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Brian Pronger

AUDEN, WYSTAN HUGH (1907–1973)

Anglo-American poet and critic.

The child of cultivated, upper-class parents, Auden profited from a traditional British elite schooling. As a student at Christ College, Oxford, he first excelled in science, but shifted to English with the intention of becoming a "great poet." A quick study, Auden acquired an undergraduate reputation as an almost oracular presence, and he began to assemble around him a group of young writers that included Christopher Isherwood (whom he had met at preparatory school), C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender. After leaving Oxford in 1928 Auden decided to spend a year in Berlin learning German. He then held a series of school-teaching jobs that allowed time for writing.

Like the other members of his group—who came to be known as "the poets of the thirties"—Auden broke with the pastoral placidity of the Georgian trend in English poetry, seeking to encompass such modern technology and such trends in thought as Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism. Although he later repudiated their ideological commitments, Auden's early poems have a numinous ambiguity that unfortunately was largely lost in his later more pellucid but often facile work. In his early poetry the exaltation of the figures of the Airman and the Truly Strong Man represents a continuation of the adolescent aesthete's admiration for the "hearty." His work in the 1930s had both the exuberance and the limitations of youth.

In 1937 he expressed his sympathy for the loyalist cause by visiting Spain, and the following year he traveled to China with Isherwood. In 1940, having become disillusioned with left-wing causes, he converted back to Anglicanism, a change that profoundly affected the character and tone of his writing. With the outbreak of World War II in Europe, he settled in New York, where he met and fell in love with a young man, Chester Kallman, who was destined to be his lifelong companion. This relationship was celebrated in a series of poems to an anonymous and ungendered lover, and also in a deliberately outrageous composition, "The Queen's Masque." This unpublished dramatic composition, intended to be performed for Kallman's twenty-second birthday on February 7, 1943, was not rediscovered until 1988. In 1941 Auden collaborated with the gay composer Benjamin Britten in a chamber opera, *Paul Bunyan*. Through Kallman, whose knowledge was expert and unflagging, Auden expanded his interest in opera, and the two collaborated on a libretto for Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, as well as other works. Although actual sexual relations between them ceased after the first years, the two men made a life together based on mutual trust and affection. Auden took charge of earning a living, while Chester excelled in cooking and homemaking. Despite some asperities, their relationship survived not only in New York, but in Ischia on the Mediterranean and in Kirchstetten in Austria, where they spent the summers.

Auden's later work is marked by ambitious cycles, such as *A Christmas Oratorio* (1945) and *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), which are technically expert but, for many readers at least, lacking in the charisma of truly great poetry. Partly to make ends meet, Auden produced a considerable body of prose criticism, and this sometimes deals movingly with other homosexual authors. His most explicit homosexual poem is a piece of doggerel called "The Platonic Lay" or "A Day for a

Lay," which is not included in authorized editions of his works. Late in life he had some contacts with the emerging American gay movement, though to some his attitudes seemed old-fashioned and not devoid of self-contempt.

Auden's works are still being edited and published, and consensus on his ultimate status has not been achieved. A recent attempt to show that his work anticipated the feminist and ecology movements is unconvincing. Often courageous in his outspokenness, Auden no doubt suffered at the hands of critics who were uncomfortable with his sexuality. His poetry and prose, which were wide-ranging and copious, retain a strong sense of period: they tell us much of what the thirties were like in Britain, and the forties and fifties in America.

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AUGUSTINE, SAINT (354-430)

Bishop of Hippo and one of the Doctors of the Church. Born at Thagaste in North Africa, he was raised as a Christian. As a young man Augustine seems to have been deeply troubled by the strength of his sex drive. Later he recalled how "in the sixteenth year of my flesh . . . the madness of raging lust exercised its supreme dominion over me." In the course of his studies of rhetoric at Carthage he gradually abandoned his Christian faith. Augustine was drawn instead to **Manichae-**

anism, which held that man was a product of a primal struggle between the high god and his Satanic opponent, whose powers were almost equally great. Although he later abandoned this dualistic belief, important residues of its dark coloration remained with him.

During his youth he formed a very deep bond with another male student. After the premature death of this beloved friend, Augustine movingly remarked: "I still thought my soul and his soul to have been but one soul in two bodies, and therefore was my life a very horror to me, because I would not live by halves. And even therefore perchance was I afraid to die, lest he should wholly die, whom so passionately I had loved." (*Confessions*, 4:6).

In his thirties Augustine came under the influence of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, and was baptized in 387. He then returned to North Africa, where he became a priest in 391. Four years later he became bishop of Hippo, where he led a demanding life of church administration, theological controversy, and serious writing. His best known works are his autobiography, *The Confessions*, and his lengthy meditation on Christian history, *The City of God*, which was occasioned by the news of the sack of Rome in 410.

In keeping with the mainstream views of the Greek and Latin theologians who had preceded him, the mature Augustine maintained that sexual intercourse was lawful only within marriage with the aim of producing offspring—thus excluding birth control. Even within marriage he denied that sexual pleasure could ever be approved as an end in itself. Somewhat exceptionally, he held that, despite the cleansing efficacy of baptism, some taint of the sin of Adam lingered in the very act of procreation through semen which ascended genealogically to our first parent. From such premises Augustine concluded that the individual free will is radically circumscribed, seeing in the capacity of the male member for unsought-after erec-