EVOLVONG WILDS: AUDEN, ECOLOGY, AND THE FORMATION OF A NEW POETICS

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A Legacy in Crisis

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.
—W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeat

"The unacknowledged legislators of the world" describes the secret police, not the poets.
—W.H. Auden, The Dyers Hand

Nothing I ever wrote saved a single Jew from being gassed. It's perfectly alright to be an engagé writer as long as you don't think you're changing things. Art is our chief means of breaking bread with the dead, but the social and political history of Europe would be exactly the same if Dante or Shakespeare or Mozart had never lived.
—W.H. Auden, Interview with Adam Levy

W.H. Auden is, without question, a prominent figure in twentieth century Anglo-Saxon literature. One needs only to submit his name in any database to recognize the wide-reaching effects of his work both within the poetic and the scholarly communities alike. Yet, despite Auden's due celebrity, there is a singular point of contention within Auden scholarship (a crisis, one may call it) that coalesces with the major crux of both Auden's life and the contemporary political world at large, namely, that there is a sharp contrast between his pre-1940 poetry and the verses that follow until his death in 1973. Just as Great Britain was set to enter the Second World War, Auden, the shining example of British twentieth-century literary achievement, emmigrated to America, effectively turning his back on his homeland in the hour of its greatest need. Just as he shunned his British celebrity, Auden also disowned the politically-minded poetry of his youth that afforded him his literary fame, instead turning towards a more subdued, domestic poetic voice. How are scholars to interpret such a divergence from what made Auden a

household name in the 1930s? Is his post-1940 work a decline that somehow mars Auden's otherwise illustrious career, thus stripping him of the title of "great" and naming him "merely good?"

The majority of Auden scholars agree that Auden's emigration and subsequent political apathy dramatically altered the course of his career, so much so that the fulcrum on which conversations surrounding Auden's legacy usually balances begins with his self-imposed exile. Jo-Anne Cappeluti puts it succinctly: "With the exception of [Edward] Mendelson, whether a critic sees Auden becoming a Christian poet or a secular poet at mid-career, there is always the sense of something lost, less powerful than in early Auden" (9). The aforementioned Mendelson, Auden's editor and literary executor, writes that Auden's early verse was "edgy with antagonism"; however, while he doesn't believe Auden's sudden shift in trajectory to be a downwards one, he does admit to the seeming lack of urgency pervading his later verse (Mendelson, *Early Auden* 5). Gone are the menacing landscapes of his poetic youth, refusing entrance to travelers and refuting prescribed definition from the reader. Gone are the ambiguous personas that seem to contradictorily threaten and attempt to teach the intended audience simultaneously. Gone is almost every mark of Auden's early poetry that distinguished it as exemplary in the 1930s. Rather than the spy present in "The Secret Agent," we are given the elderly man contemplating his death in "Talking to Myself." Auden eschews his entire political endeavors after his move to America and, in fact, excises much of his early poetry from his completed collection post-1940. As Edward Upward, a staunch critic of later Auden, writes:

> He seemed to have deliberately chosen not to become the truly great poet that I was sure he could have become. I had never doubted that he would have a

> permanent place amongst the English poets, but I had come to think—and I still think—that it will not be as high a place as it could have been. (Carpenter 454)

These are the sentiments that plague Auden—that, somehow, Auden's second act amounts to nothing more than a decline in poetic aptitude.

I, in one sense, absolutely agree with critics such as Upward, who argues that Auden's poetry undergoes a metamorphosis mid-career, catalyzed by his trek across the Atlantic Ocean. His edgy antagonism is replaced with a more reserved, reflective, and religious style. He has, at times, been charged with domesticity, especially in the poem sequences such as "Horae Canonicae" and "Thanksgiving for a Habitat." Many of Auden's skeptics stand firm in the idea that Auden abandoned the political world, and, thus, abandoned his ability to make any tangible changes within the frameworks of an ever-growing international politics. As he grew in age, so too did his poetry grow in docility—therefore rendering his later work much less consequential than the biting words of early verses such as "Letter to Lord Byron" or "Journey to Iceland."

As insightful as are the readings offered by Upward and others, I see them as limited. Indeed, while Auden's exile marks a drastic change in the tone and subject matter of his work (the volta of his career, to adopt poetic terminology), it is not, as some would argue, a turn for the worse. Rather, it is merely a turn for the different. I argue that what his later poetry lacks in political immediacy it makes up for in a politics that was, at the time, just burgeoning into relevance. I speak here of political ecology, a field that begins in 1962 with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and has, in the decades since, gained considerable traction, having been engaged by groundbreaking critics including Jane Bennett and Timothy Morton. Rather than dismissing Auden's later years as nothing more than trivial, what if, instead, we are to view these poems as an early entry within the eco-critical field? In what follows, I will argue that Auden's 1939 poem

"In Memory of W.B. Yeats" inaugurates his recreation of his poetics and ushers in the ecologically-minded poetry that dominates the twilight of his career. His post-1940 poetry still seeks to reshape the ways in which his readers interact with the surrounding world, albeit in subtle ways that may not speak as loudly as the bombast of his youth. While his later poetry is not explicitly ecological, his mindfulness concerning the human/other divide speaks mightily to the ideals of respected twenty-first- century ecological thinkers such as Donna Harraway and Cary Wolfe.

As Auden writes in the opening pages of his prolific *The Dyer's Hand*:

> Every work of a writer should be a first step, but this will be a false step unless, whether or not he realizes it at the time, it is also a further step. When a writer is dead, one ought to be able to see that his various works, when taken together, make one consistent *oeuvre.* (21)

While many view Auden's later years a misstep, as a break in an otherwise illustrious *oeuvre,* I will show in what follows that this is not the case. Rather, Auden's early poetry demonstrates subtle yet detectable marks of the eco-critical, marks that he explores in greater depth during his American years. I will approach this project in such a way as to validate Auden's moves from the political to the ecological, beginning with his childhood discovery of what he calls his "sacred landscapes" and outlining his career step-by-step as he rises in his British literary celebrity, chafes at his political fame, and reinvents his poetics. These are, despite some critics attesting otherwise, steps forward in Auden's overarching body of work. Critics such as Upward are too often distracted by Auden's extreme shift in style to notice the ways in which his later poetry seek to do something, for the mid-twentieth century, completely new. As his early works lead into his second act, we may trace Auden's trajectory from a politically-minded poet to one whose

works contributed to the birth of a new intellectual field. However, there are far more similarities between his early and later poems than is often allotted. While it is true that his early verses exemplify his predilection for the political, they nonetheless showcase evidence of the ecological that would find its way more prominently in his later poetry. In much the same way, he remains as political at the end of his life as he is at the beginning, despite the politics manifesting in a more indirect manner. I will begin, then, by showcasing how Auden's early poetry foreshadows his move into the realm of the ecological while maintaining a primarily political forefront. I will follow by illuminating Auden's crisis years between 1939 and 1940, and will show how "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" provides Auden with a new poetics which would guide his later poetry. I will then finish with the later, ecological Auden, along with the various poems which seek to blur the lines between the ontological divide. The speaker of "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" claims that "poetry makes nothing happen" (36). The speakers in Auden's poems that follow, however, seem to disagree. While his early work may seek to alter the political landscape (and only hints at the ecological that is to come), his post-1940 verses instead offer up ways in which the individual may communicate and interact with the non-human world. In this way, Auden enacts a much more personal politics, perhaps offering his vision for a more sustainable, symbiotic biosphere, one only attainable through the respective acts of his singular readers.

A Brief Note on Sacred Objects

Many of us have sacred landscapes which probably all have much in common, but there will almost certainly be details which are peculiar to each.
—W.H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand

General practice amongst literary critics calls for the complete separation of writers from the work that they have produced. Auden was himself a staunch believer in this principle, arguing that "a writer's private life is, or should be, of no concern to anybody except himself, his family and his friends" (Levy 23). This rule is, mostly, one that should remain unbroken. If a critic were to impose aspects of writers' biographies onto their work, then any number of interpretative limitation if not outright errors could potentially manifest. Yet, there are always certain exceptions that shatter any notion of a universal truth. Despite his protestations, Auden's biography illuminates his work, providing details that help to fill in the blanks that his ambiguous voice often leaves in its wake. His life is inextricably linked with his work, especially as he draws on the images and scenery that monopolized his youth. To disregard the biographic is not only to misread many of Auden's most influential verses, it is to do a great injustice to his entire poetic collection, thus damaging Auden's status within the hierarchy of the English literary tradition *en masse*. Both Auden's early and later poetry share similarities in their settings and in the way their non-human actors interact with their human counterparts. It serves my argument well to make a brief note of Auden's childhood and to, more importantly, elucidate why abandoned mining camps and limestone hills appear again and again throughout his collection.

Auden was born the third and last son to Constance Bicknell and George Auden in York, 1907. A year later, the Audens moved to the city of Birmingham, an industrial hot-zone in the early years of the twentieth century, where Auden's father founded and ran a medical practice

intended to serve the local industry workers that made up much of Birmingham's populace (Carpenter 3). It was here that Auden spent his childhood days, and where, as biographer Humphrey Carpenter surmises, he first became aware of and infatuated with his surroundings. His surroundings consisted of the lead mines and factories that surrounded the city, landmarks that Auden would soon adopt into his imaginative world. His love of things industrial began in Solihull where he, along with his brothers, would often take walks to the local gasworks. This was, at first, not for the mere enjoyment of idling around the mechanical equipment. Rather, his ventures were prompted by a slight bronchial condition. The fumes from the gasworks were thought to be good for the young Auden's chest. Soon, however, Auden became captivated by both the men and the machinery of the gasworks. He spent many a day conversing with the laborers and watching in astonishment as they went about their tasks. The gasworks was, as Carpenter writes, "the first place that seemed to him numinous, arousing a feeling of wonder and awe" (5). These were the sights and smells that occupied the young Auden and that endeared him to the mines and factories of his childhood town.

As Auden grew, so too did his love for the industries of Solihull and Birmingham. He expanded his knowledge of the surrounding area via train rides from Sulihull through the countryside and into the more condensed city center. Carpenter paints Auden's enthusiasm for this commute well:

> Nothing was more exciting to Wystan than a train ride from Solihull into the city with its smoking chimneys and huge warehouses, and then (if he was lucky) onwards by another train, further north, where the line ran to Wolverhampton—past the canal, and between mile after mile of blackened factories with furnaces flaring up as the train passed. (6)

Not only did these landscapes provide fuel to fire Auden's imaginative world, they also influenced many of the books that made up his adolescent shelf. George Auden, himself an educated man and a voracious reader (it was he who first introduced Wystan to Freud, a figure that would influence much of Auden's work in the 1930s), encouraged his children to read as much as they could in whatever subjects interested them. Wystan, enamored by the industries that engulfed him, chose to fill his bookcase with titles reflecting his ever-growing appreciation for the lead mines. This, along with the "emotional intensity" of Auden's "highly-strung Anglo-Catholic" mother, led Auden to bury himself deeper and deeper within his imaginative world of "lead mines, slag-heaps, and mining machinery" (Davenport-Hines 16).

Unsurprisingly, Auden had, at least until his teen years, thought himself destined for a life as a lead miner—a notion that may have terrified other young men (especially those whose fathers were doctors, as Auden's was), yet one that tantalized the young Auden with the promise of an adventurous-if-not-dangerous life (Carpenter 14). However, despite Auden's interest in the miner's life, his imaginative world would soon take an interesting turn. It would be, as Richard Davenport-Hines points out, "emptied of human beings" (16). Carpenter pinpoints this peculiar move by the young Auden succinctly. "It was not so much," he writes, "that he wanted to understand machinery and to know how it worked: rather that he wanted to love it and make it part of his private imaginative world, of which the gasworks had been the beginning" (13). It was the silence that captivated Auden—the stillness of the machines after the work had been done, the cold, opaque glare of his reflection in the metal, the ways in which the earth reclaimed itself after a mining operation had been abandoned by whatever corporation had started the digging in the first place. His sacred objects were not the miners or their work. Rather, they were the metal

itself, and the machines that extracted it. Auden writes on these sacred objects in his oft-quoted essay "Making, Knowing, Judging." He writes:

> Most of my reading had been related to a private world of Sacred Objects. Aside from a few stories like George Macdonald's *The Princess and the Goblin* and Jules Verne's *The Child of the Cavern,* the subjects of which touched upon my obsessions, my favorite books bore such titles as *Underground Life, Machinery for Metalliferous Mines, Lead and Zinc Ores of Northumberland and Alston Moor,* and my conscious purpose in reading them had been to gain information about my sacred objects. (*The Dyer's Hand* 34)

Given the above, the question invariably arises as to what a man whose obsession involves the destruction of the earth and the extraction of its resources has to say to the ecologically-minded reader? Should not any eco-critical reader worth her salt dismiss Auden outright as he sings the praises of such a damaging and environmentally-negligent practice? If one is to answer this question truthfully, one must first make note that Auden's chief interest does not lie within the practice of mining itself. Rather, it is in the sacred objects discussed above, a point that we must keep near the forefront if we are to discuss Auden in an ecological light—even as he demonstrates his aptitude for the metalliferous.

Critic Paola Marchetti offers a possible avenue for ecocritical discussion revolving around Auden. As she points out, Auden uses his early landscape to work "through a complex series of opposites" (200). Marchetti argues that these opposites are merely projections of what she calls Auden's "bi-polar vision." As she writes: "His poetic landscapes are haunted by the opposition of the wilderness and the city, reflecting a divided human nature, engaged in a historic quest in which the ideal is repeatedly threatened with relapse into barbarism" (200). In

this way, Marchetti surmises that Auden uses his landscapes, and thus his sacred objects, as nothing more than tools for discussing the self. Like many critics before her, she chooses to read Auden's landscapes in the Freudian sense, as a projection of Auden's inner turmoil, working to find a resolution through the stanzas on the page. What if, however, we were to take a different approach? What if we were to read many of Auden's works not as allegory (as Marchetti would have us do), but as drama, with human and non-human actors alike.

In the specific case of Auden's early poetry, and especially within the lines of his two most often acknowledged as his earliest poems ("The Watershed" and "The Secret Agent"), the "complex series of opposites" is undoubtedly two-fold. Traditionally, as in Marchetti's reading, the opposites are read as a break within the speaker's psyche, between desire and the ever-present-yet-just-out-of-reach desired. This breakdown subjugates the landscape and scenery to a supporting role—merely the backdrop for a human-led struggle. However, as poems such as "The Watershed" and "The Secret Agent" suggest, this reading is in many ways a misleading one. The opposites presented within the poetry can and should be read literally. They portray the struggle between the land and those who made it their profession to tear it up in search of plunder. These poems will be explored in depth in the following section. Even within the political, Auden's inclinations for eco-critical thought are made manifest. These ecological inclinations, while decipherable in Auden's early poetry, will be explored in greater depth as his remarkable career ripens in maturity.

Ecology in the Audenesque

Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock.
Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:
This land, cut off, will not communicate.
—W.H. Auden, "The Watershed"

The Audenesque, a term used to describe the originality of Auden's poetic voice, which he developed at the age of 20, about five years after he started writing poetry, is defined by the ways in which Auden simultaneously invites his reader to share in the drama of his poems and yet keeps the reader at least an arm's length away from anything tangible. It is, as one critic writes, "cryptic, ambiguous, and menacing" (Davenport-Hines 16). His early poems are marked too by their peculiar way of "seeing" the drama unfold. Rather than placing the reader in the center of the drama, Auden would often choose to reveal the plot through a bird's-eye view, what Carpenter calls Auden's "hawk's vision" (36). This was a technique that he pilfered from Thomas Hardy, but that stayed consistent throughout the late 1920s and into the 1930s. Auden used his hawk's vision to distance the reader from the unfolding action, further obfuscating the "meaning" of the poem. After all, Auden did write in *The Dyer's Hand* that a poem is "more important than anything that could be said about it" (49). At the same time, this vision allowed Auden to paint large swathes of landscape into his poetry, often including aspects of his sacred objects discussed in the last section.

Yet, despite Auden's recurrent addition of landscape and its various uses in his work, many critics don't regard Auden as an ecologically-minded poet. Auden himself believed that art was meant as an outlet for human emotion. Carpenter, summarizing Auden's thoughts, writes, "Humanity is naturally anthropocentric and interested only in itself, so that art should be concerned chiefly with the human life and should use landscape just as a background" (Carpenter

32). Auden writes this manifesto himself in the third part of "Letter to Lord Byron: "To me Art's subject is the human clay / And landscape but a background to a torso" (198-199). Landscapes, as Auden writes here, are, for him, nothing more than a backdrop for human melodrama. This, as I shall elucidate, does not coalesce with the works Auden writes, even within the politically-minded poems he composes during his British residency. An author's intentions or views about their work is almost never the only way in which a reader should read said work. Rather, once a piece of writing is created, it necessarily manifests a life of its own, revealing itself to each of its individual readers in often surprising ways.

While I have no doubts that it was Auden's intention to write within the public, cultural realm in the 1930s, he simultaneously gives credence to the ecological. Before delving into the poetry, it is worth noting here what I mean by the term "ecological." Morton, in *Ecology without Nature,* writes about the need for a new kind of ecology, one that eradicates the term "nature" entirely from its vocabulary and instead posits a new, inclusive conception of ecology. "Strange as it may sound," writes Morton, "the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art" (1). This is to say that positioning "nature" as "That Thing Over There" allows the human to postulate themselves as somehow above and outside of nature (1). Yet, as Morton warns us, this is a blatant contradiction when we consider how we normally equate the good with the natural. As Morton writes, "Saying that something is unnatural is saying that something does not conform to a norm, so 'normal' that it is built into the very fabric of things as they are" (14). This contradiction is built into popular cultural discussions surrounding "nature" and, in broader terms, the ecological. Morton has set out to blur the lines between "nature" and "culture," to move beyond a binary that has proven detrimental to the relationship between the human and the non-human. I argue that Auden's early poetry, his

Audenesque work, demonstrates glimpses of the framework that Morton posits in *Ecology Without Nature.* While Auden, in his early work, often resorts to binary language that position as the human/non-human relationship as antagonistic, he does so by raising the status of the non-human. Auden would, as his career progressed and he altered his poetic approach, remedy his use of the binary and adopt a type of ecology that would mirror Morton's.

Two of Auden's earliest published works, "The Watershed" and "The Secret Agent," exemplify the ecological within the Audenesque. These poems both carry a menacing tone, are written with Auden's hawk's vision, and are both traditionally read through a psychoanalytic lens, placing them squarely within the realm of the human and relegating the non-human to the sidelines. Auden's earliest poems may be, as Rainer Emig notes, anti-ecological in that they seek to subdue their landscapes through the use of linguistic cartography:

> His (Auden's) early works seek to control this environment through the use of maps, aligning Auden with Thoreau, a surveyor by profession. Yet, as Rick van Noy argues, Thoreau's increasing frustration with cartography became the generator of idealized, 'sublime' anti-maps in his poetry. Auden's early poems, in contrast, turn the environment into reified anti-sublime texts by creating linguistic maps out of place names. Simultaneously, they acknowledge the status of a self divided between mind and body. (214)

While Emig does not here allow Auden's landscapes ample room to speak for themselves as they often do in his work, he does bring up a troubling possibility concerning Auden's early work, namely, that Auden often resorts to the use of binary language and frameworks.

Emig is concerned with Auden's psychoanalytical divide of the mind and body, but we must also consider the disconcerting and rather sharp divide between the human and the non-

human in Auden's early verses. Binary language is something that many scholars in the ecocritical field are attempting to move beyond as it often reinforces a hierarchy of being that sets the human well above the animal, plant, and inanimate. This ontological hierarchy is introduced in the Judeo-Christian Bible, specifically in Genesis 1:26. The verse reads, "Then God said 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish and the sea and the birds in the sky…" This verse has, in the Western tradition, permitted the human to label the non-human as "other," thus granting the human permission to do with nature as they please. There is no denying that Auden utilizes these binaries early in his poetic career as he develops himself as a poet and prominent twentieth-century thinker. Yet, at the same time, he doesn't do so in order to raise the status of the human. On the contrary, he resorts to binary language to unsettle the human position on top of the ontological chain. He will, as his career progresses, move from binaries to a more cohesive, inclusive language as he reinvents himself as a poet at mid-career. Yet, we must, in discussing his poems of the late-1920s and 1930s, work through and within his binaries, as unsettling as they may be.

Regardless, the non-human in Auden's early verses "act" upon the worlds of their respective poems, participating with and, perhaps more controversially, against, the human. Let's take Auden's "The Watershed" as an example. The poem begins by introducing one of its characters—a stranger that has, presumably, never laid eyes on the scene they are currently viewing: "Who stands, the crux left of the watershed, / On the wet road between the chafing grass / Below him sees dismantled washing-floors" (1-3). While the start of the poem reads as if it is a question, the sentence ends as a statement, as if the speaker of the poem is simply relating the groundwork for the drama that is soon to unfold. The speaker continues, after introducing the stranger, to characterize the immediate surroundings. Readers are introduced to "Snatches of

tramline," "an industry already comatose," and "a ramshackle engine," amongst other machinery that has been abandoned by its original handlers (4-6). These are examples of Auden using his sacred objects within his earliest work. As we continue to read the poem, it is revealed that "Cashwell," the name of the locale, is in fact a deserted mining facility, once operating but now, as the speaker suggests, "comatose" (5). That, however, is where the ease of reference ends. In typical Audenesque fashion, Auden does not disclose the identity of the stranger standing by the watershed, nor does he suitably reveal the identity of the poetic speaker. Rather, he leaves these details intentionally obscured—just as he leaves readers alone to make their own assumptions.

We can, however, be sure of one thing: the poetic speaker cannot be the stranger introduced at the poem's introduction. If, then, the person standing by the watershed is not the one introducing the scene, then who, or perhaps more aptly, what, is? In this particular case, thinkers such as Marchetti have argued that the speaker is Auden's psyche, broken between some unknown desire and its inability to possess the desired (202). The speaker, if we are to submit to this line of thinking, is the desired other refusing entrance to the desired subject. Mendelson too writes that Auden's early poetry is often full of roads blocked by unseen forces (*Early Auden* 3). Emig, in writing on Auden's poetic speakers, believes that his poems "always speak from and for the position of the human" (215). There are, however, always exceptions to rules. "The Watershed" is one such exception. While it can reasonably be argued that the speaker of the poem is the speaking on behalf of the human, I argue that the speaker is in fact Cashwell, the abandoned mine, itself. In my reading, Cashwell is refusing entrance to the stranger—a human—because of the harm that humanity has caused the landscape through its mining practices. The stranger may desire to see the mine operational once more, or even to merely pass through, but

Cashwell, after reclaiming itself along with the discarded mining equipment, is not taking any chances.

The remainder of the first stanza chronicles the history of Cashwell, revealing that the speaker has an intense knowledge of the area, both of its past and its present: "And, further, here and there, though many dead / Lie under the poor soil, some acts are chosen, / Taken from recent winters" (10-12). As the speaker, Cashwell reveals that it is, in many ways, a graveyard. There are bodies buried under the soil of which the stranger is unaware. Cashwell goes on to describe the rather gruesome deaths of two mining operators who were isolated here during a storm so strong that the wind blew a winch from their grasps, killing one instantly and leaving the other's fate unknown (12-15). As is revealed here, there are no other living human bodies in Cashwell. There is only the watershed, its companion equipment, and the land itself. Yet, Cashwell, the speaker of the poem, would have had to have been present in order to describe these ghastly ordeals in the way that it does. While the speaker here is talking in soliloquy, specifically to the reader, the stranger is left ignorant of Cashwell's history and deaf to the speaker's recital. There is, at least, no indication that the stranger has heard, or has the ability to hear, the chronicle. In this way, the stranger is at an extreme disadvantage. Cashwell, having known its own history, contains a knowledge that the stranger will never possess, despite the stranger's wish to do so. Auden's tone here is informative, yet it is also threatening. Why detail the gruesome deaths of two mining operators and reveal the bodies of countless others if not to warn another that they may very well meet a similar fate? Cashwell, a conglomerate of the land, the mining equipment, and the history of its locale, has taken on an air of responsiveness—it has, in other words, moved from one being acted upon to the one doing the acting.

Bill Brown, in his seminal piece "Thing Theory," considers the possibility that "things," non-human and inanimate, may have the ability to enact change within their environment outside of human control. As he writes:

> Things seem to assert their presence and their power: you cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a falling nut. These are occasions outside the scene of phenomenological attention that nonetheless teach you that you're "caught up in things" and that the "body is a thing among things." They are occasions of contingency—the chance interruption—that disclose a physicality of things. (3-4)

We see the semblances of "things" manifesting in "The Watershed" as the stranger is unable to identify Cashwell, yet Cashwell is able to identify itself. The objects that constitute the mining facility become unattainable "things" in this sense. The stranger can see them, but he cannot "know" them in their entirety. Brown further illumines the utter strangeness of an object-turned-thing. "We begin to confront the thingness of objects," writes Brown, "when they stop working for us" (4). We tend to look "through" objects as a means to discover facts about ourselves. Rarely, as Brown attests, do we consider objects in their own right as we would consider a fellow human being. In "The Watershed," Auden forces his readers to consider Cashwell as a thing as opposed to an object. It refuses to be looked "through" as a means to disclosing the human past and, instead, demands the stranger to fully consider it as actant—a *thing* with agentic power. Granted, Cashwell does disclose facts about the human history at the mine. Yet, it is doing so on its own terms and not through the glare of the stranger's gaze.

Bennett too writes in a similar vein as Brown, exploring what she calls "vital materiality" (vii). When an object—that is, anything not human—begins to take on the responsibility of

agency—when, as Bennett writes, "the sardine can looks back," an object becomes a "thing," an actor that moves and influences its surroundings without human aide (2). "The notion of thing-power aims instead," writes Bennett, "to attend to the *it* as actant" (3). She goes on to describe a moment in her own life where a group of objects exerted their thingness on her as she was walking down a Baltimore street:

> Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing—between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman's efforts, the litterer's toss, the rat-poisoner's success), and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. (4)

This is *thingness* in the micro-sense. A group of small, insignificant objects captured Bennett's attention and, in one decisive moment, demanded her attention. In this way, they deny the average person's overlooking gaze. Or, rather, they demand to be classified as significant, as *things* worthy of mention and consideration. This is, perhaps, too small a scale with which to consider the agency that Auden's Cashwell exercises. Later in her book, Bennett describes a multi-state power outage whose origin was "complicated beyond full understanding, even by experts" (25). In the review of the incident, it was determined that the power grid's "heart fluttered" (25). In other words, the electricity went where it wasn't sent seemingly of its own accord. It took on a life of its own, gesturing towards "the inadequacy of understanding the grid simply as a machine or a tool" (25). This is more in line with Cashwell's agentic power in "The Watershed." Like the power grid, Cashwell was once controlled entirely by the human. However, also like the power grid, it has since acted of its own accord. This is undeniably a

radical statement, even at the time of *Vital Materiality's* publishing in 2010. How much more radical is it then for Auden to introduce the land as actor in 1927, intentionally or otherwise?

The beginning of the second stanza gives further credence to an active Cashwell: "Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock, / Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed / This land, cut off, will not communicate" (19-21). Instead of speaking to the reader, Cashwell ends its soliloquy and speaks directly to the stranger, urging him or her to "turn back," lest he or she meet the same fate as the operators mentioned in the first stanza. The stranger, the only other perceivable human in the text, is not the one communicating, just as he or she is not the one performing any discernable action. That title—actor, influencer, doer—is reserved for Cashwell itself, who, in typical Audenesque fashion. threateningly continues to warn the stranger to leave.

There is room, however, for the argument that Cashwell cannot be the speaker of the poem if it refers to itself in the third person ("This land"). I want to take special care to explain that Cashwell is not solely the land. It is, rather, a collection of different objects—the land being but one of the many that make up Cashwell's collective consciousness. Rather, Cashwell is the land, the watershed, the bodies that lie beneath the soil. It is, in many ways, like a city—made of a million parts that, when separated, seem minute and insignificant. Yet, when collected, can seem almost an insurmountable presence. Cashwell refers to the land just as New York City may refer to the Empire State Building, or just as I may refer to my left arm or the hair on my head. I do not wish to anthropomorphize, as I recognize the dangers of doing so, but there may not be an easier or more effective way to understand Cashwell as a collection of parts that, when unified, make up a collective whole. By telling the stranger that the land "will not communicate," Cashwell is forcefully saying that to enter is fruitless and potentially dangerous to the unwelcomed. The stranger will not find any friendly faces, nor any faces at all, here. Any that

were here have either died, as revealed in the first stanza, or left long ago. The mine, in an act of defiance towards the human, has reclaimed itself, and it is not willing to relinquish the agency that it has here re-found. Cashwell has been altered by the miners who once ran the facility, but it has since their departure accepted the left-behind equipment as its own, creating a conglomerate of "things" that have the ability to not only act, but to act against the will of a human being. This, the ability for Cashwell to actively resist the stander's presence and command him to "turn back," is as potent an example of vital materiality as we may reasonably expect to find in any literary work.

Cashwell continues its act of defiance through the poem's end, elaborating on its various threats and admonitions. "The beams" from the stranger's car will "wake no sleeper" (24-25). The wind will arrive to "hurt itself on pane" of glass—presumably the windshield of the automobile—in an attempt to turn the stranger back (26-27). If the stander is to take on the responsibility of actor, if the stranger is to attempt to strip Cashwell of its autonomy, then the stranger can expect even the wind to fight against the intrusion. The last two lines of the poem hint at two possible outcomes—either the stranger leaves in peace, or the stranger enters and will be met with preternatural force: "Near you, taller than the grass, / Ears poised before decision, scenting danger" (29-30). Cashwell has delivered its warning to the stander. Enter, and be assaulted by something "taller than the grass"—an unknown entity that could very well be the conglomerated consciousness of Cashwell itself. Or, more conciliatingly, the stranger could turn back, leave Cashwell, and retire to wherever it is he or she came. We must keep in mind that it is Cashwell offering the choice here, and not the other way around. Agency in "The Watershed" is carried out by the non-human, and thus human agency acts in subservience to its counterpart. Capitalism has, by the start of the twentieth century, modified nature into a market commodity

(Garrard 69). The fact that Cashwell was once a mining operation speaks to that truth. However, Cashwell flips the script on the commodifier, reinventing itself as an actor on par with, and in many ways above, the human.

While "The Watershed" is a testament to thing-power well before the advent of vital materiality, this is not the only ecologically minded sentiment that runs through the course of its lines. Eve Sorum writes that "we see almost a parody of the pastoralism that functioned as one of the more familiar 'nostalgic tropes' used (and reimagined) in eighteenth-century poetry" (169). Pastoralism, or the nostalgic wish to return to an idealized past where nature is inherently subject to culture, has persisted in Western literature since classical times. Yet, despite its persistence, and as eco-critic Greg Garrard points out, no other trope has been "as deeply problematic for environmentalism" (37). Rather than submit to the pastoralist tradition, Auden circumnavigates it. The stander is clearly yearning for the days when Cashwell was an operational mine, idealizing a past that may have well been damaging to the environment as well as the people who worked the mines. Yet, instead of satiating the stander's desire, Auden chooses instead to deny this idealization. Cashwell has reclaimed itself, and it is not keen on being owned once again. By breaking with pastoral traditions, as Auden does in "The Watershed," he positions himself within a radical ideology—one that attests to the agency of the non-human.

Just as "The Watershed" showcases both Auden's unique style and his willingness to write ecologically, so too does 1928's "The Secret Agent" share in these qualities. Yet, "The Secret Agent" ups Auden's political attentiveness while pushing the ecological more to the fringes. The poem revolves around a spy attempting to infiltrate enemy territory and plan a site for a dam. In doing so, the spy wishes to utilize the hydropower in order to provide electricity for his home state. The poem begins in the third-person, laying the foundation for the struggle

between the trained spy and the spy's undisclosed enemies: "Control of the passes was, he saw, the key / To this new district, but who would get it?" (1-2). Maintaining the Audenesque ambiguity, "The Secret Agent" leaves out many details as to the specifics of the unfolding plot. The spy is left unnamed, as are his stately affiliations. The "new" district, too, is left unnamed at the poem's onset, leaving the reader with little detail to situate the plight of the spy. The same, too, goes for the spy's "bogus guide" that is introduced in the following lines. This "bogus guide" has led the trained spy into a trap that has cut off all communications between the spy and his government (3-4). We can see here that the danger is immediate and palpable—Auden sets up the reader to cheer for the survival of the spy, to see the spy escape the trap and return the favor to the bogus guide. This is, admittedly, a drama that, unlike "The Watershed," revolves entirely around the human. The land here seems to be nothing more than a tool to be used by the spy or his enemies, whichever would happen to "control" the area first. Thus, agency belongs to the human and the non-human is again relegated to a place of acquiescence.

However, as we continue to the second stanza, non-human agency becomes more and more apparent as the drama unfolds. While the spy wishes to possess the land for the use of his people, we already know by the end of the first stanza that he has failed his mission. In doing so, he has failed to dominate the area in any tangible way. Greenhearth, as the area is named at the beginning of the second stanza, is a "fine site for a dam," but the spy would not be the one to claim it (5). Much the same as in "The Watershed," Auden gives the land in question a specific place name—a trait common to many of Auden's early poems (Emig 214). Cashwell is replaced by Greenhearth, a site that the spy's commanders have deemed a worthy location to erect a dam and build bridges. Yet, as we learn by the end of this stanza, "the bridges remain unbuilt and trouble coming" (8). Both Cashwell and Greenhearth rebel against human agency in their

respective poems, albeit in different ways. This is, as I have mentioned, a binary framework that Auden adopts in his early poetry. It is not an ideal framework from which to write a poem concerned with the agency of the non-human, yet it nonetheless showcases Auden's willingness to bring about a more inclusive structure of being. He will, as his poems mature in style and tone, overcome this binary speak. Still, both Cashwell and Greenhearth offer glimpses of Auden's tearing down of the ontological hierarchy. While Cashwell reclaims itself after the mining operators left—an extreme demonstration of the agentic non-human—Auden takes a much more subtle approach with Greenhearth. Upon first reading, the spy can reasonably be considered the protagonist of "The Secret Agent." They are, after all, the poem's namesake. What if, however, we were to read the spy as the antagonist, a modern imperial conquistador, pressing into a land that isn't and shouldn't be "owned" in order to rob it of its resources for the good of the empire? If this is the case, the bogus guide adopts the role of protagonist, fighting on behalf of Greenhearth against the spy who would see the rivers dammed and the waters stopped. However, in tricking the spy, the guide is able to ensure the river would continue to flow freely and the surrounding land would remain unchanged.

This reading becomes more apt the more we consider Britain's history of imperial conquest. Through the 1800s and into the early 1900s, England was a global presence, with locations of its empire stretching across the globe. In order to sustain such an over-reaching influence, the British Empire engaged in acts of plunder akin to theft, conquering peoples in, for example, the African Congo, and stripping their land of its resources for personal gain. Granted, Greenhearth is certainly not a name that inspires visions of the African desert, but it is true that in naming a locale, one can begin to exercise control over it. The opening of the last stanza hints at this possibility, as the spy reflects on his dire circumstances and longs for home: "The street

music seemed gracious now to one / For weeks up in the desert. Woken by water / Running away in the dark" (9-11) The spy, as evidenced above, has spent weeks within an unnamed desert. The street music is a recollection of better times, a flash back to a docile city in a more hospitable locality. Now, his cover blown and his fate within the hands of his captors, he dreams of an urban home and a companion he left behind (11-12). The fact remains, however, that the spy is currently in foreign territory, and Greenhearth, the possible site for imperial expansion, was named so only through the imperially-tinted lens of the spy and the spy's government.

The ending of the poem reveals the ultimate fate of the spy, and serves as a fair warning to those seeking imperial expansion deemed justifiable only in the eyes of those doing the expanding: "They would shoot, of course, / Parting easily two that were never joined" (13-14). The ending is reminiscent of a love story that never comes to fruition—only we the readers know better than to subscribe to the spy's nefarious cause. Auden may position Greehearth and its people as the unnamed "other," referring to them only as "they," thus de-humanizing them in comparison to the tragically-heroic spy. Yet, at poem's end, it is the collective and undisclosed "they" who possess the ability to act. They capture the spy, they execute him for his intentions, and they ensure Greenhearth lives another day unimpeded. What at first reads as tragedy is in fact cause for celebration. Auden, in "The Secret Agent," sets up a political drama that unfurls into an ecological one, showcasing his ability to consider ecological principles within his politically-minded verses.

These two poems, despite being two of Auden's earliest, clearly demonstrate Auden's ability to work within multiple realms of thinking. He is at once anti-capitalist and ecological, at once Freudian and story-teller. Carpenter suggests that Auden doesn't have any "real aptitude for noticing the details of nature" such as did, for example, Robert Frost (Carpenter 32). Yet, as the

poems suggest, Auden nonetheless attributes agency to the non-human on multiple occasions. This is an aspect of his poetry that he will more fully explore towards the end of his life and is one that makes Auden such a quandary for his readers. He claims that art is solely for human culture, then writes a poem that denies that same culture the ability to dominate the non-human other. He effectively collapses any hierarchy of being, denying a binary that has for centuries remained a defining principle in Western culture.

Auden, Politics, and Hints of the Ecological

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just
Walking dully along
—W.H. Auden, "Musee des Beaux Arts"

"The Watershed" and "The Secret Agent," while certainly exemplary examples of ecology within the Audenesque, are not the only two poems that showcase Auden's ability to be both political and ecological within the confines of an individual poem. Rather, much of Auden's work throughout the 1930s follows within the same vein. Granted, Auden was under self-imposed orders to "attend to a public sphere," or, in other words, to write with the hopes of effecting change through his influence on England's body politic (O'Neil 343). Specifically, because of this political engagedness, contemporary critics often hold the 1930s Auden in much higher regard than the later Auden. Yet, they often miss the links that tie Auden's early and later poetry together. Critics are right to point out the differences in tone, in subject matter, and in urgency, but they fail to recognize the ways in which Auden introduces his private sphere within the public one. Interestingly enough, Auden attacks modernist writing for its ambiguity, its double-voiced nature, and its overall failure to communicate its meaning clearly. Yet, these are the very attributes that define much of Auden's poetry in the 1930s, and what makes it possible for Auden to attend to the public and private spheres simultaneously (Mendelson 117). While Auden does not make an effort to present his ecological thinking at the forefront of his Audenesque work, he nonetheless allows glimpses of the ecological to shine though his culturally-minded veneer. In this way, the two "halves" of Auden's career are linked closer than

many critics have acknowledged, giving Auden a more connected body of work that disavows his so-called post-1940 decline.

Yet, despite Auden's poetic prowess and his ability to write as effectively for a twentieth-century reader as he does for a twenty-first-century one, he came painstakingly close to foregoing poetry altogether. Auden's primary goal in the 30s is to write for the public sphere, to be politically engaged, and to, hopefully, leave the world a better place through his poetry. However, on a solemn Autumn day, Auden, conversing with a friend and fellow poet, very nearly committed literary suicide. Lamenting that his friend's poetry was much better than his, and that his were "just the harmless jingle of a schoolboy who had thumbed through the *Oxford Book of English Verse*," Auden "drew his manuscripts from his pockets" and proceeded to cast them into a nearby pond. Auden, as Carpenter writes, "declared that he had got poetry out of his system once and for all and that the human race would be saved by science" (41).

While at first glance it would appear as if this incident would have a damaging effect on Auden's poetic career, it in fact did quite the opposite. It gave Auden a framework within which to write, a framework that would lend itself well to the double-voiced nature of Auden's work in the 1930s. Auden is, then, at once poet and scientist—viewing objects and events with an inquisitive yet emotionally invested lens befitting one who would, like Auden, straddle this vocational line. Luckily for the English canon, Auden decided against abandoning poetry, and instead would marry science and the arts, leaving his readers with a collection that is at once as scientifically analytical as it is artistically insightful. Auden's poems in the 1930s exemplify these double-natured attributes while maintaining his trademark style. His work in this decade launched Auden out of literary obscurity and into the national spotlight. They are at once ambiguous and borderline-menacing, and they entertain politics as their chief subject. These

traits would, after 1940 and Auden's self-imposed exile, disappear from Auden's work. Yet, they showcase here how the two halves of Auden's career are more connected than many critics give credence.

Let us start, then, by viewing Auden's 1938 poem "Brussels in Winter" as an example of Auden's penchant for attending to multiple ideologies within a singular poem. While not a widely studied poem, it nevertheless exemplifies the ecological within the Audenesque by detailing Auden's experience within the European capital during the winter of 1938. The poem begins with the speaker walking through the Brussels city center, seemingly with no other destination in mind than wherever the road may take him: "Wandering through cold streets tangled like old string, / Coming on fountains rigid in the frost" (1-2). Brussels, according to this description, is frozen in the depts of winter but simultaneously active in its twisted, winding streets. It is both moving and unmoved. Let us remember that Auden wrote this poem as tensions in Europe were beginning to boil. Nazi Germany had, by 1938, started its aggressive behaviors towards its neighbors. While it had not yet invaded Poland, the threat of doing so was unmistakable. These are the anxieties that presided over Brussels in 1938, just as they presided over much of Europe. The city, as Auden writes at the onset of the poem, is alive, yet frozen in anticipatory apprehension.

While Auden introduces his political angle at the poem's inception, the next two lines harken back to "The Watershed" and Brown's thing theory: "Its formula escapes you; it has lost / The certainty that constitutes a thing" (3-4). As the speaker wanders through Brussels' streets, the city (referred to as "it" within the poem) becomes distant, intangible, and in many ways mystifying to the speaker. The third line suggests that the city was once familiar and welcoming to the speaker, an object whose "formula," as the poem suggests, was identified, written down,

and easily remembered. Yet, the city now has adopted a mist-like quality. The speaker can hold the image of the city within his mind about as well as he can hold it within his hands. Brussels has, to adopt the language of thing-theory, transformed from knowable "object" to unknowable "thing." In 1938, almost seventy years before the theory was fully defined, Auden uses what today we would call thing theory language in describing an entire city. Brussels becomes, to the speaker of the poem, an entity that is both an enigma and a paradoxically-familiar entity. Brown describes the sensation of *thingness* in a similar manner:

> The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. And yet, the word *things* holds within it a more audacious ambiguity. It denotes a massive generality as well as particularities, even your particularly prized possessions…The word designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday. (Brown 4)

This unknowability within the familiar is what strikes Auden's speaker as they consider the city of Brussels in the rigid frost. It is concrete in the sense that the speaker has passed and will pass the rows of arcades countless times before and perhaps countless times to come. It is ambiguous in the sense that the arcades the streets, and the fountains are not the city itself. They are members of the city, but they don't constitute its entirety. The city is more than the sum of its parts, of which the speaker is one of many. It disorients, as Brown suggests in the passage above, the relation between the subject—the speaker of the poem—and the object—Brussels. The distinction between the two becomes blurred in such a manner that makes pointing out the subject –the thing doing the acting—a tall task.

We can also turn here to Bennett's notion of assemblages in order to better understand the effect the city imposes on the poem's speaker. In the second chapter of *Vibrant Matter*, Bennet introduces the "agency of assemblages," or the ways in which groups of objects act in accordance with one another. She describes the phrase by considering the relationship, much as Brown does, between the human and the non-human:

> While the smallest or simplest body or bit may indeed express a vital impetus, conatus, or clinamen, an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces. A lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors, and once humans themselves are assessed not as autonoms but as vital materialities. (Bennett 21)

In this passage, Bennett furthers the implications present in Brown's thing theory by turning the human body into a *thing* itself. Agency, writes Bennett, is a "confederation of human and non-human elements" that work together to enact tangible change (21). Bennett, turning to Deleuze and Guattari, calls this confederation an assemblage (23). Important here is the assumption that no part of a given assemblage has "sufficient competence" over its other members (24). Rather, the members of a given assemblage work for and against each other on equitable ground.

We see a concrete example of an assemblage in Auden's "Brussels in Winter." A city is, necessarily, a collection of objects both big and small, human and non-human: people, buildings, pigeons, the taxi driving much too fast down a busy highway. These are but a few members of the gargantuan assemblage that is a city. For Auden, the idiom "the city has a life of its own" takes on a literal meaning. Brussels has, like an enigmatic, mysterious stranger, become

undefinable; it has "lost the certainty that constitutes a thing." In this way, the city acts upon the speaker of the poem in a similar manner to which the speaker is acting upon the city. The speaker may choose his route through the winding streets, but there is no doubt that the streets, in some regard, persuade the speaker to take them. Is one more well-lit than another? Does one have music drifting slowly through its arcade? Is one paved smooth while another is worn with use? These are examples of how a street, let alone an entire city, can act upon the human will. Yet, we would be remiss to disregard the human agency within the assemblage that is the city. The flattening of the ontological hierarchy certainly lowers the dominance of the human, but humanity is, as Bennet insists, still a vital contributor to the assemblages that include them. The remaining stanzas of "Brussels in Winter" also attests to this point as they speak of "the old, the hungry, and the humbled" masses that make up the population of Brussels (5). They act in concert with the non-human to make up the life of the city.

There are, however, some who argue against a theory of vital materiality that I purport here and that Bennett, amongst others, brings to prominence. Benjamin Boysen, for example, argues that adhering to a theory that, at first glance, trounces human agency could potentially give the human leave to abdicate any responsibility:

> But what, perhaps, is even more infelicitous about the Romantic vision of an originary unity with the material world is that it might inspire passivity and withdrawal from political action. Distrusting the public scene of human rational action and sensing a greater unity with the local network of agential forces of which one is part, on might, in the face of climate change, for example, feel tempted to turn one's back on the public political scene and remain "dwelling" in one's backyard, feeding the hedgehogs milk in the evening. (Boysen 237)

Boysen certainly brings to light a potential downfall of vital materialist thinking. If, as he surmises, human agency is rendered insignificant by the mere fact that all things, inanimate and otherwise, have agency, then why should the human feel responsible for their actions? Should not the blame be dispersed across all parties just the same as agency? To adopt a popular idiom, this critique is to miss the forest for the trees. Vital materialism does not abdicate humanity from responsibility. Rather, if anything, it increases human responsibility by advocating for an inclusive nature-culture that, in turn, benefits all objects, human and otherwise. Vital materialism is, as Bennett attests, "an ethical call to political action" (Bennett XV). By harming the environment, we in turn harm ourselves. This may be reading Bennett's work in its most selfish sense, but it nonetheless serves to refute Boysen and others like him. We have just as much responsibility to feed the "hungry masses" in Auden's poem as we do to avoid making our planet nothing more than a continuous, all-encompassing landfill.

More to this point, the third stanza provides an apt example of the non-human working in concert with the human, creating an assemblage that in turn constitutes a city. As the human and the non-human work in concert, we see the rising of a nature-culture that holds the potential for a more harmonious existence with the non-human other: "Ridges of rich apartments loom tonight / Where isolated windows glow like farms, / A phrase goes packed with meaning like a van" (9-11). While Auden speaks to the hushed, anxious nature of a European city preparing for inevitable war, he also details the ways in which the city itself, with both its human and non-human inhabitants, manifests a life of its own. The apartments loom like specters. The windows glow with light. Even phrases are "packed like a van" with incredible force. These non-human elements decide the qualities of the city just as much, if not more so than the speaker walking through the streets of Brussels.

The speaker seems to recognize this fact, albeit they attempt to dissuade the self of this uneasy notion at the poem's end by reasserting that history is, after all, made for man. Auden writes: "A look contains the history of man / And fifty francs will earn a stranger right / To take the shuddering city in his arms" (12-14). Agency here is thrust back into the arms of the human, but not before the speaker of the poem experiences the other-worldly sensation of being acted upon by the inanimate. The human may be able to take the "shuddering city in his arms," but the city, too, has the capacity to either accept or reject any given stranger. This is necessarily a reading that anthropomorphizes the non-human city, an act that some may view as doing a disservice to the notion of an agentic materiality. This is, however, simply not the case. Bennett turns to Darwin's study of an earthworm and George Levine's critique of the study as an example. Darwin, in studying the earth worm, begins to see in them "an intelligence and a willfulness that he recognized as related to his own" (99). This was, for Levine, an anthropomorphic gesture that pointed more towards Darwin rather than it giving any credit to the worm. Yet, as Bennett makes clear, Darwin's anthropomorphizing nonetheless led to his discovery of the worm as its own "distinctive, material complexity" (99). It is within this spirit—that anthropomorphizing is, in some cases, a tool—which I write of Auden's Brussels. By anthropomorphizing the city, we see the disintegration of any hierarchy of being. The speaker, along with the non-human elements of the assemblage, all act upon each other, with none necessarily rising above another.

Other early poems, such as "The Wanderer" and "The Watchers," also exhibit signs of non-human agency as the human actors in their respective poems give way to the mounting pressures of the non-human other. In "The Wanderer," for example, the speaker falls victim to "houses for fishes," "a bird stone-haunting," "bird-flocks," and a "sudden tiger's leap" (10, 13,

19, 22). Non-human agency is rampant throughout much of Auden's early poetry such as these, despite his focus on the political. Poems such as these make it possible to view Auden's shift at mid-career as necessary. His later poems are, if we accept this view, less of a reinvention of himself and more of an emergence of the poetic qualities that were present for the duration of his working life.

While "Brussels in Winter" further demonstrates Auden's ability to grant agency to the non-human outside of the natural landscape, his 1935 poem "On This Island" displays Auden's use of the British landscape while simultaneously allowing the crux of the poem to revolve around Auden's beliefs concerning the current state of British affairs in 1935. The poem begins, like "The Watershed," by introducing a stranger to a landscape which he or she has never examined: "Look, Stranger, on this island now / The leaping light for your delight discovers" (1-2). The island here is England itself, a land that the unnamed speaker knows well and wishes to share with the stranger. While the scene is ambiguous as the speaker and the stranger remain unnamed, the tone reads differently than it does in poems like "The Watershed." Rather than threatening the stranger, the speaker invites the stranger to "stand stable here / and silent be" so the speaker may reveal England's treasures (3-4). Yet, despite Auden's written wish to relegate landscape to the background, he continues the poem by having the speaker emphasize the importance and beauty of the sea and the English coastline ("Letter to Lord Byron Part III," 198-199). After imploring the stranger to be silent, the speaker continues: "That through the channels of the ear / May wander like a river / The swaying sound of the sea" (5-7). The speaker, captivated by the sea, wishes to share with the stranger his or her revelry. Not only that, Auden, through alliterating the "s" phoneme, invites his readers to hear the sea brushing against the English shoreline just as the speaker invites the stranger. It is as if his readers may be the poetic

stranger themselves, being carried through at Auden's behest snippets of the English seaboard. In this way, Auden paints his readers into his canvas landscape—indirectly taking his arm around their shoulders as they watch the sea swaying in the English breeze. Auden, in a Wordsworthian manner, is noticing the details of nature. Yet, it is a very specific nature which he is here advocating for. He does not sing the praises of the sea for the sea's sake, but rather calls attention to a specific one that reminds him of home and of his idealized landscape.

The second stanza, too, draws the attention of the stranger to the natural beauty of Great Britain, although, instead of taking the bird's-eye view of the first stanza, it focuses its lens to a small field by a cliff. The speaker also invites the stranger to "pause," just as the speaker invites the stranger to "look" in the first stanza (8). As they pause, the speaker further describes the natural landscape: "The chalk wall falls to the foam and its tall ledges / Oppose the pluck / And knockoff the tide" (9-11). Auden, in using the landscape, creates his ideal England—harmonious, docile, with the sound of the sea skimming the side of the chalk cliffs. The end of the stanza reveals the only living being other than the stranger and the speaker lingering in the area—a seagull lodging on the cliff face (13-14). It is odd that Auden, at the height of his literary recognition for his political poetics, would write a poem so enamored with the natural. To this point, "On This Island" is not peopled. Rather, its population consists of the sea, the field, and the cliff face. In the first two stanzas, Auden lifts the wilderness above the domestic. His emphasis is on the natural aspects of England and not the man-made (Daniel 148). Yet, while Auden allows the landscape room to act on its own accord, he does so in this poem in order to portray his ideal English citizenship—communal, harmonious, and containing a common perception. In order to accomplish this common perception, the speaker invites the stranger to share in his or her patriotic, naturalistic vision of England.

Yet, the third and last stanza seems to shatter the speaker's dream of a unified, organic England. Harkening back to the first stanza, the beginning of the last stanza again widens the lens, bringing the speaker and the stranger back into the clouds as if they are looking down on the island from above. Having retreated back to a place of omniscience, the speaker describes the scene below: "Far off like floating seeds the ships / Diverge on urgent voluntary errands" (15-16). Auden, fifteen lines in, finally introduces fellow humans into the poem. Yet, they do not seem to share in his speaker's vision for England. Rather than "looking" and "pausing" along with the speaker, such as the stranger has done, the ships instead speed away from each other, indifferent to the plights of the other ships and pre-occupied by "voluntary" errands. Instead of listening to the sound of the sea, or witnessing the gull rest on the cliff face, they disperse to unknown locations. The poem continues: "And this full view / Indeed may enter / And move in memory as now these clouds do" (17-19). The speaker, longing for a unity with the ships' crews, appears to be further and further from the speaker's desired reality. The "full view" is the speaker's wish for the ships to slip out of their solipsism and join in the idealized, moralized landscape, unifying under a national cause for communal living. Yet, the speaker realizes the futility of this dream, recognizing that these musings move in and out of the mind like the clouds over the ocean—tangible in a singular, defined moment, but, like the sailing ships, dispersed and disparate in the next. While the landscape here plays a significant, vital role in Auden's idealized England, it nonetheless acquiesces to the political by poem's end. Yet, "On This Island" remains a prime example of Auden's double-voiced verse. He simultaneously attends the public sphere of the English citizenry and the private sphere of an idealized landscape. While Auden is, in 1935, not yet prepared to dedicate an entire poem to the ecological, he allows for glimpses of his later poetics to manifest in his early work.

"On This Island" is not the sole example of Auden's discussions of the political through the natural landscape. It is, rather, one amongst a litany of others. "Paysage Moralise," for example, details a variety of natural locales, including "valleys," "barren mountains," "islands," and "green waters. Such as in "On This Island," Auden uses the land as a proxy for political considerations. Paola Marchetti argues that there are "dualities of body and mind, nature and culture" crystallized in the varying landscapes of "Paysage Moralise" (204). This duality is expressly on display in the poem's final lines: "It is our sorrow. Shall it melt? Then water / Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys, / And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands" (37-39). It is fascinating that Auden chooses to utilize a natural disaster—floods immense enough to flush "green these mountains and these valleys," as the force that will destroy our cities. This is nature versus culture, the natural versus the man-made. Yet, in these final lines, Auden acquiesces to the calamitous power of the natural. Nothing he does, or anyone else does, could possibly stop the floods from coming. To rebuild the cities is to rebuild them with the scars of catastrophe in mind—it is to remember and to respect the power that nature has over man. Auden, in 1929, would give voice to the macro-natural with "Venus Will Now Say A Few Words." Venus, the Roman goddess of sex, love, and fertility, doubles as the voice of Mother Earth (Emig 215). In it, Venus admonishes humanity for their belief in an unending happiness – "For joy is mine, not yours" (11). Soon after, Venus expresses her power to "shift ranges" and weather the storms of man: "Think—Romans had a language in their day / And ordered roads with it, but it had to die" (23-24). Auden, writing on the rise and fall of cultures, and reminding his readers of their own impermanence, asserts the lasting power of nature. When cultures fall, when languages die, Venus lives on to watch the cycles repeat. This notion, that nature will always outlast any individual nation-state, is one that will occupy much of Auden's

American writings, and one that he more fully explores in poems such as 1954's "Ode to Gaea." He will, however, advocate for a more inclusive nature-culture, or nature within culture, that would see the human living in harmony with the non-human. This is especially apparent in his "Talking" poems that will be discussed at the end of this paper.

While the poems discussed above provide ample evidence of the ecological within Auden's political poetry, no poem is regarded for its stark portrait of Europe in the 1930s more than "Musee des Beaux Arts." In "Musee," Auden, inspired by Bruegel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" which he first viewed while staying in Brussels during the winter of 1938, creates an ekphrastic poem that details the ways in which we tend to disregard the suffering of those around us. Auden begins by evoking the "Old Masters," most likely painters such as Breughel, and how these masters were "never wrong" in regards to their depictions of human suffering (1-3). Suffering, as Auden writes in the opening stanza, is commonplace: "How it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking / Dully along" (3-4). The tone, as scholar Ahmed Khaleel points out, is an expecting one—as if Auden knows a tragedy will soon pass but which he is powerless to divert (105). Auden, writing in 1938, is cognizant of the dangers that Hitler's Germany represents, both for the eventual victims of the Holocaust as well as to the European continent at large. While the Final Solution is not yet in effect, Hitler's anti-Semitic rhetoric and policies are systematically oppressing members of Germany's Jewish population. "Musee's" opening lines are a response to these tragedies and Auden's pleas for the common people to recognize their own culpability in the suffering of others. There is, for Auden, no such thing as an innocent bystander. To by-stand is to commit an act of violence. England, in 1938, had yet to take any tangible actions against the Nazis, thus, in Auden's mind, branding England culpable.

However, while "Musee" is necessarily a response to the political situation in Europe, it is also a response to an egregious act of violence that Auden had witnessed the year previously during his trip to Iceland—an act that had made Auden question the human capacity, including his own, for empathy. While the violence was carried out by human actors, it was the complete destruction of a non-human body that so effected Auden. As Davenport-Hines writes:

> He (Auden) watched a great whale being torn apart by winches and cranes worked by men who were indifferent to its suffering, and had a repulsive vision of humankind's inexorable, disciplined yet workaday ferocity. This incident provided a theme for "Musee des Beaux Art," in which people are too selfishly inattentive to notice the great harm happening near them. (19)

As Davenport-Hines attests, "Musee" was prompted by a multitude of factors—one of which is the ecological. The whale, torn asunder by an indifferent Icelandic whaling crew, gave Auden a glimpse at the depths of humanity's negligence—towards each other and towards the natural world.

If Davenport-Hines's account is an accurate one, then it opens the door for an ecological reading of "Musee," especially if we read the poem in the context of climate change. This is not to suggest that Auden's main concern is global warming, nor is it to suggest that the violence perpetuated by climate change is as immediate or perceivable as the atrocities of the Holocaust. The destructiveness inherent in climate change is a slow-burning one as opposed to the explosiveness of Nazi Germany. It requires we adopt a much larger scale in regards to human history than we are accustomed to in the humanities. I here wish to turn to Rob Nixon and his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* to further expound upon the kind of violence that arises when the general population chooses to ignore and, ultimately, contribute to

a warming planet. Nixon speaks specifically of "slow violence," the kind that is "dispersed across time and space," originating in one area and having a catastrophic effect potentially thousands of miles away and decades in the future (2).

When we think of violence, we typically envision a specific event, a fixed place in time, that is as explosive as it is traumatic. Nixon's slow violence, however, shifts both the temporal and spatial scales. As the planet's atmosphere warms, so-called first world countries (the U.S.A and Great Britain, amongst others) are not the first to experience the creeping violence despite being the countries who most contribute to greenhouse gas emissions and the burning of fossil fuels. Rather, it is the under-developed world that must pay the price for the amenities of the few. This transference of payment from the third to the first world is brought on mostly through the willful ignorance of the culpable party (4). Climate change is, in 2020, a well-documented, scientifically proven fact. Yet, a disconcerting number of people in the developed world attest to the contrary. Fossil fuels, after all, are what make the machinic world go 'round. However, the media, as Nixon notes, may have pre-conditioned its viewers to behave in this manner. He, in response, asks the following questions:

> How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow-moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image world? (3)

These are the questions with which Auden wrestles in "Musee." Let's, for example, consider lines three through five in light of Nixon's argument. Suffering, as Auden suggests, occurs through the menial tasks that occupy us every day—while we are eating, walking, opening a window. But, as Auden's lines suggest, we don't always realize the implications of our actions.

While we open our bedroom window, there may be someone in need of help only a block away. While we turn the keys in our ignitions, we ignore the rising water levels in the Maldives stimulated by the collection of CO2 in the atmosphere. Unthinking and indifferent, we contribute to our own demise, unwittingly committing the violence that Auden is adamantly against by enjoying our modern-day amenities.

Like the person eating in "Musee," we ignore and advance the suffering of both the planet and those more vulnerable than ourselves. Auden, in the second stanza, elaborates on the workaday ignorance of the young while the "aged" wait for "the miraculous birth"—of cognizance, of noticing, of deciding to act instead of sitting idle (5-6). Yet, by the stanza's end, Auden reveals that he doesn't believe the birth is ever coming: "Anyhow, in a corner, some untidy spot / Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree" (11-13). We will continue, as Auden suggests, to act in the same manner, living our lives day to day, scratching our innocence because we, *of course,* are not to blame for the torturer, just as the Western middle and upper classes cannot possibly be to blame for the sinking of the Maldives or the melting of the ice caps. The readers are, as Auden surmises, nothing more than a dog or a horse living in infinitely ignorant bliss—unaware of the political malefactions their everyday actions cause to someone halfway across the planet.

Auden's words take on tangibility in the last stanza as he invokes Breughel's "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," describing the scene just as the young man plunges into the ocean, legs still visible above the water. Auden is especially critical of the other people in the painting, such as the ploughman: "The ploughman may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry, / But for him it was not an important failure" (15-17). With fields to tend and a full day's work ahead of him, the ploughman ignores the "forsaken cry" and carries on with his business. In the painting, the

ploughman is neither looking at Icarus nor is he searching for the source of the forsaken cry. He is, rather, hunched over, plough in hand, making rows in the field for his crops—too preoccupied by his own troubles to notice the drowning man slightly over the cliff's edge. Auden doesn't even make mention of the other two visible people in the painting—a man watching a flock of sheep and another man fishing—both as oblivious and as engaged with their tasks as the ploughman.

As in the second stanza, Auden lays the ploughman on the page in order to reflect his readers' own negligence, like a mirror, back at them. The ploughman in the painting is no different than the British citizenry going about their day while the Nazis systematically oppress their Jewish population—just as it is no different than me starting my car on a cold January morning as it idly discharges CO2 into an overburdened atmosphere. We can again turn back to Nixon's definition of "slow violence" to make the above comparison work. While it is undeniably true that the Final Solution is a much more sensational, "explosive" violence than that perpetuated through climate change, we can still perceive the damage done by global warming by widening our temporal framing. We are trained, through the media and through our common conceptions of time, to view the world in terms of the human life. That is, our temporalities are shaped by our comparatively short life spans. If, however, we train ourselves not to see violence in the solely explosive sense, but to perceive the way it can creep and crawl and build up over decades and centuries, then we may be able to avoid the negligence that Auden is vehemently against. Our caricature, as Auden suggests, is like that of the ploughman who ignores the splashing of the helpless Icarus, just as we, in the most general of senses, ignore our contributions to a "slow violence" that plagues the world's most vulnerable, both human and non-human alike.

Auden saves his most incriminating critique of a negligent culture for his last three lines as he describes an expensive ship sitting in the harbor: " And the expensive delicate ship that must have seen / Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky, / Had somewhere to get to, and sailed calmly on" (19-21). The ship, fully aware of Icarus' plight, decides it has more pressing matters, sailing on and leaving Icarus to drown. Unlike the ploughman, the ship is fully aware of its negligence, yet it decides it doesn't have the time to change its course of action. Again, Auden holds a mirror for his readers to view their own reflections. For the twentieth-century reader, this means recognizing the clear and present danger that was Hitler's Germany and reacting in abhorrence of its evil. However, "Musee," for twenty-first-century readers, calls attention to the ways in which they effect both the environment and, in consequence, those worse off than they. "Musee" is, as a result, a perfect microcosm of the ecological Auden appearing within the political Auden.

The poems listed in this section are but a few amongst many of Auden's 1930s works that bridge the gap between his adolescence and maturity through his ability to attend both the political and the ecological concurrently. Some do, admittedly, rely on the human/non-human binary that contemporary eco-critics seek to eradicate. Yet, this is the result of a young writer still finding his ideal poetic subject. He will, as I shall show in the sections to come, eliminate the use of the binary and instead advocate for a more sustainable nature-culture that would have the human and the non-human living in harmonious acceptance. While his overarching goal of the decade is to evoke wide, sweeping changes in his readership, changes that could, in turn, alter the course of human history, he nonetheless offers up moments of the ecological, such as his inability to define the city in "Brussels in Winter" or his willingness to give the earth a voice in "Venus Will Now Say A Few Words," that will come to define Auden's work for the remainder

of his poetic career. However, soon after 1939, Auden would come to a crossroads. He had achieved literary fame in Britain for his Audenesque style and his politically-minded verse, yet he did not see his poetry transforming the political landscape in the ways that he wished. Thus, he decided a change, in both his scenery and in himself, was in order.

America, Yeats, and a New Poetics

Having spent twenty years learning to be himself, he [the poet] finds that he must now start learning not to be himself. At first he may think this means no more than keeping a sharper look out for obsessive rhythms, tics of expression, privately numinous words, but presently he discovers that the command not to imitate himself can mean something harder than that. It can mean that he should refrain from writing a poem which might turn out to be a good one, and even an admired one.

—W.H. Auden, The Dyer's Hand

By the end of 1939, Auden had returned to England from a trip abroad, one that routed him and his companion Christopher Isherwood through New York City on their way home (Davenport-Hines 19). On this trip, Auden had ample time to consider his status as literary icon in England and the pressures that such a title entailed. Having been exposed to the burgeoning literary scene in New York City, Auden made up his mind. He would leave England permanently, and, with it, he would leave his celebrity behind. As Lyndsey Stonebridge puts it, Auden became a "voluntary refugee" (1335). This, understandably, did not sit well with Auden's British readers. As Davenport-Hines writes:

> Many of his young, leftist, admirers felt betrayed by the departure of their putative spokesman. This resentment intensified after the outbreak of war in Europe nine months later, and scurrilous journalists and politicians tried in 1940 to brand Auden as a coward. The belief that he had deserted Britain during a dangerous crisis led to enduring hostility. (19)

Auden, however, left not because of his cowardice—he had, after all, been working diligently in order to avert the war. Rather, he felt a keen sense of needing to reinvent himself. His early poetry had lifted him above many of his literary peers in the minds of his British readers, but his work did not accomplish what he hoped it would. The war would still come, Hitler would still

commit his atrocities, and millions of people would still succumb to the grave. No amount of verse Auden wrote would hinder that.

America, however, offered Auden a fresh start. While some of his verse had travelled across the Atlantic, Auden was a generally unknown commodity amongst the American literary types. Thus, near the end of 1939, Auden began to radically reinvent himself amongst his peers in New York City. He had, after much internal debate, decided that political poetry was, in fact, "quite fruitless." Auden had, early in his American years, attempted to return to the political scene and found that it was "too much for his conscience." He had given a speech on behalf of refugees fleeing violence in Spain and, while the speech was a rousing success, Auden later wrote that he "felt just covered with dirt afterwards" (Carpenter 256). While Auden's was certainly a reinvention of poetic style—his verses took on a lighter tone and dropped much of its early ambiguity—it was, more-so, a reinvention of his primary subject. Direct political engagement had, in Auden's eyes, failed him. Any amount of socialist propaganda, as Auden had labeled his early work, amounted to nothing more than "self-indulgent luxury" (Mendelson, *Early Auden,* 191). Mendelson shines further light on Auden's political falling-out in *Later Auden:*

> Democracy was a hard discipline. It could be won only by truth-telling and by an undogmatic and unsentimental attention to the reality of ordinary men and women. If we want to save our democracy, "we must first make it more worth saving; and to do this, we must first see to it that we personally behave like democrats in our private as [in our] public lives; and when I look at my own, I wish I had a clearer conscience". (37)

Thus, Auden believed himself, at this point in his career, to have largely failed in his profession. He was, he felt, both dishonest with himself and with his readers. While he still believed that a poet with any merit should be versed in the major political issues of the current times, he never again felt pressured to reenter to the public sphere (Mendelson, *Early Auden,* 195).

Not only did Auden avow to no longer write with the macro-political in mind, he actively sought to re-write and, in some cases, entirely dismantle his early verses. During the 1964 presidential race, candidate Lyndon B. Johnson misused a line from Auden's "September 1st, 1939," a poem of which Auden was not already overly fond. By 1964, Auden had rewritten the line to read "we must love one another and die." Johnson, in an attempt to appeal to his voting audience, both added context and altered the line in a way that changed its meaning entirely. "These are the stakes," says Johnson over a television commercial, "to make a world in which all of God's children can live, or go into the dark. We must love each other, or we must die" (Mendelson, *Later Auden* 478). In response to the egregious misuse of the verse by the eventual president, Auden cut the poem entirely from his collection (479). This would become a theme for the later Auden looking to censor what he believed was his rash, dishonest younger self. Popular poems such as "September 1st, 1939: and "Spain 1937," both overtly political and praised by both the Academy and general readership alike, Auden called "trash" of which "he was ashamed of having written" (Levy 28). For the remainder of his life, Auden would censor, write, and rewrite, dozens of his early works. There are very few politically-forefront poems that Auden included in his final collection of works. "September 1st" and "Spain 1937" certainly did not make the cut.

What, then, if not for political workings, was poetry for? To whom did a work of art belong to after its production, and what should the primary poetic subject be? While Auden

would spend the remainder of his life censoring his early works, he would also spend it answering these questions. Many critics prefer the younger Auden for his political engagement and his cryptic voice—both aspects that would drop from his work post-1940. Yet, Auden's new poetics, detailed in his elegy "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," would define a second act as politically engaged as the first—albeit on a different scale. Rather than attempting to influence policy changes on the governmental level—what I have been calling macro-politics—Auden instead chooses to focus on micro-politics, or the ways in which he can influence his individual readers in order to effect the sweeping changes he couldn't during the 1930s. "In Memory on W.B. Yeats" illumines this newfound ideology and helps builds the bridge between the young Auden and the more reserved later Auden.

First, however, it is important to note Auden's relationship to Yeats before discussing the elegy that would transform Auden's poetic style for the remainder of his career. As Auden writes in *The Dyer's Hand:*

> In judging a work of the past, the question of the historical critic—"What was the author of this work trying to do? How far did he succeed in doing it?"—important as he knows it to be, will always interest a poet less than the question—"What does this work suggest to living writers now? Will it help or hinder them in what they are trying to do?". (46)

It is with this quote in mind that we must consider Auden's relationship to Yeats. Not as a critic, but as a mentor. Bridgitte McCray calls Yeats a "poetic father figure" for the Auden of the 1930s, serving as guide for the young Auden in his quest to impact the political sphere of the era (McCray 302). Yeats, writing in response to the British occupation of Ireland, attempts to raise the status of the Irish uneducated with the hopes of liberating Ireland through the proletariat. This

made Yeats the perfect role model for an Auden who believed that poetry had the cultural power to enact sweeping social changes. Yeats was the steppingstone for the political Auden, a model from which Auden was able to mold his own poetry. Through the 1930s, Auden held Yeats in the highest regard, counting him amongst the elite in the profession. Yet, as Auden became disillusioned with the macro-political, his relationship to Yeats became increasingly disenchanted. This is not to say that Auden ceased viewing Yeats as an influential figure. In fact, Auden's 1970s poem "A Thanksgiving," published posthumously, listed Yeats as one of the greatest contributors to his poetry (Auden, "A Thanksgiving").

This later praise, however, did not prevent Auden from criticizing Yeats in 1939. While he had until this point viewed Yeats as the pinnacle example of the political poet, his views on politics changed as he left England for America. "Events happen of themselves," writes Auden, "that cannot be prevented by anyone's art" (*The Dyer's Hand* 62). Yeats, of course, believed his work could help fuel an Irish revolution. Auden, in the wake of his own works' failure to avert a European catastrophe, rebuked Yeats for "subscribing to a poetics of patriotism" (Poole 124). Yeats had worried that his play, *Cathleen ni Houlihan,* incited men to join the Irish rebellion, leading to their eventual deaths at the hand of the English. Auden thought this a preposterous statement considering his own failures to enact the societal changes he wished to see in 1930s Europe (Myers 736). He would, as I have mentioned, dispose of the macro-political altogether and turn towards "other matters" (Carpenter 268). These "other matters" included an entirely new approach to poetry, one that Auden revealed in his elegy to the late Irish poet, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats."

The poem is written in three parts. The first section briefly introduces Yeats's death, but moves quickly onto other images. "He disappeared in the dead of winter," yet there were still

wolves running in the forests and snow falling on public statues (1-8). Nature, as Mendelson points out, takes little interest in Yeats's death (Mendelson, *Later Auden* 3). The larger workings of the world keep moving forward despite what should be a monumental loss to its English-speaking population. The people, too, care little for Yeats's passing as they twist the words of his poetry into unrecognizable shapes. "The words of a dead man," the poem continues, "are modified in the guts of the living" (22-23). The last stanza of section one speaks to the inability of the public to recognize Yeats' loss as detrimental to the society at large. Thus, they fail to recognize his written work as a tool for social change. Yeats, in this way, is transformed into more than a man. Rather, he becomes a metaphor for a kind of poetics that associates itself with the macro-political (Mendelson, *Later Auden* 4). Only "a few thousand" will think of the day of Yeats' death as "one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual" (28-29). There is nothing monumental or momentous about this, nothing even remotely ceremonious. The passes on like any other day with only the slightest hiccup to disrupt the lives of those who took notice. If we are to carry out the metaphor, Auden is writing that poetry, in the public sphere, does not affect the kind of change he once hoped it did. Nature and culture alike continue forward as if nothing significant has been lost.

If section one introduces Yeats as metaphor, section two drops all notion of pretense. While Yeats remains for the first half of this section, poetry itself takes center stage by the end. Auden begins the section by reiterating Yeats' inability to influence the public Irish sphere: "Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry. / Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still" (34-35). Despite all of Yeats' herculean efforts, Ireland retains its madness just as England retains its presence in Ireland. None of Yeats' works managed to oust the British despite their blatant patriotism and calls for action to the Irish citizenry. "For poetry," Auden famously writes,

"makes nothing happen: / it survives in the valley of its making" (36-37). We must be careful with our interpretations of these lines. One could easily understand these lines to mean that poetry, in Auden's mind, is pointless. It "makes nothing happen," and therefore it doesn't deserve our attention. Yet, this is not the position for which Auden is arguing. When Auden writes that poetry makes nothing happen, he means that Yeats' poetry, the poetry of the patriot and of the macro-political, makes nothing happen. To believe that poetry has the power to enforce political change, to influence the writing of policy, and to avert clashes between nation-states is nothing more than a fool's dream. This is not a call to action. Rather, Auden uses Yeats as an example and lesson for his future self (Mendelson, *Early Auden* 363). To ascribe to a poetics of politics is to be remembered as something "slightly unusual" ("In Memory" 29). Instead, Auden argues for a new poetics, one that focuses less on the body politic and more on the individual. Poetry, instead of legislating, "survives, / a way of happening, a mouth" (40-41).

The third section further elucidates Auden's newfound poetics and his refocused attention on the micro-political. The first three stanzas of the final section illustrate a Europe on the brink of war. All "the dogs of Europe bark" as each nation wallows in its "hate" (47-49). Instead of writing in the antagonistic, cryptic voice of his youth, one that would further add to the sense of built-up dread, Auden turns towards a more positive, inclusive message:

> Follow poet, follow right
> To the bottom of the night,
> With your unconstraining voice
> Still persuade us to rejoice (54-47).

Even in the darkest days, poetry's job is to heal, not to enforce. Poetry, an act of creation itself, is, like creation, an act of addition rather than on of negation (Mendelson, *Later Auden* 13). Only

the poet can teach the masses to sing in the rain, to "sing of human unsuccess / in a rapture of distress" ("In Memory" 60-61). The poem's ending is poignant, pointing towards the next thirty years of Auden's poetic career: "In the prison of his days / teach the free man how to praise" (64-65). Auden's job is no longer to tell his readers how to live an in authoritarian voice. Rather, it is now to guide them along towards a more positive environment of inclusivity and understanding. Auden writes in *The Dyers Hand* that a poet is "singularly ill-equipped to understand politics" (84). This is a lesson he learned through his attempts to attend to the public sphere. Yet, a few pages later, he says that "in our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act" (88). I argue that Auden's turn in "In Memory" was not away from the political per say, but rather away from the macro-political. Instead, Auden adopts a poetics concerning the micro-political, centering on individual relationships between the human and the non-human. This move will go on to eradicate the binaries that plagues his early poetry and, in their place, advocate for a cohesive relationship between the human and the non-human, one that recognizes difference and, in turn, celebrates it. We can see these changes taking place in Auden's American poetry that both directly follows the publishing of Yeats' elegy and that Auden will continue to explore up until his death in 1973.

A Reformed Poetics in Practice

A culture is no better than its woods.
—W.H. Auden, "Bucolics"

Auden's work in the 1940s and beyond is widely viewed as inferior to his 1930s work. The Audenesque that made his poetry famous within British literary circles largely disappears post exile. Gone is the menacing tone, the ambiguous meaning, the "stranger" visiting a strange land only to have their desires denied. These were poems following the Yeats model—macro-political, legislative, and looking to enact social change through the enforcement of Auden's personal beliefs. Now, with the writing of "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" and his self-imposed exile, Auden's style and content changes. His style becomes one centered around play as opposed to work. It now takes on an air of inclusivity, contentedness, and acceptance that was missing from his work in the 1930s. In many ways this can be attributed to Auden's re-found belief in the Christian faith (Mendelson, *Later Auden* 151). He had previously, at the age of sixteen, abandoned his faith in pursuit of something more tangible, turning away from God and towards Freud. Christianity, however, would come to define much of his later adult life.

Yet, while Auden wrote a plethora of religious poems post-1940, he never completely shed himself of the political realm (Brus 338). Rather, as I have mentioned, he shifted from the macro to the micro, instead choosing to focus on the individual's power to change their environment for the better. While I do not deny that the Church assisted Auden in reshaping his poetics around one of healing rather than one of control, leading to numerous religious poems, I want to make special note that Auden's reformed poetics also bled into his portrayal of the human / non-human relationship. While his early work allowed glimpses of the ecological to rise to the surface, they nevertheless relied heavily on a binary between the human and the non-

human, a binary that has been dismissed as false and, ultimately, damaging in eco-critical circles. However, Auden's post-1940's work begins to break down the binaries he relied on in his youth. While he does remain anthropocentric in much of his language, he does so in order to coax his readers towards the ecological (Sultzbach 155). His proposed inclusivity, then, is not meant to be specifically cultural. Rather, as the following readings will demonstrate, it was meant to heal the relationship between nature and culture as well and, in many ways, eliminate the need for such a distinction.

We should begin with what Emig calls Auden's "most ecological poem," one that resembles his earlier "Venus Will Now Say a Few Words" (Emig 217). "Ode to Gaea," like "Venus," gives voice to the planet itself. The poem opens with Gaea, who is referred to as "Mother," looking down onto the Earth as if she was looking through a glass (1-4). The scenes she looks down upon are, as the poem reveals, "natural" (5). The oceans are full of plankton providing nourishment to the creatures of the sea and on land "leaves by the mile hide tons of / pied pebbles that will soon be birds" (9-16). These are not the antagonistic scenes we are used to reading from Auden. Here there is no Cashwell pitting itself against the stranger as in "The Watershed." There is only Gaea and the inhabitants of the planet whom she is looking down upon. These are the landscapes which she holds dear: the oceans, the forests, the rotting leaves covering the ground by the mile. This is the "companionship" which Gaea craves (14). But what does this mean for Gaea's human inhabitants? Gaea may believe that "of pure things Water is the best," but in what regard does she view people (24)? "How," Auden asks, "does she rank wheelwrights?" (25).

In Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism,* Garrard details the ways in which the wilderness and landscape has been popularly regarded by civilization. He cites the rise of agriculture as "both

the cause and the symptom of an ancient alienation from the earth that monotheistic religion and modern science then completed" (Garrard 68). He continues tracing the human relationship to wilderness through the rise of capitalism and the scientific revolution. The wilderness, through this time period, transforms from threat to be avoided to commodity to be exploited. He scathingly labels the Scientific Revolution "an ecological disaster in and through which a primal authenticity was lost" (70). This "primal authenticity" refers to humanity's pre-agricultural connection to the land as provider. Humans did not work the land, yet it provided enough sustenance for survival. In this way, the human / non-human worked in concert together, without a nature / culture distinction, and thus without a binary. Auden necessarily lives within a society dependent on agriculture and commodity, squarely placing "land" as something that needs modified in order to work *for* instead of *with* the human, despite any perceived detriments the land may face as a result.

This line of thinking, that the land is commodity to be exploited, is what Auden calls into question throughout much of the body of "Ode to Gaea" as the poem turns its attention from the non-human to the human. The speaker of Auden's poem postulates Gaea's answer to how she would rank the wheelwright: "One doubts if she knows / which subspecies of folly is peculiar to those / pretty molehills" (25-27). The speaker believes that Gaea would rank the wheelwright "a subspecies of folly." In comparison to Gaea's thoughts on the plankton and the leaves, the wheelwright is nothing more than a jester. Much of the poem's next sixty lines are devoted to the folly of human actors who believe themselves superior to the non-human. There is a "vast a detestable empire," a pilgrim who has cycled through belief in "thirteen gods," and the clergyman who preys on the sensibilities of the easily persuaded (33, 44, and 75-80). These are but a few of the execrable characters that people "Ode to Gaea." However, by framing the poem

as an ode to the earth, Auden uses these characters as examples of the negative. They ascribe to the viewpoints present in Garrard's writing, the viewpoints that Auden is here arguing against. The planet for them is nothing more than a stage on which plays the human drama. Yet, through the thirteen gods of the pilgrims and conniving of the "pious" man, Gaea remains constant.

While at first it appears as if Auden is relying on the same binaries that dominated his youth, the ending of the poem offers a vision of a more hopeful future, one that starts to break down the nature/culture divide. As Auden writes, "Earth, till the end, will be herself" (93). Our landscapes, the paintings we make with "woods where tigers chum with deer and no root dies" are to Gaea nothing "but lies" (97-98). These landscapes where time stands still, where the world is idealized rather than projected as it is, are nothing to Gaea who looks upon the Earth as her own body. She will, as the lines suggest, accept both the human and the non-human alike, as almost nothing can alter her perception of the denizens of her body. Gaea, by denying the idealized landscapes that we have created, advocates for a realistic portrait of the earth that includes both the human and the non-human. Like a caring mother figure, Gaea wishes to see all her children living harmonious unity. While she may continue to live on despite any outside actions, she wishes to bring her body along intact. To do so requires the cooperation and consideration of all parties involved, to have the non-human again work *with* instead of *for* the human.

If "Ode to Gaea" is Auden's reattempt to represent the ideas he first introduced in "Venus Will Now Say a Few Words," then "The Hidden Law" is his attempt to more succinctly represent the thing power he introduced in "Brussels in Winter." Auden begins the poem by referring to the eponymous "Hidden Law," capitalized as such, and how the law "takes the atom and the star / and human beings as they are" (3-4). The human and the non-human are here

inextricably bound together by the Hidden Law. While the Law remains unnamed, we can infer that Auden is pointing towards an unalienable truth—or even Truth—within the fabric of the universe. It is the job of the reader, then, to decipher what this Truth may be. Auden, however, does not leave his readers entirely in the dark. There are decipherable clues within the text that help the reader towards Auden's desired destination. The first is already revealed in the opening stanza: the Hidden Law affects all material objects, both human and non-human. It, as Auden writes, "takes them as they are, and answers nothing when we lie" (4-5). The Hidden Law—synonymous with Brown's thing theory—binds nature and culture into one amorphous entity, suggesting that all actors are subject to the unspoken Law. In so doing, Auden begins to generate a new concept of nature and culture, one that rejects the standard binary and instead wishes to concern itself with the entirety of the material world.

Auden reveals the second and most substantial clue in the following stanza as he describes the ways in which humanity has attempted to control the Hidden Law:

> It is the only reason why
> No government can codify,
> And verbal definitions mar
> The Hidden Law (6-9).

Here it is best to turn our attention back to Brown's thing theory and the disturbing of the subject-object relationship (Brown 4). An object transitions to a thing when it refutes our definition of what the object should be. Take, for instance, a hammer with a wooden handle. Its most basic function is to secure or remove nails to and from a wooden frame. We, as in a shared sense of humanity, have created hammers in order to make carpentry and the shaping of our environments an easier task. What happens, Brown would have us ask, when the hammer ceases

to function in the way we think it must? What happens when the handle breaks and we forced to consider the hammer as an object outside of our immediate control, when we are accosted by its immediate otherness that defies our ore-conceived notions of what a hammer should or should not be? The object, in this case the hammer, ceases to perform its human-defined role. In refusing to be used as a mere tool, it distorts the subject-object relationship. It wrests, however minutely, agency from the human and forces its alterity onto its observer.

We can also turn to Rene Magritte's famous 1929 painting *The Treachery of Images* to help us understand Auden's intentions in "The Hidden Law." The Painting, perhaps better known as *This is Not a Pipe*, calls into question the ability of human language to encapsulate the entirety of a given object.

(Magritte, https://collections.lacma.org/node/239578)

The painting clearly depicts a pipe, and to deny so would be a blatant lie. Yet, is it really a pipe? Can it be stuffed with tabacco, or smoked, or even held? Magritte writes on his painting that this is not a pipe. It is, rather, a representation of a pipe. Magritte calls into questions the sanctity of how well a signifier accurately represents the thing it is signifying. Human language, Magritte suggests, inadequately measures the reality of a given object. Language is merely a representation, a signifier, that cannot possibly encompass the entirety of, for instance, a pipe. Auden is making the same claims in the second stanza of his poem: "Verbal definitions mar / the Hidden Law" ("The Hidden Law" 8-9). No matter how precise we may be in our descriptions, we will always find them lacking. The object, despite our attempts at order, is utterly unknowable and uncapturable through the medium of language. No government, no matter how powerful, can transcend language. Language is the crutch which we must all lean against. The "Hidden Law," then, is that language will always fail at complete representation, despite how precise or deliberate we may speak. While Auden admits that we can "escape" and "forget" the hidden law, he acquiesces that we only hurt ourselves when we do so: "These are the ways we're punished by / the Hidden Law" (12-15). Ultimately, the Hidden Law states that we are, both human and non-human, only knowable to ourselves. Language, albeit a necessity, can only provide so much in the way of ordering and controlling our environments. "The Hidden Law" suggests that in forgetting this inherent truth, we do ourselves a disservice. It dictates that, although language is a necessary crutch, we acknowledge and celebrate the unknowability of the human and non-human alike.

Poems such as "The Hidden Law" ultimately point towards the human inability to completely dominate our surroundings. Enslaving the non-human other and subjecting it to the whims of human will not only damages the non-human, but it in turn serves to harm the human

as well. By viewing the planet and its inhabitants as nothing more than a commodity, as resources to be plundered and utilized for production and consumption, we contribute to climate change, rising ocean levels, and natural disasters that are becoming increasingly unnatural as the decades progress. The continuous cycle of production, consumption, abandonments, and reproduction saturates the planet with landfills filled with non-degradable items that will sit unused for thousands of years, thrown "away" into some unassailable ether which far too many people believe to be without consequence to the environment or to ourselves. This is, out of convenience or willful ignorance, a lie that we have tricked ourselves into believing, and is a product of our false sense of control over the world writ large. As Bennett reminds us, "vital materiality can never be thrown 'away,' for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity" (6). The human attempt to control and sedate unwanted material is rendered moot by the landfill's sheer refusal to be contained within the walls we build for it. Toxins seep from a conglomerate of discarded items and wash away with rainwater. Bugs and birds feast on the refuse. The wind carries lighter objects to undisclosed locations. Our attempts at control are, ultimately, failures.

"Ode to Gaea" and "The Hidden Law" warn readers against believing in their own superiority. They remind readers that the order they wish to embed into reality is nothing more than a veneer, like a gilded chain, meant to stroke the human ego. These poems and others written in a similar vein attempt to steer the human back towards a pre-industrial understanding of the human/nonhuman relationship. By relinquishing any pretense of control, we realize the detriments of our own predatory inclinations. Auden, through the two poems above, believes we can achieve a level of symbiosis that is not only beneficial to the human, but to the non-human as well. Kelly Sultzbach points to Auden's "Ode to Terminus" as a prime example of Auden's

cautious approach concerning the human propensity towards control, one that echoes Auden's concerns in "Ode to Gaea" and "The Hidden Law:

> "Ode to Terminus" disrupts any anthropomorphic certainty that science claims to reveal by employing scientific rhetoric for the purposes of undermining scientific presumptions of control. [The Poem] creates a lexicon of scientific systems but combats its own hermeneutics by slipping toward the opposite binary in any dialectic the poem presents, whether it be scientific order versus organic chaos, human observer versus nonhuman subject, or poetic imagination versus scientific fact. (Sultzbach 161)

Auden, as Sultzbach writes, switches frequently between scientific order and organic chaos, at one moment lambasting scientists for their "tall stories" then immediately reprimanding the "self-proclaimed poet" as being "abhorred in the Heav'ns" for uttering "some resonant lie" ("Ode to Terminus" 60-64). In their place, Auden invokes Terminus, the Roman god of border markers, to "teach us how to alter our gestures" (48). In other words, Auden asks the god of boundaries, borders, and control to teach his readers to control properly. That is, to relinquish our domination of the land in order for Sultzbach's organic chaos to thrive. This is necessarily an uncomfortable condition for the human, yet it is one that Auden believes is necessary if we are to move beyond the human/non-human binary.

In Auden's 1948 poem "In Praise of Limestone," Auden creates a landscape that Aurelian Saby calls "nearly Utopian" (Saby 287). While the poem is popularly read as a metaphor for the human body, once can't help but to notice the level of harmonious interplay between non-human characters, especially at the poem's outset: "With their surface fragrance of thyme and, beneath, / a secret system of caves and conduits; hear the springs / that spurt out everywhere with a

chuckle" (4-6). The poem goes on to introduce a plethora of characters, among them a butterfly, a lizard, a ravine, and the limestone itself. What's special concerning these characters, and I want to make careful note of, is the way they interact with each other. Take, for example, lines twenty-one through twenty-three, as the speaker of the poem calls the reader's attention to these very interactions: "Watch, then, the band of rivals as they climb up and down / their steep stone gennels in twos and threes, at times / arm in arm, but never, thank god, in step." First, it is important to note that Auden is here considering the non-human residence within the limestone landscape—specifically the butterflies and the lizards mentioned earlier in the first stanza. Secondly, we must consider the manner that the band is "walking." Butterflies and Lizards are, naturally, rivals, as lizards commonly eat butterflies. Yet, what is important here is how the band of animals and insects creates its own sense of order independent of human definition. They do not walk "in step," as would a marching military or, metaphorically speaking, a subdued individual. Rather, they express their agency through their independence. While one could attempt to force the band to walk "in step," the band would inevitably resume the chaotic-ness of independent life.

The speaker continues musing on the limestone's residents and their lives on the impermanent stone face, regarding them in conjunction with the human body. Here, the tone shifts from casual observance to deep introspection. The limestone landscape, despite the freedom its residents appear to have, are trapped within the confines of the limestone. Rather than seeing this entrapment as a detriment, the speaker considers it "lucky" (35).While they are trapped on the limestone, "their legs have never encountered the fungi / and insects of the jungle, the monstrous forms and lives / with which we have nothing, we hope, in common" (36-38). Despite the speaker's insistence on the difference between the human and the non-human, the

"we hope" disrupts the speaker's certainty with a sliver of doubt. The distance between the human and the non-human, and thus between the two ends of a binary, come crashing towards each other. The doubts unnerve the speaker, but they force readers to question their own place amongst the wider world. What if the order with which we center our lives is a self-induced fallacy? What does that mean, then, for the human / non-human relationship? The poem leaves these questions unanswered, but in raising them brings to the reader's attention the precarious place of the human atop the ontological hierarchy. We attempt to control, to walk "in step," but we should rather walk "hand in hand." Keep in mind, too, Auden's new poetics—to "teach the free man how to praise," that is now his guiding principle ("In Memory of W.B. Yeats" 65). "In Praise of Limestone" questions what it means to be "free." Is freedom inherent in human order, or is it more readily apparent in the natural chaos of a limestone landscape?

Tony Sharpe, however, makes note that the "limestone is not as sweet as it looks" to the speaker of the poem (Sharpe, "Unbearable Lightness" 314). The landscape is an impermanent one, easily eroded by wind and water to the point of unrecognition after years of exposure. One could argue that a lack of control subjects the limestone to capricious instability—a state of constant fluctuation. This is a fact that is hard to disavow, yet Auden seems, by the poem's end, to celebrate the liminal nature of the limestone and revel in the lack of human control. The closing lines of the poem speak to this belief: "When I try to imagine a faultless love / or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur / of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape" (91-93). For Auden, impermanence, lack of control, and shareable qualities to the non-human are all desirable traits, not detestable ailments to be cured or fought against. Like in Auden's 1965 poem "Amor Loci," his return to the sacred objects and mining landscapes of his youth, the earth offers a potential Eden (Sharpe, "Knowing Your Place" 118). The Earth is

regarded as a love that does not abandon ("Amor Loci" 41-49). One must only recognize their own frivolous position within their environ to make it so. This is the sentiment that Auden brings to light in "In Praise of Limestone:" The land as mother, as provider, and as transient as those who reside on its surface. Teaching praise here means to his readers the love of place. Not for what a specific place has to offer, but for the place in an of itself.

Unlike in the Audenesque style, these poems exemplify a poetics of gratitude and satisfaction. He was, during his later years, attacked by critics for the docility of his American work compared to his work of the 1930s. In response, Auden leaned further and further into his new poetics, and with it arose poems that echoed sentiments of appreciative content (Davenport-Hines 23). While many poems, such as "A Thanksgiving," were pointed towards Auden's poetic influences, some were directly addressed to the non-human and remained radical in their approach to the environment. Auden's "Thank You Fog," first published in 1973 a few months before his death, provides a clear understanding of Auden's approach to the ecological, further disintegrating the human / non-human binary that was present in much of his early work. Auden wrote "Thank You Fog" in response to cancelled plans on account of a blanket of fog that had covered the area on the night of his planned travels (Carpenter 445). Yet, interesting anecdote aside, Auden's poem showcases his willingness to treat the environment as an equal, acknowledging its agency and thus complicating a "cultural" world dominated by the human will.

Auden begins the poem by commenting on New York weather and the smog that frequently hovers over the city from air pollution ("Thank You Fog" 1-2). Auden's next line, however, directly addresses the fog that has descended on the evening, placing the speaker in a dialogue with the inanimate fog that acknowledges the agency of both parties: "You, her

unsullied sister, / I'd quite forgotten and what / You bring to British winters" (3-5). First, take notice of Auden's style. This is no longer the voice of a young man filled with angst and anxiety. It is, rather, one of experience and thanksgiving. Yet, while the style is markedly different, both the Audenesque poems and poems such as "Thank You Fog" remark on the political. For instance, Auden makes a careful distinction between smog, a haze created through the mixing of fog and air pollutants, and smog's "unsullied sister" fog. In so doing, Auden comments on the damage that New York City has enacted upon the very air itself. In comparison, the fog descending on the British countryside remains untainted by a concentrated area of industry. Auden subtly comments on the quality of the air, but he quickly moves into the scene presented in the second stanza. Auden introduces four human characters: Jimmy, Tonia, Sonia, and the speaker of the poem. These characters are forced to stay indoors once the fog has covered their house in an impenetrable haze. Yet, unlike within his Audenesque poems, Auden's language here is one of gratitude and thanks: "But how delighted I am / that You've been lured to visit / Wiltshire's witching countryside" (10-12). Auden continues to refer to the fog as if in dialogue, capitalizing "You" as if referring to a proper noun. In so doing, he acknowledges the fog's ability to act on the people within the house.

The human and the non-human are intermingled and enmeshed, but here Auden does not fight against the enmeshment. Rather, he celebrates the crashing of nature and culture together. While the fog looms outside, the speaker of the poem muses on the party of individuals inside and continues to reference the fog as "You." At the end of the final stanza, Auden makes reference to the ways in which humans have damaged the environment, harkening back to the smog/fog distinction. Auden writes, "No summer sun will ever / dismantle the global gloom / cast by the Daily Papers" (45-47). He then calls the earth a "sorry spot" because of the "facts of

filth and violence" done to it by humanity that "we're too dumb to prevent" (49-51). This is a scathing remark by a surprisingly straightforward Auden. Humanity has damaged its relationship to the earth through intermittent acts of violence and filth. But now, in the context of the poem, and on the evening that the fog descends upon the British countryside, the party of four inside, "so restful yet so festive," is forced to reflect on themselves and on their relationship to the non-human. For this, Auden is eternally grateful. In one sense, the fog literally stops the violence by forcing people to, like Auden and his friends, cancel any plans of trudging forward into the evening. In another, the fog asserts its agency and forces the human to recognize it as actant.

The final lines of the poem echo Auden's gratitude to the fog, demonstrating his reimagined poetics of gratitude and his micro-political sensibilities simultaneously. He ends the poem simply, writing "Thank You, Thank You, Thank You, Fog" (54). As at the poem's outset, the capitalization forces the reader to consider the fog as a character in the drama and not simply a member of an indecipherable background. Nature and culture collide, and the distinction between the two opposites begins to blur. In Auden's new poetics, he does not wish to force his readers into thinking a certain way. Rather, he raises questions that would otherwise go unexamined. This is his approach in "Thank You, Fog." He subtly maneuvers his way through word choice and stylistic approaches into bringing nature and culture together. Thus the ecological Auden does not attempt to influence the body politic in the macro sense. Rather, his aim is to subtly push the individual to be more conscientious and responsible in their actions. By presenting the fog as a character within the poem, Auden effectively rebukes distinction between nature and culture.

Among Auden's poetry that marks his efforts to collapse the nature/culture divide, "Bucolics" is perhaps his lengthiest attempt. Written in seven parts, each section is titled a

different element of what would stereotypically be defined as nature—winds, woods, mountains, lakes, islands, plains, and streams. Each section, along with referencing a natural scene, is dedicated to one of Auden's influences. I wish here to focus our attention on section two, "Woods," dedicated to the Russian composer Nicolas Nabokov. Notice how, at the poem's beginnings, Auden already juxtaposes nature (woods) with culture (music). This theme will be the guiding force throughout the poem's lines, and will, by poem's end, culminate in a complete disintegration of a damaging binary language. The poem begins by drawing attention to the binary itself, and the ways in which culture has clearly demarcated itself from the "primal woods" (1). As Greg Garrard makes note of, while humanity was once fearful of nature, they moved to becoming possessors of it (Garrard 69). Auden references this past with the first three stanzas. He writes that the woods were "reduced to patches, owned by hunting squires," sectioned off in neat little boxes to be controlled in clearly defined locations (7). He also references both the King and the Pope warning "their silly flocks" to steer clear of the dangers present beyond city walls (10). This is the place, after all, where "bears, lions, and sows with woman's heads / mounted and murdered and ate each other raw" (3-4). Richard Davenport-Hines writes that Auden believes that "human nature is criminal" (22). While he is referring to human nature in the religious sense, one can also infer that he is referring to humanity's criminal history towards nature. As evidenced in the above, Auden was aware of the cultural need to control space, place, and location, and he was aware how this need led to the severance of a primal connection to the land.

However, after Auden introduces the mis-portrayal of the natural world by the human, he allows the forest to speak for itself. At the end of stanza three, Auden remarks on the nightingales—stand-ins for a generalized nature—and their perceived culpability in the

nature/culture divide. The first line of the fourth stanza refutes this claim and absolves the nightingales of any liability: “Those birds, of course, did nothing of the sort” (19). Auden utilizes the remainder of the fourth stanza to reinforce this claim, comparing “sylvan nature” against the “Gang,” what could be synonymous with culture writ large. Auden labels the Gang “short / and lower-ordersy” in comparison to the sylvan nature because of its attempts to control, chop up, and dominate the woods for its own personal use (20-24). The woods, on the other hand, have never made such a foray into the realm of the human world. Therefore, liability for the break between the two lies squarely on the shoulders of the human, reducing the human to the animal which, in their eyes, is unreasoning and, therefore, commodifiable. By calling the Gang “short / and lower-ordersy,” Auden effectively smashes any notion of cultural superiority at the beginning of the poem. The ontological hierarchy, where humanity has resided on top for millennia, experiences a leveling out. While this could offend some readers, it also allows for the possibility of healing, that the two sides, the human could once again find its ancestral connections to the land and begin to work towards the wellbeing of land, plant, animal, and human alike.

In stanza six, Auden introduces this very possibility while repudiating those who have sought to commodify the woods: “Old sounds re-educate an ear grown coarse, / as Pan’s green father suddenly raps out / a burst of undecipherable Morse” (31-33). Through the rise of agricultural practices and the sectioning off of land, humans have, Auden suggests, forgotten what it means to be in communion with the woods. They have even forgotten the “old sounds:” birds chattering, deer grazing, wind rustling through the leaves. Yet, Auden also suggests that the human can be re-educated to learn to appreciate, enjoy, and protect these sounds as well. The end of the stanza sees Auden utilize what Greg Garrard calls a “critical anthropomorphism” that,

when used correctly, is used bio-centrically (Garrard 157): “And cuckoos mock in Welsh, and doves create / in rustic English over all they do / to rear their modern family of two” (34-36). Not only does Auden consider a pair of doves a “family,” he also gives credence to their “language.” Auden anthropomorphizes here in the critical manner for which Garrard advocates. It is not to render the birds as humanlike as possible nor is it to completely strip them of their individuality. Rather, it is to illumine the desirable differences between species, including the human. Their language is indecipherable to the human ear. While study of a certain species could certainly shed some light to its meaning, we can never know for certain what the cuckoo is saying. This is, however, not something to lament, but is rather a fact to be celebrated. It is a return to harmony and to a theory of mutual respect.

The following two stanzas continue in the same manner as the sixth, presenting the woods and its inhabitants as living entities that demand and deserve respect. The woods have a language all its own: “A fruit in vigor or a dying leaf, / Utters its private idiom for descent” (38-39). Even the fruits and leaves have a language unto themselves, a “private idiom” that only they can understand or communicate. This is, again, a fact to be celebrated and not scoffed at. Auden admits that the “late man,” ancestors to the human race, knows how to listen to these sounds and, in the wake of the cacophony, revel in his inability to understand (40). He would, after being immersed in the roar of the wilderness, hear “the oldest of his joys, / exactly as it was, the water noise” (41-42). This is not a forest or a wood sanctioned to be so by the king or the pope. This is not a fenced-off area to be feared or to be mined for its resources. It is, as Auden writes in these stanzas, an area with intrinsic value that deserves recognition and praise, but it also deserves to be intermingled with the human as equal, a nature-culture that allows for the harmonious growth of all species involved. “A well-kempt forest,” writes Auden at the opening of the next stanza,

"begs Our Lady's grade" (43). "Well-kempt" in this case does not refer to a tended cultivation, but a recognition of praise-able differences. Understanding is not the first step towards reconciliation. Auden here argues for the opposite—a recognition that to lack understanding does not then warrant the domination of the offending party. The forest deserves "Our Lady's grace" just as does any civilization.

As Auden has done in previous poems, he saves his wittiest and most pressing remarks for the final stanzas. He writes: "The trees encountered on a country stroll / reveal a lot about a country's soul" (47-48). This mixing up of nature and culture that Auden insists upon forces his readers to question their own relationship to the land. A country's soul, traditionally reserved for the human and denied to the non-human, is inextricably linked to the condition of the trees. If they are, for instance, "a small grove massacred to the last ash" or "an oak with heart-rot," we can reasonably conclude that the culture is not a desirable one (49-50). To neglect the well-being of the woods is to neglect the well-being of the self. If this is true, if the woods are reduced to an object to be possessed and manipulated, then Auden surmises that "this great society is going to smash" (51). Auden ends the poem in a succinct, straightforward, and matter-of-fact manner that leaves little room for mis-interpretation: "A culture is no better than its woods" (54). The poem, as I mentioned early, is dedicated to Nicolas Nabokov, a Russian composer who was friends with the more famous Igor Stravinsky. Auden bookends the poem with references to the mixing of nature and culture, thus begging the question: why separate the two in the first place? Are we not, along with the non-human, better off by striving towards a symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship? Music, Auden suggests, comes from both the human and the non-human, from both Nabokov and the nightingale. What, then, is the difference?

Emig, in his essay on Auden's ecological principles, considers Auden's critical anthropomorphism and the ways which this leads to a productive discourse surrounding the nature/culture divide:

> Only when the later poetry painfully and playfully acknowledges that differences at the roots of self and nature while simultaneously accepting their relatedness, can a communication emerge…Out of this accommodation, respect and moral obligations emerge—the product of a system of "difference" created by language, consciousness and culture, not as a consequence of ontological givens. Humans do not become moral by becoming one with nature, but by accepting their differential relatedness to what they call nature. (Emig 224)

The later Auden, after his reimagined, reborn poetics detailed in "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," seeks to heal the broken relationships he observes within the wider world. As Emig states above, this healing often came in the recognition of differences between the human and the non-human. While his early poetry allotted for glimpses of the ecological, where the land had agency, it was often pitted against the human in a power struggle. Poems such as the ones described in this section take a different route. They present the human/non-human relationship as an opportunity for growth and reconciliation. It is commonly said that the first step to solving a problem is admitting that there is one. Auden not only reveals the problem to his readers, he also insists that they question their own environmental ethics.

When Nature and Culture Collide

We had felt no talent to murder, it was against our pluck.
Why, why then? For raison de' tat.
—W.H. Auden, "Talking to Mice"

Joseph Simmons writes that Auden's later poems are "like a crossword puzzle" where "meandering seems to be the point" (86). This is not a knock against Auden's resurgence in the 1940s and onwards. Rather, it points towards Auden's realigned poetic interests. The poems of his youth often demanded much of his readers—their political activeness, their undivided attention, their ability to decipher his often-cryptic lyrics. His later poems, however, make no such demand on the reader. They instead suggest possible questions and then allow readers to answer those questions for themselves. I want to end with three poems that present radical ideas in regard to the non-human and to the human body. Two are written as a series, with each touching on similar topics of acceptance and acknowledgment of difference: "Talking to Dogs" and "Talking to Mice." I will end then with a poem that denaturalizes the human body and asks its readers to question their presumptions of what it means to be human. The poem, titled "A New Year Greeting," identifies the non-human element present at all times within and upon the human body. These poems close the ontological gap between the human and the non-human and cement Auden's well-deserved place amongst the ecological thinkers of the 20th century.

We may start, then, with Auden's "Talking to Dogs," a poem that again utilizes Auden's biocentric anthropomorphism. Written in response to the running over of Auden's dog Rolfi in 1970, "Talking to Dogs" is both a celebration of Rolfi's life and an acknowledgment of difference between species. Auden wastes no time in pointing out the ontological differences: "From us, of course, you want gristly bones / and to be led through exciting odorscapes / —their

colors don't matter" (1-3). Auden here makes reference to the obvious—that Rolfi's primary sensor is his nose. Consequently, his experiences are centered around smells, around "odorscapes," and not around sight. According to Auden, Rolfi desires to be "led" through these odorscapes, which we can infer that Auden happily obliged during Rolfi's life. Auden goes on to acknowledge other favorite behaviors of his beloved dog: to chase a rabbit, to sniff another dog, to be "scratched on the belly and talked to" (4-5, 9). Rolfi, of course, cannot understand what is being said to him, at least not in the same sense that Auden would understand another speaking person. Instead, Auden guesses that "probably, you hear only vowels and then only if / uttered with lyrical emphasis" (10-11).

Garrard, in considering Donna Haraway and her relationship to her dog, scrutinizes the typically held belief that the human necessarily domesticates and shapes the animal:

> Animals, in other words, make us human in a continual process of reshaping, just as we affect the evolution of both domesticated and wild species. As she [Haraway] asserts, "to be one is always to become with many." Haraway does not underestimate the asymmetry of power that often pertains between humans and other animals, but the love and deep knowledge of dogs that pervades her understanding of species encounters encourages her to emphasize the pleasure and freedom that the mutual discipline of animal companionship can engender. (Garrard 151)

Just as we shape dogs, so too do dogs, amongst other animals, shape us. This doesn't mean, as Garrard points out, that the typical human/dog relationship is cemented entirely in an equitable manner. The human remains largely the master of the dog. Yet, in Garrard's reading of Haraway, the ontological gap between the two species begins to close, thus acknowledging the agency of

dogs to affect evolutional changes in their human companions. In acknowledging and giving credence to the power of inter-species relationships, Garrard and Haraway alike argue against the redundant, harmful nature/culture duality. Rather, they favor the more inclusive natureculture, one that concedes to a theory of intermeshing subjectivity.

We see this relationship play out in "Talking to Dogs" in the second half of the poem. While Auden has already addressed Rolfi's inability to fully comprehend human language, he argues that Rolfi transcends the inter-species language barrier through properties that are seemingly innate to animal companions:

> Being quicker to sense unhappiness
> Without having to be told the dreary
> Details or who is to blame, in dark hours
> Your silence may be of more help than many
> Two-legged comforters. ("Talking to Dogs" 39-43)

Rolfi possesses the almost-preternatural ability to "sense unhappiness" within his human companions, whether physical or mental, without being explicitly told so through the medium of language. As in "The Hidden Law," human language becomes more of a hindrance than it is a distinguisher of human intelligence. Whereas any "two-legged comforter" must first, according to the logic of the poem, be told through language of a sufferer's anguish, a dog, like Rolfi, may perceive the same suffering through a change in body language or demeanor of the human. A few lines previous, Auden writes that "Humor and joy to your thinking are one, / so that you laugh with your whole body" (32-33). Language for Rolfi arises through the manipulation of the physical body and not through vocal representations. Therefore, Rolfi foregoes the signifier/signified relationship, in turn avoiding the subjective nature of human language. With

spoken language transcended, a major barrier between species crumbles. It is Rolfi's silence, his presence, that Auden desires, not the hollow words of Man. In communicating with the body, dogs are far superior than mankind. This is not to suggest that is impossible for the human to identify, understand, and react appropriately to body language. It is simply to say that Auden, within the context of the poem, has recognized and acknowledged the ways in which Rolfi—and by extension most dogs—communicate more effectively than the human. While the poem is addressed to Rolfi after his passing, we may read the text as a monument to many human/canine relations whether Auden intended this to be.

Now that Rolfi has passed, his absence is palpable. The silence loses its meaning without the presence of the canine body and the human is again relegated to the prison of the spoken word. Rolfi has, in the "continual process of reshaping" suggested by Garrard, notified Auden of human limitation (151). The next few lines of the poem, however, again re-shifts, on the surface level, the seat of power back to the human: "In citizens / obedience is not always a virtue, / but yours need not make us uneasy / because, though child-like, you are complete" ("Talking to Dogs" 43-46). While this child-like obedience seems at first glance a demeaning gesture meant to raise the status of the human, we must consider the motivating factors behind the obedience. Rather than manifesting through fear or duty, Rolfi's obedience is manifested through love and loyalty. This loyalty, however, is a reciprocated one. Just as Rolfi listens to Auden's commands, so too does Auden, we can infer, care for Rolfi's needs. This is not a master/servant relationship reliant on taxing demands or back-breaking work. Rather, this is a representation of a companionship, equal in loyalty and respect between both parties. Just as Rolfi cares for Auden when unhappiness sets in, so too must Auden care for the well-being of Rolfi. Without this mutual respect, the relationship becomes tainted and reverts to a harmful binary between nature

and culture. This is a binary that here Auden is actively attempting to avoid through his portrayal of the human/non-human relationship.

Auden's preference for an inclusive nature-culture is further solidified with the poem's closing lines: "Let difference / remain our bond, yes, and the one trait / both have in common, a sense of theatre" (50-52). Garrard, quoting from John Berger's "Why Look at Animals," writes:

> Animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are. (Garrard 152-153)

In other words, the more we claim to know about a given animal—the more we classify and categorize—the more control we exert upon the animal. Thus, they become "further away" as we identify and label the differences between them and the human, whether that difference be behavioral, anatomical, or otherwise. Auden, however, refuses to identify or control the differences between Rolfi and himself. Rather, he makes the bold case for difference as a bonding agent. He recognizes the differences between himself and his dog, but he does not seek to categorize them. Instead, he celebrates them—both by writing this poetic elegy and by refusing to claim human superiority.

In "Talking to Mice," Auden considers the human relationship to animals that are, typically speaking, viewed as pests to be exterminated and avoided at all costs. The poem directly addresses the ways in which the human and the non-human dwell together, and how this close proximity can often lead to violent encounters that are, more often than not, bred from the pre-conceived notion that alterity is something to eradicate. "Talking to Mice" forces its readers to ask ethical questions regarding the well-being of animals and insects that are normally thought

of as undesirable in that they provide no tangible benefits to the cultural realm. Auden begins the poem by referencing these less-than-desirable animals: "But those animates which we call in our arrogance *dumb* are / judged as a species and classed by the melodramatic division, / either *Goodies* or *Baddies"* ("Talking to Mice" 5-7). First, it is important to note Auden's word choice here. He labels this "melodramatic division" as human "arrogance." By placing the human atop the ontological hierarchy, we inflate our own self-worth in comparison to the "spiders and roaches and flies" that we deem as "all irredeemably evil" (7-8). When we look into the eyes of these creatures, unlike when we observe a dog or an elephant, we do not see a reflection of ourselves. Instead, we tend to see something that is "irredeemably evil" simply because they neither look nor act nor reason as we do.

Auden, however, approaches this subject sarcastically by first recognizing the inherent arrogance in such a manner of thinking. When he writes that these creatures are "*Dreck* to be stamped on or swatted, abolished without any hover," he does so in a reproachful, sarcastic manner that calls attention to the absurdity of such an approach. By first calling his readers' attentions to human arrogance, he asks his readers to question their own ethical approach towards creatures that are stereotypically considered a hindrance or aesthetically displeasing to the human eye. Garrard gives voice to a popular argument in eco-critical circles, one to which Auden here draws his readers' attentions. Garrard, summarizing the myriad of theorists before him, writes that "cruelty to animals is analogous to slavery" (Garrard 146). This is certainly a claim that could potentially draw ire. Essentially, it equates the subjection and subjugation of the human body to that of, say, a spider. In this way, a theory such as the one proposed above has the capability of rendering human suffering moot.

This, however, is an argument that doesn't hold water when more closely scrutinized. Garrard continues by saying that "the capacity to feel pain, not the power of reason, entitle(s) a being to moral consideration" (146). If we are to take this ethical bearing seriously, it is not a lowering of the status of the human, but a raising of the animal other. I want to take a moment here to present a scenario. Let us imagine a man and a mouse trapped together in a burning building with no possibility of escape. Rescuers may only choose one subject to save from the inferno. Garrard's summations, on the surface, make this an impossible choice. Both can feel pain, and thus both should be considered for salvation—a preposterous conundrum that inverts the logic of Garrard's summations. We can, however, reasonably conclude that the human rescuers would choose to save the life of the man over the life of the mouse, as well they should. This theory, that we should consider the well-being of an animal based on its ability to feel pain, is meant more to prevent the unnecessary harm of an innocent creature because of the direct result of human action. In other words, the theory makes it impossible to turn an animal into nothing more than a commodity, a cog within the industrial machine. Auden, in "Talking to Mice," presents this theory of inclusivity and anti-cruelty by referencing his own failings in adhering to the very ethics he proposes.

As the poem continues, Auden introduces the mice couple who, through "Spring and Summer," had been dwelling within his home in a "peace as idyllic as only Beatrix / Potter could paint" ("Talking to Mice" 28-31). This idyllic peace, however, becomes disrupted once the "couple" of mice begins to multiply into a swarm by the end of the summer (33). Auden, like in "Talking to Dogs," addresses the mice as "you," acknowledging their presence and their agency within the house. He has known that the mice are living within his domicile and yet has done nothing, at this point, to prevent them from doing so. Yet, after they multiplied beyond control,

Auden decides to take action: “Knowing you trusted in us, and would never believe an unusual / object pertaining to men could be there for a sinister purpose / traps were baited and one by one you were fatally humbugged” (33-35). Within these lines, Auden labels the mice trusting—a generally desirable trait—and himself sinister—a less-desirable trait. The plot of the poem revolves around a grandiose betrayal traditionally preserved for the likes of Julius Caesar and Brutus. Auden assumes the role of the murderous Brutus while the mice are, by default, Julius. In the eyes of the mice, Auden is a friend who has earned their trust through their living arrangements. They could never believe that the traps were meant to kill when Auden has never before raised a hand against their well-being. This is another example of the biocentric anthropomorphism that Auden utilizes through much of his later poetry—a trait that didn’t arise within his verse until after his reinvented poetics. By calling the mice trusting, Auden necessarily imbues upon them human traits. Yet, in doing so, he does not deny them their mice-ness. In the poem “Natural Linguistics,” Auden writes that “every created thing has ways of pronouncing its ownhood” (“Natural Linguistics” 1). The mice that occupy much of Auden’s poem do exactly this—“pronounce their ownhood”—through their proliferation and residence within the domicile.

Yet, one can’t help but to notice the brutal methods which Auden takes in ridding the house of the unwanted guests. After lazily “sipping cocktails,” seemingly unworried about the carnage that has, in the past week, surrounded him, Auden walks into the kitchen to find an occupied trap (41). What he finds, “a broken cadaver, its black eyes beadily staring, obumbrated a week,” strikes a chord within Auden, forcing him to consider the violence which he has orchestrated (43-45). His senses being struck by a cadaver that was once a living, breathing, *trusting* mouse, Auden adopts the arrogance he sarcastically humorizes at the poem’s onset.

However, this realization does not sit well within the empathetic Auden as he is forced to come to terms what he sees as reckless abandon. “We had felt no talent to murder,” he writes, “it was against our pluck” (45-46). This is immediately followed with a remorseful cry of “Why? Why then?” (46). Auden questions his own decisions—his own ethics—in ending the lives of over a dozen mice that were merely attempting to live the best existence they possibly could. Auden, entirely ashamed of his recent actions, has no other choice but to label his motives “*rasions d’Etat,”* an action enacted purely for political reasons, often by corrupt governments that veer far from justice or the protecting of its people, and that often leads to the grisly murders of many of its citizens (46).

Auden dedicates the last three lines of the poem to the reprimanding of himself as he continues to compare his actions to that of a totalitarian State: “As / householders we had behaved as every state does, / when there is something It wants, and a minor one gets in the way” (46-48). There are two factors at play within these final lines. The obvious has already been stated, that Auden labels himself as a murderous State that does what it wants, regardless of the consequences, simply because It can. This is certainly accurate, but it also invites a more positive reading. The mice become members of the State that Auden here evokes. After considering his actions, Auden believes that the mice have inherent rights to the dwelling just as he does. Within the home, the mice are free of predators, are given shelter, and are able to scavenge for ample food supplies. Are they not, Auden asks, simply doing what is best for them and their offspring? Would not any human undertake the same route in order to protect and feed themselves? While Auden comes to this conclusion only after his orchestrated murder, he nevertheless argues for the nature-culture that would see the mice be respected simply for their vitality. In “Talking to

Mice," Auden offers himself as an example of compromised ethic concerning the non-human, just as the poem becomes a guide to better inter-species practice for its readers.

If "Talking to Dogs" and "Talking to Mice" represent Auden's ethical approach to the animal other, then "A New Year Greeting" represents Auden's questioning of the sanctity of the human body. In other words, the poem seeks to de-naturalize the body by calling attention to the non-human aspects that make up the conglomerated human body. The human body, like the city in "Brussels in Winter," becomes an assemblage of *things* that are not entirely dependent on human reason. In fact, as we will soon learn through Auden's poem, human reason is not possible without the non-human. This is interdependence on smallest of scales—not just mice living within a physical house, but micro-organisms making the human body their home. In contemplating his own death, Auden must consider the impact to the organisms that reside on his skin. In *Later Auden,* Mendelson accurately portrays the parallels between Auden's early work and the work he produced near the end of his life:

> In the last years of his life, he [Auden] wrote elegies for himself…After 1969, his every third thought was of the grave. At the start of his career, his poems had evoked a doomed country of defunct machinery and obscure betrayals, and now, at the end, they settled into the doomed country of his own body, where the obscure betrayer was hidden deep within himself. (Mendelson, *Later Auden* 507)

In wrestling with mortality, the body becomes, for Auden, an obscure, irrational *thing.* The body no longer belongs to Auden, even before death. Rather, it works as one of Bennett's assemblages.

Auden wastes no time in addressing the non-human residents that live on and within him. He first writes that the new year is for "taking stock of our lives," addressing his readers in an act

of shared experience. Yet, he quickly points out that "our" lives are not entirely our own. Rather, they belong to the myriad of micro-organisms and bacteria that make up the body. He writes:

> My greetings to all of you, Yeasts,
>
> Bacteria, Viruses,
>
> Aerobics and Anaerobics:
>
> A Very Happy New Year
>
> To all for whom my ectoderm
>
> Is as Middle-Earth to me (3-8).

The skin becomes liminal—neither human nor non-human, but a "Middle-Earth" that resides between the two. By clouding the distinctions of the body, Auden clouds the distinctions between nature and culture. Kelly Sultzbach draws her readers to this poem as a prime example of the inter-relational Auden: "In poems like 'A New Year Greeting…' the speaker's attitude is one of respect and admiration for the nonhuman other, even when one might expect a reaction of abhorrence" (Sultzbach 182). To appreciate the ecological Auden, one must come to understand how his poetry references the "natural" in unexpected ways. Sultzbach here draws our attentions to an Auden who understands his body as a planet for other living creatures, and yet does not react in disgust. Rather, Auden glorifies his body as planet for the micro-organisms residing there. The micro-organisms, through their complete alterity in comparison to the human, resist the typical anthropomorphism that allows most humans to view a non-human as intelligent or aesthetically pleasing. Auden, however, resists the temptation to revolt in the presence of alterity on his body. Rather, he welcomes it with open arms.

Sultzbach continues to interpret the implications of Auden's poem concerning its ethical approach to in-folding nature-cultures:

> And even though the tone is wry, the poem wrestles with one's ethical positioning as a planet for other lives and, as Louise Westling keenly interprets the poem, has the effect of making the inquiry applicable to the reader too, who "'hears' that voice in his or her mind and experiences a witty understanding of our close kinship with other creatures that includes intricate dialogues and responses within our very bodies, of bewildering complexities of interrelationship". (Sultzbach 182)

In addressing the alterity of the human body, Auden forces his readers to question their own-ness. What is considered solely human if the body itself is comprised of an assemblage of separate living creatures? As the poem continues, Auden points to the agency the micro-organisms possess in altering his body. He implores them to "build colonies" on his body, but only if they promise to "behave as good guests should, / not rioting into acne / or athlete's-foot or a boil" ("A New Year Greeting" 17-24). They have the ability, as Auden attests, to change their "world" just as we can terraform ours. While Auden may actively avoid unwanted skin conditions through basic hygiene (such as the washing of his hands), he acquiesces that the choice is, ultimately, not his. Should a boil appear, there is nothing for him to do but wait for it to remedy itself. The distinction between body and environment, between nature and culture, dissolves. To think of the body as a self-contained, self-sustaining unit is blatantly false and is, more-so, a practice in solipsism. It would deny the fact that the air we breathe, that fills our lungs and sustains our lives, comes from the forests or the oceans (Bennett 102). The body, Auden argues, is the epitome of an inter-relational object.

The middle stanzas continue to point to the alterity of the human body by critically anthropomorphizing the micro-organisms that live on the skin. Auden writes: "If you were

religious folk, / how would your dramas justify / unmerited suffering?" ("A New Year Greeting" 38-40). The germs and yeasts are, obviously, not a religious folk. They have no dramas in which to interpret the "unmerited suffering" that befalls them as people do. Yet, in describing the germs in this way, Auden calls his readers' attentions to an ulterior perspective of time—one that necessarily does not share the human perspective. Stanza six likens Auden's every-day actions, such as dressing or bathing, to natural disasters for the denizens of his skin, this shifting the timescales down to one suitable for single-celled organisms:

> By what myths would your priests account
>
> For the hurricanes that come
>
> Twice every twenty-four hours,
>
> Each time I dress or undress. (41-44)

There are other disasters too, such as the "flood that scalds to death" every time Auden bathes (47-48).While these "disasters" occur multiple throughout one "day" as we understand it, time does not have the same meaning for the micro-organisms. What to us is an hour may be to them, Auden suggests, a few years. What for us is a hot both is to them a scalding flood. While these comparisons may not be based entirely on scientific fact, they nevertheless permit us to consider something as small as a single-celled germ in its own right—as an entity worthy of moral consideration.

By poem's end, Auden cares more for the denizens of his skin—his body as planet—than he does for his own well-being. Auden dedicates the final stanza to the "Day of Apocalypse," or the death and eventual decay of his body. Auden likens his death to an apocalypse for the inhabitants of his body because, with his death, their "planet" ceases to exist. What once sustained them now crumbles to bone and, sooner or later, dust. "My mantle," Auden writes,

"suddenly turns too cold, too rancid, for you" (51-52). Auden is concerned only with the inhospitable nature of his decaying cadaver, not for the world he himself leaves behind in death. While the final lines bring the reader back to the human world, they seem to suggest that it may be crueler than the micro-organisms': "And I / am stripped of excuse and nimbus, / a Past, subject to Judgement" (54-56). Auden here refers to the judgement all human souls will face upon entering the afterlife in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a judgement that the yeasts, bacteria, and viruses are lucky enough to avoid. He will become, as the poem suggests, his entire "Past," laid bare without any possibility of hiding or escape. While his soul is judged, the micro-organisms may rest in oblivious peace, unjudged and thriving.

While much of Auden's poetry post-1940 delineates the need to reconsider the nature/culture divide, "Talking to Dogs," "Talking to Mice," and "A New Year Greeting" offer his most succinct and self-contained ecological arguments. They present the necessary intermingling of the human/non-human world that symbiotically sustains both parties just as they rid themselves of the need for such a binary distinction. The environment, the "outside" as it may be called, constantly shrinks within these poems. The house becomes a residence for both man and mice. The body becomes both a human expression and the environment itself. The poems celebrate the liminal, the in-between spaces that seem to express the sincerest modes of living among the non-human, both animate and inanimate. Auden becomes, through his poetry, an advocate for ecological thinking.

A Legacy Cemented

He Still Loves Life
But O O O O how he wishes
The good Lord would take him.
—W.H. Auden, Untitled poem written before his death in 1973

Auden died September 9th, 1973 of sudden heart failure in a Vienna hotel room after reading his poetry to a group of Austrian intellectuals and university students. According to Adam Levy, "Auden has seldom sounded so young and vital" as he did during what would be his final public address (Levy 40). While Levy noted this vitality during Auden's address, this same vitality ran throughout the latter part of his poetic career just as it did in the 1930s. If we are to believe Auden's mantra, that every work of a writer is simultaneously a first and a further step towards "one consistent *oeuvre,"* then we must read his work through the lens of these glasses. In doing so, we bridge the previously wide-open chasm that separated his Audenesque poetry of the 1930s with his poetry written post-1940. His poetry undeniably undergoes a seismic metamorphosis after his self-imposed exile as his style and tone changes from one of cryptic ambiguity to one of a more domestic complacency. Yet, this only describes a miniscule element of his poetic transformation. While his voice matured, so too did his approach towards the political and, through that, the ecological. Poems such as "The Watershed" and "The Secret Agent" certainly present Auden's early ecological thinking, yet they do so by relying on the binary between nature and culture that critics have since labeled as dangerous and reductive. They would pit the human against the nonhuman in a battle of will that gave the nonhuman agency, but nonetheless presented this agency as antagonistic and antithetical to any human action. His later poetry, however, expounds upon these ecological ideas and presents a much more consolidated, healthy relationship between the two parties, often muddling the distinction

between the human/nonhuman and, therefore, advocating for an interwoven, interpenetrating natureculture.

The natureculture for which Auden advocates contains the potential to alter the human perception of the environment and, in turn, influence national policies by reshaping public opinions. By approaching the political through the individual, Auden shifts his focus form the commanding voice of his youth to a reconciliatory one that is more focused on healing the broken relationship between the human and the nonhuman alike. He "lets the healing fountain start" by eliminating the need for a binary by muddling what it means to be an agent of physical change ("In Memory of W.B. Yeats 63). By flattening the ontological hierarchy in poems such as "The Hidden Law" and "Talking to Dogs," Auden allows nonhumans room to speak on their own terms in conjunction with, and not against, the human. In so doing, the "nature" and "culture" distinction becomes unnecessary and obsolete, obfuscating the ways in which all materiality works in concert with itself, including the human body.

Auden's legacy, then, does not fall into disarray after the second half of his career as many critics (such as Upward) claim. Rather, Auden earns his place amongst other Modernists such as Pound, Eliot, and Wolfe because of, not despite of, his reformed poetics and increased interest in and expression of the ecological. In this way, Auden becomes a precursor for contemporary ecological thought, presenting ideas about naturecultures and intermingling species that today have become ubiquitous in ecological circles. His poetry foreshadows the works of critics such as Morton and Bennett, both of whom would put into concise language Auden's thoughts in the mid-twentieth century. His sacred landscapes—abandoned mining equipment, lead, the gasworks—would grow to include commonalities such as the house or the

family dog. These assemblages in turn assist Auden in concaving the ontological hierarchy, brining all forms of matter closer together.

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