appealed to everyone because it was not an explicit comment on either society at large or class in particular. Marie's own ideological allegiances never surfaced" (37).

refugees from the Spanish Civil War, and, as he told a friend later, "I suddenly found I could really do it, that I could make a fighting demagogic speech and have the audience roaring. . . . it is so exciting but so absolutely degrading; I felt just covered with dirt afterwards" (qted. in Mendelson *Prose II* xiv). After making a series of speeches about the Sino-Japanese War, he finally resolved, "Never, *never* again will I speak at a political meeting . . ." (qted. in Mendelson *Prose II* xiv). As Mendelson explains, Auden "left England partly to sever . . . his oratorical relations with an audience that admired him for his politics" (*Later Auden* xviii), and Cooper concurs that by the time of his emigration he had "climbed down for good from off the speaker's platform" (137). Auden wanted to strip his art of oratorical excess as well. As "New Year Letter" testifies, he was anxious to avoid becoming a "demagogue who raves" (*DM* 48)-- which, he felt, he seemed in danger of doing at times in the Thirties-- and rebuked himself for "relaps[ing] into my crimes" by "Adopt[ing] what I would disown, / The preacher's loose immodest tone" (*DM* 22). The theatre is particularly dangerous because a live audience is more likely to tempt him to employ "[t]he preacher's loose immodest tone," exploiting his characters to do so. Besides his concern that such behaviour would compromise the integrity of his art, Auden also worried that it would endanger his spiritual health. As he showed with Ransom, the misuse of one's gift can spell personal disaster, and throughout the plays, he and Isherwood underline the spiritual corruption of the "demagogue who raves," those like the Leader. Auden was even more concerned over the effect of "poisoned rhetoric" following his conversion when he attended more closely to the state of his soul, questions of eternal salvation and damnation having become very real to him-- a factor that may have influenced Eliot's retreat from oratory as well but certainly not to the same degree.

For these main reasons-- a fear of inefficacy and a distrust of oratory-- Eliot, motivated primarily by the former, and Auden, motivated primarily by the latter, began to turn to other kinds of drama. "Eventually, as Yeats had withdrawn to the symbolic intensities of the drawing-room, Eliot took the opposite road to Broadway and the West End" (Mendelson *Early Auden* 261), and wrote plays resembling drawing-room comedies. As though acknowledging that his audience was and always had been bourgeois, he now began to write directly for them in his bid for popularity. Auden's withdrawal from didactic theatre as well as political poetry corresponded with his emigration to America-- where he had gone to escape Ransom's fate-- and his conversion to Christianity. When he had been in the U.S. for only a few months, Auden began work on the libretto for *Paul Bunyan* (Fuller 309), thus initiating what was to be an enduring interest in the rarefied world of opera. Although he continued to preach at times in his poetry, especially in the early days of his conversion, Auden seems to have been attracted to opera at least in part because he thought that the nature of the medium actually hindered his ability to pontificate. So whereas in their early works they employed similar techniques to proclaim oft competing gospels, when they came to share the same dispensation they embraced radically different dramatic forms. Despite the otherworldliness of opera, as Auden conceived it, the libretti still reveal important aspects of his belief, and particularly the ways in which his theology departs from Eliot's. Nevertheless, in their later dramatic works it is Eliot who clings more to the notion of didactic theatre, although he now chooses to cloak his message in theatrical conventions.

Ministering in the Drawing Room

Eliot's decision to abandon experimental theatre was based on more than his failure to emulate Marie Lloyd's success. As Sidnell explains, when Eliot adapted some of the material from *The Dance of Death* for *The Rock*,

> he self-consciously diverged from Auden's experiment, finding that some of his own earlier suggestions for a more sensuously vital theatre were not, after all, conducive to the effects he wanted. After an uncertain moment . . . he began to fashion a dramaturgy in which, over the course of his development as a playwright, stage movement, gesture and music would become less and less important. . . .This progressive curtailment of the sensuousness of the theatre was unexpected in one who had been so preoccupied with its ritual origins and had a high regard for the music-hall. (95)

Although in "Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern," Eliot stated that "if we want a living religious drama we must be prepared to accept something less sedative, and perhaps something which may cause us some discomfort and embarrassment in the process of getting used to it" (9), by the time he wrote this in 1937 he had already begun to move away from the total theatre ideals that he discovered were uncongenial to him.[30] His lack of affinity for more sensuous theatre can likely be attributed to "a matter of temperament, of a certain disaffection with the human body" (Sidnell 95), but also to his dependence on language. Despite the deficiencies of language, Eliot seemed to decide that the compensations total theatre offered, in terms of music for instance, were not enough to warrant the introduction of so many elements that could distract from the all

[30] Sidnell even suggests that one possible reason that Eliot didn't continue with *The Superior Landlord* was that he found it "too Audenesque and Group Theatre-ish" (102).

important word. The importance he placed on language reflects his desire to edify, since he was so committed to articulating his beliefs in his work. For example, he claimed that for religious drama simple productions are best because "we do not want our words to be distorted by actors with star personalities or eclipsed by magnificent scenery and costume" ("Religious Drama and the Church" 5). From the beginning, certain elements like the primacy of the word distinguished his work among the Group Theatre cadre, leading one reviewer who had seen *Sweeney Agonistes* to note presciently that "Mr Eliot would be infinitely more at ease renovating a traditional form" (qted. in Sidnell 129). Although Auden condemned "the pure West-end drama that is talk without action" and called "the comedy of manners" a form "antipathetic to poetry" (*Prose I* 70), Eliot became to develop a dramaturgy partaking of both the West-end drama and the comedy of manners which he felt would better suit his needs. The ritualistic elements in his plays, *The Family Reunion* (1938), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953), and *The Elder Statesman* (1958), progressively dwindles as he seeks more realism, once regarded as the enemy. Perhaps in reaction to the charges regarding the ineffectual anachronisms in *Murder in the Cathedral*, he was determined that the contemporary relevance of his plays would be immediately comprehensible. He was offered the chance to work on other historical and religious plays "but Eliot was quite determined to refuse them all" having become convinced that "[i]f the poets of the twentieth century were to find once more a place in the theatre, it could only be by writing of contemporary life" (Browne 90). He averred, "What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre," which was one of the reasons why he decided that *Murder in the Cathedral*

was "a dead end" (*OPP* 82, 79). As with his treatment of the Incarnation in *Four Quartets*, he strove to reveal the importance of Christian revelation to the modern world by situating it explicitly *in* that world. Although it ran contrary to so much of his earlier dramatic theory, Eliot's turn to more conventional theatre-- "concentrated in time and place, unified in plot, illusionistic in manner, uninterrupted by music or choreographed movement and employing an unobtrusive poetic metre" (Sidnell 202)-- was a deliberate attempt to woo the audience. Rather than trying to create a taste for more avant-garde fare, he would satisfy the appetites they already had, and thereby, ideally, make them receptive to his beliefs.

While secular viewers may have appreciated the dramaturgy of *The Rock* or the more popular *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot realized that the message of these religious works was only embraced by those who already shared his beliefs. Therefore, in keeping with his desire for unconsciously Christian poetry, these later plays represent his attempt to create unconsciously Christian drama, designed to edify a secular as well as a religious audience. In "Religious Drama and the Church," he states: "The Church has the opportunity, greater now than in the period of industrial expansion, of gathering to itself, of educating and spiritualising, all the potential forces of civilization. And these forces, gathered in the Church, will consequently radiate out from it" (5). As mentioned, he ultimately wanted to see all drama become unconsciously Christian, in which both the writer and the audience are not aware of any particularly religious content in works which nevertheless affirm Christian values. As with Christian literature in general, however, such a state can only be achieved when the whole of society embraces Christianity, allowing their corporate belief to be taken largely for granted. He hoped to contribute to

the evangelization of society that would usher in such an era, but realized that in a culture like his, which did not have that kind of ideological homogeneity, the artist tends to become "overconscious of his beliefs as held" (*UPUC* 129), as Chesterton demonstrated. In the meantime, Eliot at least wanted to draw the Church and secular drama, one of these "potential forces of civilization," closer. In his "opposition to the compartmentalization of life in general, to the sharp division between our religious and our ordinary life," he protests against the "division of religious and secular drama into watertight compartments" ("Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" 13). He looked forward to the time when a "fundamentally Christian and Catholic" play "may be written and may be performed successfully to audiences which will not be consciously attending a 'religious play,' because they will be imbued with the Christian and Catholic way of feeling, even when they ask only to be entertained" ("Religious Drama and the Church" 5). So even if secular forces make it difficult for a Christian dramatist to incorporate his beliefs unconsciously, the *audience* may still receive these beliefs without conscious awareness. In order to accomplish this goal, however, Christian dramatists may have to employ a degree of cunning. As Eliot confided to Browne,

> I have always been most desirous to see ordinary plays written by Christians rather than plays of overtly Christian purpose. In the theatre, I feel that one wants a Christian mentality to permeate the theatre, to affect it and to influence audiences who might be obdurate to plays of directly religious appeal. (qted. in Browne 312)

The Christianity informing their work, regardless of the subject, "enables 'evangelization' to occur naturally" and more effectively than attempts "to militate

conversion" (McCarthy 37). So after writing drama of an "overtly Christian purpose," he sought to interweave his religious values into the kinds of plays that would appeal to a secular audience "ask[ing] only to be entertained," like drawing-room comedies.

Betraying a degree of disdain for the audience he seeks, Eliot remarked, "I should imagine that Mr. Noel Coward has about all the intelligence and sensibility that a successful dramatist can afford to be encumbered with" if he is to have popular success ("Religious Drama and the Church" 4). Seeming to emulate Coward in the hopes of similar popularity, Eliot draws upon the conventions of the drawing-room comedy in order to seduce his secular audience. No doubt encouraged by the reaction to the comedic elements in *The Rock*, he wrote what on the superficial level appeared to be light comedies. For instance, one reviewer declared that the wit and "wisecracks" of *The Cocktail Party* were "reminiscent . . . of Oscar Wilde" (qted. in Browne 234).[31] The very deliberateness with which Eliot chose to use comedy to further his religious designs testifies to the fact that he was not a Christian dramatist who could overcome the

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[31] Eliot even seems to have expanded upon a humorous bit in *The Rock*, involving forgotten glasses and a bottle of gin, for *The Cocktail Party*. A nosy middle-class woman who comes to inspect the work of the builders expresses shock when she sees them drinking what appears to be gin. She doesn't realize that they are toasting the completion of the church on which they've been working diligently. Since she has left her glasses in the car, however, the Major accompanying her asks, "How do you know it's a gin bottle, if you haven't got your glasses" (69), suggesting perhaps that she is so familiar with the appearance of a gin bottle herself that she can spot it from a distance without the aid of her spectacles. In *The Cocktail Party*, the equally inquisitive Julia uses the excuse of forgotten glasses to return to Edward's flat at the most inopportune moments, when Edward is in the midst of private discussions about his wife who has just left him. Much of the humor in the first act depends upon these interruptions, during one of which she comes upon Edward and his mysterious guest, later discovered as Sir Henry Harcourt-Reilly. Although it turns out that she is friends with Harcourt-Reilly, at the time she expresses shock that Edward has been drinking gin with this "dreadful man" and presents herself as an amusingly silly and nosy woman by peppering him with questions regarding his guest and declaring, "*This* is what I call an adventure!" (*CPP* 365). Julia is not actually inane or ill-intentioned like the woman in *The Rock*, but her seemingly dizzy exchanges and exclamations set the comedic tone in the opening scenes. Much like the play itself, the guardians, Julia, Alex and Harcourt-Reilly, initially effect a frothy or slightly ridiculous manner in order to lower defenses and accomplish a deeper purpose. Despite any similarities in the kind of humor employed, however, Eliot did not want *The Cocktail Party* to seem indebted to the music hall like *The Rock*. For example, a draft of the play included a humorous anecdote about false teeth but Eliot wondered if "it is too near a stale music-hall joke" (qted. in Browne 173) and decided to delete it. He was committed to using material derived from and suitable for the drawing room comedy rather than the music hall he once celebrated.

"unpropitiousness" of his age, and incorporate his beliefs more or less unconsciously. Neither was the audience given the chance to absorb his beliefs unconsciously. Although Browne assured him that regardless of the chosen subject whatever he wrote would "be a Christian play" (160), and Eliot's own contention that a Christian dramatist need not address religion directly in order to edify, he choose to do so anyway, and the religious thrust of the plays is glaringly apparent to all but the most obtuse viewers. Most if not all reviewers noted the Christianity in the works and many critics made the theological content the focal point of their articles, as in William Arrowsmith's review of *The Cocktail Party*, which he called a clearly "Christian play" behind "a secular mask" (393).

Eliot may have expected that certain members of his audience, the most sensitive and spiritually aware, *would* recognize the religious dimension, while the majority assumed they were only watching an amusing play, receiving edification without their knowledge. In 1933, he had praised Shakespeare for writing plays with "several levels of significance" in which the most unsophisticated enjoyed the plot whereas "auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding" could appreciate "a meaning which reveals itself gradually" (*UPUC* 146). Despite the multi-level significance, the auditor is never "bothered by the presence of that which he does not understand" (*UPUC* 146). Eliot relates that he wanted to try a similar technique in a play he once began to write, presumably *Sweeney Agonistes*:

> My intention was to have one character whose sensibility and intelligence should be on the plane of the most sensitive and intelligent members of the audience; his speeches should be addressed to them as much as to the other personages in the play-- or rather, should be addressed to the latter who were to be material, literal-

> minded and visionless, with the consciousness of being overheard by the former. There was to be an understanding between this protagonist and a small number of the audience, while the rest of the audience would share the responses of the other characters in the play. Perhaps this is all too deliberate, but one must experiment as one can. (*UPUC* 147)

When he became a Christian, this method likely became even more appealing since he realized that many audience members would be resistant to the deeper meaning of his plays because of its religious nature. The spiritual elite may safely apprehend the religious dimension, but for the rest of the audience "truth must be smuggled in like contraband" if it is to be effective (Grove 167). This condescending position is to be expected from one who thought that "the audiences are always wanting something better, though they may not know it" ("Religious Drama: Medieval and Modern" 12), implying that Eliot knows what they want and need and acts for their own good. Although Browne claimed that in a play like *The Cocktail Party* the "undertones are deep" but "they remain undertones" (288), which is what Eliot intended, the religious meaning of the play is center stage, as it were, and apprehensible to everyone, not only the spiritually sensitive. As Robin Grove states, "The plays are not social drama only; they mean something else all the time. Beneath their drawing-room manners, what they mean is Sin, and Expiation, Vocation, Sacrifice; the Way" (167), a religious import which the "drawing-room manners" never manage to conceal. So even though he was no longer employing his oratorical powers to address the audience directly, he continued to preach in these later plays. It's possible that the manner in which he propagated his beliefs in these works may have struck some audience members as *more* distasteful than in his earlier, avowedly

religious drama because he may have struck them as sly, as though trying to deceive them into accepting as secular a drama with an ultimately evangelistic purpose.

Prospero Sings

In the introduction to his published T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures, Auden remarked that "Eliot . . . much to my regret, never wrote an opera libretto, but from the verse play, in which he took a life-long interest, to the opera libretto is a short step" (*SW* 12). Eliot, who showed no interest in writing libretti, would not have agreed. While he claimed, "To work out a play in verse is to be working like a musician as well as like a prose dramatist: it is to see the whole thing as a whole musical pattern," he nevertheless insisted that "It is *not* like opera, but some musical form like the sonata or fugue" [emphasis added] ("The Need for Poetic Drama" 994).[32] Auden may only have made the comment in an attempt to justify the inclusion of a lecture on opera in a series bearing Eliot's name,[33] but in his case, if not in Eliot's, there is some truth in the claim. While Eliot retreated from the total theatre ideals he once advocated in part to focus attention on the language of his plays, Auden moved in the other direction and allowed his words to become subsumed in the music of opera. He had already begun to take this "short step" in his plays with Isherwood, who, recall, claimed that due to his ritualistic impulse, "If

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[32] Eliot likely meant that the intricate pattern of a sonata or fugue is more akin to the structure of a poem than opera, in which extramusical elements can distract from whatever pattern there is. He was clearly drawn to using musical metaphors for poetry, as witnessed by his criticism and by the titles of many of his poems: "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," "Preludes," "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," "A Song for Simeon," and, of course, *Four Quartets*.

[33] In the series, Auden was not constrained to lecture on Eliot's work, but apparently felt somewhat obliged to address subjects in which he had been interested. Two of the selected topics were important to both poets, "The Martyr as Dramatic Hero" and especially "Words and the Word." However, the third lecture centered on the Icelandic sagas which Auden relished but Eliot may never have even read. He concedes that "it could be sheer selfishness on my part to drag them in," but tries to excuse himself by noting that "the successful 'social' realism of the sagas" sheds light on the "relationship between those secondary worlds which we call works of art and the primary world of our everyday social experience" which is "a problem which concerns every artist" (*SW* 12). After drawing this rather tenuous connection, Auden may have felt a little-shamefaced about lecturing on opera, another subject of little concern to Eliot but which absorbed him.

Auden had his way, he would turn every play into a cross between grand opera and high mass" ("Some Notes" 74). Auden himself, looking back, said that his plays "seem to me now to be *libretti manqués*" (qted. in Mendelson *Libretti* xxix). This operatic tendency is most discernible in *On the Frontier*, the play for which he was most responsible (Isherwood "A Conversation" 51). Its aspiration to "the condition of opera" (Mendelson *Plays* xxviii) is revealed, for instance, in the duet of sorts between the Westland Students and the Ostnian Air Cadets (*Plays* 384-85), and, more generally, in the way in which the music furthers rather than interrupts or merely comments upon the action as was often the case in earlier plays. A minor character even hums a well-known snatch from Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* (*Plays* 381). So while Eliot was trying to purge most extraliterary elements from his later plays, Auden made music ever more integral to his drama. As Auden grew less enamored with the idea of exploiting the instrumental possibilities of the stage, he seemed to become more eager to capitalize on its aesthetic possibilities, all of the things which drama can do that the printed word cannot.

Despite these early gestures toward opera, Auden only became well-acquainted with the medium after meeting Kallman, an opera enthusiast who accompanied him to performances and passed on his knowledge. Kallman likely played a role in Auden's decision to accept Britten's commission to write the libretto for *Paul Bunyan* in 1939 (performed May 1941). Although it was not particularly well received at the time (Fuller 309), Mendelson notes that it was only the second "libretto written by a major English poet for a major English composer" (*Libretti* xvii).[34] As with Eliot's work in the theatre, Auden's venture into opera was disrupted by the war, but he returned to it shortly

[34] *King Arthur*, written by Dryden and set by Purcell, is credited as the first (Mendelson *Libretti* xvii).

thereafter and continued to devote himself to the medium until the end of his career. In fact, after the completion of *The Age of Anxiety* (1946), his longest works were all libretti. Now collaborating with Kallman, he continued to work with important composers. They wrote *The Rake's Progress* (1947-48) for Stravinsky, *Elegy for Young Lovers* (1959-60) and *The Bassarids* (1963) for Hans Werner Henze, and *Love's Labour's Lost* (1969) for Nicolas Nabokov.[35] They also translated *The Magic Flute* (1955), altering it substantially in the process, and wrote the unset *Delia* (1952). Additionally, as Eliot had done with verse drama, Auden wrote extensively about the medium-- contributing many more articles on opera than he had ever done on verse drama-- and about his experience in writing for it. Summing up his achievement in "Auden in Opera: The libretto as poetic style," Robert Marx states:

> From the late 1940s until his death in 1973, W. H. Auden worked actively and enthusiastically as an opera librettist. In the history of the opera, no poet of equal genius identified himself so closely with lyric theater. Not even Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who was a major influence on Auden, was so committed to opera or to the development of its aesthetics. . . .Opera was integral to Auden's working career as a poet. (9)

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[35] Britten and Stravinsky also set some of Eliot's work, although previously written poems. C. F. Pond, in "Benjamin Britten and T. S. Eliot: *Entre Deux Guerres* and After," relays that in the 1970s, Britten set two poems by Eliot, "Journey of the Magi" and "The Death of Saint Narcissus," which "mark a nearness to Eliot that Britten did not achieve within the poet's lifetime" (216). According to Donald Mitchell, towards the end of his life Eliot's verse was "among the few things Britten found himself able to read" (qted. in Pond 235). During his lifetime, Eliot was very particular about whom he would allow to set his verse, declining most requests, but he was happy to allow Stravinsky to do so. Writing to a composer who had wanted to set *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot told him he didn't think it was suitable, unlike Part IV of "Little Gidding," which was set by "Stravinsky, with my full permission and encouragement" (qted. in Pond 225). For more on the relationship between Eliot and these two composers, and their treatments of his work, see Pond's article or Peter Dickenson's "Connections between T. S. Eliot and Major Composers: Igor Stravinsky and Benjamin Britten."

Although Auden invested so much of his energies into opera, many critics overlook this section of his career. As David Pascoe relates in "Taking Liberties with English Libretti," this neglect is largely due to a general disregard for libretti, which are often "deemed unworthy by literary critics," so that "we are left to rely on musicologists to fill the gaps in our knowledge of a neglected verbal form" (82). In Auden's case, this state of affairs is particularly unfortunate since his libretti reflect and clarify positions in his prose and poetry, but also because his decision to turn to this dramatic form in the first place is so revealing. Ahead of any ideological considerations, Auden worked so extensively in opera because he took great pleasure in it. Although he achieved a great deal, he asserted that librettists are generally uncelebrated so "it's not a thing to do unless you really enjoy it" (*Libretti* 624). Significantly, however, the humble position of the librettist was itself an attraction, since it prevented Auden from abusing his rhetorical powers, as he felt he was prone to do in the verse dramas, while still providing an outlet for his dramatic energies.

Auden did not completely disavow didacticism when he turned to opera, but rather believed that the nature of the medium itself mitigated the force of his rhetoric and rendered it essentially harmless. Opera could not give rise to a demagogue. He was not averse to more popular forms-- for instance, he wrote lyrics for *Man of La Mancha* before losing his commission and at one point planned to write a stage adaptation of *Goodbye to Berlin* with Isherwood[36]-- but didn't seem as driven to find a large audience as he did during the Thirties. Opera was "safe" because, not only was it unlikely to provide him

[36] Isherwood stated in a 1961 interview that "we thought we were going to do a musical together based on *Goodbye to Berlin*. . . .I'm sorry that hasn't come off, but perhaps it will" (51), although others ended up adapting what was to become *Cabaret*. Auden lost the commission to write the stage adaptation of *Don Quixote* because of ideological differences with the producer, Dale Wasserman (Mendelson *Libretti* xxix).

with a platform from which to address the masses, but also because of what he regarded as the relative unimportance of the words to the music and of the librettist to the composer. In their collaborations with composers, Auden and Kallman generally followed the same procedure that Hofmannsthal did with Strauss: "The choice of dramatic subject and its style of treatment was to be the librettist's business, not the composer's who must wait patiently till the librettist finds a subject which excites his imagination" (Auden qted. in Mendelson *Libretti* xxvi). While this approach sounds as though it would grant the librettist considerable authority, Auden did not see it that way.[37] Rather, he continually asserted that the librettist is merely a servant and the libretto's function only to inspire the composer; it has no independent value. In "Notes on Music and Opera," for example, he states:

> The verses which the librettist writes are not addressed to the public but are really a private letter to the composer. They have their moment of glory in which they suggest to him a certain melody; once that is over, they are as expendable as infantry to a Chinese general: they must efface themselves and cease to care what happens to them. (*DH* 473)

The composer's needs even take precedence over more purely literary consideration, and one may find that in order to satisfy these requirements one must curtail any personal artistic ambitions. The program note for *The Rake's Progress*, signed by Auden and Kallman, asserts:

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[37] When describing his working relationship with Auden, Isherwood remarked, "I have always thought of myself as a librettist to some extent with a composer, his verse being the music; and I would say 'Now we have to have a big speech here,' you know, and he would write it" ("A Conversation" 51). Though this description seems to confer much of the power to Isherwood, he believed, like Auden, that the librettist is essentially subservient. He is only catering to the virtuoso. Incidentally, Auden was very involved with the structure of their plays as well, especially as he gained more experience in the theatre.

> The first duty of the librettist is . . . to write verses which excite the musical imagination of the composer; if these verses should also possess poetic merit in themselves, so much the better, but such merit is a secondary consideration. Many things, such as striking metaphors and images or subtle verbal ambiguities, which are highly prized in spoken poetry, have to be avoided . . . (*Libretti* 615)

In his transitional poetry, Auden simplified his style in order to express his new beliefs more clearly, but here, in contrast, any simplification is in the service of another work of art, the opera as a whole, providing the composer with more manageable verse to set and conforming to the demands of the stage. Auditors are less adept than readers in processing highly elaborate language, and in the dense vocal arena of opera this difficulty is exacerbated. Nevertheless, one should still strive to write verse of high quality within these confines not because of its intrinsic worth but because "[m]ost composers will be more stimulated by good verses than silly ones, provided that they are so written as to be settable to musical notes and singable" (Auden *SW* 79). Auden's repeated assertions that "the words must be completely subordinate to the notes" (*Libretti* 611) underline his belief in the relative modesty of the librettist's contributions. Tellingly, after their conversions both Auden and Eliot were drawn to mediums which they felt demanded humility, a virtue of utmost importance to them as Christians but one "not conspicuous among modern men of letters" (Eliot *SE* 370). Eliot even claimed, "When a poet, however brilliant and accomplished, begins to write for the theatre, he must regard himself as a beginner, not only in the theatre, but in a new deal of humility: I can hold out to him the hope that his labour may result in a certain moral purification, even if it has no other result" ("The Future of Poetic Drama" [1938] 21). Although drama always requires

a degree of humility, since one must cooperate with and adapt to many other contributors during and after one's apprenticeship, when Auden turned to opera he may have had even more hope than Eliot of receiving "a certain moral purification" through the exaggerated humility of his position, as he saw it, helping to combat the inveterate pride of the artist. Unlike in his verse plays, in which composers had catered to him, he now felt obliged to cater to them in a self-effacing manner.[38] So although he doesn't say so explicitly, Auden seems to have been attracted to opera at least in part because as a librettist he could work with a live audience without fear of succumbing to any demagogic tendencies, thereby vouchsafing his spiritual well-being. Moreover, he may have felt reassured working in the world of music because, as he acknowledged, traditionally music is regarded as "unique among the arts for it is the only art practiced in Heaven and by the unfallen creatures" (*DH* 501).

Auden's operatic collaborations, as well as fostering humility, also proved a more effective check on his tendency to preach than had his earlier dramatic collaborations. While working with Isherwood and the Group Theatre, he dealt with individuals who generally shared his ideology and were consequently eager to exploit his abilities to further their shared cause. Similarly, after *The Rock*, Eliot insisted on working only with Browne as his director and main collaborator (Browne ix, 180), a fellow Christian who helped to reinforce the theological meaning of his plays. Auden's libretti were written for composers of disparate ideologies, however, so that they were not in league in this

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[38] In *For the Time Being*, on the other hand, Auden did not exhibit this kind of humility, since he seemed to expect Britten to serve him rather than the other way around. He wrote a text which was much too long to be set to music, and didn't agree to make any of the cuts which Britten requested (Callan *Carnival* 184), largely because he wanted to expound upon his theology in great detail. According to Mendelson, Britten "had begun to resent what he took to be Auden's dominant role in their relations" (*Libretti* xx), as particularly shown in this instance, and Auden's lack of accommodation contributed to the demise of their friendship.

sense. Although this arrangement was likely not a conscious decision on Auden's part, it did have the effect of complicating the status and reception of his beliefs within the work, and limited the degree of didacticism he could employ. Even if he were to have made any attempts at demagogic pronouncements, they would no doubt have been quashed by the composers. Since he was the co-writer, Kallman undoubtedly had an even more marked effect on the ideological content of Auden's libretti. Whereas Isherwood had shared his ambivalent Marxism, the Jewish Kallman did not embrace his Christianity. Although Auden seems to have been the dominant partner in his working relationship with Kallman, as he was with Isherwood, working with Kallman seemed to limit the forcefulness with which he expressed his Christianity, as suggested by the tenor of the works which he wrote when alone.[39] In 1967, when Henze proposed a work for solo and

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[39] Auden gave Kallman much credit for his turn to opera, remarking, "I came rather late in life to an interest in operatic music; then, thanks above all to the enthusiasm and erudition of my friend and collaborator, Chester Kallman, and to the opportunities provided by the Metropolitan Opera House in New York to hear perfect performances, I became a real opera fan" (*Libretti* 607). His relationship with Kallman also made him particularly eager to write libretti because it gave them a chance to work together. After planning *The Rake's Progress* with Stravinsky, Auden brought in Kallman to collaborate on the libretto without the composer's knowledge. Stravinsky had been initially annoyed, but was soon reconciled and welcomed Kallman's participation (Mendelson *Libretti* 573). Callan states that "the opportunity given to Auden and Kallman by Stravinsky did affect their relationship. It made opera the center of their lives (Auden may have welcomed the work of a librettist partly to give Kallman an occupation)" (*Carnival* 216). By working together, Auden likely hoped to strengthen their relationship and prevent Kallman, who was unfaithful from the beginning, from leaving him. He was very sensitive on Kallman's behalf and insisted that his contributions were recognized, perhaps to pacify his frequently overshadowed young lover as well as to ensure that justice was done. Auden complained that critics' assertions as to who wrote which passages "have been, at a conservative estimate, seventy-five per cent wrong" (*DH* 483), and that consequently they often credit him for sections written by Kallman. His championing of Kallman even extended to giving him credit for works he did *not* write. As well as insisting that Kallman receive equal credit for the libretti themselves, he signed many opera articles in both of their names even when manuscripts reveal him as the sole author (see, for example, Mendelson *Libretti* 604, 614-15), a consideration which Kallman did not seem to reciprocate. Similarly, while Auden alone wrote the lyrics for his aborted version of *Man of La Mancha,* Kallman was named as his co-writer in the publicity. Dale Wasserman relates, "I recall asking Auden why Kallman was to receive co-credit and he said, 'That's simply our arrangement'" (qted. in Mendelson *Libretti* 507). Mendelson suggests that Kallman may have eventually planned to help with the lyrics (*Libretti* 507), but Auden seemed determined to present themselves as a writing team whether Kallman contributed or not. He was never so anxious on Isherwood's account, likely because of the somewhat tenuous nature of his relationship with Kallman and the fact that Kallman, unlike his earlier collaborator, did not already have a literary reputation of his own. He was therefore often accused of riding on Auden's coat-tails. While Kallman's contributions should not be underestimated-- for example, he

chorus, Auden decided to write "Moralities," a "text after Aesop" (Mendelson *Libretti* xxx). The choice of such a subject reveals that his didactic impulse was undiminished. While this text is moralistic but not specifically Christian, two other dramatic works do promote Christianity: "The Book of Daniel" (1957) and "The Twelve" (1964). In the former, a version of a medieval liturgical drama produced by the New York Pro Musica (Mendelson *Libretti* xxvi), the presentation of the Old Testament prophet Daniel is extremely orthodox, and, in an ending that seems rather tagged-on, Auden references the Incarnation and Crucifixion, events which figure so prominently in his major postconversion poetry. Daniel foretells of when "The wise Word that was from the beginning, / Maker of all things, should be made flesh / And suffer death to redeem mankind" (*Libretti* 407). Auden wrote "The Twelve," an "Anthem for the Feast of any Apostle" for the composer William Walton and dedicated it to the Dean of Christ Church,

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suggested using the fairy tale mechanism of the three wishes to structure *The Rake's Progress* (Mendelson *Libretti* 574)-- he nevertheless was in many ways the minor partner. Even those passages which critics had failed to attribute to Kallman were to some degree indebted to Auden since the older poet had such an immense influence on his artistic development. Spears states, for example, "Judging by his single brief volume (61 pages), Kallman's poetry is much like Auden's and sometimes bears the marks of obvious derivation . . ." (*Auden* 271), not surprising given that Kallman was only eighteen when he met Auden and then lived with him for decades. Also, although Auden claimed to value co-writing because it helped one find flaws in the text and revise accordingly ("no critic can help you once you've published or had your premiere. But, to have someone who says *before* you've published, 'now look here, that won't do at all!'-- well, *that* is a blessing of collaboration" [qted. in Levy 36]), he seems to have dictated rather than submitted to Kallman during revisions. For example, Marx relates, "Auden . . . seemed to be the dominant author, establishing matters of style and tone. Kallman's notes on *The Rake's Progress* suggest that Auden was also a strict editor: 'My first contribution, Shadow's announcement of the inheritance, was mercilessly trimmed by my collaborator . . . . Auden, after looking over the long dialogue in couplets that I produced, said, 'Charmingly done. I think you can manage to do it in four lines, though.' I did" (10). Despite Auden's public efforts, Kallman *was* generally recognized as the less powerful partner in their collaborations, due to Auden's towering reputation and the tonal and thematic similarities between his poetry and the libretti. According to Sean O'Brien, "Auden could never separate his profound affection for Kallman from the need to be everywhere dominant," but "Kallman, understandably, could never reconcile himself to the secondary status much of the world awarded him. . . .How many people could stand overhearing a visitor's cruel, pitying comment: 'What a shame Chester doesn't write a cookbook?'" (3). The tension that inevitably arose between them is hinted at in "The Dome of the Rock" (1970), Kallman's contribution to *Auden: A Tribute*: "I shared his work and life as best I could / For both of us, often impatiently" (227). Nevertheless, Auden's efforts to give Kallman equal credit suggest that he didn't intend to be so dominant, and rather wanted to deflect his oratorical power by sharing responsibility for the text with another writer, one moreover of distinctly different beliefs. In this manner, Auden could feel he was contributing to a work of art, not merely advancing a position.

where it premiered (Fuller 523). The text describes how the apostles overcame the hostility and mockery of "a joyless world" to preach the gospel: "When they heard the Word, some demurred, some were shocked, some mocked. But many were stirred, and the Word spread" (*CP* 815). Although, like Eliot's *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral*, these works were done on commission, Auden's acceptance of these assignments reveals that he still, at times at least, feels the urge to preach to a live audience about his beliefs.[40] Much as Isherwood tried to stifle any indication of what appeared to be Auden's burgeoning religious beliefs in the plays they wrote together-- by "keep[ing] a sharp eye on him" so that the characters didn't "flop . . . on their knees" ("Some Notes" 74)-- Kallman may have encouraged Auden to limit the extent to which he expressed his fully developed Christianity in their libretti. Furthermore, the nature of opera, unlike the ecclesiastical dramas which Auden wrote alone, makes it difficult to satisfy any urge to preach. Besides forcing Auden to satisfy the demands of numerous collaborators, including Kallman, he believed that in the performance as well as in the composition of an opera words are of little importance and rhetoric thus largely ineffectual.

After they have inspired and been disregarded by the composer, Auden insists that the words of a libretto are not even of much interest to the audience, which, he claims, probably can't hear most of them anyway. In "The World of Opera," he states, "The opera house is not a *Lieder* recital hall, and they will be very fortunate if they hear one word in seven" (*SW* 78). Furthermore, he's not convinced that the words are heard as

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[40] These two works do not have as significant a place in Auden's oeuvre as *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral* do in Eliot's, however, because of their short length and relative obscurity. Moreover, they are not in Auden's main line of development whereas Eliot's two dramas were essential to his apprenticeship in the theatre and influenced all the plays that followed.

words at all, asking "whether the listener hears the words as words in a poem, or, as I am inclined to believe, only as sung syllables" (*DH* 473). Also, since "Nobody reads a libretto by flashlight *during* the performance" (qted. in Mendelson *Libretti* 682) and Auden's libretti were mostly unpublished, the audience often wouldn't have had the opportunity to study the libretto more closely outside of the theatre.[41] Auden's extreme claims regarding the unimportance of the libretto to the composer and the audience should not be taken at face value, however. For example, Fuller notes that "the kind of inaudibility he finds in the words of opera is . . . probably exaggerated (436), and certainly the words in the operas to which he contributed, particularly in the recitative, are often surprisingly clear even to the opera neophyte. Moreover, many opera patrons do in fact read the libretto during the performance. Also, when Henze had made considerable cuts to Auden's and Kallman's libretto for *The Bassarids*, they requested that the excised text be restored for the printed version, so Auden clearly did not think his words were completely irrelevant once they served the composer (*Libretti* 581-82).

These hyperbolic claims, however, were likely an attempt to reassure himself that he was *not* abusing his rhetorical abilities-- compromising his spiritual well-being and his artistic integrity by railing at the audience-- despite the didacticism which his libretti often display. Although he was now working in Ariel's sphere, dominated by beauty and song, his Prospero tendencies led him to gravitate towards moralistic, typically

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[41] Mendelson notes, "*The Magic Flute* was the only original or translated libretto that Auden published through the ordinary book trade. His other libretti either remained unpublished in his lifetime or appeared only in the form of pamphlets sold mostly in the opera-house lobby" (*Libretti* xxvi). Eliot's plays, on the other hand, were all published. He hoped that they would be immediately intelligible during the performance but also reveal more depth when read ("The Need for Poetic Drama" 995). With Mendelson's landmark edition of the libretti, this approach is now more possible with Auden's postconversion dramatic work as well. Auden would not necessarily approve, however, since he claimed that the words existed only for the music and that one could not begin to know an opera without hearing not only a performance of it, but a good performance (*DH* 25).

allegorical subjects. For example, while Stravinsky was the one who initially proposed using Hogarth's engravings "The Rake's Progress" as the basis for an opera, Auden was immediately attracted to the idea of working on what he described as a "bourgeois morality tale" (*Libretti* 617). In portraying Tom Rakewell's abandonment of his fiancée Anne Truelove, his debauched living, his failed marriage to a bearded lady, and eventually, his financial bankruptcy and insanity, Auden allows his Christianity to inform the action. For instance, Joseph Kerman notes that Rakewell from early on "has an exaggerated sense of guilt and, by a somewhat uneasy extension, sin" (11), reflecting Auden's conviction of universal sinfulness and need to rely on grace, derived in part from his reading of Kierkegaard. Also, in Hogarth's prints the Rake is left tormented in the asylum, but Auden and Kallman fashioned a happier ending. Anne, who "uses Kierkegaard's religious vocabulary" (Mendelson *Libretti* xxii), leads him to redemption, and Rakewell, although still insane and soon to die, comes to "ravishing penitence," making a "confession of my sins" (*Libretti* 89). The religious dimension, particularly with its Kierkegaardian thrust, no doubt derived from Auden, but since he believed, or wanted to believe, that many of his words would be lost in performance anyway, he did not have to fear that he was preaching in a potentially corrupting manner.

In many ways, then, opera proved a fortuitous choice for Auden. He could continue to express his beliefs, which are apparent on the page, but with the confidence that the medium itself provided a safeguard against the "poisoned rhetoric" of his Group Theatre years. Of course, this safeguard makes the question of how much of his belief is actually transmitted to the audience uncertain, but Auden was not so motivated to edify via the stage as was Eliot. While he may not have wanted to preach to a live audience,

however, Auden's beliefs invariably *do* inform his work, as shown with *The Rake's Progress*, and he no doubt wanted the audience to attend to at least some of the ideological content of the operas. If this were not the case, it's unlikely he would have written so many articles about his libretti, often detailing their meaning as he saw it, repeatedly and at length. Even if an audience didn't grasp the ideological thrust of his libretto during a performance, they could understand it more clearly with the help of this extradramatic material. In fact, Auden and Eliot reveal significant aspects of their belief systems both through their choice of medium-- particularly in regards to their differing views on the mimetic limitations of art and the importance of free will-- and their choice of themes, specifically in their contrasting notions of the proper relation between the Positive and Negative way. Their works also reflect their evolving perspective on the role of art itself, especially in regard to one's spiritual state.

Incorrigible Staginess / Ostensible Realism

In *The Sea and the Mirror*, Caliban described life as "the greatest grandest opera rendered by a very provincial touring company indeed" (*CP* 443) to illustrate that we are all "inveterate actors" who cannot escape "our incorrigible staginess" (*CP* 443-44). Our art as well is only "contrived fissures of mirror" (*CP* 444), bound to deceive if taken as an accurate reflection of reality. In poems like *The Sea and the Mirror* and "'The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning,'" Auden celebrated overt artifice in literature because he thought that only by acknowledging a work of art's distance from reality can it point indirectly to the truth forever outside its bounds. So besides its ability to hamper oratorical excess and sinful pride, Auden was drawn to opera because he regarded it as the *most* artificial art form. Since people are stagy and opera is stagy, opera

paradoxically might seem to offer a realistic view of the world. However, Auden suggests that staginess can manifest itself in different ways, and while people are stagy in large part because they try to conceal their artifice, opera is stagy because it celebrates its artifice. In a radio talk, he explained that the reason why "I like Opera and why I am interested in writing libretti more than, I think, in writing plays" is because "it is the most un-*verismo* of all media" (*Libretti* 625). He claimed that "the world of opera . . . seems to be another planet altogether" (*DH* 25) and that it is a medium of "pure artifice" (*DH* 469). Of course, his plays with Isherwood were not *verismo* either, and like Brechtian drama, refused "to create a dramatic illusion into which the spectator can enter and escape" (Spears *Auden* 91). After Auden's conversion, however, he became even more conscious of the inability of art to express ultimate truth, which can only reside in the religious sphere, and consequently more wary of illusionistic art that made any claims to truth. Opera's artifice, on the other hand, reminds the audience of its essentially frivolous and humble position relative to religious revelation:

> The paradox implicit in all drama, namely, that emotions and situations which in real life would be sad or painful are on the stage a source of pleasure becomes, in opera, quite explicit. The singer may be playing the role of a deserted bride who is about to kill herself, but we feel quite certain as we listen that not only we, but also she, is having a wonderful time. . . .Consequently the pleasure we and the singers are obviously enjoying strikes the conscience as frivolous. (*DH* 468-69)

The audience "will be constantly aware that they are watching music drama, in which the most highly charged sections are sung not spoken" (Giddings 183), and the triumphant virtuosity of the singers, regardless of their characters' circumstances, reinforces the

impression that they are only role-playing. Therefore, in his libretti as well as his poetry, "Auden uses artifice to present his Christian conception of art" (Sawyer 83-84) by helping to distinguish between the realm of the frivolous, where opera clearly resides, and that of the sacred. As Caliban stated, only by recognizing works of art as the "feebly figurative signs" that they are can we "rejoice in the perfected Work which is not ours" but God's alone (*CP* 444).

Of course, Eliot's religious convictions, specifically that he must present Christian tenets in recognizably modern settings in order to edify, led him to move in the opposite direction and embrace realism, of a kind. *The Family Reunion*, his most ritualistic play after *Murder in the Cathedral*, reveals the way his dramatic development might have gone, however. It contains some material that seems derived from the drawing-room comedy, particularly in the exchanges between unperceptive relatives, but its tenor is markedly different from the plays that followed. While all of his later dramas took Greek plays as their models, only *The Family Reunion* really exploited the material. Borrowing from the *Oresteia* trilogy, Eliot introduced a decidedly unrealistic element in the Eumenides, furies who pursue his protagonist, Harry, haunted by guilt after the death of his wife, back to his childhood home. Only when he stops trying to evade them does Harry realize that the Eumenides, now "bright angels" (*CPP* 339), are there to lead him to salvation, through which he may redeem the curse on his family. The play's ritualistic element may derive from another dramatic source as well, the Noh drama. Eliot's interest in Noh is evidenced in *Sweeney Agonistes*, which, as he told Arnold Bennett, was an attempt:

> to refashion contemporary life . . . into a disciplined and ritualized mode in the manner of Noh drama, with masks and light drum taps as part of the effect. In the form of incantation, strange sins and desires might come to light which the quotidian details of ordinary living effectively concealed. (Ackroyd 145-46)

Although there are no masks or drum taps in *Family Reunion*, Ackroyd contends that it is nevertheless an extension of the Noh-based symbolist drama of *Sweeney Agonistes* (247). Eliot's attempt to incorporate Noh into his stage work, like Auden's,[42] is almost certainly due to Yeats's influence, and despite his ambivalence towards Yeats, Eliot may have done well to cleave more closely to his example. While *The Family Reunion* bears some similarities to Yeats's *Purgatory*, for example, in its cyclical action resulting from inherited curses, Eliot moves further away from such symbolist drama after his disappointment with the reception of the play, which did not rival the considerable success of *Murder in the Cathedral*. Ackroyd suggests that Eliot's decision to abandon this kind of drama was "a fatal mistake, based, I believe, upon an accidental misreading of the situation. A director other than Browne might have given more theatrical conviction to the Furies, as other more recent productions have done, and a more enthusiastic public response might then have persuaded Eliot to continue with his exploration of symbolist drama" (247). Whether or not he was at all responsible, Browne also lamented Eliot's turn to realism after *The Family Reunion*: "This play surely indicates the direction in which Eliot might fruitfully have moved. Its foundation is the ritual which, in one form or another, the poet needs, which he had used so satisfyingly in

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[42] For example, *Elegy for Young Lovers* uses elements from Noh, as the librettists explained: "'The management of the action will owe something to the Noh plays,' Auden told a friend; Kallman told Henze that the presence of the same character on stage at the end of act one and the start of the next 'gives the opera a visual "flow" which I feel intrinsic to our adaptation of the Noh technique'" (Mendelson *Libretti* xxvii).

Murder in the Cathedral, and to which the theatre was actually turning back even as he wrote his last plays" (343).[43] Although the play presented him with a way to deal with contemporary life in a ritualistic manner *and* "demonstrate[ed] an essentially Christian doctrine on an essentially pagan foundation" (Keown qted. in Browne 167), Eliot's dissatisfaction with its poor response and with the staging of the Eumenides (*OPP* 84) led him to conclude that it was another dead end.

Eliot tried to make his later plays seem realistic in their verse as well as their content. While he expressed some satisfaction with the verse of *The Family Reunion*, he felt there were "passages which called too much attention to themselves as poetry, and could not be dramatically justified" (*OPP* 83). He later condemned such passages as "too much like operatic arias" (qted. in Browne 298). Whereas Auden praised opera as "the last refuge of the High style" (*SW* 102), Eliot, in a radical about-face from his earlier views, consciously tried to write transparent verse. As late as 1936, he had protested against the trend of theatrical naturalism and counseled that poets should "take the opposite direction, and not let the audience forget that what they are hearing is verse" ("The Need for Poetic Drama" 995). By 1938, however, he was advising Pound, "If you write a play in verse, then the verse ought to be a medium to look THROUGH and not a pretty decoration to look AT" (qted. in C. Smith 53). He went even further, arguing in 1957 that "We have to accustom our audience to verse to the point at which they will cease to be conscious of it . . . The verse rhythm should have its effect upon the hearers,

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[43] Browne did try to steer Eliot from his realist course, but one presumes not forcefully enough. For example, after *The Confidential Clerk*, he advised:

> I can't help feeling that the *Clerk* has taken you as far towards naturalism as you will want to go: and as I live with it I find that, with all its skill and fun and its impeccable choice of words, it does not grow on my affections as the other do: there is inevitably a thinness in the tone compared with those plays in which the several levels could be more freely used. (294)

Perhaps their close friendship and his gratitude to Eliot prevented him from intervening sooner and more effectively.

without their being conscious of it" (*OPP* 74-75). Not only did he want the Christian ideology transmitted unconsciously, he wanted the verse itself to be absorbed in this manner. He believed that verse which celebrated its artificiality, like Auden's, made it more difficult to convince the audience of a play's realism and consequent relevance, as he now saw it. Since, unlike Auden, he did *not* want "to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world" (*OPP* 82), transparent verse would enable him, he hoped, to give the illusion of reality while still exploiting poetry's ability to affect the audience on a deep, instinctual level.

Auden would not have countenanced Eliot's mimetic pretensions, revealed, for instance, through this desire for transparent verse. In fact, through his mouthpiece Caliban, Auden asserted that the more an artist seems to capture reality, the more likely he is to delude his audience, because he will appear to have bridged what is an unbridgeable gap between the truth-claims of art and reality, specifically religious reality (*CP* 442). While, as shown in Chapter Three, Eliot's awareness of the limitations of art, and of language in particular, prevented him from suggesting that art can express divine truth, his plays reveal that he had more confidence than Auden in art's ability to approach this truth without distortion. However, his adoption of the conventions of the drawing-room made his plays appear to many viewers as outdated as well as unrealistic. He had hoped to portray "the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre" (*OPP* 82), but the audience was more likely to imagine they saw their world in the naturalistic drama of Eugene O'Neill, for instance, than in Eliot's plays. As Browne explains, "He tied himself to social, and still more to theatrical, conventions, conventions which were already outworn when the plays were written. Perhaps they

reflect an unconscious reversion to the drama that Eliot must have seen as a young theatergoer before 1914" (343). Eliot sacrificed much of the strength of his poetry in order to serve a "realism" already doomed to fail: "[H]e put his poetry, as he says, 'on a thin diet.' We have seen the progressive diminution of poetry in these plays, quite deliberately achieved. The poet's skill is still supremely evident in the choice of language, and his inspiration often peeps through it; but too much of his energy is devoted to the correct expression of unimportant social niceties" (Browne 343). Despite Eliot's contentions, less ostensibly realistic dramas, like *Sweeney Agonistes*, for instance, would likely have struck the audience as *more* relevant and consequently may have been more effective in furthering his evangelistic goals. Even naturalistic drama, well-executed, may have better served his needs. So whereas Eliot's plays suffered when he began to write in what he regarded as a realistic way, Auden chose a medium which encouraged him to write with the overt artifice that he found aesthetically pleasing and theologically sanctioned, since it reinforced the notion of the frivolity of art from a religious point of view.

Free Will versus Determinism

The virtuosic singing in opera signified more than artifice to Auden; it represented freedom. Much like Eliot, he valued music for its ability to express "extraordinary situations or states of violent emotion" (*SW* 77), forcing "[a] good libretto plot" to be

> a melodrama in both the strict and the conventional sense of the word; it offers as many opportunities as possible for the characters to be swept off their feet by placing them in situations which are too tragic or too fantastic for 'words.' No

> good opera plot can be sensible for people do not sing when they are feeling sensible. (*DH* 471-72)

Besides sharing this widely-held belief in music as the medium through which to convey emotional extremes and other experiences difficult to articulate, Auden idiosyncratically insisted that it embodied free will. While even the "succession of two musical notes is an act of choice" not governed by necessity (*DH* 465), the freedom which Auden believed is inherent in music is most pronounced in singing because it is "the most gratuitous of acts" (*SW* 82). He believed that "opera in particular is an imitation of human willfulness" (*DH* 470), asserting, "A passive hero is impossible in opera because music is supremely an assertion of volition and a passionate assertion" (*Libretti* 608). As he put it, "The mere fact that they sing at all is such an assertion of will that you simply cannot deal with a passive character" (*Libretti* 621). Therefore, "The characters best suited to inhabit it are not only passionate but willfully so, persons who insist upon their fate, however tragically dreadful or comically absurd" (*SW* 82). Although he generally retreated from political statement regarding opera, he did claim that repression in the modern world may lead people to feel that they had no control over their lives, but because music epitomizes freedom, "Every high C accurately struck demolishes the theory that we are the irresponsible puppets of fate or chance" (*DH* 474). The ideological implications of the sense of freedom expressed by music aren't limited to politics, however. When Auden embraced existential Christianity, opera-- which emphasized the free will to which he now attached a spiritual significance-- became the highly appropriate medium whereby he expressed the importance of choice.

Significantly, Eliot's choice of dramatic form also reflects his ideology, which differs from Auden's in that he emphasizes submission over free will. In his later plays, and in keeping with the conventions of the drawing-room comedy, he emphasized structure at the expense of character. He wondered himself whether *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk* might be *too* structured. *The Cocktail Party*, for example, "was so well constructed in some ways that people thought it was just meant to be farce" (*Writers at Work* 102). A photograph even shows him diagramming its plot as though it were a mathematical proof (Ackroyd 356). This decision to focus on structure, at least partially motivated by his insecurity in writing for the theatre, was unfortunate since it likely stifled the subconscious sources of inspiration of which he often spoke, and which his most memorable works seemed to access. However, the very rigidity of the plays does reinforce their meaning, although no doubt inadvertently. While Auden asserts his characters' freedom, Eliot emphasizes their need to submit to God's foreordained plan by manipulating them to fulfill his own design. As with the selected appropriations from Dante in their transitional poetry, therefore, their choices of dramatic genre, as well as the subjects of the texts themselves, reflect their conflicting views on the importance of free will versus submission to God's design.

In his verse plays of the Thirties, Auden, like Brecht, "rejected a theatre that, however 'advanced' its technique, made the audience a passive spectator of the inexorable movement of character or fate" (Mendelson *Early Auden* 261). He conceived of drama as a "supremely conservative" medium capable of portraying "the relation between man's free will and the forces which limit and frustrate that will" (qted. in Mendelson *Early Auden* 258), but in fact his emphasis in the plays more often fell on

these limiting forces. For example, in *On the Frontier*, Eric, a young student who had hoped to resist the war through pacifism, becomes disillusioned and laments: "We cannot choose our world. / Our time, our class" (*Plays* 416). When Auden turned to Kierkegaardian existentialism, however, his belief in the religious imperative of choice led him to emphasize free will more heavily in his new dramatic ventures. *Paul Bunyan*, for instance, which was written during the time when he first began to think seriously about theology,[44] anticipates the assertions of existential freedom in *New Year Letter*. After the lumberjacks under Paul Bunyan's command have finished their pioneering work in the American frontier, the community disperses and "the life of choice begins" (*Libretti* 45). While man will always be governed to a degree by necessity-- those things such as the demands of the body which can impinge upon freedom-- "External physical nature has been mastered, and for this very reason, can no longer dictate to men what they should do" (Auden *Libretti* 572). As in *New Year Letter*, Auden portrays America, with its heterogeneous society and lack of shared values, as the quintessential embodiment of modern man's fundamental aloneness, forcing him to struggle "at freedom's puzzled feet" (*Libretti* 45).[45]

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[44] The rough draft was mostly complete by January 1940, the month Auden began *New Year Letter* (Fuller 309). The opera wasn't performed until May 1941, however, by which time Auden felt fully established in his new faith. He made at least one significant alteration at this late date-- writing a song for Tiny after Britten discovered that the actress playing her had a particularly fine voice (Reed 8)-- so it's possible that he made other changes which reflected his Christianity more substantially than the original draft might have. Certainly, elements within the libretto seem to have a distinctly religious tenor.

[45] The similarities between the two works even extend to some passages which Auden seems to have adapted from *Paul Bunyan* for *New Year Letter*. For example, in the libretto he wrote:

> Here . . . is your life, and here
> The pattern is already clear
> That machinery imposes
> On you as the frontier closes . . . (*Libretti* 45)

In the poem, this passage becomes: "More even than in Europe, here / The choice of patterns is made clear / Which the machine imposes . . ." (*CP* 238). This example demonstrates the close link between the poetry and the libretti, which makes critical neglect of the latter more regrettable. Even if one is not interested in opera, the libretti serve to illuminate many of the central concerns of Auden's poetry.

In *The Magic Flute* and particularly *The Bassarids*, Auden and Kallman do seem to adopt a more deterministic world view, but only because of the source material. *The Bassarids*, an adaptation of Euripedes' *The Bacchae*, dramatizes a society in which gods control men's lives. When Pentheus, the king of Thebes, denies the divinity of Dionysus, the demi-god punishes him through dismemberment, carried out by his entranced mother and aunt. Even here, however, the librettists undermine Greek fatalism. In a speech near the end of the libretto, they look ahead to the eventual destruction of these gods, which "[f]or a post-classical audience . . . points toward a different relation between divinity and humanity than the one assumed in Euripides' myth" (Mendelson *Libretti* xxviii). Mendelson contends that the librettists refer to the misrepresentation of this relation in their epigraph from Gottfried Benn: "The myth lied" (*Libretti* xxviii). From his existential perspective, Auden would argue than men are in charge of their own destiny--they are not dictated to by divinity. As he wrote in *New Year Letter*, "we're free to will / Ourselves up Purgatory still, / Consenting parties to our lives" (*DM* 45-46). The other libretti portray man's essential freedom more clearly, and the need to take responsibility for one's life is particularly explicit in *Delia*. Forced to choose between a magus who can promise her unchanging youth and safety and the knight Orlando, who truly loves her, Delia tries to evade her existential responsibility, requesting that they decide for her. While the magus acquiesces, ordering her to stay with him, Orlando repeatedly tells her that she must decide for herself: "I love you / But cannot make / This choice for your sake" (*Libretti* 118). Her happiness is only secured when she accepts her responsibility and makes her choice, picking Orlando. Since *Delia* exists only as a text,[46] its celebration

[46] Stravinsky had requested another libretto from Auden and Kallman after their happy collaboration on *The Rake's Progress*, but later decided that he wanted to pursue other interests, leaving the text unset

of freedom is not reinforced by the willfulness of the human voice but neither are its words in any way obscured as Auden claimed they would be in a performance. It was written in the expectation that it would be performed, however, which may be why it lacks the more distinctly religious vocabulary that Auden often employed in his poetry when discussing human freedom.[47] As well as accommodating Kallman, Auden did not want to advocate Christian existentialism too explicitly in the libretti. Consequently, the audience, at least those not well versed in his postconversion poetry, would not necessarily have realized that there *was* a religious dimension to the existentialism embodied by the works. Nevertheless, the libretti, through their form and content, subtly testify to this important facet of Auden's theology without violating his new-found rhetorical chasteness.

Eliot's insistence in his plays on the need to submit to God reflects the Calvinist streak in his theology, a belief in a kind of foreordination.[48] At times, his deterministic

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(Mendelson *Libretti* xxiii-xxiv).

[47] Auden nevertheless thought that *Delia* reflected his beliefs adequately enough to adapt its final chorus for "Lauds," the final poem of his extremely religious sequence *Horae Canonicae*. However, he changed the refrain of the chorus, whose metrical form is a "musical representation of the mass-bell" (Fuller 461), in order to express his theology more forcefully. "*Day breaks for joy and sorrow*" becomes "*In solitude, for company*," which, as the context makes clear, "describes the individual sinners that make up the church congregation" (Fuller 462), that is, everyone responsible for the Crucifixion recreated in the sequence.

[48] Eliot's early works paint quite a fatalistic world as well, as demonstrated, for example, by the presence of fortune telling cards. In *The Waste Land* and *Sweeney Agonistes*, the introduction of the cards gives the works structure but also helps to create the sense that the character's lives described therein are determined by forces beyond their control. In "Fragment of a Prologue," for instance, Dusty and Doris are learning how to do a reading and turn up the foreboding two of spades, "THE COFFIN" (*CPP* 117). Both characters are unnerved by this card, Dusty repeatedly murmuring, "Cards are queer," and Doris remarking, "I'd like to know about that coffin" (*CPP* 118). With Sweeney's entrance and subsequent homicidal talk-- "Any man has to, needs to, wants to / Once in a lifetime, do a girl in" (*CPP* 124)-- the insinuation is that the cards have revealed destiny, that one of the girls *is* fated for the coffin. Interestingly, in *On the Frontier*, Auden and Isherwood use fortune telling cards in a similar way. A reading by the Westlander Mrs. Thorvald has indicated that war is inevitable, and when aggressions duly break out, she cries, "The cards do not lie!" (*Plays* 385). The cards are utilized to show that the characters are destined for war, a view reinforced by the later lament of Mrs. Thorvald's son, Eric, over their essential powerlessness (*Plays* 416).
Mrs. Thorvald also uncovers the Queen of Hearts, which she recognizes is meant for her son (*Plays* 378). As he is fated to do, he falls in love with Anna, an Ostnian, but is not able to exercise the autonomy required to transcend the political situation and make a happy life with her. In *The Rake's Progress*, on the

perspective also seems informed by the sort of Greek fatalism which Auden repudiated in *The Bassarids*. For example, his recurrent use of the image of the wheel sometimes only indicates the passage of time (*CPP* 254), but elsewhere recalls the pagan concept of the wheel of fate. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Thomas rebukes a Tempter who tries to sway him from what he believes is his destined path by saying, "Only / The fool, fixed in his folly, may think / He can turn the wheel on which he turns" (*CPP* 247). The quality of determinism in the plays is usually of a clearly Christian derivation, however. Throughout *Murder in the Cathedral*, for example, Eliot contends that God orchestrates all of the action, and that even "in sordid particulars / The eternal design may appear" (*CPP* 265). Auden remarked that historically "Becket had little to fear by returning to England. Eliot gets around this by letting Becket . . . have inner premonitions that to return to England will mean his death" (*SW* 20). In fact, within the confines of the play, Thomas's martyrdom is clearly predestined, part of the "eternal design." As he preaches in his sermon,

> A martyrdom is always the design of God, for His love of men, to warn them and to lead them, to bring them back to His ways. It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will

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other hand, cards are used to very different effect. In 3.2, a scene written by both Auden and Kallman (Mendelson *Libretti* 575) but whose seed was already in the scenario Auden had written after his initial consultations with Stravinsky (Auden *Libretti* 587), Shadow proposes to Rakewell "A game of chance to finally decide your fate" (*Libretti* 84). In the libretto, however, cards are used to demonstrate free will, not fatalism, since the cards are not just uncovered to reveal Rakewell's fate-- he must choose the cards that he thinks the Shadow has selected. In doing so, Rakewell also dramatizes Auden's belief in the need to rely on faith above reason, as Simeon propounds in *For the Time Being*. Although Shadow was meant to have discarded the Queen of Hearts, the card that the Rake first correctly selected after thinking of Anne, he slyly reintroduces it into the pack. Thus, Rakewell is only saved when he absurdly chooses the Queen of Hearts again. Like Joseph in the oratorio, he must take the leap of faith. Shadow spitefully strikes him with insanity, but the Rake is nevertheless redeemed through his embrace of what is essentially Christian existentialism. As in the libretto as a whole, however, the religious dimension at work in the card game is not necessarily clear to those who aren't familiar with Auden's theology and its emphasis on freedom and the absurdity of faith. Nevertheless, the characters clearly exercise more free will in Auden's and Kallman's libretti than in Eliot's works, early *and* late.

> in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr. (*CPP* 261)

Whereas Auden's operatic characters are faulted if they do not exercise their freedom, Thomas above all must not willfully embrace martyrdom but only try to determine God's plan for him and then submit to it. His temptation is a temptation to act. When he apparently satisfies himself that he *is* called to martyrdom-- "Now is my way clear, now is the meaning plain" (*CPP* 258)-- he declares, "I shall no longer act or suffer" but only "make perfect my will" (*CPP* 259, 271). Like the speaker of *Ash-Wednesday*, Thomas embraces the Dantean message that peace is only attained through submission to the will of God. Through Thomas's obedience, "God's purpose is made complete" (*CPP* 271), and although they must share the guilt of his death, the chorus thanks God "For the blood of Thy martyrs and saints" which "Shall enrich the earth" (*CPP* 281).[49]

Although Eliot wanted to write less explicitly Christian drama following *Murder in the Cathedral*, his decision to focus on saint-like characters in his later plays gave these works an unmistakably religious thrust. His last play, *The Elder Statesman*, is in the "Christian Everyman pattern" (Griffin 574), whereby the title character must resist tempters, in the shape of blackmailers, and confess his sins in order to die in a state of grace. The other plays, however, feature characters with particular vocations, the elect, allowing Eliot to continue to expound upon the ways in which God works through

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[49] This focus on submission as opposed to action likely contributed to what some regarded as the static and "undramatic" quality of Eliot's plays. Because Thomas must not act but only submit, it is difficult to portray his inner state on stage, as Auden asserted. Eliot himself noted that a "serious" flaw of *The Family Reunion*, for example, was that "the situation" was not "develop[ed] in action" (*OPP* 83-84). Auden's willful operatic characters, on the other hand, *do* reveal themselves through their actions, much as Ransom had done. Tom Rakewell's "progress," for example, is clearly charted through his decisions: abandoning Anne, marrying Baba, investing in a "miraculous" bread machine which bankrupts him-- revealing his messianic desires (Auden told Stravinsky "Il désire devenir Dieu" [Spears *Auden* 275])-- and, finally, reconciling with Anne in the asylum.

extraordinary individuals. While *The Family Reunion* bears some stylistic differences from *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*, thematically it is remarkably similar. In all three plays, the protagonists, Harry, Celia and Colby respectively, must discover their vocation and then submit to God's plans for them, much as Thomas did. As Harry's perceptive aunt Agatha pronounces, "Accident is design / And design is accident / In a cloud of unknowing" (*CPP* 337). God's design regarding her nephew soon becomes clear, causing Harry to marvel: "Why I have this election / I do not understand. It must have been preparing always, / And I see it was what I always wanted" (*CPP* 339). By submitting to God's agents, the Eumenides, he can redeem his own guilt and that of his family, brought about by his father's desire to kill his mother. The clearly religious nature of his election is reinforced in the closing passage, in which Agatha intones that "the curse" may "be ended":

> By intercession
>
> By pilgrimage
>
> By those who depart
>
> In several directions
>
> For their own redemption
>
> And that of the departed . . . . (*CPP* 350)

Like Thomas, Harry only finds peace when he renounces willfulness and prepares to submit to the divine plan. Celia resembles Thomas even more closely because her calling ends in martyrdom, although of a less orthodox kind. After discovering her vocation, she becomes a missionary of sorts and, while tending dying villagers in a politically volatile country, ends up "crucified / Very near an ant-hill" (*CPP* 434). As with Harry, her

election is described in transparently religious terms. For example, she begins on her path to sainthood by discovering a "sense of sin," making her feel that she needs to "atone" (*CPP* 414, 416). Although she must choose to accept her vocation, she is presented as one of those marked by God who will "go far" spiritually (*CPP* 421). Her death, though gruesome, is declared "triumphant" because like Thomas she fulfilled God's plan, helping to redeem those around her (*CPP* 438). There is even the indication that another character, Peter, will discover a vocation of his own through his encounter with her (Browne 193). In *The Confidential Clerk*, a play centered on mistaken identities and swapped babies that owes something to *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Colby's essential difference is marked by the characters around him. Kaghan, for instance, calls him "the sort of fellow who might chuck it all / And go live on a desert island" (*CPP* 480). Unlike Eliot's other saints, however, his vocation does not require anything so dramatic. In fact, his calling, to become the organist at a local church, sounds so modest as to be ridiculous, but Eliot indicates that this is only the first step in his spiritual journey. The clerk Eggerson prophesies, "I don't see you spending a lifetime as an organist, / I think you'll come to find you've another vocation" (*CPP* 518), something spiritually grander which God will presumably reveal in time. So the divine plan to which these characters must submit is akin to the intricate design of the plays themselves, in which, as Harry puts it, "Everything tends towards reconciliation" (*CPP* 333).

Despite the manner in which the style and substance of the plays seem to complement each other, Eliot's decision to use elements associated with the drawing room comedy in order to portray sainthood may actually have undermined his message, as Auden perceptively noted in his 1953 review of *The Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot*.

He contends that "[i]f in *Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party*, one hears an occasional discordant snobbish note, I believe that this is not a matter of sensibility but of technique" because Eliot

> has simply taken on unchanged the conventions of English 'High' Comedy that have existed from Congreve down to Noel Coward, under which the decor and the main characters are aristocratic. So long as the dramatic subject is one of the various worldly self-affirmations, like love between the sexes, and the moral values implied are social, the convention is perfectly satisfactory; wealth and good-breeding are quite adequate symbols for gifts and virtues. But when the theme becomes one of spiritual election, of the radical gulf between the Christian faith and *all* worldly values, the symbolism breaks down. I am absolutely certain that Mr. Eliot did not intend us to think that Harry is called and not John because John is stupid, or that Celia is called and not Lavinia because she is of a higher social class, but that is exactly what the comedy convention he is using is bound to suggest. Now that he has pretty well solved his verse problem, he has time to consider, as I am sure he is, the problem of 'setting.' That is one reason, surely, why we look forward so eagerly to *The Confidential Clerk.* (*CR* 228)

Auden is trying to give the older poet some friendly advice here, but Eliot, if he read it, did not act upon it. He seemed to think that he only had to perfect the formula, as it were, rather than venture into new dramatic forms.[50] As Auden implies, however, Eliot's use of drawing room conventions can make it more difficult to assert that spiritual reality transcends the worldly concerns typically depicted within these kinds of dramas. While

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[50] See Eliot's interview in *Writers at Work* and his essay "Poetry and Drama" in *On Poetry and Poets*, for example.

his saints might seem more relatable in these settings, the audience can lose sight of their essential otherworldliness, an otherworldliness which Eliot believed Christianity required.

The Positive and Negative Way in the Drama

Eliot's adoption of the kind of tight structure associated with drawing room comedies for plays about saints was also problematic since it led him to emphasize the negative way in a form designed to celebrate the positive. As "Little Gidding" revealed, he had begun to show more acceptance for the affirmative way after the ascetic period of the transitional poetry, and he did continue in this vein in *The Elder Statesman.* While writing this last play, Eliot had married his second wife, and according to Browne, "His new-found happiness was already reflecting itself in the play. The relationship between Charles and Monica had hardly been defined . . . Now, they were to have a series of scenes in the first and last Acts, in which their love for each other was to be dramatized" (317). The love scenes, while not universally admired-- one critic called them "conventional and dated" (qted. in Grove 163)-- do give the play a tone more in accord with that of the drawing-room comedy it imitates. Also, like Dante in the *Vita Nuova,* Eliot suggests that the emergent love, between the young couple as well as between Monica and her father, the eponymous statesman, helps the characters come closer to God. Assured of his daughter's affection, Lord Claverton is able to confess his youthful sins and attain the spiritual peace he so long sought. After discovering the profundity of her love for Charles, Monica exclaims, "O Father, Father! / I could speak to you now" (*CPP* 583) in such a way as to suggest that she is finally capable of communicating with her Heavenly father as well. Unique among his plays, *The Elder Statesman* shows

"human love becom[ing] the earthly reflection of divine love and thus a positive value" (C. Smith 26). While love can nurture the spiritual development of these rather ordinary people, however, Eliot shows that it only hinders that of the saints.

In contrast to the circumstances of the composition of *The Elder Statesman*, Eliot was still deeply affected by the dissolution of his first marriage when he wrote *The Family Reunion*. Harry's disastrous marriage was even thought to reflect Eliot's own.[51] Nevertheless, as Eliot presents him, the mistake was not in his choice of partner but in marrying at all. Although Harry didn't know of his vocation at the time of his marriage, he eventually comes to realize that he is meant to lead a solitary and ascetic life. Therefore, the Furies must intervene when he feels a momentary attraction for Mary, because to attach himself to her would be an "evasion" of his calling (Browne 107). While both of the marriages in *The Family Reunion*, Harry's and his parents', are tormented, *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk* put matrimony in a less gloomy light. The marriages of Edward and Lavinia and Sir Claude and Lady Elizabeth, respectively, while hardly ideal, improve over the course of each play as they begin to deal more honestly with one another. Like Harry, however, Colby and Celia must forswear marriage themselves. For Colby, whom Eliot described to Browne as "ascetic" (286), this is not difficult even before he knows that he has been called. Noting his lack of interest in her, Lucasta says, "He doesn't need me. He doesn't need anyone . . . / . . . He has his own world" (*CPP* 500). Celia, on the other hand, "must make the difficult choice of giving up human for divine love" (C. Smith 26), and the first step is breaking with her lover, Edward. Before she commits to her spiritual vocation,

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[51] This assumption is reflected in the title of Carole Seymour-Jones's biography of Vivienne Eliot, *Painted Shadow*, alluding to the description of Harry's wife as a "restless shivering painted shadow" (*CPP* 290).

however, Reilly presents her with a less rigorous option whereby she would become "reconcile[d] . . . to the human condition" by leading an ordinary life, including a typical marriage: "Two people who know they do not understand each other, / Breeding children whom they do not understand / And who will never understand them" (*CPP* 417). Although he says, despite this description, "It is a good life," it is not, as Celia wants, "the best life" and she rejects it (*CPP* 417). For a saint, such a life would involve terrible compromise. In these plays, therefore, Eliot propounds a very Pauline idea of marriage. It is acceptable and even recommended for some people, but the Christian elite should forgo it in order to concentrate on things of the spirit. Since to Eliot sainthood demanded this kind of self-abnegation, his decision to center his middle plays on these saintly figures necessitated a return to a primarily negative theology, such as dominated the transitional poetry and left many critics feeling he had excluded too much of life. Also, the unusual step of using drawing-room conventions to convey this negative theology likely only served to draw *more* attention to the fundamental Christianity of the plays, rather than obscure his didactic purpose as he had hoped.[52]

Before and after his conversion, Auden consistently came against what he regarded as the Manichean assumptions embodied by, for example, Eliot's middle plays. Although Auden insisted one must embrace freedom-- wherein one exercises reason and the higher faculties, including those related to spiritual aspirations-- he cautioned that one is nevertheless inevitably governed by necessity as well, particularly those instinctual forces of the body. Therefore, he would interpret the decision of Eliot's saints to

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[52] For example, some audience members "objected to the mixture of ascetic metaphysics with sub-Wildean or Cowardian silly jokes" in *The Cocktail Party* (Chamberlain 512), and E. M. Forster stated that the Christian message portrayed in this play, which he called "Mr Eliot's 'Comedy,'" "comes down with too sudden a bump" (368).

embrace an essentially monastic life as an attempt to repress their natural drives, fundamentally damaging to the psyche, as Auden's early plays and poems illustrate. When he became a Christian, his conviction of the need to balance both sides of one's nature was reinforced by his readings of Williams, who, as has been shown, insisted that Christianity required both the Affirmative and the Negative way. Like Williams, Auden condemned the widespread perception of the spiritual superiority of the Negative way, and proclaimed that the Affirmative Way-- which allowed one to express one's sexuality and capacity for love, for instance-- was equally valid and in many ways preferable since it did not lay one open to the dangers of repression. So whereas Eliot's plays are largely dominated by the theme of sainthood, Auden's and Kallman's libretti obsessively focus on the need to reconcile what they term Reason and Passion. In *The Rake's Progress*, Rakewell's foolishness is shown in his attempt to avoid the imperatives of both Reason and Passion by following Shadow's devilish council and committing an *acte gratuite*, marrying a bearded lady without any motivation: "Would you be happy? Then learn to act freely. Would you act freely? Then learn to ignore those twin tyrants of appetite and conscience. Therefore I counsel you, master,-- Take Baba the Turk to wife" (*Libretti* 62). As Auden later explained, "We decided . . . to be fashionably modern, and make him . . . commit an *acte gratuite*" in the deluded hope of asserting "his freedom of will from the compulsions of Passion and Reason" (*SW* 88). According to Auden, true freedom only comes from acknowledging those forces which constrain one's freedom, otherwise one is liable to be ruled by them.

In the Preface to their translation and adaptation of *The Magic Flute*, Auden and Kallman remark that the original libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder and Carl Ludwig

Giesecke might seem "peculiarly silly" but only because "a proper treatment of its material would have made it one of the greatest libretti ever written" (*Libretti* 129). While they may not claim that their version achieves this status, they are confident that it corrects some of the errors of the original, most importantly regarding its treatment of the relation between Reason and Passion. As in the original, they portray an ongoing battle between the "irrational" Queen of the Night, Astrafiammante, and the "rational" high priest Sarastro. However, in their version, "What has been a relationship of antagonism . . . is finally replaced by a relationship of mutual affection and reconciliation, the marriage of Pamina and Tamino" representatives of each respectively (*Libretti* 130). They assert that the original ending, in which the Queen is defeated but Sarastro continues to rule, doesn't take into account the interdependence of Reason and Passion:

> Though the conscious and rational must take the responsibility for the instinctive, and hence be the 'superior' partner, neither can exist without the other. What the libretto fails to make clear is that, though the Queen must be defeated in order that the New Age may come, her defeat completes Sarastro's task: he must now hand on the crown to Tamino and pass away like Prosper in *The Tempest*. (*Libretti* 130)

So Auden and Kallman made *The Magic Flute* accord with their vision in *Delia*, written a few years earlier, which asserted that the struggles between the Goddess of the Night and the Magus can never result in one's ultimate defeat over the other. Interestingly, Tamino, one of Auden's few characters of destiny, has a "vocation" which "demands faith, patience and courage" like Eliot's saints (*Libretti* 130), but his calling actually *requires*

that he embrace the Positive Way. When in a kind of catechism in the temple, he is asked what he wants, he replies, "The light of wisdom *and* Pamina's hand" [emphasis added] (*Libretti* 156). He doesn't have to choose between the demands of Reason and Passion. In fact, his calling, to unite these two forces, will only be fulfilled in his marriage to Pamina, that through them "might be reconciled / The Dark and Light in Man" (Auden "Proem" *Libretti* 135). Auden even believed reconciling Reason and Passion was required for society's salvation. In 1941, echoing his poem "Christmas 1940," he stated:

> We have first of all to recover a sense of the unconditional (if we don't it will be supplied to us in the form of an external tyranny), to work out conventions which are really linked to our beliefs, and then, instead of indulging either in arid and selfish abstractions or in blind mass feeling, to marry emotion and reason in each . . . (*Prose II* 502)

It is not enough to have "a sense of the unconditional," that which provides a foundation for all values; Passion and Reason must be balanced if a society is to thrive and to uphold these values. So for Auden, the integration of these two aspects of human nature had significant political and religious implications.

The danger of repressing one's natural drives, featured so heavily in Auden's earlier works,[53] is dramatized with brutal force in *The Bassarids*. In their program notes,

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[53] This theme is particularly apparent in his drama. For example, in his first major work, *Paid on Both Sides*, the failure of the hero, John Nower, to extricate himself from the feud and consummate a healthy relationship is linked to repression. According to Fuller, "The Nower-Shaw feud represents a psychic split in one individual. When the Spy groans at the revelations of the Man-Woman," during his trial, "John cannot bear it, and shoots him . . . . This suggests, by the evident theme of sexual repression, that John represents the repressive Censor, and the Spy the repressed natural drives-- the Ego and the Id respectively" (27). As in many of Auden's works, the hero's repression can be traced in large part to an overly dominant mother. Nower was unable to develop normally because from his birth his mother had groomed him for a single purpose, to avenge his father's death. Similarly, in *The Orators*, which, recall, Auden regarded as "an abstract drama" (qted. in Fuller 85), "the introverted adolescent" is portrayed as "obsessed and motivated by mother love, unable to free himself from it, deriving his neurosis from her and yet accused by

Auden and Kallman write that Pentheus' "attempt completely to suppress his instinctual life instead of integrating it with his rationality brings about his downfall. One might say that a similar fate would have befallen Sarastro, had there not been a Tamino and a Pamina to marry and so reconcile Day to Night" (*Libretti* 700). Pentheus tries to lead an abstentious life, vowing that he will

> Henceforth . . . abstain
>
> From wine, from meats
>
> And from woman's bed,
>
> Live sober and chaste
>
> Till the day I die! (*Libretti* 270)

Like Eliot, Auden accepts Williams's teachings on the need for the positive *and* negative way-- telling Ursula Niebuhr that relative to her husband's theology, "I would allow a little more place, perhaps, for the *Via Negativa*" (qted. in U. Niebuhr 106). However, whereas Eliot portrays the potential danger of the positive way, at least where saints are concerned, Auden shows that excessive adherence to the negative way can be even more destructive. In Pentheus' case, his ascetic tendencies have already made him vulnerable, and cause the extreme repression which leads him to recoil at the thought of the Bassarids, the worshipers of the Dionysus, who "Do the forbidden / Shameless thing"

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her of it" (Fuller 88-89). The Airman, who like Nower is pressured to kill for the sake of family honor ("Fifteen years since my uncle's death. . . .But what have I done to avenge . . . ?" [*EA* 84]), also suffers from sexual repression, betrayed by such statements as, "There is something particularly horrible about the thoughts of women pilots" (*EA* 88). Of course, the potential destructiveness of mother-son relationships is central to *The Ascent of F6*. Like Volumnia in *Coriolanus*, Ransom's mother manipulates him and leads him to betray his ideals and ultimately lose his life. *On the Frontier* doesn't feature the same kind of oppressive mother figure, but it does highlight the dangers of repression. In the "Notes on the Characters," Martha Thorvald is described as "Violently repressed, fanatical" (*Plays* 358). Her displaced sexuality is directed at the Leader, whom she worships with religious devotion. For example, placing flowers before his portrait, she exalts, "Don't these look beautiful, under the Leader's picture? They're just the colour of his eyes!" (*Plays* 379). Her denial of her sexuality thus makes her more vulnerable to the demagogue's manipulation and blindly supportive of his ruinous policies, revealing that even before his conversion Auden believed that repression was dangerous for the individual *and* for society.

(*Libretti* 270). Since this repressive reaction, rather than his differing theology, is ultimately responsible for his decision to outlaw Dionysus's cult and anger the god, his divine punishment actually stems from his attempts to live a seemingly unobjectionable virtuous life. Auden would then caution Eliot's saints to embrace their passionate, instinctual life so as not to be sacrificed to it like Pentheus.[54] Although the portrayal of Passion and Reason in the libretti owes much to Auden's affirmative theology, the audience might not appreciate its theological application. Even more so than with his emphasis on free will, the religious tenor might be obscured because he treated this general theme so often before *and* after his conversion. However, since Auden believed that reconciling Passion and Reason would inevitably improve society, including its

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[54] The libretto for Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost* also shows how repression makes one a prey to one's instinctual side. As with all of their adaptations, Auden and Kallman focused on the few elements in the original that most interested them rather than trying to incorporate all of the action. Mendelson points out that "little of Shakespeare survived into Auden and Kallman's libretto. . . .Kallman told an interviewer: 'We stamped Shakespeare to bits and then put it together again'" (*Libretti* 717). This approach allowed them to focus more intently on this relationship between Passion and Reason. Sounding very like Pentheus, their King of Navarre proclaims that for three years "It shall be a crime / In Navarre for a man / To speak with a maid" and that the men of his court

> have sworn
> To study here with me,
> To hold the busy world in scorn,
> And serve Philosophy:
> All earthly pleasures we'll eschew,
> All vain delights exclude,
> In contemplation of the True,
> The Beautiful, the Good. (*Libretti* 319, 317-18)

One of his courtiers, Berowne, admits, however, "To see no ladies, to fast not sleep, / Are vows too hard for me" (*Libretti* 318). When the Princess of France arrives with her attendant ladies, the other men are immediately infatuated, causing Berowne to remark, "This is the liver vein, which makes flesh a deity, / A green goose, a goddess, pure idolatry . . ." (*Libretti* 336). He soon falls in love as well, but his earlier acknowledgement of his passionate side makes him less vulnerable when confronted by the women. Although the men are not destroyed like Pentheus, they are made to look foolish, and Berowne actually appears less silly and more in command of himself than the rest. As with *The Magic Flute*, however, *Love's Labour's Lost* does make a place for the negative way. Unimpressed with the various declarations of love from the men, the ladies demand more concrete proof of their devotion. While the Princess goes home to grieve after her father's death, she tells the King of Navarre to "Let some forlorn / Retreat of prayer / Receive you whilst I mourn" and Berowne is told by his intended to "Visit the sick and dying" in her absence (*Libretti* 354, 355). However, as with Tamino, all of their trials are to end in marriage, so the positive way, which Auden believed best integrated Passion and Reason, is ultimately celebrated.

spiritual health, the audience wouldn't need to know there *was* a religious dimension.[55] Therefore, he may have achieved what Eliot only hoped to do-- convey a religious tenet in such a way that the audience might unconsciously receive and act upon it.

Artist as Saint, Artist as Monster

While Eliot's plays generally adhere to the negative theology of his transitional works, his attitude towards art displayed therein is starkly different. The speaker's anguish in *Ash-Wednesday* derived in part from his fear that his artistic ambitions were sinful but that he would nevertheless be unable to renounce them. By the time Eliot wrote *The Rock*, he was able to affirm that, though language is always inadequate and the value of literature limited-- constructed from "the slimy mud of words . . . the sleet and hail of verbal imprecisions" (*CPP* 164)-- an artist can nevertheless use his talent to serve God:

> LORD, shall we not bring these gifts to Your service?
>
> Shall we not bring to Your service all our powers
>
> For life, for dignity, grace and order

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[55] Although Auden didn't want his libretti to become too topical, like *On the Frontier*, one of the reasons he was drawn to the *Bacchae* was because he thought it could be used to show how contemporary society's well-being is dependent on the reconciliation of these two halves of human nature. In "The World of Opera," he explains that "we thought the *Bacchae* of Euripides was excellent potential material for a grand opera libretto, since the myth seemed to us exceptionally relevant to our own day" (*SW* 96). Whereas "the eighteenth century," when *The Magic Flute* was written, "took it for granted that, in a conflict between Reason and Unreason, Reason was bound in the end to be victorious," "[t]oday we know only too well that it is as possible for whole communities to become demonically possessed as it is for individuals to go off their heads" (*SW* 96). Auden seems to imply that Hitler, like Dionysus, was able to exert such control over the people, inciting them to what was essentially madness, because he tapped into the previously repressed instincts of a nation that regarded itself as highly civilized and rational. So within the libretto, the abandon with which the Bassarids follow Dionysus is itself unhealthy, and results from the repression within Theban society as a whole, perhaps caused in part by Pentheus' influence. Thus, Pentheus' distaste for the unbridled behavior of the Bassarids is partially justified, but his rejection of the Dionysian aspect of his own nature is nevertheless dangerous and in the end allows the demi-god to control him completely. So Auden repeatedly and paradoxically asserts that one must acknowledge one's irrational side in order to maintain a degree of rationality, and thus avoid "repression and its damaging, sometimes fatal, effects" on individuals and society (*SW* 96).

And intellectual pleasures of the sense?

The LORD who created must wish us to create

And employ our creation again in His service . . . (*CPP* 164-65)

Accordingly, Eliot uses his own gifts in *The Rock* and his other dramas for this purpose, and in numerous essays urged the church to exploit the theatre in particular for evangelization, ideally operating unconsciously.

Eliot even suggests that art can help one recognize one's vocation in *The Cocktail Party* and *The Confidential Clerk*. "A saint limits himself by writing poetry" (Eliot *ASG* 52), but the very inadequacy of art can spur one towards sainthood. When confessing to Edward his former delusion that he and Celia were once on the verge of a romantic relationship, Peter states, "It seemed to me we had a great deal in common. / We're both of us artists" (*CPP* 367), specifically writers. As Celia begins to shed her former identity, she gives up her poetry because she realizes that art, like romantic love, cannot satisfy his spiritual yearnings. The same realization begins to dawn on Peter. Alex, one of the guardians always intervening for the spiritual welfare of the other characters, gets Peter a job in film in America. When Peter achieves a modicum of success, he returns to England, hoping to assist Celia in furthering her artistic career and thus win her love. After hearing of her death, however, he dismisses his achievements and his *métier*, saying "I've tried to believe in it / So that I might believe in myself" but realizes "here I am, making a second-rate film" (*CPP* 435). Although the play dramatizing Peter's awakening strives for realism, it is the overt staginess of the film referenced within this ostensibly realistic play that serves to instruct. As Auden's Caliban asserts, overtly artificial works helps one to see the frivolity of art relative to the seriousness of religion.

In Peter's case, his apprenticeship in film seems to have been a stage through which he has to pass in order to gain a deeper understanding, both about Celia's nature and about spiritual truth, to which a "second-rate film" bears witness by indirection. In *The Confidential Clerk*, the connection between artistic pursuits and spiritual advancement is more direct since Colby's first step towards sainthood is to become a church organist. Although Sir Claude mistakenly conflates art with religion-- confessing that his pottery "makes life bearable. It's all I have. / I suppose it takes the place of religion" (*CPP* 466)-- for Colby his art is clearly subservient to his faith.[56] Colby had earlier been dominated by artistic ambitions, but as he begins to realize his vocation he only hopes to use his talent in a humble, spiritually-affirming manner: "I want to be an organist. / It doesn't matter about success . . ." (*CPP* 516). As long as one doesn't overvalue art, it can serve a spiritual purpose and "then leave us, as Virgil left Dante, to proceed toward a region where that guide can avail us no further" (*OPP* 87), as Eliot himself hoped to do through these plays, inspiring his audience to seek richer spiritual nourishment elsewhere.

Of course, Auden asserted that art could serve spiritual purposes as well, especially through indirection, as demonstrated with Peter in *The Cocktail Party*. Also, although he claimed that the nature of opera made the transition of ideology extremely difficult, the deliberateness with which he incorporated his beliefs into the libretti shows that he had not abandoned all hope of transmitting his views even in that otherworldly medium and influencing the audience thereby. As shown, Auden likely felt that opera

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[56] Like Sir Claude, the former music hall performer and one-time fiancé of Lord Claverton, Mrs. Carghill of *The Elder Statesman*, esteems art too highly. Despite Eliot's affection for music hall entertainers, she is portrayed negatively because of her lack of spiritual development, as evidenced by her attempt to blackmail Claverton. Eliot suggests that this development has been hindered by her attitude towards art, since she regards her years on the stage as the peak of her life. Rather than trying to seek God, as Claverton begins to do, she merely reminisces, "I had my art" (*CPP* 552).

could actually be used to reinforce certain aspects of his theology, particularly his existential emphasis on free will. Like Eliot, he also portrays some of his artist figures in a positive light, most notably in *Paul Bunyan* and *The Rake's Progress*.[57] Moreover, although he no longer tried to unite society through art, Auden did believe that it could form communities of friends. As he wrote in "New Year Letter":

> . . . art had set in order sense
>
> And feeling and intelligence
>
> And from its ideal order grew
>
> Our local understanding too. (*DM* 16)

It is music in particular that accomplishes this feat in the poem, creating "a *civitas* of sound" (*DM* 16), and, appropriately, the potential benefits of music are also detailed in the libretti, especially *The Magic Flute*. Whereas the music of the flute threatens the spiritual journeys of the penitents in Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* and Dante's *Purgatorio*, in the libretto the magical instruments from Astrafiammante assist Tamino and Papageno in their quest. For example, Papageno plays his bells to enchant the evil Monostatos and his slaves and thus evades capture (*Libretto* 149). Tamino is told that the flute "will well

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[57] Since the mythic Paul Bunyan is kept offstage and the audience only hears his voice, the writer Johnny Inkslinger assumes "the chief dramatic role" (Auden *Libretti* 571). Auden explains that he "seemed the most suitable, as satisfying Henry James' plea for a fine lucid intelligence as a compositional centre. Inkslinger, in fact, is the only person capable of understanding who Paul Bunyan really is, and, in a sense, the operetta is an account of his process of discovery" (*Libretti* 571). Inkslinger takes on a positive role in the community, contributing to the logging work as a book-keeper and teaching the men about poetry, as well as helping them understand the significance of the myth that Paul Bunyan represents. In *The Rake's Progress*, Baba the Turk is the bearded lady whom Rakewell marries as an *acte gratuite*. "Unlike Rake, she is a symbol of the artist" (Fuller 439), and, as Auden explains, "the beard, so to speak, represents her genius, something that makes her what she is and at the same time cuts her off from other people" (*Libretti* 622). The librettists don't condemn her devotion to her art but rather celebrate her delight in it and the theatricality which informs every aspect of her life. For example, returning home with her wedding procession, Baba blows kisses to the spectators "with the practiced gestures of a great artiste" (*Libretti* 69). She also behaves honorably towards Anne, encouraging her to seek out Rakewell because "I know he still loves you" (*Libretti* 80). She is thus portrayed much more sympathetically than Eliot's music hall performer in *The Elder Statesman*.

defend you / And in your darkest hour befriend you" and, echoing the sentiment of *New Year Letter*, that "it can bring good will to men, / Peace, prosperity and mirth . . ." (*Libretti* 142).[58] Nor is it only enchanted instruments that can work such wonders. As Papageno and Pamina sing,

> Music makes us frank and free
>
> Joined in peaceful harmony
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Music, Love and Sympathy
>
> Keep our green world turning. (*Libretti* 150)

These expressions of the value of music are consistent with the original libretto, but Auden's and Kallman's version mentions another use. Their Sarastro proposes treating musical harmony as a model for integrating the spheres of Reason and Passion:

> May we learn
>
> Of music how to serve each other's turn:
>
> For music, from the primal darkness sprung,
>
> Speaks an undifferentiating tongue,
>
> Yet, tamed by harmony, the beast can tame,
>
> And every elemental passion name. (*Libretti* 168-69)

Nevertheless, even this libretto which explicitly celebrates music shows that art can be dangerous. In their version of *The Magic Flute*, a priest takes the instruments from Tamino and Papageno before they begin their trials, explaining, "Till purified from all unhallowed powers / These instruments could work you harm and sorrow" (*Libretti*

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[58] Also, when Tamino learns that Pamina is alive, he exclaims that "No tongue has wit that grateful all to utter / That its heart would say," and plays his flute instead (*Libretti* 148). So the libretto itself trumpets the ability of music to express certain emotions more forcefully than language.

158).[59] In fact, their libretti reveal that all art, despite its potential value, can be detrimental to others and to oneself. While Auden and Eliot both acknowledge the benefits *and* the dangers of art, spiritual and otherwise, in their theatrical works Eliot increasingly emphasizes the former and Auden the latter.

Auden's ambivalence towards art and artists is noticeable even in his plays of the Thirties, when his relatively engaged position would lead one to expect a greater show of faith in the ability of art to change the world for the better. For example, in a section of *The Dog Beneath the Skin* for which Auden claimed chief responsibility (Auden *Plays* 555), Alan and the disguised Francis encounter a Poet in Paradise Park. Initially, the Poet only addresses Alan in foreign languages-- Greek, Latin, Italian and French-- although he is also a native English speaker (*Plays* 242). This particular detail may be a dig at those poets like Eliot and Pound whose use of foreign languages struck some readers as alienating and indicative of excessive self-regard and intellectual pretension. However, Auden suggests that due to their imaginative faculty, *all* poets, elitist or accessible, are susceptible to solipsism. When asked where Francis is, the Poet points to his forehead and replies, "Here. Everything's here. You're here. He's here. This park's here . . . . If I shut my eyes they all disappear" (*Plays* 243). From his perspective, "I'm the only real person in the whole world" (*Plays* 243). Although he mocks the Poet,[60] Auden's uneasy sense remains that artists, even ostensibly political writers like him, tend to regard other people as little more than material for their work. *On the Frontier* initially seems to

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[59] The libretto by Schikaneder and Giesecke merely implies that the instruments are taken away when Tamino and Papageno first enter the temple, without placing any importance on the event. There is no mention of the flute and bells when the two men are captured by priests who initially think they are spies (90), but the instruments seem to have been confiscated around this time since they are later returned to them (108).

[60] For example, when an increasingly annoyed Francis as "the dog" bites the Poet's hand, Alan tells him, "Never mind. Just shut your eyes and you'll forget all about us" (*Plays* 243).

endow art with considerable power. While the Westland Leader discusses his plans to invade Ostnia, Valerian puts on a record of Rameau's *Tambourin*. The symphony elicits an immediate reaction from the Leader: "Ah . . . that music! How clearly I see the way, now!" (*Plays* 396). In an instant, he decides to withdraw his troops from the border, prompting Valerian's friend to whisper to him "you have saved us all!" (*Plays* 397). As in *New Year Letter*, however, the pacific and conciliatory effect of the music is only short-lived. Moments later, the Leader gets word of Ostnian aggression and, forgetting his music-borne epiphany, reverts to his war-mongering mode. In fact, art is so often used to inspire enthusiasm for war and dreams of martial glory that the play suggests it is only truly efficacious when it is co-opted for such purposes. Watching Westland students march off to battle, Dr. Thorvald exalts, "It's the spirit of Pericles! The poets have not sung in vain!" (*Plays* 385).

Ransom's failure to exercise his talent successfully is also a reflection of Auden's views about artists since "Ransom's attempt on F6 and all it implies is in fact an international symbol of the creative act of the poet" (Fuller 194), and, even more importantly, as shown the play has an admittedly autobiographical dimension. As Mendelson explains, "Ransom's story is the parable of an artist who yields to the flattery of public acclaim and official sponsorship and in consequence destroys both his art and his life" (*Plays* xxvi), which is "the fate Auden had avoided" (*Early Auden* 286). Auden felt that moving from his native country, which was keen to exploit his gift, made Ransom's particular fate more unlikely, but he was still concerned over the possibility that his art could lead to the ruination of others and of his own soul. Although working in opera lessened his fears that he was abusing his oratorical power, Auden's conversion

made him even more concerned about the spiritual effects of his work, demonstrated most forcefully in *Elegy for Young Lovers*.

In this opera, Auden and Kallman set out to investigate the "Myth of the Artist Genius" so they put a great poet at its center (*SW* 90), Gregor Mittenhofer, modeled on Yeats, Stefan George, and to a degree Auden himself.[61] They were interested in the dangerous implications of this myth, as they explain in "Genesis of a Libretto":

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[61] Auden is somewhat inconsistent when discussing the inspiration for Mittenhofer: "Auden described him to Lincoln Kirstein as 'a cross between W. B. Yeats and Stefan George', and to Elizabeth Mayer, with whom he was translating Goethe's *Italienische Reise* at the time, as 'rather a good portrait of G'" (Fuller 481-82). However, he and Kallman claim in "Genesis of a Libretto" that "the only things about him which were suggested to us by historical incidents were drawn from the life of a poet-- no matter whom-- who wrote in English" (*Libretti* 247), so it seems to be primarily a portrait of Yeats, not George and Goethe, who both wrote in German. Mendelson claims that the poet writing in English is actually Auden himself. He draws a parallel between Mittenhofer's patroness Caroline and Carolina Newton, who bought manuscripts from Auden for a short time in the early 1940s (*Libretti* xxvii). Mendelson's proof isn't terribly convincing however, especially when he tries to compare the love triangle in the libretto to the fraught relationship between Auden and Kallman. While there are certainly some similarities between Auden and Mittenhofer and "[t]he temptations to which Mittenhofer yields in the libretto are the same temptations to power and authority that Auden had confronted in his life" (Mendelson *Libretti* xxviii), the main model does seem to be Yeats. Referencing the statement in "Genesis of a Libretto," Fuller remarks, "The occasion and indeed tense would seem to forbid self-reference" (482). Although he notes Mendelson's claims to the contrary, Fuller maintains, "The librettists' intention seems to underline the Yeats sources . . . The self-confessed theme also derives most obviously from Yeats ('The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life or of the work')" (482). Writing to James Stern, Auden revealed, "Our main character is a cross between W. B. Yeats and Stefan Georg [sic] and is very libellous . . . Like W. B. Y., he gets ideas from a lady who has visions" (qted. in Mendelson *Libretti* 663). Auden makes the connection between Mittenhofer and Yeats publicly in "The World of Opera": "Remembering that Yeats has a wife from whose mediumistic gifts he profited, it seemed plausible that Mittenhofer should have discovered Frau Mack and made it his habit to visit her from time to time, bringing his entourage with him" (*SW* 92). Auden's use of Yeats as the model for this monstrous poet signals the divergence between his and Eliot's attitude towards their eminent predecessor. With the passing of the years, Eliot seemed to take a more favorable view of Yeats, likely due in part to their work together at the Group Theatre. While occasionally exasperated by him-- Eliot apparently once told Doone that "he felt like kicking Yeats down the stairs" (Ackroyd 216)-- during this period he developed "an increased liking and admiration for the old poet" (Sidnell 267). Accordingly, Eliot pays homage to him through the Yeatsian compound ghost of "Little Gidding," a figure with gravitas and wisdom. Auden's experience with Yeats at the Group Theatre may have caused the opposite reaction, since his deep ambivalence towards the poet is apparent in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats." After his conversion, Auden, while continuing to admire his artistic achievements, seems even more repelled by the way in which Yeats conducted his life, as the portrait of Mittenhofer suggests. According to an acquaintance, Auden liked to say that "of the literary men he had known only three struck him as positively evil: Robert Frost, Yeats and Brecht" (qted. in Giddings 168), although he admired the work of each. So while Auden at times claims that "there is, after all, a relation, however obscure and misunderstood, between art and goodness" (*Prose II* 54), he acknowledges elsewhere that this is often not the case. Works like *Elegy* and "The Cave of Making" demonstrate that there *is* a "lack of identity between Goodness and Beauty" (*Libretti* 246), which makes the practice of art so morally dangerous. One may be tempted to view the creation of a great poem as the justification for one's sins, as Mittenhofer does.

> This is a genius myth because the lack of identity between Goodness and Beauty, between the character of man and the character of his creations, is a permanent aspect of the human condition. The Theme of *Elegy for Young Lovers* is summed up in two lines by Yeats: 'The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life or of the work.' Aesthetically speaking, the personal existence of the artist is accidental; the essential thing is his production. The artist-genius, as the nineteenth century conceived him, made this aesthetic presupposition an ethical absolute, that is to say, he claimed to represent the highest, most authentic, mode of human existence. (*Libretti* 246-47)

"Accept this claim," they continue, "and it follows that the artist-genius is morally bound as a sacred duty to exploit others whenever such exploitation will benefit his work and to sacrifice them whenever their existence is a hindrance to his production (*Libretti* 247). Mittenhofer does exploit everyone around him, and travels with an entourage to ensure that all of his whims are satisfied. As his patron Caroline tells his doctor, "Great poets are like children" (*Libretti* 194) because of their sense of entitlement and continual demands. Whereas Auden claimed in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939) that "You were silly like us, your gift survived it all" (*CP* 248), Mittenhofer maintains that he is able to write not despite the seemingly absurd conditions of his life but because of them. Although he has to be humored like a child and has fits of rage, he insists that everything he does is

> To protect and save
> The tiny store
> Of what within

Is genuine. (*Libretti* 217)

Mittenhofer clearly subscribes to the myth of the artist genius, and believes that he must do whatever is necessary to serve his art: "[I]f it should prove necessary in order to create a masterpiece, the artist must be prepared ruthlessly to sacrifice his own life and happiness and those of others. He is not to be judged by the moral standards we apply to ordinary morals" (Auden *SW* 90). He is not even grateful to those who contribute to his success, expecting them to do no less.[62] So as the libretto demonstrates, he succumbs to the danger of which both Auden and Eliot warned, worshiping art and his own abilities. This idolization leads to moral confusion, as even Mittenhofer admits. He reveals that he cannot experience anything

Without reflecting: 'Now,

Could I use that somehow?

Would it translate

Into number and rhyme?'

Until in time

One no longer knows

What is true and false

Or right and wrong.

Only what goes

And won't go into song. (*Libretti* 218)

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[62] Thinking of his entourage, he fumes, "BAH! What a bunch! What a scrubby bouquet!" and insults each person in turn (*Libretti* 230). *Paul Bunyan*'s Inkslinger faces a similar "temptation . . . to despise those who do the manual work that makes the life of thought possible" (Auden *Libretti* 571), but he is humbled when he has to become a book-keeper in order to make a living, realizing that "a guy gotta eat" (*Libretti* 23). Inkslinger sees that one cannot be governed solely by artistic ambitions and that he is not so different from those around him, who are also subject to the demands of the body. Pampered and patronized, Mittenhofer has not had to learn such a lesson.

Mittenhofer does not fight against his tendency to regard everything and everyone as only material for his art, but accepts such a perception as his privilege. So while Mittenhofer "is someone to be respected" because of his considerable gift, he is nevertheless "a monster" (Auden qted. in Mendelson *Libretti* 667).

The height of his monstrosity comes when he allows the eponymous young lovers, Elizabeth his former mistress and Toni his doctor's son, to die so that he may complete his masterpiece. He sends the couple, whom he secretly despises, up a nearby mountain to collect edelweiss, which he claims to need as a "visionary aid" (*Libretti* 228). When a blizzard threatens and he is asked by a guide if anyone from his party is on the mountain, he says no, effectively condemning them to death. Since he has decided that the poem they've inspired is to be an elegy, to his mind they must die before he can finish it. Their lives are worth less than his poem. As he tells Caroline:

> Everything must be paid for
> Eventually
> In time or in the service
> Of eternity:
> I do not ask the price for
> They shall pay for me. (*Libretti* 239)

Caroline is also one of those who must pay, since with her knowledge of what he has done she "starts to go mad" (Auden *SW* 95). On the mountain, Toni and Elizabeth realize their death is imminent and begin to see things more clearly, acknowledging, for instance, that they are not truly in love with each other. They also become spiritually enlightened, praying:

God of Truth, forgive our sins,

All offenses we fool made

Against thee. Grant us Thy peace.

Light with Thy Love our lives' end. (*Libretti* 242)

Mittenhofer exhibits no such growth and remains unrepentant. Before reciting his poem, he looks in a mirror and cheers "One. Two. Three. Four. / Whom do we adore? / Gregor! Gregor! Gregor!" (*Libretti* 242). As Spears states, "It is hard to see how the librettists could have made it any clearer that Mittenhofer is both a follower of a false religion and himself a false god; the contrast between his religion of art and the true religious perception of the young lovers is made very sharp" (*Auden* 287). During the recitation, his poem is represented by music and we hear "*the voices of all who contributed to the writing of the poem*" (*Libretti* 243), whom he felt entitled to sacrifice as needed. Although the poem *is* meant to be a masterpiece, Auden would agree with Toni that "What the world needs are warmer hearts, / Not older poets" (*Libretti* 212), or at least older poets like Mittenhofer. He clearly projects onto the poet his own fears of valuing art above people *and* above religion. Since Mittenhofer is destroyed solely by his artistic ambitions-- not by any desire to save the world like Ransom-- Auden shows that even after renouncing any demagogic aspirations he must continue to guard against misusing his talent if his work is not to cause any harm, including to himself. In general, the libretti reveal that Auden had less confidence in the ability of art to edify and promote spiritual growth than Eliot did, which is a main reason why he was reluctant to use the theatre to promote Christianity too directly whereas Eliot, despite his assertions, wrote plays of an explicitly religious nature with the hope of contributing to society's

redemption.

Although Auden and Eliot made considerable strides in their respective fields, their stage works illustrate the ongoing difficulties involved in reconciling artistic and religious values. Together, Auden's libretti and Eliot's plays highlight the two major problems faced by the religious artist: how one's artistic ambitions may threaten one's spiritual development, and, conversely, how one's religious commitment may undermine the perceived quality of one's work. While Auden's libretti are generally highly regarded, some literary scholars and musicologists contend that they are at times too dense for the medium.[63] Although Auden insisted that the librettist must serve the composer by writing verse easy to set, he didn't always abide by his own guidelines, in large part because he wanted to express complex ideas integral to his beliefs.[64] Overall, however, Auden and his critics were content that he was not abusing the medium in order to preach and that his Christianity usually "unobtrusively informs his work" (Hennessey 570). Therefore, the libretti, particularly *Elegy for Young Lovers*, reveal that Auden was mainly concerned about the effect of art on his beliefs, not vice versa.[65]

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[63] See Marx's "Auden in Opera: The Libretto as Poetic Style" and Willard Spielgelman's "The Rake's Progress: An Operatic Version of Pastoral," for instance.

[64] For instance, in his discussion of the scene in *Elegy for Young Lovers* in which Toni and Elizabeth cast aside their delusions and turn to the religious sphere as they approach death, Auden admits,

> This scene, for which, incidentally, I was responsible, will not do at all and must some day be completely rewritten. To my fond eye it reads well and might be effective in a spoken verse play. But for opera it is far too literary and complicated in the argument, far too dependent upon every word being heard, to get across when set to music. (*SW* 95)

So as in his verse plays, his desire to voice his beliefs in the libretti can sometimes have a deleterious effect, according to critics and Auden himself.

[65] The potential for art to undermine one's spiritual progress is underlined in other works also. Like in *The Magic Flute*, when Tamino's and Papageno's instruments are taken away until they are purified, in *Love's Labour's Lost* the men must cease from writing love poetry to the women until they are similarly purified through their penitential tasks-- an aspect of the original play which Auden's and Kallman's libretto emphasizes. Auden even lost his commission to write the lyrics for the musical *Man of La Mancha*

Conversely, in his drama Eliot seems relatively satisfied that art can be practiced without endangering one's soul, and his plays, while continuing to warn against valuing art too highly, don't betray the same anxiety over his vocation as did *Ash-Wednesday.* Moreover, his conviction that drama could and should be used to serve the Church led him to feel that his excursions into the theatre were not only acceptable but commendable from a theological perspective. In discharging his Christian duty in this way, however, many critics think that Eliot succumbed to the other danger against which the religious writer must guard and overemphasized his beliefs to the detriment of the work. Peter Levi's reaction is quite typical: "For my own taste their construction is too Greek, their atmosphere is too bleak, and their message is too Christian" (134). Leavis, Eliot's erstwhile supporter, likewise disliked the religious content of his plays, and regarded *The Cocktail Party*, for instance, as "an artistic voyage into a Christian-mystic realm that was . . . a regression into what he considered an archaic cliché" (McCarthy 40). Ozick, while not in sympathy with Eliot's beliefs, grants that *Murder in the Cathedral* is "a major devotional play of orchestral breadth" (150). She contends, however, that the plays that followed, including *The Family Reunion*, are "unmistakably dead, embalmed, dated beyond endurance," due to Eliot's reliance on outdated conventions (150). Also, she argues, "Much of Eliot's dialogue, instead of achieving the simplicity of common speech he aspired to, plummets to the stilted, the pedestrian, the enervated . . ." (150). Many

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because of his insistence that the literature Quixote reads is dangerously delusive, as opposed to romantically inspiring, and needs to be renounced. In "Song of the Knight of the Mirrors," Quixote is told:

> Look! Unlearn your bookish lore.
> . . . . . .
> Look again! Don't shut your eyes!
> Look! It's time to recognize
> Some facts. (*Libretti* 521)

So while the dangers of art are explored most extensively and powerfully in *Elegy for Young Lovers*, they are focused upon in many of the other stage works as well.

critics would agree with her assessment, generally attributing these various faults either to the supposedly diminishing energy of an aging poet or to Eliot's pursuit of popularity. According to William Harmon,

> Eliot began as a writer of terrifically concentrated poems and essays and then drifted . . . into a lazier orbit of much less concentrated plays and lectures. The unmistakable direction of this drift is from private to public and from more elitist to less elitist. . . .He wanted an audience, and not only in the general sense of a vague body of readers: he wanted an audience of living auditors, and he was willing to sacrifice much for the sake of an audience. (515)

Eliot acknowledged that all artists would like a degree of popularity, if only to feel appreciated, but objected to the view that he was pandering to the audience solely to feel more successful.[66] He was not seeking popularity merely for popularity's sake. Eliot needed an audience in order to edify, and he adopted the outmoded conventions and flatter verse in his drama that so many critics deplore in what appears to be a misconceived attempt to make Christian tenets appear more relevant and palatable to that audience. Eliot and Auden undoubtedly advanced the field of religion and literature by applying their theories to works for the stage as well as the page. However, their inability to resolve all of the problems facing religious writers reveals how extraordinarily complicated these issues really are.

Despite their various contributions in theory and practice, Eliot's and Auden's decision to devote so much of their later years to the theatre likely contributed to the

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[66] Recall his reference to those "unfriendly critics" who suggest that "from the beginning I aspired unconsciously . . . to Shaftesbury Avenue and Broadway" (*OPP* 90). The perceived desire for popular success struck many in elitist literary circles as rather vulgar. The later success of *Cats*, the musical loosely adapted from Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, would have been regarded as an embarrassment.

perception that their careers were in decline. There were some disappointments, like *The Family Reunion*, but Eliot's plays, especially *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Cocktail Party*, were quite well received at the time of their premieres. The success of *The Cocktail Party* was even parodied in a poem in the *New Statesman* called "Nightingale among the Sweenies," which includes such lines as ". . . it's a riddle how / Lowbrow and middlebrow / Mix with the highbrow at this highbrow wow!" (qted. in Browne 247). However, Lesley Chamberlain asserts that though the three productions of this play were hits, their success was "deceptive": "All three occasions owed the excess of their popularity to Eliot's living celebrity as poet and Nobel laureate" (512). Ozick claims that the same is true for all of the plays: "They came because of the supremacy of Eliot's fame. They came because verse drama by T. S. Eliot was the most potent cultural vitamin of the age" (150). The later plays in particular have not aged well and tend to be dismissed as failures, as these statements by Chamberlain and Ozick suggest. Overall, the plays lack the vitality of his best poetry, from which his fame sprang in the first place, so Eliot's turn to drama seemed a falling off to many former admirers and current scholars. Eliot's reputation may even have been ultimately hurt by his decision to champion verse drama. "At one stroke, he restored to pulsating life the half-dead poetic drama," but in the end he only slowed rather than thwarted the progress of prose drama, since "what amounts to a revolution has taken place in the theatre since he wrote" (Browne 344). He exerted considerable influence among his contemporaries and continues to show dramatists how to write verse drama without creating Shakespearean pastiche, but nevertheless his deep and lasting investment in what now seems to be a fading art form strikes many critics as further proof of his current irrelevance.

Auden's libretti didn't suffer the same kind of reversal, although that's in part because they never did achieve the high profile of Eliot's plays. In Anglo-American culture, operas always tend to be less popular than plays, and according to Auden, the opera lover usually "is a conservative who does not welcome new opera; there are too many from the Golden age which he has still to hear" (*Prose II* 401). At the time, however, his turn to opera after writing political drama did hurt his reputation since he and Isherwood were considered one of the "chief hopes of the movement" (Dukes 11). His abdication of this kind of engaged theatre, like his rejection of political poetry, struck many admirers as a traitorous action. Though Auden valued opera because it hampered didacticism and celebrated artifice, these same qualities led some in those highly politicized times to dismiss it as a decadent and irresponsible art form, not responding sufficiently to society's problems. However, while Auden's libretti don't have as decisive a role in how critics perceive the shape of his career as do Eliot's plays,[67] their lack of emphatic pronouncements about his ideological position may actually help his current reputation. The perception many critics have of the later Eliot as relentlessly and didactically Christian stems in large part from his drama, whereas Auden's libretti reinforce the notion that he is less of a slave to his religious beliefs. Although he wrote explicitly Christian works as well, the operas show that Auden can incorporate his theology in less obtrusive ways. Thus, their postconversion works for the stage support the common perception that Eliot became narrowly religious whereas Auden retained more of his former range and interests, making Auden appear more appealing to many readers today. Bloom, for instance, found Auden's Christianity less offensive than that of

[67] One reason is that they are even more neglected than Eliot's late plays, and many critics have likely not read them. Also, Auden wrote so much throughout his life that the libretti don't represent as substantial an amount of his total output as the plays do Eliot's.

the older poet, but also thought his works show an "enormous range" compared to Eliot's (*Auden* 3). Nevertheless, both Eliot and Auden suffered an eclipse in their reputation following their conversions, so that, with some notable exceptions, their later works, including those for the stage, are given less attention and often less respect than their early works.

Conclusion

In a 1964 article, Naomi Mitchison, who was a friend of Auden's, expressed disapproval over his revisions, specifically of "September 1, 1939" (Mendelson *Later Auden* 478). To her statement that "he may take another jump into what for me would be memorability," Auden replied in a letter:

> 'If by memorability, you mean a poem like *Sept. Ist, 1939*, I pray to God that I shall never be memorable again.' In a postscript he disputed Mitchison's view-- and the then common view-- of the history of his career: 'P.S. Believe it or not, I have got better. Please *try* 'Thanksgiving for a Habitat.' (*Later Auden* 478)

His appeal to Mitchison to at least "*try*" his most recent poem shows his frustration with those critics who dismissed his later works without even engaging with them properly. However, many critics did not feel obliged to follow Auden's career closely after the publication of *The Double Man*, the volume which marked his expatriation and his conversion. Although other factors are involved, including nationalistic sentiments and antipathy to his stylistic changes, the decline in his reputation stems primarily from his embrace of Christianity. Regardless of their aesthetic qualities, the religious beliefs informing his later works were enough to provoke attacks from critics like Larkin and Jarrell, who helped to convince others that Auden had *not* "got better," but had rather become an embarrassment to his younger self.

Despite the lambasting of certain critics like Larkin and Jarrell, the later Auden is still treated better in some respects than the later Eliot. While Eliot also had to contend with naysayers during his lifetime and many readers stopped attending to his later works,

it was after his death that his reputation declined precipitously. In her 1989 article, Ozick describes in hyperbolic terms his long dominance over the literary landscape:

> When, four decades ago . . . T. S. Eliot won the Nobel Prize in Literature, he seemed pure zenith, a colossus, nothing less than a permanent luminary, fixed in the firmament like the sun and the moon . . . . or, to put it less extravagantly . . . a commanding literary figure, who had no successful rivals, and whose formulations were in fact revered. (119-20)

"[W]e no longer live in the literary shadow of T. S. Eliot," however, because he has been "knocked off his pinnacle" (152-53). In some ways, his diminution was to be expected because he *was* so prominent for so long. Succeeding generations would naturally want to distinguish themselves from their influential predecessor and develop new poetics and new critical schools, and more recently the reshaping of the Modernist canon to include previously marginalized writers, including women like H. D. and Marianne Moore, has somewhat displaced Eliot from the spotlight. The rapidity and sharpness of his decline, however, can be attributed in large part to his Christianity, and particularly the nature of his Christianity. "Even in the prime of Eliot's influence, many readers needed to overlook his Christianity; most who admired his aesthetic achievements and theories had no desire to indulge his . . . hyper-old-fashioned High Churchism" (Passaro 68), and as time progressed fewer and fewer readers were willing to make the effort to overcome their antipathy to his religious convictions in order to appreciate his work. Many modern readers are repulsed not only by the suspicions of on-going anti-Semitism which cling to Eliot but also, more generally, by his seeming lack of respect for other belief systems. They would agree with Forster, who had complained in his review of "Notes Towards the

Definition of Culture" that for Eliot "[w]here there is not Christianity there is nothing. And it has to be Christianity of an approved type . . ." (503). Discussing another of Eliot's polemics, "Idea of a Christian Society," Ozick also condemns him as intolerant: "Lamenting 'the intolerable position of those who would try to lead a Christian life in a non-Christian world,' he was indifferent to the position of those who would try to thrive as a cultural minority within his contemplated Utopia" (124). Ozick, who considers the poet "an autocratic, inhibited, depressed, rather narrow-minded, and considerably bigoted fake Englishman" (121), declares, "In the wake of forty years, it is now our unsparing obligation to disclaim the reactionary Eliot" (154), which many critics have accordingly done. Although Ozick is particularly intemperate in her comments, she does reflect a common perception of Eliot, one reinforced and perpetuated by works like Michael Hastings's 1984 play *Tom and Viv* and its film adaptation. The play, as well as charging Eliot with mistreating his first wife before eventually having her callously committed to a mental asylum, even suggests that his extremely conservative sociological views, which were shaped by his religious convictions, extended to fascism.[1] As Anthony Lane accurately remarked of the similarly libelous film adaptation, it is "more intolerant than

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[1] Shortly after its premiere, E. W. F. Tomlin complained that "The play suggests fascist leanings. There is even a fictional speech . . . in which Eliot is made to say: 'I have a preference for fascism which I dare say some of you share' . . . This is a gross distortion of the facts" (139). Tomlin correctly states that Eliot spoke against fascism vigorously and often, particularly during the Thirties, "when so many of the intelligentsia were espousing totalitarianism in some form" (139). Eliot's drama of this period, *Murder in the Cathedral* and especially *The Rock*, also testify to his anti-fascistic stance. Although the film smears Eliot's name in other ways, it at least doesn't claim that he was a fascist. Lane remarks that the adaptation, "written by Hastings and Adrian Hodges, loses none of the rich nonsense of the original play, although I was sorry not to hear the interesting line in which Vivienne reports that her husband 'adores the Fascists.' A daring little slander, not least because it was Vivienne herself who joined the British Union of Fascists, in 1934. That would not suit the playwright's plan-- wronged woman versus cold fish-- so he made the switch" (93). Lane, and others, also point out that Eliot was not responsible for committing his wife to the asylum: "Since the movie was made, a letter has been published in which Maurice [Vivienne's brother] informs Eliot that Vivienne has been committed. He didn't even know" (93). Since the letter was only recently discovered Hastings might seem somewhat absolved, except that he should have known not to accept Maurice's account of events, upon which he based the play, so uncritically.

the man whom it surveys with such distaste," and "is not just lacklustre but irresponsible, because it will foster more Eliot haters than there are Eliot readers; people will come away knowing for certain why they dislike him, without feeling the need to discover whether they like his work" (93-94). So works like *Tom and Viv*, which portray Eliot as "narrow-minded" and "bigoted" (Ozick 121), as well as the recent studies that focus on the question of anti-Semitism in his work, only serve to tarnish his reputation further.

Not only is Auden generally considered less objectionable than Eliot, sociologically, politically and theologically, in recent years his reputation has been rehabilitated to a considerable degree. In his 2002 article, Gopnik relates, "When W. H. Auden died, in 1973, no one would have imagined that thirty years later he would come back as the poet of another age, our own" (86). Like Eliot, he had been written off by many readers as irrelevant, but for various reasons, including those characteristics which distinguish him from the older poet, he came to be appreciated anew. Despite his orthodox Christianity, Auden's relatively liberal politics and bohemian lifestyle made him more appealing to a new generation than Eliot, the "Establishment icon . . . 'the Pope of Russell Square'" (Everett 12). Although Eliot's influence over countless poets is indisputable, this perception of Auden as more politically and socially acceptable allowed many poets to embrace him as their literary master without scruple, and made them less shy about acknowledging their devotion than they might have been were it directed towards Eliot. Even before the current upswing in his reputation, Auden was held in high regard by many of his fellow poets, especially American poets.[2] He has now been

[2] According to Firchow, his influence on American poets, like John Berryman, John Ashbery, and John Hollander, "was acknowledged for a few years to be almost supernatural" (466-67). Hecht, who felt enough sympathy for Auden to create a substantial body of scholarship dedicated to his work, describes his

embraced by the general population as well, in part thanks to the recitation of "Stop All the Clocks" in the 1993 film *Four Weddings and a Funeral.* Whereas the stage and screen versions of *Tom and Viv* probably discouraged many from reading Eliot's poetry, *Four Weddings and a Funeral* "turned Auden into a surprise best-seller on both sides of the Atlantic" (MacKinnon 25). It also likely spurred new editions of his work, like *As I Walked Out One Evening*, the volume of songs and light verse put out by Mendelson in 1995 (O'Brien 3). Although it may seem absurd that a romantic comedy could have such an effect upon the fortunes of a serious poet, "An irony of our moment is that it often takes a movie or television show to bring literary works to people's attention" (Tillinghast 423). Unlike Eliot, who was so maligned on screen, Auden was helped by this kind of exposure. His reputation has only risen higher in the intervening decade, plausibly making him seem the "indispensable poet of our time" (Gopnik 86).

However, Auden's popularity stems largely from a distorted perception of him and his career, brought about by the misinterpretation of or overemphasis on some of his works and the neglect of others. Although Gopnik claims that "Auden's emotional tone is our tone," he admits, "The odd thing is that Auden's poems are often saying the reverse of what we have now decided to hear" (86). For example, the much-loved "Stop All the Clocks," embraced as an elegy, "was written as a jaunty, Noel Coward-like ironic pastiche of a mourning song, unmoored from grief . . ." (86). Moreover, Auden is primarily valued for the poetry he wrote in his early career. "September 1, 1939," for instance, with its exhortation "We must love one another or die," which Auden rejected, "sprang to renewed life after . . . September 11th . . . posted on Web sites and subway

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many acolytes, including Joseph Brodsky, the Soviet émigré, and James Merrill, who made "Auden a principal spiritual figure in *The Changing Light at Sandover*" ("Hawk" 157).

walls" (Gopnik 86). Even those American poets which Auden had helped to shape were responding primarily to the work he had written in England:

> [T]hat influence undoubtedly derives more immediately and noticeably from the work of the young or English Auden. . . . so we are left with the rather odd and anticlimactic conclusion that the American Auden had relatively little impact on the work of the following generation of American poets. Only the English Auden did. (Firchow 467)

Although some later poems are still widely read and anthologized, such as "In Praise of Limestone" (1948) or "The Shield of Achilles" (1952), most of his major pieces, including his long poems of the 1940s and *Horae Canonicae*, tend to be overlooked. This selective focus necessarily precludes the kind of attention to his development, including his encounters with theology, which these works demand. So while Auden's reputation has improved in general, and he is often compared positively to Eliot, his later works, like the older poet's, are still unfairly neglected in favor of his early ones.

This neglect of the two poets' later work is lamentable because their joint achievement is so significant. They devoted decades of their working life to understanding how belief and literature act upon one another and how to reconcile the claims of each in order to write aesthetically uncompromised works embodying their beliefs. Together, by reinforcing, qualifying, and sometimes even rejecting each other's approaches, they created the most significant body of work to address these essential questions. Even when their attempts to express their beliefs in their poetry did not meet with their own approval or that of their critics, the works are nevertheless instructive and illuminate some of the difficulties faced by modern religious artists. It may be, as the

familiar compound ghost of "Little Gidding" asserts, that "next year's words await another voice," but certainly, in Eliot's and Auden's case, their "thoughts and theory" should not be forgotten (*CPP* 194).

List of Abbreviations

Texts by Eliot

ASG	*After Strange Gods*
CPP	*The Complete Poems and Plays*
FLA	*For Lancelot Andrewes*
OPP	*On Poetry and Poets*
SE	*Selected Essays*
SP	*Selected Prose*
TCTC	*To Criticize the Critic*
UPUC	*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*

Texts by Auden

CP	*Collected Poems*
CP [1945]	*The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden*
CR	*A Company of Readers*
CW	*A Certain World*
DH	*The Dyer's Hand*
DM	*The Double Man*
EA	*The English Auden*
FA	*Forewords and Afterwords*
SW	*Secondary Worlds*

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