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Stephen Sandy

AUDEN AT BENNINGTON

W. H. Auden spent the spring of 1946, from March until July, at Bennington College in Vermont. The post-war period was a time of many comings and goings at the little experimental college with its clientele of privileged girls, and a number of tales grew up about the eminent poet's relation to the college—dates and facts—and with colleagues, many of whom were eminent themselves and have had their own stories to tell. That Bennington girls danced nude and ogled Auden from the garden outside his study windows, and such stories must remain lore, unverifiable embellishments of fact; that Auden and Roethke shared a house turned out not to be the case.

In the past five years I have communicated with available members of his classes, searched fragmentary and usually chaotic college records, and interviewed acquaintances from that period. A picture of Auden with some fresh details emerges. If the story is not earthshaking, it is only that Auden's time at Bennington was peaceful and full of work on The Age of Anxiety; the record nonetheless speaks to "myths" and misconceptions—which it may be helpful to correct—of this moment in his life.

Auden was able to spend considerable time away, in June even spending a week in New York ¹—with the college's relaxed schedule, absences he could afford. With his financial situation more secure and with Kallman a part of his life, he was able to settle in; on balance he seems to have enjoyed living in Vermont.

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In mid-December 1945, Auden paid his second visit to Bennington College. He talked with Lewis Webster Jones, the college president, agreeing on final arrangements for his appointment for the spring term, 1946.

Theodore Roethke, whom Auden would replace, was being eased out of Bennington on the twin occasions of his 1945 Guggenheim—he had postponed it

¹Communication from Edward Mendelson, to whom I am grateful for many details and constant support.

until January 1946² —and the prospect of a nervous breakdown, evidenced by increasingly manic and erratic behavior through the fall of 1945. On this brief visit, Auden was put up in the Commons building, in the college's only guest suite, the same he occupied six years earlier when he first visited the tiny New England college in the spring of 1939. Roethke entertained Auden at Shingle Cottage³, where he lived with others such as Kenneth Burke, and where Auden was soon to take up residence. In a letter to Burke dated December 21, 1945, Roethke wrote:

Auden was here for a day and a night. He's coming on for one semester . . . He didn't want to stay in the guest room . . . so we drank and roared down in Shingle until 3:30 or 4:00, at which time I retired virtuously to one of the upstairs rooms. ⁴

The college had been in touch with Auden since he came to give a talk, "Writing as a Career," in 1939 (*W. H. Auden Society Newsletter*, Nos. 10-11). For example, Jones had wired Auden at Swarthmore on August 24, 1944, offering a one year appointment to begin that month, which Auden turned down because of his prior commitment to Swarthmore. Now, on November 23, 1945, Jones again invited Auden to join the faculty:

I am happy to offer you an appointment as a member of the Bennington College faculty for one semester beginning February 1, 1946, at a salary at the rate of \$4,000 per year plus an allowance for travel of \$100. . . .⁵

Auden's reply is not recorded, but thanks to Roethke his visit to Bennington that December is.

Auden was put on the college payroll in March; the semester began on March 26, and Auden was assigned Roethke's apartment in Shingle Cottage. He

² Communication from G. Thomas Tanselle, John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, July, 1993. Letter from Roethke to Guggenheim Foundation, December 20, 1945, requesting "immediate activation" of his fellowship. Further citations from Guggenheim Foundation are noted in the text as *Tanselle*.

³ Shingle Cottage: early 19th century Cape, remodelled in Greek Revival style; later overlaid by the Jennings family with paneling, molded tiles, and oversize fireplaces in the Arts and Crafts style. This house was let to Robert Frost when the Jennings family moved uphill to "Fairview," their extensive new stone country house. When the Jenningses bequeathed Shingle Cottage to the college, it was used as a single male faculty residence. Auden lived here in an apartment that took up the first floor, which Roethke had occupied; Kenneth Burke and Pier Maria Pasinetti lived upstairs.

⁴ *Selected Letters of Theodore Roethke*, ed. Ralph Mills. (In 1945 the fall semester ended December 15.)

⁵ Letter from Lewis Webster Jones, November 23, 1945, (Bennington College Archives, Business Office). Further citations from Bennington College archives are noted in the text as *Archives*.

had two courses, *Forms of Literature*, an introductory course all literature faculty taught, which included the—at the time—somewhat advanced choice of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. As well he taught *Verse Form*, a prosody workshop ordinarily taught by Roethke, “the study of verse as an intellectual discipline” in the words of Roethke's rubric for the course.⁶ He may well have taught, whether as a course or in tutorial format is not clear, *Modern English Poetry*, another Roethke course, billed in its description as “Hardy, Lawrence, Owen, Auden, Thomas.”

One senior, Elinor Brisbane Philbin, would not have missed the eminent Auden, so she took *Forms of Literature*; she remembers that it was held in Franklin House living room (each dormitory had a large, well furnished living room with fireplace, sofas, antique furniture, and paintings on the walls); “there was coffee and everyone smoked like crazy.” In 1993 she recalled that

Auden loved strange literature: odd things. We read Greek writers, some essayists, Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. He played operas constantly, Mozart and others. He would perch up on the edge of his chair, lost in thought and smoking. We did read *To the Lighthouse*, but he didn't go into it very much. He told us about her suicide, though, walking down to the river.

On his relations with the students, she is quite clear:

We adored him, and he was indifferent to us. He told us things like the difference between envy and jealousy. I'd never thought about such large simple ideas, the difference between envy and jealousy, that sort of thing. I remember his saying, “when you read something, you must give it your original thought; don't listen to others; just your own response.” He was a marvelous man, very hard to define; he liked strange literature and was *crazy-mad* about opera. He had very white skin and small piercing eyes.

Indeed, Philbin notes that she had been convinced that Auden was an albino. Her advisor, the economist Peter Drucker, had steered her toward the course; moreover, Drucker “would come to Auden's class and they argued a great deal. Drucker had just converted to Roman Catholicism, God knows why, and he was feeling mystical. Auden argued with him. They argued about God, and he told Peter Drucker that he was ridiculous.”⁷

⁶ *Bennington College Bulletin* with course descriptions.

⁷ My thanks to Ms Philbin and other Bennington graduates who were Auden's students and who remembered him for me on this occasion: Elinor Brisbane Philbin, Eleanor Rockwell Edelstein, Miriam Marx Allen, and Beatrice O'Connell Lushington. Further quotations from Bennington graduates are noted in the text by name.

A junior, Eleanor Rockwell Edelstein, was a student in *Verse Form*:

We had to write a poem a week in the style of the week's lesson . . . pastoral, ode, sonnet, sestina, elegy, limerick, ballad and rondel. We wrote lyrics and epics, learned the difference between masculine and feminine rhyme, and tinkered a lot with meter. I suspect most of our poems were lousy; I know mine were . . . but Auden was not interested in our youthful muses; he wanted us to understand the skeletons before we ever presumed to deal with inspired flesh and blood. Perverse as I may have thought this approach was at the time, I realized fairly soon that Auden's lessons increased my appreciation and critical ear/eye immensely. (*Edelstein*)

She adds that "I had studied with Leonie Adams as a freshman and Ted Roethke as a sophomore, so I already knew my muse was wispy and very occasional." Yet she had numerous encounters with Auden, and her memories of the man are crisp. "I spent a great deal of scheduled time in his company, [also] on the Commons lawn or in his office, discussing or being lectured about poetry." Clearly, Auden as mentor was a troubling presence:

I did not find Auden a particularly warm individual, although he was not unkind. Instead, the words which come to mind are serious, stern, awkward (physically and socially), wry, uneasy in his role as teacher. These are not qualities which endear a teacher to his students in the classroom, and I clearly remember a kind of dread during each class that something embarrassing would happen—not to me, but to Auden, such as falling out of his chair, which indeed he did one day. I had read most of Auden's poetry before he came to Bennington, and liked it; I did not want him to look foolish. (*Edelstein*)

She remembers a story that Kenneth Burke told. "He said that Auden had a habit of shaving while standing in the bathtub, despite the fact that it had no shower, and that he left rusty razor blades in the bottom of the tub." She and her fellow students were amused by Auden's insistence on "proper form," while he "went about in carpet slippers, occasionally on the wrong foot, and lunch displayed on his tie and shirt front."

Auden was appointed faculty advisor to the student literary magazine, *Silo*, his assigned contribution to the extracurricular life of the college. Only two bits of data survive concerning Auden in this capacity. He published one poem in *Silo*, a small lyric—"How still it is, the horses"—which he now called "Noon." (One likes to think there is a hint here of influence from the impressive rural landscape

extending downvalley from the study windows of Shingle Cottage; if so, it would be one of few examples of the New England countryside joining in Auden's mind with the English landscape he loved so well.) The poem became part of *The Age of Anxiety*—which he worked on while at Bennington—as Malin's speech at the beginning of *Part Three*.⁸

One senses that Auden's relation to the student literary magazine was slight. Miriam Marx Allen (Groucho Marx's daughter), then a freshman, cherishes the memory of her first-year submission to *Silo*.

With all the audacity of a freshman, I submitted a story called "Olive Rudd" to the [sic] *Silo* for possible publication. The members of the *Silo* [board] liked my story very much, but, since another story had been submitted by a senior who would soon be graduating, the students . . . were in a dilemma They finally gave both stories to Mr. Auden . . . without any background on the two authors, and left the decision to him. The following day he returned both manuscripts with the words, "I choose this one" penned across the top of mine. (Allen)

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Among faculty colleagues who remembered Auden, few remained in 1993. But Catharine Osgood Foster—"Kit"—and her husband Tom had many recollections, both specific and general. Almost exact contemporaries (all three were born in 1907), Tom and Kit Foster became Auden's friends. In an article for *The Bennington Banner*, Kit Foster remembered:

We used to ride around in an aged Chevrolet four-door sedan that belonged to Elizabeth Hall . . . Tom went away to England and Ireland, and I knocked around from pillar to post with [the car] and an old black dog we had named Dan'l. That was the spring that W.H. Auden came to teach at Bennington College (where I was teaching at the time) and he was a frequent rider in the old car, sitting in his favorite seat in the back with the old dog, to whom he became very attached.⁹

In an interview, Kit remembered giving him rides. "I had an old car and an old dog. The dog had the habit of chewing the back seat of the car, and Auden would get in and say he would sit in the back seat and I'd say, 'No. Come on up front.' No, he

⁸ "Noon," *Silo*, p. Spring, 1946. Malin's speech: *The Age of Anxiety*. New York: Random House, 1946-47, p. 62.

⁹ *The Bennington Banner*, October 4, 1973, p. 4. Here after noted in text as *Banner*.

liked it better back there with the dog. He didn't mind it a bit."¹⁰ When I asked what kind of dog it was, Kit said, "a shaggy mutt. And Auden was very fond of that dog." Tom added,

I remember when we were driving past the cemetery one night, Auden wanted to know if any famous people were buried there, and I said Robert Frost's son was buried there, the son who committed suicide. . . . Carol was buried there and Frost, of course, was still alive. —Robert was alive. So that was the only person that Auden would have been interested in.
(Interview)

In the small college community, most faculty did most things together, but it seems that Wystan and Kit—and, on his return in April, Tom—grew especially close. "We used to go out to supper, movies, lectures or some party at the house of a faculty member." While Tom was in England, Kit stayed mostly with the Hymans (Stanley Hyman and Shirley Jackson), who were well known for their spirited parties. Tom remarked: "I only saw Auden on two or three occasions in the evening, but I never saw him drunk."

Auden was given one section of the freshman course *Forms of Literature*, the one Elinor Philbin attended; they were all to teach *To The Lighthouse*, which, Kit reported, he'd never read:

But he said, "All right, if this is what the job is, we're doing it." And he read it and he said afterwards with great surprise, "I was so amazed that a woman writer could actually write a novel that was a work of art." (Interview)

Wallace Fowlie, a close friend of the Fosters but no longer on the Bennington faculty, was living in New York when Auden was at Bennington. "One of the things that Wallace told me [Tom said] was that Auden thought that women should not be seen in the evening. He didn't care to associate with women in the evening."¹¹ The Fosters had heard rumors of Auden's relationship at this time with

¹⁰ Taped interview with Kit and Tom Foster, September, 1992. Hereafter noted in text as *Interview*.

¹¹ Wallace Fowlie reports a story from this period in New York. "On one of his early visits to New York, [Auden] asked to share an apartment with a friend of mine, Bill Gilmore. Bill and Sherman Conrad and I had been good friends at Harvard and used to meet in New York at least once a year. At one of the meetings in Bill's new apartment, he told Sherm and me that Auden had taken the second bedroom . . . Auden soon came in with Chester Kallman. They said hello and went into Auden's room for an hour. Then Chester left, and Auden joined us. He was holding a book in his hand and asked if he might read to us a few lines of Dryden. He did (reading poorly) but then talked about the passage. It was a most pleasant hour for the three of us. I remember his

a woman, whom they had decided to call Gypsy Rose Lee, perhaps because of the unlikelihood, for them, of her existence; but chances are they had heard gossip of Rhoda Jaffe. We talked about his having a wife. Tom wondered when it was “that he married Thomas Mann’s daughter—when he was still in England?”

Kit: I remember telling the story of somebody asking him [at a lecture] whether he was still married to Erica Mann, and he kind of looked up at the seating [in the hall] and said, “Uh, yes, I, yes . . .”. He finally answered by just looking up.

Tom: I’m sure it never occurred to me at that time to think of him as being homosexual. I don’t know why not. It never occurred to me that this had just been a marriage of convenience to get her out of the country.

Kit: Oh, well, I knew it was. Thomas was innocent. I wasn’t.
(*Interview*)

It was while he was at Bennington that Auden became a U.S. citizen. Auden was delighted and was inseparable from his papers, showing them to everyone. “His passport arrived in the mail,” Kit remembered, “and he would carry it around in his back pocket all the time and pull it out and look at it. Someone said, ‘Oh, you ought to put that in your safe deposit box.’ ‘Not at all,’ Auden said, ‘I might need it some day.’ So he’d pull it out and look at it and put it back and keep on showing it.” (*Interview; Banner*)

One evening that spring Auden was invited to visit the Manhattan home of Lydia Winston Malbin, a Bennington trustee, to see her famous collection of Futurist and other twentieth-century art. (It included Picasso, Léger, Boccioni, Henry Moore, Pollock, De Stael, Schwitters, Naum Gabo.) Auden, according to Tom Foster,

was served a cold supper, which he did not appreciate one bit. He said, “if I had known that, I wouldn’t have gone. Who did she think I was to invite me there and give me a cold supper like that?” He went on to say how the British believe in conspicuous consumption and added, “if you’d been invited to a British household they would have given you a fine dinner. But in America they don’t believe in conspicuous consumption.” Which of course isn’t true at all [Tom concluded], but he felt it was at that time. (*Interview*)

speaking of taking sherry every afternoon at Oxford in the rooms of Father D’Arcy.” (Letter to author, 12 June 1993).

Auden had a reputation for enjoying faculty meetings, the literature department meetings, his counselees, and his classes. Kit Foster remembers him sitting under the apple tree in the Barn quadrangle (the chief classroom building) when the weather was fine. "They kept Adirondack chairs out there and he would sit there, waiting for his next counselee, beating time on the arm of the chair, keeping his rhythms going, and I saw him doing things like that at the evening meetings, too. . . he'd be tapping on the chair, listening to some rhythm that interested him at the moment."

Auden was a wonderful teacher, according to all reports. He gave his students startlingly difficult and long assignments and they all broke their necks to get those assignments done Then he'd ask them to write in class, besides, which they hastened to do, too. The only complaint was that he would walk around the room like a monitor and mutter light verse to himself, not quite under his breath, so that they were horribly distracted while trying to write. (*Banner*)

The Fosters' old friends Connie and Paul St Onge, at Mt Holyoke College, told Kit that Auden said he never slept on his left side, because that would put weight on his heart and he didn't believe in doing things like that to his heart overnight. Many of the Fosters' memories focus on well-known Auden quirks, such as his obsession with going to bed at ten, and rising early to write every day. Tom Foster, who had just returned from England when he met Auden, summed up his view of Auden as he knew him at Bennington:

The war was over in 1945 and I had to go to Halifax [I saw how] London was completely bombed out and . . . well, anyhow, Auden was thirty-nine years old, so he had come through the war and brought with him the fame, not the notoriety. (*Interview*)

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Auden was not tied to Bennington that spring. On June 3, he delivered the Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard ("Under Which Lyre"). In mid-June he spent a week in New York, where on June 19 he and Chester gave a dinner party for T. S. Eliot; Bennington's term went until graduation on July 20, after which his friends Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr collected him (Ursula Niebuhr remembered the date

as in June) to stay at their country place in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, about 35 miles south.¹²

A final Bennington note: in his memoir Alan Ansen quotes Auden, back in New York that fall, as saying, "I've moved from 57th Street. Too expensive. A student of mine at Bennington with whom the superintendent seems enamored of got me this [7 Cornelia Street] apartment." In the same November talk, Auden said, "Yes, [I taught at Bennington] for one term, while someone else was away on a Guggenheim fellowship. Bennington is positively a brothel, you know. Around eleven o'clock one night I heard a knock on my door. A girl came in and simply refused to leave—insisted on staying the night. Oh, they're nice girls, all right. But they talk. The next morning they rush to the telephone and tell everyone all about their night. It used to be that people were more reluctant to tell than to do. Now it's the other way round."¹³

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¹² Spender, Stephen. *W. H. Auden, A Tribute*. New York: Macmillan, 1975. p 113.

¹³ Ansen, Alan. *The Table Talk of W. H. Auden*. Princeton: Ontario Review Press, 1990. p. 1, 6.