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W.H. Auden Society  
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## Writing As A Career: An Early W.H. Auden Jaunt in the States

In the course of researching Auden's 1946 term spent at Bennington College, it came to light that Auden had visited the small fledgling college in Vermont shortly after he took up residence in the United States. The visit was one of his first literary jaunts in America. Leaving England, Auden had arrived in New York on 26 January 1939,\* less than four months before he came to Bennington. On 17 May 1939, Chester Kallman wrote Auden: "you are probably on your way to Bennington or some such outpost of Education." This reference, brought to my attention by Nicholas Jenkins, provided the initial hint that Auden had come to Bennington before he taught there in 1946. Further inquiries revealed a remarkably detailed, if tantalizingly incomplete, record of that visit.

On 18 May 1939, Auden was to read his poems and to speak on "Writing As A Career," a talk otherwise unknown and unrecorded. According to Jenkins, the term "career" would have been a pejorative one for Auden at that time; he looked askance on such conventional views of ordering life and pursuing goals. Thus what he would have had to say might hold considerable interest.

What survived in 1993 in the records of Bennington College and in the memories of those present in 1939? Would a copy of his talk by chance turn up? In those days, Bennington College was blissfully informal as to its archival responsibilities; moreover, the files had been moved a lot in the

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\*Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden, A Biography* (New York, 1981), 253. Other references to Carpenter noted in text. Kallman's letter is in the Berg Collection, NYPL. In writing this note, I am indebted to many: in the first instance to Nicholas Jenkins of the W.H. Auden Society and Edward Mendelson. I am especially grateful to the Bennington students present on that day, in particular for the splendid thoughtfulness of Vida Ginsberg Deming, Faith Jackson, Phyllis Wright Turner, Hoima Forbes Cherau, Barbara Livingston, Dorothy Cousins, and Betty Mills Brown. I also want to thank Ben Belitt, Margaret DeGray, and Wallace Fowlie; Susan Sgorbati, Dean of Faculty at Bennington; and above all Tom and Kit Foster and Rebecca Stickney, Bennington resources and guiding lights.

intervening half century, suffering diminution, an unselective loss of institutional memory—just as those who met and heard Auden might not remember the occasion fifty-five years later. While he was a celebrity in New York literary circles from the start of his American residence, Auden was far from universally regarded as famous. Still, many of the students present at his reading were well aware of his reputation, and more. Vida Ginsberg Deming, a student present at the talk, recalls, "Eliot was the God-head, and the four young—Auden, Spender, Isherwood, and MacNeice—the demi-Gods." Bennington students with a literary bent were in touch with important movements of the day as much as anyone in New York, and she goes on to remind us that "we were the generation that read *Four Quartets* as they appeared."

Yet for others there would have been no call for them to inscribe their memories with details of an occasion that was not quite momentous. In either case, both faculty and students were expected to attend all these meetings—and discuss them, advisor with advisee, the following day. Even so, to the poet Ben Belitt, a member of the faculty that spring, it came in 1993 as "a great surprise" to learn that Auden had visited the college then. The local newspaper, *The Bennington Evening Banner*, can be scrutinized in vain for reference to Auden—before, during, or after his visit.

Auden, on the recommendation of Richard Eberhart, was spending a month as a guest teacher at St. Mark's, the traditional prep school outside Boston, a bastion of propriety and 19th century values. It was an old private school, not unlike the English public school; "it sets out to be an American Eton," Auden remarked (Carpenter, 264-65). Bennington must have offered a contrast, since it was a young experimental liberal arts college (scarcely a decade old) for women.

Bennington College was elitist but more radical than conservative, an informally rigorous college where students studied under artists such as Paul Feeley, composers like Otto Luening, or writers such as Wallace Fowle, Ben Belitt, Francis Fergusson (all on the faculty in 1939); the students "learned by doing" at Bennington, where "education was a performance art." The college regularly sponsored talks, readings, and performances by the likes of Carl Sandburg, James T. Farrell, Katherine Anne Porter, Martha Hill. There was strong interaction between students, faculty, and guests: at a reception given by the Luenings, a senior, Faith Jackson, danced for Carl Sandburg, and he sang for her. The place must have been attractive

enough to Auden; and the 1939 occasion must have been a pleasant one on both sides, for the college would invite Auden to teach at Bennington twice, in 1944 and 1945, and Auden did return to teach at Bennington in 1946.

The first visit, however, was not without hitches. What follows here is the record, insofar as it remains and/or can be reconstructed, of this New England trip which Auden made so early in his American sojourn.

On 11 April 1939, literature faculty member Henry Simon (brother of the founder of Simon and Schuster) wrote Auden inviting him to give "a reading or lecture to the college community," suggesting dates and reminding him that the invitation had already been presaged by Mr. Willert (Oxford University Press) and a Mrs. Brown. Simon wrote him at the Oxford University Press and suggested he come up from New York by train, either to be met in Albany or to go straight through to North Bennington—a service then available daily. He also hoped that Auden "might find it possible to stay for a day or two." Auden replied shortly in an undated note from 237 East 81st Street:

Dear Mr Simon,

Thank you for your letter. I suggest May 18th. I hope to be teaching then at St Mark's School in Southborough, Mass and could come [drive?] over.

I wonder if you could tell me what fee you suggest.

Yours sincerely,

W. H. Auden

Simon replied for the Literature Division on 19 April, discussing routes to Bennington, fees (he "thought that Mr. Willert had mentioned the fee" which was to be \$25 "and expenses" which were to be \$10); asking for "the topic of the meeting;" stating that William Troy, the Chairman, would introduce him; and again expressing the hope that Auden could stay over—so that Simon could meet him (since he had to be in New York on Thursday evenings).

The correspondence then breaks off until May 15th. It is three days before the event, and—evidently—the College has not heard from Auden as to his topic or his travel plans. Dorothea Hendricks, Secretary of Evening Meetings, wires Auden at 81st Street on May 15th:

Would greatly appreciate your letting us know at what hour to expect you Thursday and, if possible, the topic of your talk or reading.

Isherwood, sharing the 81st Street apartment with the poet, evidently relays this request to Auden at St. Mark's. Auden telegraphs Hendricks the following day:

A little uncertain on being driven over. Hope about six p.m. Title "Writing a Career" and will also read.

It is signed, "Auden, St. Mark's School." The day following, 17 May at 2 p.m.—now but one day before Auden's talk—the poet wires Hendricks:

Arrangement about car very difficult. Could you possibly fetch me? Wire collect Western Union.

Southborough, Mass., is over a hundred miles from Bennington. Forty-five minutes later Dorothea Hendricks wires Auden back:

Sorry not possible to send car to Southboro. Could you take 1:36 train from Framingham, or 2:10 from Worcester, arriving Pittsfield 5:05? daylight saving time? Car could meet you there. One hour drive to Bennington. Please wire if we are to meet this train.

The "one hour" drive is something of an exaggeration on Hendricks's part; even today it takes an hour, if traffic is light, to make the trip between Pittsfield and Bennington, and the roads are improved. The next morning, May 18th, the poet wired:

Arriving Pittsfield 5:05.

Wystan Auden

Auden arrived in time to have (a brief?) dinner in the Commons (senior Barbara Livingston "waited table in the Faculty room" and remembers serving him). He would have settled in to the guest suite; the dining room was a floor below these rooms, which were across the hall from the "College Theatre" where he spoke (see floor plan). The program, with a checklist of his books, announced, "TONIGHT Wystan Hugh Auden will speak on 'Writing As A Career' He will also read." The meeting took place at 7:30, so the dinner must have been hurried, though spirits were served; and there would have been very little time indeed for him to relax or prepare.

The meeting took place in the College Theatre, a large room with a raised, proscenium arch stage, from which speakers delivered their talks, on the third floor of the College Commons. Vida Ginsberg Deming remembers:

He was a lank, loose-limbed, blond young man, reasonably drunk and speaking with as unintelligible an Oxford accent as one could aspire to in caricature. In fact his whole limp-fair posture was something we greeted with ambivalent pleasure. To see the feet of clay of our stars gave us a charge.

Phyllis Wright Turner was a senior then and in attendance; she corroborates Deming's memories with some pointedly circumstantial recollections:

Auden seemed decidedly ill at ease, standing more stage-right than at the center. He was tall, slim and somewhat slouched with a bad haircut—or perhaps just cowlicky hair. He avoided looking at the audience and set his gaze on a point about ten feet up the middle of the left side wall. I remember turning to see what was there. Nothing *I* found.

Faith Jackson has similar recollections, though she recalls him seated—perhaps he both sat and stood. (And evidently she was seated in the path of his gaze, as opposed to Turner, who presumably sat on the opposite side of the hall.) Jackson recalls nothing of the talk (“I never embraced Writing as A Career until much later”) but was probably “wool gathering,” as she says, because she had just given her senior dance performance; yet:

I have a strong sense of *him*. . . . I can tell you exactly how he sat, sideways to the audience, his legs seemingly crossed more than once, his head turned in our direction like an alert sparrow. The rest of him sloped. Today I would compare him to one of those over-long draped figures by Beardsley. He was all one color, or seemed so, his voice, and his suit, hair, skin, a yellow-beige.

It is interesting to note that Auden on this occasion inspired visual memories strongly, but not audial ones; doubtless the fact that he was difficult to understand plays a role in these painterly recollections. It may also be that after a long day Auden was somewhat stupefied for lack of an “upper”; at this time in his life he regularly took benzedrine each morning (Carpenter, 265). Perhaps he left St. Mark’s School ill-prepared.

For Faith Jackson, there was something off-putting about Auden—as well as for Phyllis Turner and Vida Deming. Trying to account for her lapse of memory as to what Auden actually said, Jackson concurs with the others:

I have to say in my defense that there was something about him that short-circuited a response: did he hold us in contempt? Was he painfully shy? Was he too cerebral? He was ruffled. His eyes were way back in his head.

Vida Deming has more judgmental recollections:

In general his performance was rather down the nose & snide. He hadn't yet decided to teach and clearly felt awkward dancing for the peasants for money.

"Remember, too," she cogently continues, "it was a female college. His vulnerability because he was so inept and graceless touched our literature-beguiled hearts & didn't affect our pleasure in his poetry. It was a poignant side-show, also irritating."

The English poet's talk, as we have seen, was not reported in the local newspaper. But *The Bennington Evening Banner* evinced a local passion for the English, and for poetry, nonetheless. The newspaper ran a weekly column, "Today's Poetry," and it will illustrate the cultural time lag in a small Vermont town. But the major story in May, 1939, was the visit of George VII and Queen Mary to Canada; Bennington was obsessed with it, and there was front-page illustrated coverage day after day. Yet *The Banner* also followed Bennington's concerns over the threat of war by running a front-page story with photos of the German submarine fleet. The mood of impending conflict may have been a reason for printing—two days after Auden's talk, as it happened—a page-length, double-column "Today's Poetry" consisting of poems from the First World War. Siegfried Sassoon was represented by the full text of "Counter-Attack" and "Does It Matter"; there were two poems by Wilfred Gibson. English poets were in vogue in Bennington, but Auden's day had not come. Bennington College students knew his work and admired him as a celebrity. Yet to the town of Bennington, Anglophile as it was, Auden—who just eighteen months before had received the King's Gold Medal for Poetry from King George himself—meant nothing.

After Auden's talk and reading there was a brief question and answer period, of which no record remains. Then the faculty, and perhaps a senior or two, retired to a party, given by Francis Fergusson at his residence on "Faculty

Row." Catharine O. Foster, a member of the Literature Faculty, remembers that Auden rose suddenly around 10 p.m. and, clapping his hands together, excused himself, saying that he had to go to bed and get his rest. Whether he went back to the Commons guest suite with a guide or found it himself, no one remembers; or whether he stayed for "a couple of days" or left the next morning. (At any rate, he was in New York that weekend.) And the essence—or even any details—of the tantalizing talk "Writing As A Career" appear to be lost forever, along with the rest of this minor occasion only partly rescued from oblivion.

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