Landscape as a Benchmark: Poetics of Place as a Critical Tool in W.H. Auden's Prose

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Abstract

W.H. Auden had a profound and clearly defined spatial awareness. As an editor of anthologies, Professor of Poetry at Oxford and author of essays, reviews, forewords and introductions, he was also prolific in the profession of a literary critic judging the work of others. This paper traces the connections between these two facets, with a special emphasis on Auden's readiness to use other writers' topophilic responsiveness to the physical environment and landscape as a benchmark for assessing their qualities. Focusing on Auden's critical assessment of Wordsworth, Frost, Betjeman and Rilke on the basis of their poetics of place, the present study examines Auden's implementation of this criterion in his critical method.

Keywords

W.H. Auden, poetics of place, landscape, topophilia, criticism, William Wordsworth, Robert Frost

Auden's fame rests on poetry. Within a few years of the publication of his debut volume *Poems* (1930), his poems began to draw exceptional critical attention from his contemporaries and scholars. Since then, the amount and variety of criticism scrutinizing Auden's technically accomplished verse from an impressive array of perspectives has grown steadily. This weight has, however, somewhat overshadowed Auden's prose. Apart from a handful of article-length studies and with the exception of scholars approaching Auden's prose as a means of reading his poetry, the body of his more than seven thousand pages of critical writing remains largely unexplored.

Its rigour and variety corroborate Auden's reputation as an omnivorous reader. His essays, lectures, forewords and commentaries display erudite views on politics, psychology, culture and architecture as well as education and technology. Auden's prose evinces his stature as a formidable critic. Especially through his American years following his 1939 emigration to the USA, Auden gained respect as an assessor of both established and young poetic voices. The range was profound. He lectured and wrote on Shakespeare and the Romantics and published on Alexander Pope, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, Robert Frost, Rainer Maria Rilke and others. Gradually, his voice gained the power to launch and influence poets such as Joseph Brodsky and John Ashbery, respectively.[1]

His critical method was somewhat idiosyncratic. One of his recurrent critical criteria reflects his exceptional personal fondness for landscape, places and human spatial experience. Such a centrality of the spatial aspects of a literary work derives from Auden's exceptional intellectual and emotional interest in places, landscapes and the physical environment. Auden knew that among his maternal ancestors and relations through marriage was the landscape painter John Constable.[2] He himself wrote several ekphrastic poems responding to oil landscapes by Pieter Brueghel and Giovanni Bellini. His prose and poetry make references to, and provide commentaries upon, the

1 See, for example, Ian Samson, "Auden and Influence," in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: CUP, 2004), 226–239.

2 Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1995), 7–8.

visual imagination of Salvator Rosa, Nicolas Poussin and others. While his maternal lineage provided Auden with a distinguished background, a more immediate impact on Auden's exquisite spatial responsiveness seems to have come from his father Dr. Augustus Auden, who held a first-class Cambridge degree in natural sciences, published in *Nature* on geology, and, through expeditions to the former lead-mining regions of the Northern Pennines, ignited in his son a fascination with the earth and landscapes even in early childhood. The father nurtured his son's fondness to such a degree that when W.H. Auden came to Oxford in 1925, it was with the intention of pursuing a career in mining and engineering. Despite the fact that he became a poet, Auden's prose and poetry show that he remained loyal to his childhood experience and penchant for places. Through his life he travelled widely and wrote travel books on China, Iceland and other countries. He wrote about his topophilic affection for the Pennines and Iceland, calling them his sacred places. In his lectures he assessed the difference between Classical and Romantic poets through their different treatment of the sea, islands and other topoi.[3] And he elevated writers' responsiveness to the physical environment, their rendering of the relation between man and landscape in prose or poetry, into a benchmark which he used to assess the quality of even some of the major poets within the Anglo-American literary tradition. This paper examines Auden's use of other writers' poetics of place as a means for the critical assessment of their work.

A clue to Auden's idiosyncratic approach is to be found in a lecture he gave in 1956. In 1928, Auden left Oxford University with only a third-class degree and no poem published. However, in the following thirty years, he gradually grew into a recognized poet of international renown. A symbolic act denoting such recognition came in June 1956, when Auden returned to his *Alma Mater* in order to deliver an inaugural lecture on the occasion of becoming Oxford Professor of Poetry.

Fittingly, Auden titled his speech "Making, Knowing and Judging". Aged fifty, the man at the lectern was an experienced "maker" of poetry. Nevertheless, to the distinguished audience of Oxford dons he revealed an anxiety about his new duty to *profess* poetry, which, as the title of the lecture implies, he understood as a skill combining the *knowledge* of the work of others and its critical *judgement*. Although modest about his abilities and experience, as a reviewer since the 1930s and as a lecturer at American schools since the early 1940s, Auden had frequently practised critical assessment of other poets and prose writers, thereby attaining an impressive knowledge of their poetics. This practice allowed him to formulate and spell out his critical method. When examining a poem, he told the dons, the critic should always attend to two aspects of the text under examination:

> […] the questions which interest me most when reading a poem are two. The first is technical: "Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?" The second is, in the broadest sense, moral: "What kind of a guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or *the good place*? His notion of the Evil One? What does he conceal from the reader? What does he conceal even from himself?"[4]

Auden's critical prose does indeed confirm this view. His reviews and introductions often assess the formal qualities of poetry, perhaps because Auden's own formal virtuosity ranges from Anglo-Saxon

3 See Wystan Hugh Auden, *The Enchafèd Flood, Or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea* (1950, New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

4 Wystan Hugh Auden, "Making, Knowing and Judging," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose 1956–1962 (vol. IV),* ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 490, emphasis added.

prosody, through classicist poetics, to modernist experimentalism. Frequent though the assessment of such issues is, the major weight of Auden's criticism falls on the other question – the moral aspects of the work. Auden often evaluates poets on the basis of their moral standards, ideas and assumptions about culture, politics and history.

As explicitly stated in the quotation above, to understand the moral stance of an author, to find an answer to the question "What kind of a guy inhabits this poem?", Auden inquires into the poets' notion of places. This is most obvious when he assesses poets on the occasion of their introduction in a foreign country. Introducing a poet to a new culture was a task which Auden always took very seriously. In his Prefaces and Introductions, he usually adopts the position of an intercultural mediator eager to make the reception of the poet's work smooth and comprehensible. To do so, his focus falls on their poetics of place. A solid example is provided by his assessment of John Betjeman's and Robert Frost's poetry on their introduction to American and British readers, respectively.

In 1946, seven years after his emigration to the USA, Auden became an American citizen. In the same year he decided to compile the first edition of John Betjeman's poetry in America. Since the 1920s, when the two met at Oxford, Auden had held Betjeman in the highest esteem. He was convinced that Betjeman's merit lay in his engagement with the English landscape. At the same time, he was worried that its specificity, as well as Betjeman's poetics, were so alien to American readers that they might easily misunderstand his poetics. In 1959, he recalled this apprehension: "Mr Betjeman's poetic universe […] is so British that when I first began introducing his poems to American friends, I was afraid that they might not be able to make head or tail of them."[5] This anxiety in Auden's reminiscence echoes the diction of his 1946 Introduction, in which he confesses his own admiration for Betjeman's specific engagement with provincial and rural England. It sprang from his conviction that Betjeman's work is a rare specimen of poetry marked with topophilia, which, he held, was a type of aptitude virtually unknown to American readers, yet essential for avoiding misinterpretation, and thus in need of clarification:

> It is difficult to write seriously and judiciously about a poet whose work makes one violently jealous. When I read lines like 'while wet fields reek like some long empty church' I am, frankly, annoyed because they are not by me. Because of all this, it is quite impossible for me to bore the reader with a serious critical introduction to Mr Betjeman's work. […] A few general remarks about topophilia may, however, be in order here since, so far as I know, it rarely attacks professional poets in this country.[6]

Because of this asserted merit of Betjeman's verse and its alleged absence in the USA, Auden dedicated most of his essay to telling American readers what topophilia is, how it forms the linchpin of Betjeman's verse and why they should appreciate it. In 1974, the Chinese humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan defined topophilia as a positive "affective bond between people and place or setting", a sentiment most commonly coupled with one's habitat in consequence of contentment

5 Wystan Hugh Auden, "John Betjeman's Poetic Universe," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose 1956–1962 (vol. IV),* ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 220.

6 Wystan Hugh Auden, "Introduction to *Slick but Not Streamlined*, by John Betjeman," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose 1939–1948 (vol. II),* ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 304.

with its capacity to provide 'homeness' – conditions for physical and spiritual wellbeing.[7] Auden's understanding is more restrictive than Tuan's in that he specifies types of places that can trigger topophilic sentiments. In preparation for praising Betjeman's work, he proceeds through negations in order to suggest what topophilia is not: "Topophilia differs from the farmer's love of his home soil and the litterateur's fussy regional patriotism […]. On the other hand it has little in common with nature love. Wild or unhumanised nature holds no charms for the average topophile because it is lacking in history."[8]

Auden viewed Betjeman's poetics of place admiringly for two reasons. First, Betjeman's focus on local English churches, teashops and railway architecture, hence historicized landscapes replete with signs of human dwelling, flattered his own predilection for the Pennine region, dappled with constructional remains evidencing the former presence of lead-mining activity. Second, Auden admired what he viewed as the genuineness of Betjeman's treatment of such places, spared from any patriotic or romanticizing rhetoric. He claimed that topophilia can only emerge from a slow, gradual and thorough appreciation of a place which may not necessarily be architecturally or visually unique: "a branch railroad is as valuable as a Roman wall [and] a neo-Tudor teashop as interesting as a Gothic cathedral."[9] In Auden's view, it is not the physical or historical uniqueness of a place but a gradually acquired topophilic sentiment of the human subject for it that makes even an indistinctive location feel unique, exquisite, even sacred.

Auden believed that Betjeman could do this very well:

> Mr Betjeman's universe is made up of a number of sacred objects […], to which he is passionately devoted. Upon this universe, a number of profane objects […] keep imposing themselves from the present outside world. Naturally, he dislikes these intrusions upon devotions, but he does not hate them. […] Hatred, like love, can only be felt for what is, to the hater, a sacred object and therefore demands the same concentration of attention as a sacred object which is loved. Mr Betjeman fails as a satirist because since they are to him merely profane, the objects of his satire do not fascinate him sufficiently.[10]

In Auden's view, Betjeman's merit comes from his ability to praise, not criticize. Betjeman could form a strong and devoted emotional bond with humanized places and, through the use of his poetic gift facilitating the transformation of such passions to verbal apotheoses, write of them as unique and sacred: "When he is writing about one of his loved sacred objects, suburban Surrey, for example, his eye for detail is unerring."[11]

Auden felt obliged to enlighten American readers about this type of attitude Betjeman had to the landscape. He was convinced that they might not interpret such poetics correctly because, he held, the American landscape fails to elicit such responses. Its untamed and unhumanized nature, together with its vastness, render impossible topophilic experience as he defined it – slowly and

7 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1974), 4. See also Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (1977; reis., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 139, 159.

8 Auden, "Introduction to *Slick but Not Streamlined*," 304.

9 Auden, "Introduction to *Slick but Not Streamlined*," 304.

10 Auden, "John Betjeman's Poetic Universe," 217.

11 Auden, "John Betjeman's Poetic Universe," 217.

gradually formed appreciation issuing from the accretion of an affectionate sentiment for man-made places. When explaining his position, Auden even hinted at John Betjeman's ebullient fondness for bicycle explorations of Victorian architecture in the Oxford district of Jericho and elsewhere:

> America is so big, the countryside not actually under cultivation so wild, that the automobile is essential to movement. Topophilia, however, cannot survive at velocities greater than that of a somewhat rusty bicycle. The American landscape, therefore, must probably be left to the farmers and the nature lovers."[12]

To farmers and nature lovers, but not poets, Auden clearly understood topophilia as a consequence of a long-term and intimate everyday experience of even indistinctive places.

Betjeman thus passed Auden's critical benchmark with honours. He focused on ordinary landscape features evidencing the presence of the human being in the world; he attended to places he knew intimately as, to use Edward Relph's terminology, "an existential insider".[13] This allowed him to write about them with devotion, clarity and intensity, making them appear as unique, superior *loci amoenī.*

Only one other poet met Auden's landscape benchmark for the same approach to places. In 1936 Auden wrote an introduction to the first edition of Robert Frost's *Selected Poems* in Britain. Again, he fashioned himself as a cultural guide and set out to teach new readers, this time in Britain, how not to misread Frost. As in the case of Betjeman, the strategy was to emphasize Frost's admirable engagement with the landscape.

Auden opens the essay with a definition of two types of nature poets. The first is "the man who lives in the country because he has to, because he works there, […] a small farmer who works the land himself". Against such a poet, Auden sets "the sensitive who lives in the country because he can afford to and because he dislikes the city."[14] The criterion for this taxonomy is clearly one of an existential relation to the countryside. Those of the former type are, to use a term employed by the humanist geographer Edward Relph, "existential insiders", who know the landscape intimately as their home because they work it, and thus engage with it intensely through casual, long-term and everyday experience: "to be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it."[15] The latter type of nature poet is a visitor or resident, whose home is elsewhere and who thus remains existentially "outside".

In his prose, Auden obviously considers Robert Frost "almost the only representative" of the first group. He praises Frost's poetry for conveying an unadorned sense of nature and relation of man to the landscape that is typical of existential insiders. Auden saw Frost as someone who knows nature intimately and thus writes about a quotidian spatial experience of it:

> His poems on natural objects, such as 'Birches', 'Mending the Wall', or 'The Grindstone', are always concerned with them not as foci for mystical meditation or starting points for fantasy, but as things with which, and on which, man acts in the course of the daily work of gaining a livelihood. […] These

12 Auden, "Introduction to *Slick but not Streamlined*," 305.

13 Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (1976; rep., London: Pion Limited, 1980), 49–55.

14 Wystan Hugh Auden, "Introduction to *Selected Poems*, by Robert Frost," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse 1926–1938 (vol. I),* ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 138.

15 Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 49.

> poems tell us, not so much of rare exalted chosen moments, of fleeting inexplicable intuitions, but of his daily and, one might say, common experience.[16]

Notwithstanding their differences, Auden clearly valued Frost for reasons that were identical to those for his fondness for Betjeman, their comparable attention to the everyday and ordinary experience of a landscape and its components in the voice of someone who knows the place intimately and identifies with it as if from inside.

Auden saw the merit of such poetry in its sober and moderate poetics of place, spared from portentous romantic evocations of a place and, as he puts it above, from attention to "fleeting inexplicable intuitions". Therefore, when introducing Frost to British readers, he felt obliged to make Frost's moderate treatment of nature pass as a merit, not a flaw. His essays offer several clues as to why he suspected British readers would misread Frost's lines and deem them too plain. For example, in his introduction to an anthology of American and British poetry, *Poets of the English Tongue*, co-written with Norman Holmes Pearson, Auden succinctly explains that European readers are likely to read American poetry under the influence of the European Romantic cliché of an exalted and enchanted nature:

> [British poets write] nature which is humanized, mythologized and usually friendly. […] The European Romantics may praise the charms of wild desert landscape, but they know that for them it is never more than a few hours' walk from a comfortable inn: they may celebrate the joys of solitude but they know that anytime they choose they can go back to the family roof or to town […]. Of real desert, of a loneliness […] they have no conception.[17]

In his opinion Frost, like other American writers, renders nature as a vast, unruly and violent force. The result is a poetics spared from false enchantments. Clearly, Auden valued those poets who convinced him of the genuineness of their poetics of place. Although not a nature poet himself, which is obvious even from his exclusion of a non-humanized landscape from his definition of topophilia, he could appreciate Frost and any other writer as long as he felt that their expression was sincere and devoid of false mythologizing.

The presence of this very quality meant that Frost and Betjeman met Auden's landscape benchmark. Simultaneously, its absence and replacement with an exalted and romanticizing diction encouraged Auden to rebuke other poets. No one took greater blame from him for this type of deficiency than William Wordsworth. Auden harboured a grudge against this icon of Romanticism because he identified in his writing a seedbed of a naïve, false and pretentious poetics of nature. Perhaps as a result of Wordsworth's influence on Auden's juvenile poems during his early formative period,[18] when Auden noticed the work of high modernists during his studies at Oxford in the late 1920s, he started to define himself against the tradition of English nature poetry. Part of this was a growing scorn for Wordsworth as a result of his elevation of nature into a superior environment.

Auden wrote critically about Wordsworth's perception of nature in terms of an uncorrupted primordial womb of pre-lapsarian organic unity. Auden's strong background in the natural sciences

16 Auden, "Introduction to *Selected Poems*, by Robert Frost," 138–139.

17 Wystan Hugh Auden, and Norman Holmes Pearson, "Introduction," in *Poets of the English Tongue*, vol. XXIII, ed. Wystan Hugh Auden, and Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: The Viking Press, 1950), xxii–xxiii.

18 See Katherine Bucknell, "Introduction," in *W.H. Auden: Juvenilia, Poems 1922–1928,* ed. Katherine Bucknell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), xix-lii.

might have convinced him about man's irredeemable dissociation from the natural environment. For example, he often wrote about natural cyclical time in contrast to man's existence governed by linear, directional and historical time made up of events, each of which is "unique or once only," and is "responsible for the occurrence of subsequent historical events, not by causing them necessarily to occur but by providing them with a motive for choosing to occur." Hence, unlike other organisms, Auden concludes, man lives within the historical time of *change* and *progress*, which "historical events create by their occurrence," and which is thus "irreversible and moves in a unilinear direction,"[19] taking man away from nature.

For Auden this separation was an essential aspect of the *condition humaine* and a consequence of inevitable evolutionary processes. Simultaneously, this opinion nourished his disquiet about nostalgic romantic calls for returns to nature:

> Just as one must be weaned from one's mother, one must be weaned from the Earth Mother […]. Along with the growing self-consciousness of man during the last 150 years […] has developed Wordsworthian nature-worship, the nostalgia for the womb of Nature which cannot be re-entered by a consciousness increasingly independent but afraid. […] Man is a product of the refined disintegration of nature by time.[20]

This alleged imperative concerning the incapacity of nature to provide a superior corrective environment fuelled Auden's bitterness about Wordsworth's poetics. Especially in his interwar essays and reviews he often explains his reasons for such resentment concerning "nature-worship". Auden usually interprets it in the context of other Romantic poets and as a concrete manifestation of their general unwillingness to face problems and the social pressure of their time. In his 1938 introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*, for example, Auden claims that poetry becomes too personal and introspective when poets isolate themselves from the social sphere because society is too heterogeneous and lacking in communal spirit:

> Wordsworth's case is paralleled by the history of most of the Romantic poets, both of his day and of the century following. Isolated in an amorphous society with no real communal ties, bewildered by its complexity, horrified by its ugliness and power, and uncertain of an audience, they [romantic poets] turned away from the life of their time to the contemplation of their own emotions and the creation of imaginary worlds – Wordsworth to Nature, Keats and Mallarmé to a world of pure poetry, Shelley to a future Golden Age, Baudelaire and Hölderlin to a past […].[21]

Out of all these poets, in his own work Auden focused mainly on Wordsworth's ruminative personal lyricism about nature. He blamed him for fashioning and promoting an approach to nature that saw it as a virtuous refuge. Auden wrote critically about such an attitude because he saw in it the source of an irresponsible but tempting desire to evade the urban space in search of a superior, pure and reinvigorating natural asylum. Because of his above-mentioned conviction

19 Wystan Hugh Auden, "Nature, History and Poetry," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose 1949–1955 (vol. III)*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 161.

20 Wystan Hugh Auden, *English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927–1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 298.

21 Wystan Hugh Auden, "Introduction to *The Oxford Book of Light Verse*," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse 1926–1938 (vol. I)*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 434.

about man's historical existence and inevitable weaning away from nature, he condemned rhetoric that promoted a consciously rustic life or organic unity between man and nature as a proof of a deplorable, pretentious and naïve nostalgic gaze.

Through the 1930s Auden's bitterness about the eulogizing of nature escalated. He repeatedly invoked Wordsworth's surname and variations on his phrase "worshipper of nature" from *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*[22] as invective directed against anyone with a similar poetics or lifestyle. Auden started to disparagingly lampoon one of the most popular interwar cultural trends – rural rides. Encouraged by the availability of cheap railway tickets, legal measures (such as the "Holiday with Pay Act", 1938) and affordable accommodation and stimulated by the mundane nature of life during the working week, the working class started to explore the "open road" of the English countryside during weekends and short breaks.[23]

This was, Auden claimed, a tempting but rather reactionary legacy of Wordsworth. Auden established a clear link between such escapism to what Patrick Wright has called "Deep England"[24] and Wordsworth's poetics of nature. For example, in *Letter to Lord Byron* (1937) he relies on Byron's acknowledged dislike of the "lakers" in the hope of finding in him an ally for his criticism of Wordsworthian poetics and its potential to fuel interwar nature tourism:

> I'm so glad to find I've your [Byron's] authority
> For finding Wordsworth a most bleak old bore,
> Though I'm afraid we're in a sad minority
> For every year his followers get more,
> Their number must have doubled since the war.
>
> They come in train-loads to the Lakes, and swarms
> Of Pupil-teachers study him in Storm's.
> […] And new plants flower from that old potato [Wordsworth].
> They thrive best in a poor industrial soil,
> William, to change the metaphor, struck oil; […]
>
> The mountain-snob is a Wordsworthian fruit;
> He tears his clothes and doesn't shave his chin,
> He wears a very pretty little boot,
> He chooses the least comfortable inn;
> A mountain railway is a deadly sin;
> His strength, of course, is as the strength of ten men,
> He calls all those who live in cities wen-men.
>
> […] All human hearts have ugly little treasures;

22 William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798," in *Lyrical Ballads*, by William Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (London: Routledge and Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 115.

23 See J.A.R. Pimlott, *The Englishman's Holiday: A Social History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1947); John Stevenson, "The Countryside, Planning, and Civil Society in Britain, 1926–1947," in *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions*, ed. Jose Harris (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 191–212; Alun Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside since 1900* (London: Routledge, 2003).

24 Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 79–82.

> But think it time to take repressive measures
> When someone says, adopting the 'I know' line,
> The Good Life is confined above the snow-line.[25]

Auden sagaciously hints at the 'nature/city' dialectic and rejects the possibility of achieving the 'Good Life' and 'Good Place' in the heights of the mountains or anywhere in a natural environment. Isolation from other people and the urban space is simply not a permissible and effective solution to unhappiness. He clearly interprets interwar mythologization and escapism to nature as a deplorable consequence of Wordsworth's exalting and pretentious rhetoric. In these lines to Byron, as in several other texts from the same decade, Auden scorns travellers for their self-imposed rusticity, discomfort and their belief that only life in nature – "above the snow-line" is the superior "Good Life".

Auden's attitude of the 1930s to ramblers reflects a common tone to be found in his poems and essays from the same period in which he mocks or denounces different forms of withdrawal from civil responsibility for the man-made environment challenged by expansive Fascism. One of them was the Scout movement. For example, Auden targeted the arguments of its founder, Baden-Powell, with a large dose of bitterness and disenchantment.[26] In his writing on Baden-Powell and William Wordsworth, Auden uses a similar arsenal. Their writing of the physical environment became a crucial critical tool for his assessment of their work. He approached both writers with caution, but not because they wrote of nature. It is their sentimental ennoblement of it as an environment that is more authentic and genuine and superior to the urban space that Auden found naïve, pathetic, anachronistic and socially irresponsible.

Clearly, Auden distrusted their tone because he saw them as existential outsiders. For him Wordsworth and Baden-Powell were lured to nature by a shallow and sentimental view, which encouraged their own search, and that of the public, for a merely temporary escapist asylum from the man-made environment. This fits in perfectly with Auden's view of the European Romantics, cited earlier in connection with the distinction Auden drew between the British and American conception of nature. Auden's interwar commitment to the political reality spiralling towards the

25 Wystan Hugh Auden, "Letter to Lord Byron, Part III," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse 1926–1938 (vol. I)*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 251.

26 As a teacher with pronounced and published opinions on the flaws of education in Britain (see my article "The Poet at the Teacher's Desk: W.H. Auden on Education, Democracy and Humanity," *Prague Journal of English Studies* 6, no.1 (2017): 27–43.), Auden shared Baden-Powell's exasperation with the excessive detrimental emphasis in modern education on "word knowledge, theories, mental experience." Auden too held that it led to the deterioration of independence, character and resourcefulness. However, he quoted from Baden-Powell's *Lessons from the Varsity of Life* in order to criticize his intention to compensate for such a deficiency by means of taking children "back as nearly as possible to the primitive, to learn tracking, eye for the country, observation by night as well as by day, to learn to stalk and to hide, to improvise shelter, and to feed and fend for themselves." Auden took Baden-Powell's word "primitive" and turned it against him in order to disagree with what he read as a naïve ambition to correct contemporary ills by reviving people's goodness through a life lived in natural surroundings. Clearly consistently with his view described above of man's historical and directional being in the world and with his grudge against Wordsworthian ramblers, Auden deems Baden-Powell's agenda "fatally primitive" and supports his claim with an explanation: "To say that the Backwoods life is natural and City life artificial is nonsense. The only possible meaning of 'artificial' in this connection is 'un-habitual'. Camping is really a highly artificial training for a better town life, and, valuable as it is, town life demands much more. The closer people live together, the more complex and civilized life becomes, the more one individual affects another and the more knowledge he needs about himself. It is here, to my mind, that scouting fails." Wystan Hugh Auden, "Life's Old Boy," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse 1926–1938 (vol. I)*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 63.

war contributed to his distaste for such escapes into the natural environment being perceived as a superior, corrective panacea for social ills. His views were diametrically opposite. Echoing his suggestions for the improvement of education are his plentiful comments demanding the nurturing of responsible citizens participating in the construction of the social space. There are, in fact, two poets whose writing about the physical world appealed to Auden because he felt it was free of sentimental enchantments and, at the same time, it focused primarily on man.

Alexander Pope's and Rainer Maria Rilke's poetics of place caught Auden's attention for reasons that differed from the awe he felt for Frost's or Betjeman's genuine and unsentimental diction. Paradoxical as it may seem, Auden turned Pope's and other Augustans' marginal attention to the landscape and the non-human components of the physical world in general into a merit. For example, in 1937 he paraphrased Pope's line "the proper study of mankind is man"[27] from *Essay on Man* in order to praise the classicists' placement of the centre of gravity on the human figure:

> if their descriptions of cows and cottages and birds are vague, it is because their focus of interest is sharp elsewhere […]. [The descriptions] are conventional, not because the poets thought that "the waterpudge, the pilewort, the petty chap, and the pooty" were unpoetic […], but because they are intended to be conventional, *a backcloth* to the more important human figures.[28]

In this espousal Auden returns to his role of a mediator employed in his assessment of Betjeman and Frost in order to preclude the possible negative reception of Pope's verse by contemporary readers expecting a more poetic writing of landscape. The same "guide-like" approach can be found in an equally positive, yet rare assessment of Rilke. Auden admired the Prague-born poet for drawing a unique relation between the landscape and man. Knowledgeable about the long tradition of European poetry, Auden often wrote about the recurring inclination of poets to attribute human qualities to the non-human objects: "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."[29] Auden wrote these lines in preparation for his commendation of Rilke in 1939. In his only essay on Rilke, he argued that one of the admirable signature features of his verse, unlike Wordsworth's, is the absence of such projecting of human qualities onto natural objects: "While Shakespeare, for example, thought of the non-human world in terms of the human, Rilke thinks of the human in terms of the non-human, of what he calls Things (*Dinge*). […] Thus, one of Rilke's most characteristic devices is the expression of human life in terms of landscape."[30] Obviously, like Pope, Rilke earned Auden's positive appraisal on account of his weakening of the prominence of the landscape, this time through its use as a means for contemplating the human being.

27 Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, *vol. I.* (New York – London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1962), 2250.

28 Wystan Hugh Auden, "Pope," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse 1926–1938 (vol. I)*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996),151, emphasis added.

29 Wystan Hugh Auden, "Rilke in English," in *The Complete Works of W.H. Auden: Prose 1939–1948 (vol. II),* ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 26.

30 Auden, "Rilke in English," 26.

Auden's critical opinion of a writer often derived from their engagement with the landscape and the physical world. His eager defence of Pope's obfuscation of landscape details, his rare praise of Rilke's avoidance of anthropomorphism, his attacks on Wordsworth's and Baden-Powell's sentimentalization of nature and his eulogizing of Frost and Betjeman for their insightful yet sober writing of places bring to light the linchpin criteria of his landscape criticism. Auden obviously made a positive judgement of a writer's work when their poetics of place convinced him of their genuineness, sobriety and unsentimental approach. Furthermore, poets merited his praise when their writing of landscape resembled the structuring principles of Claude Lorrain, Gaspar Poussin or John Constable, with a mention of whom this paper started. Like these painters, Auden liked poets who used the landscape as a background to, or as a means of focusing on, the human figure placed into the centre of their verbal composition. Indeed, such criteria make Auden's critical judgment very personal, biased and partial. At the same time, his promotion of such aspects of poets' work into critical criteria bespeaks his exceptional emotional and intellectual responsiveness to places and to human spatial experience and its transcription into language.

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