

Auden and Rilke

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ABSTRACT

This article traces Auden's references to the poetry of Rilke, showing his influence to be strongest in the late 1930's. It then compares some poems by Auden with similar works by Rilke. It argues that Auden shared with Rilke a concern with the development of the individual from childhood and with the relation of the individual sensibility to the external world and also an aesthetic and symbolist dimension, but that the effect of this in his writing is always modified by his concern with morality and his feeling that this has priority over aesthetics, and by Auden's scepticism concerning the more Romantic or mystical aspects of Rilke's thought.

Auden's interest in Rilke is well known and often commented on by critics. There are valuable comments by Hoggart, notably a lengthy passage, under the heading 'Technique', on 'his supple accommodation to the influence of Rilke' (Hoggart, 1951: 42). Waidson gives a very systematic account of Auden's interest in German literature and a number of pertinent comments by Spears, Mendelson, Davison and Buell (Waidson, 1975; Spears, 1963: 25, 44, etc.; Mendelson, 1989: 351, 356; Buell, 1986: 47-48; Davison, 1970: 141). There seems, however, not to be a systematic analysis of the precise nature of Auden's view of Rilke. Was he interested only in Rilke's literary technique, as Hoggart implies, or was his interest deeper?

We do not know when Auden first seriously read Rilke. We know that he arrived in Berlin in August 1928, when he 'knew no German and no German literature' (Auden, 1973: 521) and we can therefore assume that he was not familiar with Rilke's work before this time. The point is an important one, since (if we accept Mendelson's datings) he had

already composed poems which closely resemble Rilke in style. One example is 'The Watershed' of August 1927 (Auden, 1976: 32) which has a very Rilkean sense of the individual in space and of the consciousness of some alert animal, acutely contrasted with the questing consciousness of the human. The very title may recall the *Wasserscheide* in the *Stundenbuch* (Rilke, 1966: I, 68). Another, and very important, example is 'The Secret Agent' (Auden, 1976: 32) of January 1928, which is Auden's first use of the third-person narrative sonnet starting abruptly with a pronoun 'he', a form often considered very characteristic of Rilke.

When he arrived in Berlin, Auden seems to have acquired colloquial German quite rapidly, but we cannot tell how long it took him to master literary German sufficiently to read a subtle and complex author such as Rilke. Indeed, as late as a review published in 1939, Auden spoke very modestly of his grasp of Rilke's German (and in fact makes a grammatical error in citing the title of the *Neue Gedichte*). This consideration might make us cautious about finding any Rilkean influence in, for instance, the major early poem '1929' (Auden, 1976: 45) written between April and October 1929, although it has close parallels to Rilke on the thematic level, in its concern with solitude, exile, childhood, growth and development and above all with the significance of death for the living. In the review Auden comments on the Rilkean influence on English poetry in general, which he claimed to have perceived in the last four years, i.e. since 1935; it may not be unrealistic to think that this is the period of time over which he felt his own work to have been related to Rilke's.

There are in fact a significant but not immense number of explicit references to Rilke in Auden's writings, in the form of critical comments, in prose and in verse, and of direct quotations. These, we shall see, show a steady interest in Rilke and respect for him lasting over a considerable period, an interest which is however not uncritical.

In a 1936 review of a book by Herbert Read (Auden, 1977: 357) Auden reminds Read of a passage from *Malte Laurids Brigge* cited in another of Read's own works (Read, 1976: 75). This does not, admittedly, conclusively prove that Auden has himself read *Malte*, only that the sensibility revealed in Read's quotation was one that appealed to him. The quotation is one in which Rilke lists the varied experience, from childhood on, that a poet has to possess and master in order to integrate it into his works. And Auden goes on to deduce that the poet must be sensitive to the outside world and so 'more than a bit of a reporting journalist'. Rilke would probably have objected to the word 'journalist', since he viewed poetry as a noble and pure task, far from the commercial pressures and populism of most journalism. But there are certainly many works by Rilke—both prose works such as *Malte* itself and poems such as those about beggars, the insane, the blind, the bereaved in, for instance, the *Buch der Bilder*—which give a very precise view of the strangeness and suffering of the contemporary urban world. These, however, form a fairly small proportion of his total work. Auden, of course, is much more of a journalist, and his early reputation was very much influenced by readers' recognition of his critical commentary on the social and political circumstances of his time. The difference seems to be that for Rilke, in the quoted passage, the experiences are important because they contribute to the growth of a

poet's personality with its variety, sensitivity and humility in the face of reality, whereas Auden is less concerned with personality and more with objective reality; the distinction is perhaps not clear cut. What we should specially note here, because it will recur later in this study, is that the quoted passage is about the poet's maturing from childhood onwards and the way the experiences of the outer world contribute to the enhancement of his inner world, so that finally inner and outer are inseparable.

A second review, dated March 1939 (Auden, 1977: 387), perhaps somewhat surprisingly, refers to Rilke (and Spinoza) in the course of discussing a book about Voltaire, a clear sign that Rilke was becoming a major presence in Auden's intellectual life. The connection is in Voltaire's attack on Leibniz's optimism. Auden regards this as inferior to Rilke's 'dennoch preisen', (praising nevertheless) which he views as 'the basis for all reverence for life and belief in the future'. The point is a very important one, and Auden reflected further on the Rilkean phrase in Sonnet XI of *Sonnets from China*, which will be analysed in detail later in this article. Rilke is not simply optimistic; when he calls on the poet to 'praise nevertheless', he wishes him to recognise the evil and suffering of the world but still to say yes to life (in the Nietzschean tradition). This view is one that calls for much reflection. Some people may feel that it works only in poetry; that Rilke can assert his faith in life only because his solemn symbolism allows him to express a state of exalted contemplation. Auden makes two assertions. One is that Rilke's praising is the basis for reverence for life. It is important that Auden should have declared his belief in such reverence. We might have expected him to be skeptical about it, because his work is often critical and ironic, he has a strong sense of the frustrations and restrictions of much of everyday life, and in his early years he was sympathetic to the bleak stoicism of Freudianism and Marxism. This reverence for life contributes both to Auden's new orientation towards Christianity and to the increasingly relaxed, good-humoured tone of his later writing (though both of these too would have been very alien to Rilke). Auden's second point is the more surprising one: that Rilkean affirmation is the basis of faith in the future. This sounds strangely like a statement of political or social optimism, made at a time when (as the next sentence in the review implies) the future of Europe was indeed grim. Auden is expressing the belief that the evil of Nazism can be defeated as long as the human imagination is alert to the beauty of life, to its inherent value, in the way manifested by the great poets.

In 1939-40 Auden published two further reviews of English translations of Rilke (Auden 1939 and 1940). These appeared in the *New Republic*. The first review deals with two matters. The first of these is Rilke's technique of symbolism, his use of apparently-objective description of things (*Dinge*) to communicate a vision of a meaningful life. (This type of poem is referred to in German as the *Dinggedicht*) This Auden regards a solution to the problem of the expression of abstract ideas in verse, which he feels can in many English poets lead to preaching. Auden was of course fascinated by abstract ideas, far more in fact than many poets of the previous century (and even more than Rilke) and readers sometimes feel that some of his own work tends to excess abstraction and even preaching. The concrete vision he admires here is not confined to Rilke, but could also be found in

many poets of the symbolist tradition with whom Auden must have also been familiar, such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. The symbolist poets seek to find in the outer world the scene which seems to express the sense of a wider aspect of life. This view is very close to Auden's own conception of the 'sacred being' which has 'an overwhelming but undefinable significance' (Auden, 1963: 55). Specifically he quotes a passage from one of the elegies showing that Rilke uses landscape-mountains and rivers-in a way readily recognisable from Auden's own many landscape poems, and he quotes a passage from the poet's book on the sculptor Rodin, in which Rilke defines the importance of Things to the child and the way the adult longs to regain the lost significance of childhood experience (Rilke, 1966: III, 418-9). The elegy quoted is in fact also about childhood, about birth and motherhood; it seems as if part of Rilke's fascination for Auden is that he is the poet of childhood and growth. Secondly, Auden praises Rilke as 'one who occupied himself consistently and exclusively with his own inner life' and goes on to justify this as not excluding the importance of politics but as offering a different perspective on the contemporary crisis. Rilke's stance, he says, may seem 'selfish and unheroic' but may be a saintly exercise in patience, humility and self-knowledge. This marks a very important stage in Auden's own development; the 'journalistic' approach he had earlier praised is now bypassed, and poetry is seen as essentially private and spiritual.

The second review emphasizes the same point, stressing specifically that the poet does not have an obligation to the war (and reminding the reader of Rilke's deplorable welcome to the War God in 1914). No doubt Auden was thinking of the way he himself had been criticised when he left Britain for the United States at a time when war was imminent. More broadly, he is concerned in this review to show that defending the inner values of 'the conquering of abuses for the benefit of the deepest tradition' should be distinguished a mere ivory tower attitude, from 'selfish or cowardly indifference' and 'aesthetic dilettantism'. All this reveals a debate within Auden himself. On the one hand he did have a post-Romantic, symbolist view of the kind conventionally labelled as 'Ivory Tower'; he did care for artistic craftsmanship, sensitivity to natural and artistic form and awareness of one's own sensibility and aspirations. On the other hand he was aware that this Romantic attitude fitted ill with the role of social and psychological critic that he had adopted (and been acclaimed for) in the 30's. In fact he perceived that his Romanticism had an uncomfortable resemblance to self-indulgence and he therefore wished to sharply delimit it.

It is at this period that explicit references to Rilke start to appear in Auden's verse. The crucial works are *Sonnets from China* (mostly summer 1938), (Auden, 1976: 193-195), always recognised by critics as the most directly Rilkean of Auden's works, and *New Year Letter* (January-April 1940) (Auden, 1976: 197-243).

It may seem odd that Auden, while visiting China, should have been thinking seriously about a European poet. He was obviously impelled by the experience of war to think about the significance of poetry, which might seem to be a luxury for the privileged races; and he chooses Rilke as the most eminent representative of a view of poetry which he contrasts with the pressures of politics.

Sonnet II of the sequence is about Adam, expelled from Eden, and encapsulates the theme of innocence and experience which is crucial to the whole set, Adam's fall symbolising the acquisition of consciousness, language and self-awareness-things which both Rilke and Auden often discuss as absent from animals and which are most conspicuously displayed in literature. The poem does not particularly recall Rilke's poem about Adam (Rilke, 1966: I, 339) but the final lines,

And the way back by angels was defended
Against the poet and the legislator,

suggest a shift from Adam to the poet Orpheus, whose return from the underworld is described in Rilke's 'Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes' (Rilke, 1966: I, 298).

Sonnet III starts with discreet hints of the *Sonette an Orpheus*:

Only a smell had feelings to make known,
Only an eye could point in a direction,
The fountain's utterance was itself alone;

The opening lines expand a line from *Sonette*, I 16, 'Wer zeigt mit Fingern auf einen Geruch?' ('Who can point to a smell?'). Rilke is addressing his dog, and stresses the difference between the way the dog recognises life, death and magic and the more limited way that people apparently perceive these things. He concludes by declaring that the poet has access to the higher power of the hero Orpheus, through which he will invoke a blessing on the animal. The third line is an echo of *Sonette an Orpheus* II 15, where the fountain is described as

Ein Ohr der Erde. Nur mit sich allein
Redet sie also.
(‘An ear of earth. Only with itself does it speak, therefore.’)

In Auden humanity's exploitation destroys the intactness of the fountain of language, which becomes a means of control and creativity and so leads to restriction; the person is 'A creature to his own creation subject'.

Sonnet VII concerns a poet, apparently Homer, of whom his audience exclaim 'It is a God that sings'; the echo is of *Sonette an Orpheus* I, 5

Ein für alle Male
Ist Orpheus, wenn es singt.
(‘Once for all times, it is Orpheus when there is singing’)

Auden has made a major change here. Auden's poet expresses the feelings of his audience ('Their feeling gathered in him like a wind') and he comes to resent his audience as his talent is stretched ('He stalked like an assassin through the town'). Rilke's poet on the

contrary expresses the nature of things, and describes his own metamorphosis into things, which means that he can both obey the nature of the world of roses in which he lives, and also surpass it. Like Auden's figure, he is anxious, but what makes him anxious is his own expected death, and he is reconciled to this by his sense of transcendence. The poet for Rilke both belongs to the world and excels it; such ambiguity and multivalence is difficult for Auden to accept, because his perspective on language is more rational and social.

Sonnet XI is the first to be explicit in its reference to Rilke, and articulates clearly Auden's difference from him. 'Certainly praise', it begins, recalling many passages from Rilke, notably the late poem starting

O sage, Dichter, was du tust ?-Ich rühme,
(‘Oh tell, poet, what you do?-I praise’)

and numerous passages in the *Sonette an Orpheus*, for instance the assertion in II2 that the person who really knows the losses of the world is

Nur, wer mit dennoch preisendem Laut
sänge das Herz, das ins Ganze geborne.
(‘Only the person who, with a voice that praises nevertheless, would sing the heart born into wholeness’)

Auden recognizes the beauty of song in very Rilkean terms;

let song mount again and again
For life as it blossoms out in a jar or a face.

The solemnity of rhythm, the jar, which suggests classical aesthetics, the image of blossoming out, which is a very Rilkean recognition of the way one reality can pervade another: all these things show how Auden appreciates the fullness of feeling implicit in Rilke's immersion into ‘das Ganze’ (‘wholeness’) But Auden contrasts this aesthetic pleasure with the evils of history-the insecurity of the new West and the oligarchy of the old Families in the East. These families are ‘flowerlike’; they have modified the earth; these terms are strangely reminiscent of a Symbolist aesthetic but they are in fact applied to a social system which is ‘prodigious but wrong’. The point is acutely made: the moral must not be confused with the aesthetic, and we must not allow artistic satisfaction to blind us to evils in morality and politics.

The following poem, sonnet XII, accordingly makes no reference to poetry, but refers to the evil force of speech as political lying and to the

places
Where life is evil now.
Nanking. Dachau.

The poem is one of Auden's finest because it maintains a literal truthfulness in order to bear witness to suffering.

But Auden has not abandoned Rilke in this sequence. Poem XIX starts with a sense of panic and defeat, and turns for consolation to an example of a writer who seemed defeated but whose talent was suddenly revived, namely Rilke himself,

Who for ten years of drought and silence waited
Until in Muzot all his being spoke
And everything was given once for all.
Awed, grateful, tired, content to die, completed,
He went out in the winter night to stroke
That tower as one pets an animal

(The information is in fact inaccurate and is corrected by Mason (1963: 84); Rilke had not been totally silent for ten years at the time indicated.) Readers who know a little of Rilke's life will instantly recognise the reference to his Swiss home at Muzot, and those who are more closely familiar with his work will recognise the last line as a tribute derived very directly from a letter (11 Feb 1922) in which the poet, having completed the *Sonette*, tells Lou Andreas Salomé that

Ich bin hinausgegangen und habe das kleine Muzot, das mirs beschützt, das mirs endlich gewährt hat, gestreichelt wie ein großes altes Tier' ('I went out and stroked little Muzot, which protected it [my work] for me, which eventually granted it to me, like a big old animal') (Rilke, 1980: 744).

Rilke had found a place to belong to. Auden, the exile in China, longs for the sense of relatedness that Rilke had attained. Much of the sequence is concerned with the ideas of possession and location, as is much of the writing of Rilke. Auden, at this period, does not feel at home, as Rilke, in rare moments of grace, does; separateness is the norm in Auden's experience.

The sequence ends with a poem which returns to Europe, to 'Italy and King's'. This poem (XXI) is addressed to E. M. Forster: the resolution of Auden's concerns about imagination and morality seems at this moment to lie not in European Symbolism but in British liberal humanism. Forster, like Rilke, cultivates the inner life, though this seems strangely menacing, incarnated in the sword carried by the obsessive Miss Avery from *Howard's End* (which has caused the death of the harmless autodidact Leonard Bast) and the important thing for Forster is that 'the inner life can pay': it is a strength, a resource, not an escape from the negotiations of real life.

Auden's tone towards Rilke is somewhat less admiring by the time of *New Year Letter*. He appears at three important points: firstly, as one of the 'influential ghosts' of poetry whom Auden imagines himself to be judged by, the last of an impressive list starting with Dante. The reference is not quite as respectful as this context might suggest:

And RILKE, whom die Dinge bless,
The Santa Claus of loneliness (Auden, 1976: 204).

The first line refers again to Rilke's special kind of apparently objective symbolism, and adds, ambiguously, a point on poetry as a relation to the outside world: Rilke either is blessed with a sort of happiness in his living amidst meaningful objects or receives the good will of the objects for making them significant. The second line is presumably a reference to Rilke's letter to the 'young poet' Kappus, of 23 December 1903 (Rilke, 1980: 63), in which he rather unseasonably stresses the vocation of the poet for solitude. The view is one which might have been expected to be unwelcome to Auden, who was clearly a lover of companionship both in reality and in the persona adopted in many of his poems; presumably Auden respected Rilke's cult of loneliness insofar as it demonstrates the total commitment of the poet to his work above everything else. Even so, some irony is apparent. The letter in fact contains phrases which fit very consistently with Auden's view of Rilke's personality, as the Austrian recommends

Einsamsein, wie man als Kind einsam war, als die Erwachsenen umhergingen, mit Dingen verflochten, die wichtig und groß schienen, weil die Großen so geschäftig aussahen und weil man von ihrem Tun nichts begriff ('Being alone, as you were alone in childhood, when grown-ups went about preoccupied with things which seemed so great and important, because adults seemed so busy and you understood nothing of what they were doing').

Childhood as a discovery of oneself and of things; the theme is essentially the same as that discovered in the passages referred to in Auden's reviews. It is expanded by a passage in the notes (regrettably omitted from the *Collected Poems*) quoting a passage from Rilke on the way that things contribute to children's development, to their experiencing of 'all that is human, right into the depths of death' (Auden, 1941: 93). (Auden wrongly attributes this passage to Rilke's essay on *Dolls*; it is in fact from the same section of the Rodin book quoted in one of the *New Republic* reviews. The error suggests a fairly wide but unsystematic reading in Rilke). The stress on the maintenance of the self is further reinforced by a note quoting another of the *Letters to a Young Poet* on the dangers of love, which prevents people from fully recognising either their own individuality or the individuality of the beloved (a rather surprising point for Auden to emphasize, in view of his recent intimacy with Chester Kallman).

At a later point in the poem, Auden, still concerned about the relation of poetry to morality, reflects on the way the Devil could misuse the texts of his favourite poets to encourage cynicism. In the case of Rilke, the Devil offers a substantial quotation:

'You know the *Elegies*, I'm sure
-O *Seligkeit der Kreatur*
Die immer bleibt im Schosse-womb,
In English is a rhyme to tomb'

(‘Oh bliss of the creation which always remains in the womb’) (Auden, 1976: 213).

A note gives the reference (to the 8th *Duino Elegy*) and completes the quotation by restoring the word *kleinen* (‘small’) before *Kreatur* and giving the next two lines. Rilke in the elegy is envying insects (in one of his more reckless moments of imagination) for not gaining full consciousness of their separateness. Larger animals, he claims, have a melancholy sense of having lost the mother’s womb; the ideal life-he is briefly tempted to say-is one in which the individual has no distinct identity but merges into the processes of birth and death. The issue of the unreflectingness of animals is one that appears elsewhere in both poets; in Auden, for instance there is the reflection in ‘Our Hunting Fathers’ on the ‘sadness of the creatures’ caused by their lack of ‘the personal glory/That reason’s gift would add’ (Auden, 1976: 122). That poem treats the view with some scepticism, offering love and work, not reason, as the fulfilment of humanity; and in general the view that it is better to avoid consciousness is one that clearly appealed to Auden (and to other writers of the time: it is a major theme, for instance, in Sartre’s philosophy). Rilke, for Auden, is largely the poet of the developing consciousness, of the sensibility that emerges from childhood and that both maintains a childlike reverence for things and sensations and also acquires a sense of its own inner richness; but he also, occasionally, bears witness to the precariousness of this sensibility. Finally there is a rather odd citation of Rilke. Reflecting on the privatisation of modern society and the weakening of community, Auden comments that

Aloneness is man’s real condition,
That each must travel forth alone
In search of the Essential Stone,
The ‘Nowhere-without-No’ that is
The justice of societies. (Auden, 1976: 238)

He acknowledges the quotation, again from the 8th *Elegy*, in the notes (Auden, 1941: 151). The quoted passage indicates that Rilke is not at all thinking about social justice (if indeed he ever did): the *Nirgends ohne Nicht* (‘Nowhere-without-no’) is a perfect and inconceivable place, a place of acceptance and familiarity, where nothing is forbidden. It is no surprise to find that Rilke is interested in space and Auden in society (though Auden is often interested in space himself); the surprising thing is how forcefully Auden appropriates Rilke’s idea in this instance.

This is the high point of Auden’s concern with Rilke. From this point on, references are scant or critical. In his ‘Table-talk’ he frivolously referred to Rilke as crazy (perhaps not unjustifiably in view of such things as the Austrian’s repeated claim that there was no real difference between life and death) and as too ‘schöngestig’ (‘too beautiful a spirit’) (Ansen, 1996: 41, 72). In a 1944 essay on Tennyson he cites (as Waidson notes, 1975: 352; Auden does not identify his source) a pair of lines on childhood from Rilke’s poem ‘Vor dem Sommerregen’ (Rilke, 1966: I, 276). But a serious disengagement from Rilke starts when he notes with some regret in *The Dyer’s Hand* that he is bored with Rilke: ‘I still think Rilke

a great poet though I cannot read him any more'. More seriously, later in the volume (Auden, 1977: 51,76) he takes issue with Rilke, and with Mallarmé, another major figure in the Symbolist tradition, on their whole conception of poetry, accusing them of the 'heresy' of 'endow[ing] the gratuitous with a magic utility of its own, so that the poet comes to think of himself as the god who creates his subjective universe out of nothing'. He critically quotes the *Sonette an Orpheus*; 'Gesang ist Dasein', 'song is being', and cites a significant passage from the important critic Erich Heller (Heller, 1952: 136). Heller was in general a great admirer of Rilke and very conscious of his centrality in a certain European tradition of thought, but in the passage quoted he accuses him of allowing his emotions to get the upper hand of his observation of the 'interpreted world' (in Rilke's own phrase).

The argument relates to the same set of concerns that Auden felt in his earlier contact with Rilke, though his judgement has changed: these are concerns about the integration of the poet's individuality into the phenomenal world. At first Auden had two responses to Rilke. Sometimes he felt that Rilke was an ideal model because he showed how the poet can both express his own solitary sensitivity and also depict the outside world in a 'journalistic' style, but sometimes he judged that Rilke's stress on the inner had blinded him to politics and morality. Now Auden is strongly critical of what he sees as Rilke's subordination of the real world. Song, for Auden, is not being; it is a comment on being, a celebration or criticism of being, but it should not be allowed to replace the real conditions in which the moral or spiritual growth of the individual takes place. Hence what Hecht describes as Auden's 'notion of the frivolity of art' (Hecht, 1993: 442). Most clearly perhaps, we should recall that Auden had already written *The Sea and The Mirror*. This great work still pays tribute to the charm of love and poetry, but chiefly it is about Prospero's abandonment of magic and of Ariel, and about his weary acceptance of age and death. Ariel, the symbol of poetry, is criticised because he replaces knowledge of the outside world with emotional responses to it. Under Ariel's influence, Prospero says, 'death is inconceivable',

And every time some dear flesh disappears
What is real is the arriving grief (Auden, 1976: 404).

To become totally honest in understanding our selves, we need to know the reality of death and suffering, of the dear flesh; we cannot be content with the emotion of grief alone. And so renunciation of magic is necessary if we are to attain knowledge. Rilke's Ariel, by contrast, in the poem 'Der Geist Ariel' (Rilke, 1966: II,50) though also leaving Prospero 'machtlos, alternd, arm' ('impotent, aging, poor'), is recalled with fascination because he renders the invisible life complete, and because he mixes friendship with independence: for Rilke art was greater than the values of society and morality whereas for Auden society and morality are unquestionably more important than art.

Auden's remaining references can be quickly discussed. Dame Kind, Auden's personification of a very earthy Nature, leads him to advise his fellow poet to 'Pocket your fifty sonnets, Bud' (Auden, 1976: 667) and to tell a story of 'unpunishable gods and all the girls they interfered with' (Rilke wrote 55 sonnets to Orpheus, the hero punished by Maenads). 'Prologue at Sixty' (no doubt recalling George Steiner's very recent book, 1969:

83) refers to the Nazi 'torturers /who read Rilke in their rest periods' (Auden, 1976: 831), a particularly harsh view of the disparity between the aesthetic and the moral. 'A Thanksgiving', one of his last poems (Auden, 1976: 891), in which he recognises the writers who have inspired him, mentions such people as Hardy, Brecht, Horace and Goethe-but not Rilke; the difference from the list in *New Year Letter* is very striking evidence of Auden's changing perspectives.

There are also some more tenuous echoes in Auden's work: do the 'acrobats who make unbelievable leaps' in *The Age of Anxiety* (Auden, 1976: 510) recall the potentially miraculous acrobats of the *Fifth Elegy*? Does Quant's account of Orpheus in the same work (Auden, 1976: 477) recall Rilke's *Sonnets*, even though it is concerned with the defeat of the poet, whereas Rilke is concerned with his triumph? We cannot be certain that there is any allusion to Rilke in these cases, although it is possible. Nor can we be certain that the poem 'Orpheus' (Auden, 1976: 158) refers to Rilke, even though it dates from 1937, a period when Rilke was obviously much in Auden's mind. The themes are Orpheus's choice between happiness and knowledge, and nature's welcome to his art in summer or opposition to it in winter. Auden refers to the power of Orpheus's song over animals. This does repeat a point made in Rilke, but it is also a very well known part of the classical myth, and if Auden was thinking of Rilke's adoration of the poetic principle, he has not made the reference at all explicit in his work.

We can therefore conclude that Rilke revealed to Auden an aspect of his imagination of which he might not otherwise have been so conscious. This is a dimension of aestheticism. More precisely it is a perspective derived from Symbolism or post-Romanticism. It stresses that one aspect of the individual's growth is constituted by his intense and solitary contact with things, and that poetry is a formulation of this aspect. Auden's readers need to be aware of this influence, because it brings out the poet's deep literary culture, with its international roots, and especially because it helps us to focus on a side of Auden which may not be apparent at a first reading of his work.

This Symbolist dimension of Auden should not conceal a very fundamental difference between him and poets such as Rilke. Rilke is a monist. He believes that, in imagination, the world constitutes a vast unity, in which inner and outer, spiritual and material, life and death, are indistinguishable, and his attitude to this unified world is primarily one of proud acceptance: 'Hiersein ist herrlich' ('Being here is glorious') he asserts in the seventh *Elegy*. He accepts being here without any qualifications. Auden, late in life, was able to 'bless what is for being', to accept being without discrimination. But usually, on the contrary, he is aware of differences, incompatibilities, incongruities. He is analytical, often dualistic, and so often critical and often ironic. Of course the distinction is not an absolute one. Rilke does sometimes criticise other people's attitudes (for instance Christianity or other dualistic visions, or the demeaning materialism of the modern progressive world) and his criticism is often conveyed by an elegant detached humour or irony. The general orientation of the two poets is however very clear, and the strange thing is that, despite their differences, Auden did find something of himself in Rilke.

For there are in fact major similarities in their writing, as may be readily grasped from the explicit comments we have been studying. On the level of style there are the mastery of rhythm and structure, the complexity of syntax, and especially a form of apparently gratuitous simile (thus Rilke's church, 'reinlich und zu und enttäuscht wie ein Postamt am Sonntag' ('cleanly and closed and disappointed like a post-office on Sunday')) (Rilke, 1966: I, 478) or Auden's lighthouses which guard a bay 'Like twin stone dogs' (Auden, 1976: 148); on the level of content there are the issue of the relationship of the individual to space, objects and surfaces, the sense of the quality of human consciousness and its relation to the more restricted consciousness of animals, and the sense of self-discovery through time, growth, change, suffering, death and lamentation.

An instance of the mature style of Auden's Rilkean phase is the fourth sonnet of the 'Quest' series (Auden, 1976: 287). It is concerned with memories of childhood, and to this extent can be thought of as Rilkean in theme, and it takes the form, common in both authors, of a narrative in the third person referring to an unnamed 'he'. The first quatrain stresses the contrast between adult life and a childhood of fever, of 'large afternoons at play' outside, of a mill heard 'grinding at the back of love'. The second quatrain, shifting to a fairy-tale manner, recounts the character's failure to achieve the ideals of childhood. The sestet introduces a change. It presents a reflection on the present: if he could 'forget a child's ambition to be old'-if, in other words he could attain self-sufficiency in the given moment-he would realise that the world about him could be welcoming, that it could 'be his father's house and speak his mother tongue'. Essentially, then, the poem criticises the idea of maturing, an idea which is present already in childhood, and asserts that really belonging to the world about us is a matter of acceptance.

There are a number of features that make this a memorable and characteristic poem. There is the economy of expression, as in the opening line which refers to 'his suburb' and 'that bedroom' and leaves the reader to decipher the implied situation (the present suburb, the bedroom of childhood). On a more ambitious level there is the wittily compressed and almost paradoxical naming of important aspects of life in 'a child's ambition to be old/And institutions where it learned to wash and lie'. There are the elegant metonymies of the fever which hears (in fact the feverish child) and the afternoon at play (in fact the children outside the window) (I use 'metonymy' in the broad sense favoured by Jakobson and Lodge, for a figure where a literal term is replaced by one allied to it not by similarity, as with metaphor, but by contiguity). The symbolism of space is carefully balanced: the realistic enclosure of the sick child and the fairy tale barriers of the broken bridge and the dark thickets, contrasting with the wide spaces of the welcoming horizon and sky. The negatives form a subtle pattern, the poem starting 'no window', and continuing 'not all his weeping' before reaching the hypothetical forgetting and the acquisition of the actually inaccessible truth. Auden shows a mastery of phonetic effects, varying from the deliberately ostentatious alliteration of 'his meadows multiply' or 'his weeping ways through weary wastes' to the more discreet patterning of 'where it learned to wash and lie'. He has also a superb control of rhythm in such lines as 'some ruin where an evil heritage was burned' (where a strong emphasis on the key-words 'ruin', 'evil', 'heritage' and 'burned' disrupts the basic metre)

and in the triumphantly symmetrical final line on the 'father's house and mother tongue'. The syntax shows masterful discipline, as in the six-line sentence of the sestet, and there is great skill in fitting the syntax into the verse scheme, with rhymes on prepositions and on verbs of which the object is immediately to appear ('found/The castle'). The total impact of the poem is to give us a picture of an acutely intelligent mind vigorously and coherently formulating, in turn, a biography (of loss), a fantasy (of obstruction) and a hypothesis (of salvation) and bringing out the consistency-moral and psychological, recognisable to the reader or startling to him-of each of these experiences.

It is not difficult to find similar achievements in Rilke. An instance is 'Ein Frauen-Schicksal' ('A Woman's Fate') (Rilke, 1966: I, 269), a poem which Auden quotes in translation in his 1940 review. There is a slight similarity in the theme, since the Rilke poem is about a woman who has outlived the intensity of youthful life. The structure is very different since the poem depends essentially on a simile (Engel notes the centrality of the simile in Rilke's creation at this period, 1986: 105). The first quatrain depicts a king borrowing a drinking glass which is then treasured-and not used-by its owner; this in the second quatrain and first tercet becomes a symbol for the woman who has been used by fate (the great abstraction, 'fate', is one of the most obvious differences from the Auden poem). The second tercet then concludes in bitterness at the aging and isolation of the character. Overall then the poem differs from the Auden poem in its sense of irreversible loss. Formally however it has a good deal in common with Auden. As in Auden, the phrasing is economical to the point of paradox, as with the owner of the glass who preserves it 'als wär es keines' (as if it weren't one'). Rilke neatly uses the transferred epithet in 'die ängstliche Vitrine' ('the anxious glass') (in fact a glass case that makes people anxious who have to approach it; the effect is, again, metonymic in the broad sense, rather than metaphoric). He carefully structures patterns of time, starting with the King-in the present tense-and his subject-still in the present tense but 'hernach' ('afterwards')-then the woman as victim of fate as it acted in the past, transmuting into the present preservation of the precious things (or those which seem so), finishing with the final bleak past of aging. He carefully controls distance through the definite and indefinite articles, pronouns and adverbs: the poem starts with 'the King' choosing 'a' glass-*irgendeines*, 'any' one; then we have fate 'perhaps', 'sometimes', choosing 'a' woman who then preserves 'a small life' in 'the glass case'. Like Auden, he uses sound-echoes within a phrase, but these, again as with Auden, do not necessarily involve the repetitions close together or in the most conspicuous position at the beginnings of words. So in the phrase 'sie zu zerbrechen, abseits' ('to destroy it, by the side'); the repeated *z* sounds are quite conspicuous, and slightly difficult to pronounce, but the repeated *s* sounds create a continuing pattern which is not quite so easy to perceive. The total effect is of harshness modified by smoothness, corresponding to the way the violence of 'destroying' is modified by the placing aside. There is a very strong use of rhythmic effects. A striking example is the second line 'ergreift, daraus zu trinken, irgendeines', ('seizes, to drink from, any one') where the reader's suspense in waiting for the object of the verb suggests a pause in the king's action and the suddenness of his choice. Another is the fine symmetry of the ending:

und wurde einfach alt und wurde blind
 und war nicht kostbar und war niemals selten.
 ('and simply became old and blind and was not costly and was never rare').

The regularity of rhythm imitates the monotonous emptiness of the life. Rilke's most remarkable technical achievement in the poem is his exploitation of syntax. The first eleven lines form a single sentence, rich in shifts of focus, parentheses, qualifications (and involving the striking enjambement 'zu bang/ sie zu zerbrechen') ('too fearful/ to destroy it'), and this powerfully contrasts with the harsh simplicity of the ending.

The total import of the poem then is not unlike that of Auden's; again we are struck by the reflective and analytic power of the poet, we note his coherence in passing from a familiar and near-legendary reality (kings and glasses, fate) through an ironic distancing to a recognition of loss, and we recognise his constant awareness of the complex emotional associations of his subject matter, uniting legendary splendour and realistic despair. Both poems can be perhaps best grasped in terms of the way the verse rhythm and the structure of expectations in each leads the reader to expect a conclusion, which is then not the one the poet provides : Rilke enters into a picturesque spectacle but ends with an anti-climax as he foregrounds the helplessly unchanging aftermath; Auden enters into a pattern of nostalgia but ends by hinting, with surprising optimism, that there is a potential for novelty and harmony.

There are, then, significant differences between the two poems, most crucially perhaps in Rilke's central use of simile and in Auden's use of fantasy. What they have in common is, however, something very important: they both seek to define a kind of personality and its potential for growth and decline, and in both the definition depends essentially on the shifting perspective of the author. In fact it especially depends on the way the poets conspicuously exploit the fictive-the legendary, the negative, the hypothetical-and so attain a general or typical vision rather than a directly literal one.

It is clear that his discovery of Rilke strengthened a tendency in Auden, and that Rilke's influence waned when Auden turned from a preoccupation with the way an individual can form his own pattern of life to more general reflections on life and civilisation; but his relationship with Rilke is a striking example of the way a major writer can learn from another without loss of individuality. The important work of Harold Bloom has stressed that the influence of one poet on another can be a matter of anxiety, and that it can be a matter of Oedipal conflict. What we find in the case of Auden and Rilke, however, does not suggest conflict or anxiety. On the contrary, it shows how knowledge of a previous author can enrich a poet's technical skill and at the same time help him to focus his thinking on his priorities in life and on the way that poetry can reflect such thinking and help to form it. It shows also Auden's generosity of spirit, in his warm and explicit admiration of Rilke, and his good-humoured common-sense, in his readiness to poke mild fun at the more eccentric manifestations of Rilke's vision. In fact it tends to support a more conservative view of tradition, in which tradition offers a strength which is advantageous to the new writer. Rilke had learnt to express a certain kind of aesthetic distance from the real and he had thought out very fully the implications of Symbolist devotion to the imagination. In these ways he

had already done something that Auden wished to do. But for Auden this was only part of his total purpose. There was a debate within him between a primarily aesthetic and a primarily moral view of life, and this is in part a debate with the model of Rilke, whose excesses (if he is judged rationally) showed Auden the aspects of symbolism which he could not accept. The debate ceased as Auden grew older, changed his beliefs, and gained new experiences in his new environment in the United States; it looks as if Auden's uncertainties simply faded away, rather than being fully resolved. But we may conclude that the experience of seriously considering, over several years, a poet with whom he had much in common but from whom he had many divergences was part of the process by which he came to know himself better and so to pass on to a calmer and more confident acceptance of life.

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