Feet on the Ground: W.H. Auden's Late Landscapes

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Abstract
This paper focuses on the concept of landscape in the post-war poetry of W.H. Auden. Its aim is to define the nature of changes from Auden's earlier poetry. By the 1950s the dynamism and vehemence of Auden's ideological quest had substantially withered. While some of his poetic landscapes from this period refer to particular geographical locations, they remain sites for the poet's grappling with issues that are placeless, borderless and common to man regardless of his environment and specific culture. What disappears, however, is the desire for escape from one place to another – the hallmark of Auden's early poetry.

Keywords
W.H. Auden, landscape, place, history, nature, culture

W.H. Auden's formal virtuosity along with the intellectual diversity of his poetry has ensured much critical attention. While of some concern to most critics, analyses of the former aspects do not present the main weight of extant criticism. Since Francis Scarfe in his pioneer study (1942) called Auden's poetry "a clearing-house for modern psychology and social doctrine,"[1] scholars have centred upon the poet's ethical views and gauged the impact on his poetry of his personal engagement with modern psychology as well as political and theological systems of thought. Essential as such issues are, there are other forces active in shaping Auden's poetry before the 1950s that have received much less critical attention. One of the words that characterizes his life in this period is 'search': along with Freud, Lawrence, Marx and Kierkegaard in the realm of ideology, there are Hardy, Thomas, Eliot, and Yeats in the sphere of aesthetics and England, New York, Forio and Kirchstetten as different places of residence. Beginning to acknowledge Auden's acute spatial awareness and profound intellectual and emotional interaction with the physical environment, critics have recently started to assess Auden's engagement in poetry with local cultures, specific places and the relation between the poet's ideological development, concurring shifts of residence and poetic landscapes.

In this paper, I will draw attention to selected poems dating from the late 1940s and 1950s in order to examine Auden's use of landscape imagery. Edward Mendelson has claimed that "by the summer of 1939 Auden had stopped writing poems about places, and he turned his attention instead to time."[2] While it is possible to agree with the latter part of this claim, I will argue that Auden's poetry was even after 1939 profoundly concerned with places, admittedly in ways markedly different but by no means less significant or frequent. I will claim that the change consists in a partial replacement of geographically indefinite spaces, a signature feature of his 1930s landscape construction, with references to concrete places of Auden's residence or travel destinations. Yet I will also argue that his increasing focus on particular locations does not entail the abandonment of the previously established tendency to construct generic landscapes. Auden tends to classicize his spatial images, depersonalize concrete places and displace their local

1 Francis Scarfe, *Auden and After: The Liberation of Poetry 1930-1941* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1942), 11.

2 Edward Mendelson, preface to *The English Auden*, by Wystan Hugh Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), XX.

identities mainly through their employment in his efforts to grapple with the 'nature/culture' dichotomy, for which the unplaceable landscapes of the 1930s poetry served so well. What also remains is his preoccupation with the human desire to escape from the clutches of disquieting existence in the latter – the man-made environment. At the same time, I will show that this longing becomes the new object of Auden's explicit critique, with such attempts now condemned and subjugated to a humble acceptance of insurmountable existence in the realm of the humanized landscape, culture and imperfect Becoming.

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Justin Replogle once noted that Auden's "intellectual search ended in the 1940's; the 1950's and 1960's celebrate what has been found: that life is blessed."[3] Indeed, during this decade, Auden's previous anxiety caused by a constant search for a satisfactory ideological domain evolved into intellectual ripeness and stability derived mainly from his discovery of Kierkegaardian Christian existentialism. Yet Auden himself felt that there were other breaking points in his life. In the "Foreword" to the second edition of his *Collected Poems* in 1966, the almost sixty-year old poet looked back and explained his reasons for avoiding, in the first edition of 1944, a historical perspective by arranging his poems in an alphabetical order:

> At the age of thirty-seven I was still too young to have any sure sense of the direction in which I was moving, and I did not wish critics to waste their time, and mislead readers, making guesses about it which would almost certainly turn out to be wrong.[4]

His 1966 collection retains a sense of division, yet its essence is different. This time the poems are arranged chronologically into four sections, each reflecting what he himself called a "new chapter in my life."[5] In all cases the occasions for opening such new chapters coincide with moments when Auden changed his place of residence: the first ends with his emigration to the USA in 1939, the second with his move to Ischia in 1948, and the third in 1958, when Auden moved to Kirchstetten in Austria. The beginnings of perhaps the most interesting and substantial change in the construction of Auden's landscapes are felt towards the end of his New York days in the late 1940s. Until this moment Auden's landscape 'architecture' consisted in a tendency towards constructing reductive dialectical spaces. In poems from this period, mountains stand against valleys and the land against the sea, which involves, by necessity, transitory 'in-between' places (thresholds, divisions, borders, etc.). This allowed Auden to plant his speakers into the position of trespassing or, on the contrary, failing to enter a new, better and wished-for territory. There the focus is, more or less without exception, on the desire to escape the present state, which entails choice making or guilt springing from the failure to act. As a result, the reader is almost invariably forced into geographically vague, placeless and symbolic landscapes filled with items of an almost archetypal, timeless and ahistoric value.

Towards the end of the 1940s, however, this pattern started to change and became fully recognizable in the course of the following two decades – the last and the most

3 Justin Replogle, *Auden's Poetry* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1969), 89.

4 Wystan Hugh Auden, foreword to *W.H. Auden – Collected Poems*, by Wystan Hugh Auden (New York: Random House, 1976), 15.

5 Auden, *W.H. Auden – Collected Poems*, 16.

intellectually stable years of Auden's career. Chronologically, this shift corresponds with a series of long-term (originally only summer) stays in Europe, first in the Mediterranean – in Forio in Ischia – and beginning with 1958 in the small town of Kirchstetten, not far from Vienna. For a poet well read in the Classics and philosophy, one might imagine that European landscape, so rich with historical resonance, would make itself felt in his verse.

Moreover, as a prolific prose writer as well (of travel writing, too), in 1948 Auden coined the term 'Topophilia' to express the sensitive attitude to a historicized landscape and a personal fondness of particular places shaped by human work. The use of the word 'attack' in the following quotation reveals Auden's sense of humour when thinking about this as a medical affliction:

> A few general remarks about topophilia may […] be in order here since, so far as I know, it rarely attacks professional poets in this country [USA]. Topophilia differs from the farmer's love of his home soil and the litterateur's fussy regional patriotism in that it is not possessive or limited to any one locality; the practiced topophil can operate in a district he has never visited before. On the other hand, it has little in common with nature love. Wild or unhumanised nature holds no charms for the average topophil because it is lacking in history.[6]

Auden considered himself a topophil and frequently eulogized the work of, for instance, Thomas Hardy and John Betjeman for their topophilic qualities allowing them to render the uniqueness of particular locations in their writing.

Auden had the capacity to write a poem attempting to capture and praise local specificity. His eulogistic approach to the Italian landscape in "Ischia" from 1948 is an example:

> …my thanks are for you,
> Ischia, to whom a fair wind has
> brought me rejoicing with dear friends
>
> from soiled productive cities.
> …
> you offer a reason to sit down ; tasting what bees
> from blossoming chestnut
> or short but shapely dark-haired men
>
> from the aragonian grape distil, your amber wine,
> your coffee-coloured honey …[7]

These lines read like a topophilic praise of the island. However, here Auden is being not genuine. Examined in the context of Auden's other poems from the period and in light of his general anti-romantic stance, what is disturbing about "Ischia" is its idyllic tone. This encomium is delivered in a vivid non-Audenesque rhetoric tending towards almost provocative and mocking glorification of the island for its therapeutic

6 The coinage of this term has been incorrectly ascribed to the humanistic geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, who published a book titled *Topophilia* in 1974. Auden had used the phrase in his 1948 review of J. Betjeman's poetry "*Slick but not Streamlined*". See Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume II: 1939-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 303–07.

7 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 416-17.

powers and pastoral qualities. John Fuller's comment that the poem was written as a literary response to Brian Howard's accusation of Auden as a poet incapable of writing a visually appealing scene seems appropriate.[8] Whether mocking or serious, the poem does construct a particular idyllic landscape. If Dr. Johnson's definition of topographical poetry as "local poetry, of which the fundamental subject is some particular landscape, to be poetically described, with the addition of such embellishments as may be supplied by historical introspection or incidental meditation"[9] is to be taken as a benchmark, a substantial part of Auden's "Ischia" is a rare and somewhat intrusive specimen of this type among other more defining characteristics of Auden's use of spatial imagery.

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Most poetry from this period that is conscious of places is very different. As in the 1930s, some post-war poems contain landscape features so vaguely defined that they verge becoming types (e.g. lakes, mountains, or plains in *Bucolics*, recorded in 1953). At he same time, what strikes one about the post-1940s poetry is the immense and previously absent 'repertoire' of locatable places ranging from vast vistas to private rooms. *About the House* (1965 USA, 1966 UK), for instance, contains poems of what might be called a celebrative 'guided tour' through the attic, cellar and kitchen in Auden's small house in Kirchstetten, the first property he owned. In view of the immense scale of the ethical concerns and landscapes of the earlier poetry, such a detailed focus on small-scale private space and existence is rather unique – Auden's pre-1950s poems hardly ever deal with closed spaces and rooms.[10] In addition, the poems from after 1948 present an unprecedented myriad of different landscapes and places gathered from various geographical and cultural locations. Auden writes of Italy, New York, Kirchstetten; his imagination revisits the Pennine landscape. However, unlike "Ischia" and a few other exceptions, such poems reveal a very little effort to pay tribute to the *genius loci* of the historicized Italian and Austrian landscapes.

On the contrary, most poems are conducted under the rubric of an intellectual stance characterised by Auden's consistent effort to depersonalize places, subdue their local uniqueness and obfuscate those features that would turn the landscapes into products of specific cultural frameworks. The extent and clarity of engagement with local particularity are clouded by the force of Auden's tendency to approach concrete places as synecdochic examples which manifest issues with a general historical and geographical validity transcending local or contemporary problems. Auden achieves such results by maintaining the distance and what he called 'hawk's vision'[11]. He learned this from Thomas Hardy, his early influence, and used it so successfully in *The Orators* (1932) and in other poems from the 1930s (e.g. "The Watershed", 1927). Auden's post-war speakers almost unerringly find themselves in extreme positions: in rooms or, much more frequently, in a great distance from the landscape. "Ode to Gaea" (1954) uses such a bird-eye perspective:

8 John Fuller, *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 413.

9 Samuel Johnson, *Johnson's Lives of the Poets, vol. I*, 1789, ed. Alexander Napier (London: George Bell & Sons, 1890), 84-85, *Internet Archive*, n.d. Accessed 22 September, 2014. http://www.archive.org/details/ johnsons-livespo02napigoog.

10 When interior space does appear, it is used as a viewpoint towards the outside. An example is "A Happy New Year" (Part II), 1932.

11 Wystan Hugh Auden, "A Literary Transference," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume II: 1939-1948*, 46-47.

From this new culture of the air we finally see,
Far-shining in excellence, what our mother, the
nicest daughter of Chaos, would
admire could she look in a glass,

and what, in her eyes, is natural…[12]

The poem continues to elaborate an image of the Earth as seen from an aeroplane in a spring season of nourishment and renewed life. Delivered in an exalting voice of praise largely absent in his earlier poetic 'topography', this all-embracing portrait of the natural world celebrates cyclical time, liveliness and pleasure gained from life *as it is*.

However, after the initial stanzas, the panoramic aerial view is abandoned by 'zooming in' on a man-made road - the cultured world produced by human desire for change:

…two lines of moss
show where the Devil's Causeway
drew pilgrims thirteen gods ago,

and on this eve of whispers and tapped telephones
before the Ninth Catastrophe, square corner-stones
still distinguish a fortress
of the High Kings from untutored rock.

Tempting to mortals is the fancy of half-concerned
Gods in the sky…[13]

These lines provide a good example of a pattern detectable in a large portion of Auden's post-1940s poetry: a clear reference to a particular historical site, here Devil's Causeway, the Roman road in Northumberland. Yet Auden's earlier inclination towards constructing dialectical structures is preserved. He uses the hawk's aerial view for turning the concrete image into a replaceable type. On the one hand, there is the world of nature with its own mechanisms, rules and temporal cyclicity. On the other, there are the roads and fortresses made by man in his struggle to transcend the limitations of the disquieting present condition and to progress to a better life in the future. However, the lines of moss and square corner-stones remain but obsolete and vanquished relics of man's repetitive attempts to arrive at what Auden called 'Good Life' – life without desire and suffering.

In the post-war period Auden began to think of such efforts in terms of futility. In "Ode to Gaea" he concludes that "to Her [Nature], the real one, can our good landscapes be but lies."[14] The realms of nature and history-making man are positioned dialectically one against the other. They are kept apart by the disinterest of the former in man's endless struggle for the attainment of a utopian existential environment - "the good landscapes". As John Fuller notes, "Gaia becomes unapproachable and finds

12 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 423.

13 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 424.

14 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 425.

human ideals irrelevant."[15] In this poem, Auden actually broadens the gap by pointing towards the unknowability of the Earth and her total indifference to man:

> Now that we know how she looks, she seems more mysterious
> than when, in her partibus infidelibus,
> we painted sizzling dragons
> and wizards reading upside down,
>
> but less approachable: where she joins girl's-ear lakes
> to bird's-foot deltas with lead-blue squiggles she makes,
> surely, a value judgement,
> 'of pure things water is the best,'…[16]

Auden here debunks wishful thinking about the caring protectiveness of the Mother Earth. He juxtaposes man's romanticized metaphorical, ornamental rhetoric and speculative tendencies: "she makes,/ *surely*, a value judgement" with the simple language of nature: "of pure things water is the best". This laconic response to man's laudatory remarks implies the unapproachability of a nature oblivious to human presence and compliments. Thus Auden reiterates almost verbatim his 1930s views of nature as a source of merciless impersonal forces ignoring and crushing human desires.[17]

This type of irreducible dialectical opposition between culture and nature forms the main contours of Auden's poetic landscapes in the period following the late 1940s. In some poems the presence of nature is less explicit and the emphasis on the gulf between the natural and man-made spaces displayed in "Ode to Gaea" is overshadowed by an obvious focus on historicized landscapes bearing traces of human existence. This is, for instance, the case of "Memorial for the City" (1949) and *Bucolics* (1952-1953). The record sleeve of the latter bears Auden's inscription summarizing this type of atmosphere in the post-1940s landscapes. Auden writes that the poems deal with "the relation of man as a history-making person to nature."[18]

In the post-war years, Auden placed the bulk of his attention on the humanized landscape and the human figure in it. Justin Replogle observes that Auden in this period often criticized people who were trying to explain and change history, "the ones whose eagerness to change and rule the world promotes their dreams of a New Jerusalem."[19] It is obvious from even a cursory look at the titles of post-war poems that Auden's 1930s critique of political discourse gradually transformed into oppositional views of other forms of control and expansion of human knowledge: "The Managers" (1948), "Makers of History" (1955), "The History of Science" (1955) or "The History of Truth" (1958). An interesting and explicit summary of this somewhat post-modern concern with power and knowledge can be found in "After Reading a Child's Guide to Modern Physics" (1961):

15 Fuller, *W.H. Auden: A Commentary*, 456.

16 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 424. Emphasis added.

17 Early signs of this attitude are already in several poems from the inter-war period, especially in the verse sections of *Letters from Iceland* (1937). "Death's Echo", for instance, has different figures pronounce their desires and hopes, but all are undercut by the speech of Death, oblivious to all human pleas.

18 In Fuller, *W.H. Auden: A Commentary*, 443.

19 Replogle, *Auden's Poetry*, 88.

This passion of our kind
For the process of finding out
Is a fact one can hardly doubt,
But I would rejoice in it more
If I knew more clearly what
We wanted the knowledge for…[20]

This type of critique of man's ontological expansionism is also a feature of a large majority of the Auden poems that involve landscapes and places under focus in this paper. As shown, "Ode to Gaea" too challenges the benefits of scientific progress, namely the air travel and the aerial views it offers: "Now that we know how she [the Earth] looks, she seems more mysterious […] but less approachable." Several other late poems from the early 1970s (e.g. "Progress?", "Curse", "Archeology") still brim with such suspicions about the benefits of scientific advancement and the seemingly ground-breaking steps being taken by the contemporary man. One such large leap for mankind was made in 1969 by landing on the Moon, but Auden's reflection on the event lacks an exhilarating tone:

Worth going to see? I can well believe it.
Worth seeing? Mneh! I once rode through a desert
and was not charmed: give me a watered
lively garden,…

Our apparatniks will continue making
The usual squalid mess called History…21

However, it is essential that Auden's sceptical attitude to human progress and his polarization of nature and the world of man as a 'history-making person' not be misread as a nostalgic expression of Romantic fallacy. Nor should it be interpreted as a facile attempt of a sentimental poet to promote escapism through the superiority of nature. Both options would have been too shallow for Auden, who preferred historicized landscape and had a very consistent negative view of the Romantics, especially Wordsworth, already by the 1920s.[22] On the contrary, as I hope to illustrate in the following section, most landscape poems promote an ordinary and temperate life in which existential limitations are accepted *within* a historicized landscape *as it is*. After 1950, this became the only landscape worth celebrating.

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The expansive 'prospect', reminiscent of the early 'hawk vision', is clearly linked with what Auden imagined to be the common, non-localized human struggle to surpass the present state of mankind. "Ode to Gaea" as a whole and especially the lines "roofs for some great cathedrals", "waterproof linings for coffins" gathered by people from the lead mines in "Not in Baedeker"[23] (1949) are but a few of examples of landscapes 'littered'

20 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 557.

21 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 633.

22 See, for example, Auden's essay "Noble Savage" or parts of *Letter to Lord Byron*.

23 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 420.

with cultural monuments evidencing human 'historicizing' but ineffective desire to overcome the shortcomings of imperfect post-lapsarian existence.

Particularly indicative of Auden's post-war tendency to wrestle with these global concerns while subduing local uniqueness is the way the limestone landscape of the Northern Pennines is treated. He referred to it elsewhere in terms of an unmatched embodiment of his idea of Eden.[24] Yet, in his later poems the area loses such qualities to such an extent that it serves merely as a means of blurring the differences between Italy and England, their cultures and histories. Looking back in 1971, Auden admitted that "the limestone landscape was important to me as a link between two utterly different cultures, the northern guilt culture, I grew up in, and the shame culture of the Mediterranean countries."[25] As the first poem written in Italy (Florence) before arriving in Ischia, Auden's "In Praise of Limestone" (May 1948) is a fine example of this blurring rather than differentiation between the two cultures. With regard to its title, it is of importance that the poem was written after Auden's arrival from a visit to his father, at the time living in a holiday cottage in a small village near Threlkeld, some twenty-five miles southwest of Alston village - the centre of the poet's life-long limestone paradise in the Pennines. The poem is so thematically vague that even many of the finest Auden critics debate interpretations of it.[26] At the same time, it is a wonderful example of Auden's synthesizing poetics of place and his 'landscape syncretism'.

In this poem Auden once again inscribes in the English and Italian limestone landscapes issues that are general and global. The English and Italian scenes intermingle with such subtlety that the transition from one to the other is sometimes imperceptible. Justin Quinn in a recent reading of the poem notes that, although knowledgeable on the subject of local history and geography, Auden "bleaches that particularity in order to make the limestone landscape more generic, more exchangeable with 'Anywhere you like, somewhere / on broad-chested life-giving Earth.'"[27] Auden's bleaching results in a greater 'visibility' of commonalities rather than differences between the two places and cultures. Like in "Not in Baedeker", Auden gives examples of the transformation of limestone, presented as a natural "wild" material and "weathered outcrop", into different man-made religious, practical and pleasurable products. Besides "temples", "fountains" and "formal vineyards", he writes of historical sites

> Where something was settled once and for all: A backward
> And dilapidated province, connected
> To the big busy world by a tunnel, with a certain
> Seedy appeal, is that all it is now? Not quite:

24 See, for example, Auden's essay "Reading" in *Dyer's Hand* (1962) based on Auden's Oxford lectures.

25 Wystan Hugh Auden, "Phantasy and Reality in Poetry," in *In Solitude for Company: Auden after 1940*, ed. Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (New York: OUP, 1995), 193. There is in Auden's poetry an indisputable concern for the 'guilt' and 'shame' issues linked to the recent radicalism of Italian politics as well as to its Christian past. Katherine Bucknell points out that Auden crossed out the words 'protestant' and 'Catholic' originally placed before the words 'guilt' and 'shame', respectively (Auden, "Phantasy and Reality in Poetry", 193n).

26 See, for example, John Fuller's article "Writing Auden's Commentary." *Auden Society*, n.d. Accessed 19 April, 2010. http://www.audensociety.org/14newsletter.html.

27 Justin Quinn, "On Audenstrasse," unpublished essay. Quinn's inserted quotation is from Auden's "Horae Canonicae" (1952).

It has a worldly duty which in spite of itself
It does not neglect, but calls into question
All the Great Powers assume; it disturbs our rights.28

The historical site referred to in this quotation as "connected / To the big busy world by a tunnel" is undoubtedly the medieval Castello Aragonese, Ischia, accessible through this type of a passageway. Yet its particularity is further suppressed, which gives it the air of being any place capable of reminding us anew of a moment when things were not "settled once and for all". It looks neglected and its dilapidated façade "calls into question[s]/All the Great Powers assume". In other words, to his poetic inventory of man-made artefacts, Auden in this poem adds another concrete exemplar evidencing general human futility of ceaseless attempts to surpass the limitations of our imperfect existence.

Besides this, the centre of the poem has its own atmosphere because Auden focuses on people living in the limestone landscapes. This is so because he did not only imagine limestone as a hyphen between two or more disparate cultures. From the very beginning of the poem strong and explicit parallels are also drawn between this type of environment and man. Both share their "inconstant" character as well as contrast between surface façade and the underground complexity. In this connection, Auden in this poem provides a judgement which attenuates the seemingly critical attitude to mankind mentioned previously: "accustomed to a stone that responds," the inhabitants of limestone landscapes "have never had to veil their faces in awe / Of a crater whose blazing fury could not be fixed…"[29] Limestone "responds" because it is malleable and can easily be shaped by the human hand (as opposed to gravel or granite). It records human being in the world because it can be turned into statues, fountains; it is important for growing vine. It is light and moderate like human existence devoid of fear and the need to "veil […] faces in awe". Auden further claims that this landscape is not suitable for those who crave for change, for a break from the ordinary life and its cyclical *status quo*. Such characters, the poem suggests, must seek "immoderate soils where beauty was not external."[30] Thus Auden in this poem abandons the English or Italian limestone regions for the sake of discoursing on the need of moderation.

In 1965, seventeen years after "In Praise of Limestone", Auden summarized his view of the character of the limestone landscape in "Amor Loci". Its common interpretation as a love lyric about Kallman's betrayal and the hardship of building a real love relationship cannot be easily disputed. The poem opens with a very affirmative voice of familiarity with the lead-mining aspects of the limestone landscape. After his typical inventory of items that constitute the history of the place, Auden introduces a 'Mr. Pleasure', a figure redolent of morality types, whose shallow-minded material nature responsible for the relics has no emotional relation to the landscape. Auden thus recalls a common 1930s situation of his poetic figures who were barred from 'entering' a place because they were strangers (e.g. "The Watershed", 1927). "*To me, though,*" the poem continues, the landscape offers

28 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 415.

29 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 415.

30 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 415.

much: a vision,
not (as perhaps at
twelve I thought it) of Eden,
still less of a New
Jerusalem but, for one,
convinced he will die,
more comely, more credible
than either day-dream.

How, but with some real focus of desolation
could I, by analogy,
imagine a love
that, however often smeared,
shrugged at, abandoned
by a frivolous wordling,
does not abandon?31

Once again, the landscape of the Northern Pennines becomes an analogy to what Auden thought was the general nature of human love – full of faults which is inconstant, difficult to find and maintain. Also, the process of a personal growth from the idealizing nature of childhood imagination to the realization of the imperfect nature of true love is presented as a statement that applies to man in general. The landscape, while littered with visible historical signs of human existence, is now a place spared from man's ambitious desire to progress towards improvement vivid elsewhere. Drawing attention to its disuse is a way of imagining the ephemerality of any struggle and of the limitedness of the human effort and life. The limestone landscape thus becomes a tangible manifestation of Auden's post-war idea of man's healthy existence: our being in the world should be soft, moderate and without excesses; it should take place in the actual 'landscape' and lifespace full of relics of the past.

This is no defeatism. Auden's early imagining of limestone landscape as Edenic is replaced by blessedness derived from its unmatched capacity to represent human acceptance of a moderate and limited existence. With external beauty, character imperfections and capacity to supply material that can be shaped into relics of human being in the world, the limestone landscape is more "comely, more credible" than the eager struggle and "day dream" of Eden and New Jerusalem. In the 1930s, Auden flooded his poems with speakers possessed by such utopian dreams. They were anxious to escape from their historicized landscape – to get across borders, thresholds and obstacles, an attitude which stood for their courage to make a personal and history-making decision leading up to the arrival in a purer and superior space imagined in terms of nature, islands or faraway places (e.g. "Have a Good Time", 1931 or "Dover", 1937). What is still heard in "Ischia", "In Praise of Limestone" and elsewhere in the post-war poetry is Auden's life-long topophilic predilection for man-made landscapes teeming with history. Yet instead of the previous ever-present tendency of speakers to escape from it, Auden's idea of a good place and life becomes that which exists now and is full of material relics of a human struggle to transcend its imperfections.

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31 Auden, *W.H. Auden - Collected Poems*, 585-586.

In his first substantial essay "Writing" (1932) Auden wrote: "the novelist […] goes from the general to the particular, the poet from the particular to the general, and you can see this also in the way they use words."[32] An analysis of Auden's post-war engagement with the cultures of southern Europe shows that his poetic landscapes are informed by similar politics of representation.

Several poems from this period and central to his canon respond to particular locations, yet they do not enunciate local uniqueness nor serve local issues. Auden's imaginative dynamic consists in a systematic tendency to efface local singularity and universalize the experience of a specific external detail by seeing it in a borderless analogy with others. Auden's speakers gain distance and view places from the air, which allows the poet to transcend and synthesize the locations with the surrounding space. In the poems analyzed above, Auden tends to level out local specificity by means of finding similarities between different places or by correlating the particular and fleeting with the placeless and the universal. He focuses on what places share or he treats them as concrete manifestations of large supra-regional and even supra-temporal issues. As illustrated in my analysis of "In Praise of Limestone", the most common tendency is to reduce local man-made and non-carpentered details into images of the traditional and locally unspecific 'culture/nature' dichotomy.

Auden employs such a syncretic and universalizing approach to landscape because he finds in places a means of discoursing upon man and general ethical issues. Auden admired Rainer Maria Rilke for developing a style refraining from pathetic fallacy. In an essay "Rilke in English" (1939) he claims: "One of the constant problems of the poet is how to express abstract ideas in concrete terms. The Elizabethans solved it for their generation by an anthropomorphic identification." Auden goes on to praise Rilke for finding a fresh alternative. He concludes that while Shakespeare "thought of the nonhuman world in terms of the human, Rilke thinks of the human in terms of the non--human, of what he calls Things. … One of Rilke's most characteristic devices is the expression of human life in terms of landscape."[33] The poems analyzed in this paper display a similar approach. The limestone in "In Praise of Limestone", the Devil's Causeway in "Ode to Gaea" and other man-made objects in his poetic landscapes are a means of imagining an essential trait of human existence. They are approached as symbols and material memories of a general yet fruitless anxiety of man to change the course of history in search of what Auden termed 'the Good Life'. In a namesake essay of 1935, he claims:

> Man is an organism with certain desires existing in an environment which fails to satisfy them fully. His theories about the universe are attempts, whether religious, scientific, philosophical, or political, to explain or overcome this tension.[34]

The above analysis shows that by the 1950s Auden deemed such desires futile. He rejected attempts to soothe the anxiety and tension by advocating humble existence in a place *as it is* – a place with traces of the past occupied by moderate inhabitants, not a place *as it should be* envisioned by eager idealists.

32 Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden, Volume I, Prose 1926-1938*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 20.

33 Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose, Volume II: 1939-1948*, 26.

34 Auden, *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden, Volume I, Prose 1926-1938*, 109.

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