W.H. Auden:
The Poet and the Sea: The Sea and the Mirror

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Abstract

The endeavour of modernist authors to 'make it new' involved a significant revision of the use of imagery. This paper focuses on W.H. Auden and the ways in which he used the image of the sea. It shows that the contours of the poet's symbolic landscape changed in parallel with his dynamic ideological development. As a whole, the paper argues that there is a discernible relationship between the two phenomena, which, however, remains to be defined by scholarship.

> *…the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.*
> (Genesis 1.2)

An event of immense importance for scholars of Modernism was the 1999 inaugural conference of the Modernist Studies Association titled *The New Modernisms*[1]. Following the conference, E.P. Comentale remarked that "Modernism, a category once bound by traditional configurations of space and time, would no longer be the same. It was poked and pulled, preened and polished for the new century." It was "'redefined,' 'reassessed,' 'recontextualized,' 'historicized,' 'hystericized,' and, of course, 'modernized'" (1). It is no surprise that Modernism still attracts scholarly attention and that it elicits needs to re-examine its nature and ramifications. Yet, the force with which the early 20th century avant-garde renounced or at least redefined established techniques, and the multitude of '-isms' sheltered under the umbrella term Modernism suggest that the period itself can be viewed as a moment of marked revisioning.

Indeed, areas that remained unaffected were scarce. New findings mainly in psychology, physics, linguistics, anthropology and philosophy helped to define the features of Modernism and its expression. G. Lukacs in his essay "The Ideology of Modernism" gives an example of such a change when he contrasts the modernist concept of man as an inescapably solitary being with "individual solitariness" present in the literature of the 19th century traditional realism. Lukacs points at Heidegger's term

"thrownness-into-being" as a very apt description of modern human solitariness and the inability to form relationships with anyone other than ourselves, thus making it "impossible to determine theoretically the origin and goal of human existence" (176). Yet, Wojciech Kozak showed the complexity of 'rejecting' when he remarked that Modernism owed much to the scientific progressivism and research in "anthropological and ethnological studies, which had been rapidly developing from the mid-nineteenth century and were crowned by Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough"* (81). This assisted the modernist authors in finding a refuge from the bleak vision of a fragmented society in mythopoeic narratives offering the image of order. Myths were approached with such force that critics speak of a "conscious literary mythopoeic practice" (Kozak, 83).

Simultaneously, modernist authors reveal new ways of representing and working with time and space. What is most frequently discussed is their fascination and at the same time disgust with cosmopolitan life and urban culture. But, topographical imagery in general underwent immense changes. For instance, the poetry of W.H. Auden contains a unique symbolic landscape, whose 'contours' and function remain undefined by scholarship. Traditionally, Auden's work, especially his poetry written before the 1950s, is studied for its rendering of the poet's shift along the 'Freud-Marx-Kierkegaard' trajectory. Critics view Auden's life as a series of revisions caused by his relentless personal search for a stable ideological platform and firm views on the social function of art. Indeed, Auden and his work can be approached as a chain of accepting and rejecting, which echoes the above-mentioned claim by Heidegger concerning the impossibility to determine the goal of our existence. Yet, what has drawn almost no critical attention so far is the poet's acute awareness of space and place. Auden's passion for travelling, his abundant critical opinions of places and the frequent employment of spatial imagery in his poetry offer space for a large scale analysis of his poetic landscapes, both real and symbolic.

For Auden, the relationship between people and places was a one of inseparable connection:

> *Who is ever quite without his landscape,*
> *The straggling village street, the house in trees,*
> *All near the church? Or else, the gloomy town-house,*
> *The one with the Corinthian pillars, or*
> *The tiny workmanlike flat, in any case*
> *A home, a centre where the three or four things*
> *That happen to a man do happen?* (Auden, 127)

His preoccupation with places fits in with the overall tendencies of the 1930s generation. Stephen Spender's group, for example, was referred to as 'The Pylons' after his poem of the same name which focuses on such monuments of modernity in the context of a rural landscape. V. Cunningham claims that "watching and mapping and traversing landscapes couldn't be more fundamental to '30s literature's sense of itself, to the '30s writers' typical envisaging of their art and their politics as being on the road, on the way, into or across the country" (226). In the passion for places and travel, Auden himself coined the term *Topophilia*[2] in his 1948 introduction to John Betjeman's collection of poems. His lifelong preference was for a manmade landscape, especially the mining areas of the North Pennines. In a definition of anyone seriously keen on places Auden claimed that "wild or unhumanised nature holds no charms for the average *topophil* because it is lacking in history" (2002b, 304).

Auden and the Sea

Despite such predilections formed during early childhood, Auden in his verse draws upon a wide palette of spatial imagery which includes natural wilderness as well as cities or industrial sites. The following discussion focuses on the uses to which Auden put the image of the sea with the intention to illustrate that the contours of his poetical landscape underwent a development that is, in some respects, correlative with the aforementioned ideological growth.

Perhaps the most significant breaking point in the poet's life was the year 1939 when he moved to the USA. Auden crossed the Atlantic and dissociated himself from the young leftist poets with whom he had been critically 'amalgamated'. It should be emphasised that from 1928, the date of his first collection, until this moment, the sea appeared very frequently in his poems, yet, in none occupied the central theme. On the other hand, the poems share the common denominator of its portrayal, which is markedly different from poems written during and after the Second World War.

One of the earliest, yet widely known, lyrics where the sea appears is Auden's "Watershed" (1927) depicting the nostalgia of a disused English metal mining town. The quiet and nostalgic atmosphere of the first stanza echoes Auden's personal weakness for such places. Numerous other poems from this period deal with the difference between the past, when the mines were bustling centres of labour, and the present of disused and abandoned

sites[3]. The persona's nostalgic observation is 'disrupted' by the arrival of an unwelcome stranger, a typical element of Auden's early landscapes, and the mood switches to anger and the imperative:

Go home, now, stranger, proud of your stock,
Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:
This land, cut off, will not communicate,
Be no accessory content to one
Aimless for faces rather there than here.
Beams from your car may cross a bedroom wall,
They wake no sleeper; you may hear the wind
Arriving driven from the ignorant sea
To hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm.
(Auden 1976, 41)

Clearly, the way Auden uses the image of the sea contributes to the backdrop for the arrival of the stranger, whose defect is no knowledge of the place and its history. The 'guest' is separated from understanding and, as one of the lines claims, from 'communicating'. The sea is the source of the only audible element: the wind accompanies the silent ride of the uninvited guest. It brings to the shore a wild force, which makes a substantial contribution to the portrayal of the negative reception of the stranger. As a whole, this poem juxtaposes the nostalgic silence and insight of the persona with the detachment of the stranger exposed to the ignorant sea and its uncontrollable, violent energy.

Paola Marchetti, the author of "Auden's Landscapes", one of the very rare essays on the use of topographical imagery in Auden's work, notices that his poetry is imbued with bipolar oppositions (200). It is obvious that Auden projected this inclination onto the spatial imagery by involving border territories: "the most pervasive image is that of places of passage, transit and divisions: frontiers, passes and watersheds" (201). The sea plays a crucial role in this aspect because Auden's poems frequently involve shores and riverbanks as 'thresholds' offering the possibility of crossing from *terra firma* to the sea. "No Change of Place" (1929) is an example of such an option, which is, however, never taken: the shore and the pier are portrayed as impassable borderlines: "…no one goes / Further than railhead or the ends of piers, …" (Auden 1976, 42). Auden portrays the sea and the dry land wilderness as spheres of the unknown and inaccessible. To enter them is a challenge that is above the power of the individual. They are places that lie beyond the cognitive horizon and outside the world of human existence, which is usually emphasised by contrasting the sea with

the city or other manmade *loci*. It is a place that inhibits change, a frequent theme of modernist writing: "both [sea and desert] are the wilderness, i.e., the place where there is no community, just or unjust, and no historical change for better or worse" (Auden 1967, 15).

Several early poems use the image of the sea as a metaphor for propelling the aimlessness of a morally corrupted civilization. "The Ship", a section of a six-part poem called "A Voyage" (1938) written after Auden's journey to China with C. Isherwood, is an illustrative example of this phenomenon:

> *Slowly our Western culture in full pomp progresses*
> *Over the barren plains of a sea: somewhere ahead*
> *A septic East, odd fowl and flowers, odder dresses…*
> (Auden 1976, 143-144)

Besides the aforementioned and repetitive contrast of the sea with the city, where "All streets are brightly lit" and "kept clean" (ibid), the poem contains one more recurring use of the sea image in the early poetry. In this poem 'the ship' of European culture on the one hand progresses over the sea, yet it wanders aimlessly "somewhere ahead" (ibid) over the barren surface. The sea as an obstacle and cause of wandering is one of the several ways in which Auden manifests his enduring indebtedness to Northern mythology and old English literature, both of which served as an influence on the formal as well as thematic aspects of his writing[4]. The short lyric "The Wanderer" (1930), as its title suggests, draws upon old texts, especially *The Wanderer*, whose loose translation it is. Besides the opening line "Doom is dark and deeper than any sea-dingle" taken from the medieval *Sawles Warde*, Auden's poem involves a departure from home and from the "cloud-soft hand" of the partner at the beginning of an inevitable journey. In this poem the subject is 'allowed' to cross the boundary between the land and the sea. Yet, the result is a feeling of loneliness and unhappiness:

> *But ever that man goes*
> *Through place-keepers, through forest trees,*
> *A stranger to strangers over undried sea,*
> *Houses for fishes, suffocating water,*
> *Or lonely on fell as chat,…*
> (Auden 1976, 62)

Together with other types of spatial imagery, the sea provides the unwelcome 'suffocating' conditions for the subject's wandering. It serves as a direct opposite to the comfortable world of the dream in which "[his] head falls forward, fatigued at evening," and the home is recalled: "waving from window, spread of welcome, / Kissing of wife under single sheet" (ibid).

In these and several other early poems, the depiction of the sea shares certain characteristics. It is a place of darkness, uncontrollability, unpredictability and danger, which is positioned against the capacity, will or aim of the human being. The cause for Auden's treatment of the sea with such a consistent negativism is connected to his aforementioned preference of man-made landscapes. However, it has its base in Auden's articulated aversion towards the sea, a stance that is traceable in the personal recollections of his friends[5] and in the poet's own prose. Despite this personal detestation of the sea, the only essay that Auden wrote about topographical imagery was "The Sea and the Desert". It outlines the differences between what he calls 'Classic' and Romantic literature in terms of their divergent portrayals of the sea. According to Auden, the latter saw a seminal shift in the treatment of this type of imagery. From ancient narratives like *Ulysses* and the *Golden Fleece*, until the plays of William Shakespeare, the sea, Auden claims, functions as the "symbol for the primordial undifferentiated flux, the substance which became created nature only by having form imposed upon or wedded to it. The sea […] is that state of barbaric vagueness and disorder. […] It is so little of a friendly symbol that the first thing which the author of the Book of Revelation notices in his vision of the new heaven and earth at the end of time is that 'there was no more sea" (1976, 7).

Clearly, the way Auden interprets the treatment of the sea in 'classic literature' corresponds with his own portrayals in the early poetry. There it is also employed as a primordial shapeless chaos possessed of unbounded energy; it is a body that works as a force influencing, and for the most part inhibiting, people from reaching their goals. It is a place that symbolizes the opposite of the human world: a primitive *locus* of no history, no change or progress.

The Sea and the Mirror

The aforementioned attraction of the modernist writers to myths applies to Auden too. While in New York, he delivered a series of lectures on Shakespeare's plays (1946–1947)[6], in which he provided a definition of a

mythopoeic text: "like other mythopoeic works, *The Tempest* inspired people to go on for themselves. You can't read [such a work] without wanting to make up episodes" (2000, 297). "The Sea and the Mirror" (1942-1944) with the subtitle "A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" is Auden's own continuation and adaptation. It opens at the closing of the curtains after the performance of the play. Auden wrote the poem as a poetic essay, a collage of prose and numerous poetic forms. Its multifaceted thematic texture is dominated by the poet's life-long preoccupation with the nature and function of art including its capacity to substitute for religion, which re-emerged after the settlement in the USA. Auden's re-examination of the role of poetry in public issues was fuelled by his simultaneous 1940s conversion to Christianity and the discovery of the Kierkegaardian system of ethical, aesthetic and religious spheres of human existence.

This poem is traditionally read (e.g. Fuller 1998) as using the 'mirror' as a traditional metaphor for mimetic art (see for example Shakespeare's *Hamlet* III.II. ll. 21-22). It stands against the sea, the world of nature, whose reflection and illusion it is supposed to make. As in the 1930s poems, the poet links the sea with wilderness and stands it in opposition to art approached as belonging to the human world. However, the way Auden works with this motif in "The Sea and the Mirror" is utterly different. Firstly, it enables Prospero to depart from his island and return home to Milan. The sea is no longer portrayed as an obstacle causing suffering and wandering – it assists the magician in his aim – the return to the world of people and to the ethical realm.

More importantly, Auden used the sea to advance the main theme of the poem, which is theorizing about art. Prospero – the artist – while abandoning the island talks to Ariel, the spirit and imagination, about renouncing his art. He hopes that the sea will absorb the books, the origin and symbol of his artistry:

> *… 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*
> *Which misuses nothing because it values nothing;*
> *Whereas man overvalues everything.*
>
> (Auden 1976, 312)

Drowning the 'words' that 'carry no weight' in the human world is done in the expectation that the act will take away Prospero's superhuman

qualities and the capacity to make enchanting, yet false illusions. Partly due to his disappointment with art's inability to improve others, Prospero hopes that drowning the magic will enable him to re-enter the human life devoid of such an illusory 'device':

> *Now, Ariel, I am that I am, your late and lonely master,*
> *Who knows now that magic is: - the power to enchant*
> *That comes from disillusion…*
> (Auden 1976, 313)

Thus, he approaches the sea as an annihilative natural force that should eradicate the 'fascinating counsel' of art. The inability of the sea to make judgments – "it values nothing; / Whereas man overvalues everything" – is to facilitate a return to an ethical life and the limitations of human existence, its mortality and finitude:

> *I am glad I have freed you,*
> *So at last I can really believe I shall die.*
> *For under your influence death is inconceivable.*
> (Auden 1976, 312)

The theme of art as an ineffectual enterprise appears in several other texts from the same period. The very first poem written in America was the panegyric "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", who died in Menton, France, three days after Auden's disembarking in New York. The poem contains some of Auden's most famous lines degrading poetry to a powerless medium: "poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / In the valley of its making" (Auden 1976, 197). In an essay "The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats" from the same time, Auden restated his view in greater detail: "art is a product of history, not a cause. Unlike some other products, technical inventions for example, it does not re-enter history as an effective agent" (2002a, 7). Similarly, Prospero talks to Ariel – his spirit servant and the symbol of artistic imagination: "Are you malicious by nature? I don't know. / Perhaps only incapable of doing nothing" (Auden 1976, 314).

Yet, In "The Sea and the Mirror", art is not defined in relation to life and the ethical realm only. Caliban, the wild creature who Prospero 'educated', completes the poem with an oration to the audience:

> Having learnt his [Prospero's] language, I begin to feel something of the serio-comic embarrassment of the dedicated dramatist, who, in representing to you your

> condition of estrangement from the truth, is doomed to fail the more he succeeds, for the more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly can he indicate the truth in its order, its justice, its joy, the fainter shows his picture of your actual condition in all its drabness and sham…
>
> (Auden 1976, 339)

Caliban concludes his monologue by announcing that art and its "contrived fissures of mirror and proscenium arch" are just "feeble signs" of the "Wholly Other Life" (Auden 1976, 340). The presentation of art as unable to signify the truth, as being a poor sign of the 'wholly other life' derives from the poet's engagement with the aforementioned Kierkegaardian Christianity. In this respect, the sea functions as an entity that should absorb art and its illusory quality that stops everyone engaged from making contact with what Caliban and the Stage Manager call the 'Wholly Other Life' and 'Smiling secret', respectively:

> *Well, who in his own backyard*
> *Has not opened his heart to the smiling*
> *Secret he cannot quote?*
>
> (Auden 1976, 339)

It is obvious that the image of the sea played a very functional role in Auden's writing process and that it is a substantial feature of the poet's symbolic landscapes. Reminiscent of other modernist writers employing the same image[7], Auden tends to portray the sea in mythopoeic terms relying on its heavy symbolism. In general, Auden's adverse attitude to the sea is related to his personal preferences for manmade places with history. Yet, while in the early works it stands out as a force that inhibits people from their intentions and goals through its uncontrollability and life-threatening brutality, his later poetry, written in the 1940s and later, takes advantage of such qualities. The sea 'assists' mankind in reaching their ambitions, in becoming human and in living inside the ethical sphere. What Auden wrote in "The Sea and the Desert" about the Romantic use of the sea was that the sea "is where the decisive events, the moments of eternal choice, of temptation, fall, and redemption occur. The shore life is always trivial" (Auden 1967, 13). Clearly, Auden's own employment of the sea in "The Sea and the Mirror" marginally resembles such an approach.

Notes

1. Held at Penn State University, State College, PA, October 7 - 10, 1999.
2. The term is commonly but wrongly attributed to a contemporary environmental critic Yi-Fu Tuan who used the term in his 1974 book *Topophilia: a study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values*.
3. See for example: Sharpe 2007. 67-68.
4. A very detailed account of this aspect of Auden's work is: Jones, Chris. "Auden and 'Barbaric Poetry of the North'." *Strange Likeness: The Use of Old English in Twentieth Century Poetry.* Oxford: OUP, 2006. 68-122.
5. C. Isherwood admits in his "Some Notes on Auden's Early Poetry" that Auden perceived the sea as a formless entity (13).
6. Auden's notes were completely lost. The texts of the lectures were reconstructed and published by Arthur Kirsch, who used students' notes.
7. See for example Kozak, 2005.

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