

**Queering the City of God:
W. H. Auden's Later Poetry and the Ethics of Friendship**

by

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DEDICATION

For my parents.

And for Dave, Libby, and Matt: μείζονα ταύτης ἀγάπην οὐδείς ἔχει, ἵνα τις τὴν
ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ θῆ ὑπὲρ τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- Age* Auden, *The Age of Anxiety*, ed. Alan Jacobs (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
- Berg The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.
- Bodleian The Department of Western Manuscripts, Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- CP* Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Modern Library, 2007).
- CP45* Auden, *The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden* (New York: Random House, 1945).
- CSP* Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (London: Faber, 1966).
- DH* Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1962).
- DM* Auden, *The Double Man* (New York: Random House, 1941).
- EA* Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays, and Dramatic Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1977).
- FA* Auden, *Forewords and Afterwords* (New York: Random House, 1973).
- Nones* Auden, *Nones* (New York: Random House, 1951).
- Prose ii* *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose: Volume II: 1939-1948*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- Prose iii* *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose: Volume III: 1949-1955*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- Prose iv* *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose: Volume IV: 1956-1962*, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

- Sea* Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- SP* Auden, *Selected Poems*, expanded edition, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage, 2007).
- SW* Auden, *Secondary Worlds* (New York: Random House, 1968)

INTRODUCTION | EROS, BUILDER OF CHURCHES

“I like to think that if I hadn’t been a poet, I might have become an Anglican bishop—politically liberal, I hope; theologically and liturgically conservative, I know.”

—W. H. Auden¹

Scholars have for the most part kept quiet about the intersection of queerness and Christianity in the poetry of W. H. Auden, a gay British modernist poet who immigrated to America just before the outbreak of World War II and converted to Christianity shortly thereafter. A few have made the case for reading Auden as a queer poet.² And a few have explored the Christian underpinnings of Auden’s later poetry.³ Rarely, though, do scholars examine Auden’s sexuality alongside his Christianity. Instead, they tend to split his oeuvre into two Audens: the early “firebrand” and the later “conservative.”⁴

Queering the City of God explodes the scholarly myth of the two Audens, bringing to light the queer commitments of Auden’s Christian poetry. His post-

¹ Quoted in Ursula Niebuhr, “Memories of the 1940s,” in *W. H. Auden: A Tribute*, ed. Stephen Spender (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 116.

² Most notably, Robert L. Caserio, “Auden’s New Citizenship,” *Raritan* 17. 2 (Fall 1997): 90-103; Richard Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge: Poetry and the Meanings of Homosexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); and Aidan Wasley, *The Age of Auden: Postwar Poetry and the American Scene* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). In *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), Susannah Gottlieb also touches on some of the queer themes in Auden’s long poem *The Age of Anxiety* (1947).

³ Alan Jacobs, *What Became of Wylan: Change and Continuity in Auden’s Poetry* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998); Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1999); Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

⁴ Wasley, 164.

conversion oeuvre, which spans the early 1940s to the early 1970s, unfolded in the midst of two international crises: World War II and the Cold War. Fittingly, questions like, “What would a just society really look like?” and, “What role should art play in resisting a destructive political regime?” dominate his later work. He gives decidedly queer theological answers, reading his own participation in queer networks through the lens of the Christian faith to construct gay subjectivity as an anti-imperialist prophetic vocation.

The queer networks that Auden participated in after he left England include (1) a group of gay artists—among them Benjamin Britten, with whom Auden collaborated on films, song cycles, poetic dramas, and the operetta *Paul Bunyan* (1941)—who met in the Long Island home of Elizabeth Mayer, a German refugee, from 1939-1941; (2) the riotous “February House” in Brooklyn Heights that Auden shared with several other artists (Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, Jane and Paul Bowles, Carson McCullers, Golo Mann, Oliver Smith, and Gypsy Rose Lee) from October 1940-September 1941;⁵ (3) the Ann Arbor home in Burns Park that Auden and Kallman shared in 1942, a center of gay life at the University of Michigan;⁶ (4) Fire Island—a barrier island that runs parallel to Long Island and that features a lively gay scene in the summer—where Auden owned a cabin in the mid-1940s;⁷ (5) the village of Forio on the island of Ischia—like Fire Island, a favorite vacation spot for gay men—where Auden summered from 1947-1958 (and

⁵ So nicknamed after the common birth-month of its residents. For an entertaining biography of the salon, see Sherill Tippins, *February House: The Story of W. H. Auden, Carson McCullers, Jane and Paul Bowles, Benjamin Britten, and Gypsy Rose Lee, Under One Roof in Brooklyn* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006).

⁶ Much to the chagrin of their neighbors as well as the campus authorities, Auden and Kallman hosted regular “At Homes.” Unfortunately, Auden’s only literary record of the group, a masque that Auden wrote for his guests to perform at one of the “At Homes,” no longer exists: “*The Queen’s Masque*, by Bojo the Homo, played by Kallman’s Klever Kompanions.” Auden described it as “*really* obscene,” and reacted to the disappearance of the manuscript by saying, “I do hope the F.B.I hasn’t been prying up here.” See Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 321-322.

⁷ For a wonderful reading of “Pleasure Island” (1948), Auden’s poetic account of Fire Island, a culture of “naked power relations and humiliation” quite different from the queer networks that make the subject of the main part of my study, see Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 239-243.

where he met the gay German composer Hans Werner Henze, who collaborated on two operas with Auden and Chester Kallman, Auden's sometime lover and lifelong companion); (6) the farmhouse in Kirschstetten that, from 1958 on, Auden shared with Kallman; and (7) the transhistorical spiritual communion that Auden self-consciously created in his poetry with deceased literary predecessors like Henry James.

In addition to making an intervention in Auden studies, my rereading of the later Auden makes an intervention in queer studies. As we will see in the following chapters, looking at how gay desire inflects the theological ethics of Auden's post-conversion poetry gives us purchase on several current issues in queer theory. (1) The pre-Stonewall perspective of Auden's oeuvre provides a resource for thinking politically and ethically outside the strictures of gay pride. (2) Since Auden's relationship with psychoanalysis cooled after he converted, his later poetry provides a resource for talking about gay subjectivity without using the pathologizing concepts of psychology.⁸ (3) And Auden's later poetry, the labor of a gay Christian polymath, has much to offer current debates in academic theology about nature, grace, religious epistemology, and how to do ethics.

By rereading Auden to address contemporary controversies in queer theory and theology, *Queering the City of God* explodes two other myths about Auden, polar opposites of each other. On the one hand, Auden has been criticized as a topical poet who writes so often off of the headlines that he has nothing enduring to say.⁹ But on the other hand, Auden has been touted as a poet of universal human values who omits

⁸ For a brief account of Auden's move away from psychoanalysis, see Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 130-31.

⁹ See Francis Scarfe, *Auden and After: The Liberation of Poetry, 1930-1941* (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1942), 11; Charles Miller, *Auden: An American Friendship* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), 24; and Edward Mendelson, "The European Auden," in *The Cambridge Companion to W. H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 65.

anything of particularly gay or queer concern.¹⁰ Neither of these truisms does justice to the value of Auden's post-emigration, post-conversion oeuvre. Rather, his Christian poetry debunks the idea of universal human values, treating ethics not as a set of abstract, rational rules but instead as a concrete, communal way of life that carries on a story about the world, a story that began at a particular moment in history in confrontation with competing stories, and that creatively evolves through ongoing confrontation with competing stories. In other words, as we will see, precisely Auden's appreciation of the concrete, particular, historically contingent characteristics of his thinking (as a gay man, a British expatriate, and a Christian) makes him interesting to contemporary queer theory and theology.¹¹

I. PASSING FOR ONE OF THE BOYS

Not long after England's beloved poet caused an outcry in his native country by remaining in America after the start of World War II—and not long after he upset his leftist friends by joining the Episcopal Church—he wrote the valedictory “Atlantis” (1941) for his lover, Chester Kallman. The poem connects the familiar themes of Auden's post-emigration, post-conversion oeuvre (the quest for social justice, the value of dialectical thinking)¹² to a less familiar burden of his later work. A story about

¹⁰ See Bozorth, *Auden's Games of Knowledge*, 7.

¹¹ According to Mendelson, Auden claimed that he took an interest in reading anthropology “in order to confirm his suspicion of the provincial narrowness of all universal claims to authority,” *Later Auden*, 130.

¹² For a seminal early study that reads Auden's dialecticism as partly a pursuit of social justice, see Herbert Greenberg, *Quest for the Necessary: W. H. Auden and the Dilemma of Divided Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

passage and passing, a mash-up of the New Testament and Cavafy,¹³ “Atlantis” crystallizes the central argument of *Queering the City of God*: that Auden’s Christian poetry constructs gay subjectivity as a spiritual faculty, a theo-ethical guide, a prophetic call.¹⁴

Auden encountered C. P. Cavafy’s poem “Ithaca” (1911) in a French prose translation by Marguerite Yourcenar.¹⁵ Like “Ithaca,” “Atlantis” praises spiritual seeking as its own reward: what “Ithaca” calls “*le chemin*,” “*le beau voyage*” [“the way,” “the beautiful journey”]. But Auden adds a note of queer vulnerability to the journey. Cavafy reassures his traveler not to fear “*ni les Lestrygons, ni les Cyclopes, ni la colère de Neptune*” [“neither the Laestregonians, nor the Cyclopes, nor Neptune’s anger”]. None of these bogeys will cross the traveler’s path “*si tu ne les portes pas en toi-même*” [“if you don’t carry them in yourself”]. Auden’s lover, on the other hand, has much to fear from the outer world: he will have to learn “[t]o pass for one of The Boys, / At least appearing to love / Hard liquor, horseplay and noise” (*SP* 125).¹⁶ In addition to queering

¹³ Auden championed the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy. Auden’s introduction to Rae Dalven’s translation of *The Complete Poems of Cavafy* (1961) praises his “exceptionally honest” gay love poetry (*Prose iv* 292).

¹⁴ Auden has received less scholarly attention than other major Anglo-American modernist poets. As Nadia Herman Colburn puts it, “Auden sometimes falls through the cracks—neither fully English nor American, modernist nor postmodernist,” “Bibliographic Essay and Review of Auden Studies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, 241. But the past decade has seen a veritable flowering in Auden scholarship, particularly regarding questions that touch the edges of the present study. Richard Bozorth wrote the first book-length account of Auden as a gay poet, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*. Piotr Gwiazda offered the first treatment of Auden’s influence on a later gay poet, *James Merrill and W. H. Auden: Homosexuality and Poetic Influence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Aidan Wasley extended Gwiazda’s inquiry with accounts of Auden’s influence on Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, and Adrienne Rich in *The Age of Auden*. Arthur Kirsch wrote the first monograph on the religious underpinnings of Auden’s later work, *Auden and Christianity*. I offer the first book-length account of the intersection of queerness and Christianity in Auden’s later work.

¹⁵ Yourcenar’s translation is printed in *Présentation Critique de Constantin Cavafy* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), 103-104. Auden also translated “Expecting the Barbarians” from a French translation by Yourcenar. His translation appears in *Heart of Europe: An Anthology of Creative Writing in Europe 1920-1940*, ed. Klaus Mann and Hermann Kesten (New York: L.B. Fischer, 1943), 285-286. Auden met Yourcenar while living in New York. See Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 166.

¹⁶ Kallman was leaving New York to join Auden at the University of Michigan.

the journey, Auden Christianizes the destination. If his lover so much as glimpses Atlantis “[i]n a poetic vision,” he should “lie down in peace, / Having seen your salvation” (*SP* 127), an allusion to Simeon’s song in the Gospel of Luke.¹⁷

The exigencies of queer survival produce a spiritual gift in “Atlantis.” Through the perilous discipline of passing, the seeker acquires the ability to inhabit different subject positions: Ionia’s rationalists, Thrace’s mystics, and Carthage’s prostitutes. Inhabiting these subject positions enables him to evaluate “each refuge that tries to / Counterfeit Atlantis” (*SP* 126). In order to discover “the true,” the poem argues, a person has to become “[d]ialectic and bizarre”—a *Double Man* (1941), as the title of Auden’s contemporaneous book puts it. Whereas Cavafy encourages his traveler *not* to think about his enemies, *The Double Man* urges the opposite: a responsible citizen will incorporate other people’s “half-truths” into her own limited perspective (*DM* 42); healthy democracy depends on such self-critical dialogism. Finding Atlantis likewise requires the queer seeker to understand other people’s ersatz utopias and to compare them to his own. Passing, then, functions as a charism—a spiritual grace that enables the queer seeker to imagine a just society.¹⁸

¹⁷ Holding the baby Jesus, Simeon says, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: / For mine eyes have seen thy salvation” (Luke 2:29-30). Just a month before suggesting a vision of the incarnation to his “dear” in “Atlantis,” Auden wrote in “Leap Before You Look” (1940) that “A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep / Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear: / Although I love you, you will have to leap” (*SP* 124). As Humphrey Carpenter has also noted, the poem—with its description of the solitude that divides the lovers, and with its invocation of the Kierkegaardian faith paradigm—seems to implore Kallman to follow Auden in converting. See Humphrey Carpenter, 300.

¹⁸ For another paradigmatic reading of “Atlantis” that focuses on Auden as a post-national poet, see Wasley, 6-8.

II. ODD BEDFELLOWS

Queering the City of God takes its inspiration from Leo Bersani's inquiry into the connections between sexuality and sociality. In his short essay "Gay Betrayals" (1997), Bersani investigates "the continuities between desire and community, between our sexuality and the way we imagine sociality."¹⁹ He suggests that, because of an "exemplary confusion" about the value of community, "queers" have the ability to redefine sociality in ways that ought to "command the attention of straights."²⁰ The confusion boils down to the tension between gay identity politics, on the one hand, and anti-identitarian queer critiques, on the other. Queer thinkers at once take pride in a gay community and "de-gay" it (rejecting self-identification in terms of "an erotically determined essence" as an "inherently disciplinary project").²¹ Bersani cautions against "the aversion to homosexuality as an identity."²² When queer rhetoric erases the sexual specificity of gayness, it unwittingly constructs queer community along homophobic lines.²³ Bersani wants to recover the notion of a homosexual subject to ask how same-sex desire shapes a person's (and a community's) political imagination. The essay concludes with a possible answer: homosexuality disarms ethnic, national, and racial differences. It models "correspondences of being" and offers "an apprenticeship for a relationality founded on sameness."²⁴

¹⁹ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 40.

²⁰ Bersani, 38.

²¹ Bersani, 39.

²² Bersani, 41.

²³ But see David M. Halperin's review of Bersani's *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), where he argues that Bersani himself "de-gays" gayness. "More or Less Gay-Specific," *London Review of Books* 18.10 (23 May 1996): 24-27.

²⁴ Bersani, 43, 44.

Where Bersani wants “to trace the political productivity” of gay desire,²⁵ though, I trace its theo-ethical productivity, extending his project in a direction that would probably disconcert him. Religious practice lies outside his conception of homosexuality’s transgressive potential; it looks more like liberal assimilation than “an outlaw existence.”²⁶ “It seems,” Bersani laments repeatedly, “as if we can no longer imagine anything more politically stimulating than to struggle for acceptance as good soldiers, good priests, and good parents.”²⁷ Yet Auden’s writing from the 1940s on imagines a gay “outlaw existence” that takes a distinctly ecclesial form.

Although I lean on Bersani for the central question of *Queering the City of God*, I depart from his psychoanalytic account of gay subjectivity. Instead, my work responds to David Halperin’s call for an alternative (aesthetic, philosophical, sociological, or spiritual) approach to studying and describing gay subjectivity.²⁸ The problem with psychology is that it “judges subjective life according to a normative standard of healthy functioning.”²⁹ Reacting against its disciplinary, pathologizing language, and wanting “to distract straight people from everything about gay culture that might make them feel uncomfortable with it,” gay and lesbian politics has replaced “the discreditable details of *gay subjectivity*” with “the politically acceptable category of *gay identity*.”³⁰

Consequently, queer studies has largely bracketed questions of human motivation and

²⁵ Bersani, 42.

²⁶ Bersani, 43.

²⁷ Bersani, 40; see also 86.

²⁸ David M. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2007). HIV/AIDS prevention provides the particular occasion for Halperin’s rethinking models of gay male subjectivity. Halperin argues that HIV/AIDS prevention requires an “imaginative, resourceful, non-psychological, and non-moralistic strategy” that understands gay male subjectivity as “a subjectivity which is not a subjectivity of risk, an object of social hygiene, or a target of therapeutic intervention,” 109.

²⁹ Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, 9.

³⁰ Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, 5.

desire, placing a gag order on questions like, “What do gay men want?”³¹ To break the silence, Halperin notes a “persistent impulse” among gay male writers (including Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, André Gide, Marcel Proust, Jean Genet, and Roland Barthes) who turn to aestheticism in order “to imagine and to represent human subjectivity without recourse to psychology.”³² My readings of Auden’s spiritual construction of gay subjectivity particularize Halperin’s broad claim.

In fact, psychoanalysis began to lose favor with Auden himself once he discovered Kierkegaard (a shift that I will look at in more detail in the conclusion). From Kierkegaard, Auden learned that, as “In Sickness and In Health” (1940) quotes, “we are always in the wrong,” even the analyst with his overweening claims to special knowledge and authority (*SP* 121). Many critics read “In Sickness and in Health” as a coded epithalamium for Chester Kallman.³³ With a gentle sideswipe at Freud, the poem implores God

That reason may not force us to commit
That sin of the high-minded, sublimation,
Which damns the soul by praising it,
Force our desire, O Essence of creation,
To seek Thee always in Thy substances,
Till the performance of these offices
Our bodies, Thine opaque enigmas, do,
Configure Thy transparent justice too. (*SP* 122)

The prayer gives gay sex a place in Christian worship.³⁴ Wystan and Chester “seek” God in each other, performing the divine “offices” with their “bodies.” And the prayer raises one of the driving questions of Auden’s Christian poetry: how might gay love

³¹ Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, 1-4.

³² Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, 5-6, 113.

³³ Most notably Alan Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan*, 76-81; Richard Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 200-205; and John Fuller, who notes that Auden added the poem’s public dedication—to a couple he knew when he taught at Swarthmore, and at the wife’s request—two years after he wrote it. See *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 391-392.

³⁴ See Fuller, 393.

“[c]onfigure” God’s justice? (Although Auden leaned heavily on Kierkegaard as he made his way back to the Christian faith, here the poet positions himself against the theologian by imagining that an exclusive love might have ethical value. We will learn more about Auden’s rescuing the exclusive love of friendship from Christianity’s suspicion of it in chapter one.)³⁵

Toward the end of his life Auden gave a concrete answer to the question of how gay love might “[c]onfigure” God’s justice. “The Garrison” (1969), a poem about Auden’s life with Chester Kallman in Kirchstetten, Austria, affirms that “[w]e, Chester, and the choir we sort with” have “a duty” to challenge the false values of “the City” and thereby “to serve as a paradigm / now of what a plausible Future might be” (CP 846). Readers who call the vision of “The Garrison” “a gay utopia” miss the point of the poem’s ethical imperative.³⁶ The phrase “gay utopia” implies seclusion and unattainable perfection. Far from simply *withdrawing* from “the City” in “The Garrison,” though, Auden wants to *change* it as he lives in “loyal opposition” to it, counter to its norms of “greening for the big money” and “neighing after a public image.” And “the choir” he and Chester “sort with” aims for *plausible*, not *utopian*, changes.

The metaphor of the choir indicates three salient features of the queer Christian social vision of Auden’s later poetry, features that will emerge as major themes in the chapters to follow. One, a small harmonious community of artists on the periphery (what I call “the coterie,” a choice of term that I explain below) models a more just way of living to the center (“the City”). Two, the outsider community takes an ecclesial shape (choirs typically serve a liturgical function). And three, the community elevates fun

³⁵ And I here position myself against other readers of “In Sickness and in Health.” See, for example, Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan*, 81.

³⁶ For example, Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 249.

("[m]artini-time" [CP 845]) to a serious ethic ("loyal opposition" [CP 846]). The metaphor conveys these features through the shock of catachresis: the ecclesial and aesthetic analogy ("We, Chester, / and the choir we sort with") is disrupted by a martial analogy ("have been assigned to / garrison stations"). The verb "to sort" means "to sortie" or "to come out of a defensive position (e.g., a fortress) and make an attack." Because the noun "sortie" can also mean "a short, fun outing," the martial analogy has camp undertones.

"The Garrison" was first published in *The Third Hour*, the annual proceedings of an ecumenical theological discussion group of the same name that met in New York after World War II.³⁷ The inclusion of "The Garrison" in a journal of Christian theology adds an important layer of meaning to the ethic of the poem: it constructs gay subjectivity as a prophetic calling, not in the Romantic sense of poet-prophets as seers with "privileged access to truth"³⁸—a self-important notion that Auden would balk at³⁹—but in the biblical sense of prophets as people who rebuke the systemic oppressions of their society and live in solidarity with the marginalized.⁴⁰ *Queering the City of God* examines key moments in Auden's conceptualization of a calling that aligns the charisma of same-sex eros with anti-imperialist prophetic critique—from the prayerful question of "In Sickness and in Health" to the playful answer of "The Garrison."

³⁷ Along with Auden, regular attendees of The Third Hour included Jacques Maritain, Dorothy Day, and Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr. See Niebuhr, 91, 116. "The Garrison" appeared in the 1970 issue of *The Third Hour*.

³⁸ Alan Jacobs, *Shaming the Devil: Essays in Truth-telling* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 33.

³⁹ Auden called Shelley's famous dictum—that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"—"the silliest remark ever made about poets" (*Prose ii* 348).

⁴⁰ Susannah Gottlieb offers a useful definition of "prophecy in the tradition of Isaiah" as distinct from "fortune telling": it "combines exhortation and contingency," 133.

III. EITHER-ORS

On the face of it, Auden seems like a strange candidate for such an inquiry; and my claim about his later work, an absurd move. As I mentioned briefly above, scholars and critics tend to split his oeuvre into two Audens: the early Brit and the later Yankee;⁴¹ the early activist and the later quietist,⁴² the early queer and the later Christian.⁴³ Randall Jarrell's famous attack on the stylistic changes that Auden adopted in the late 1930s, "Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden's Poetry" (1941), opens with a biting riff on Heraclitus: "We never step twice into the same Auden."⁴⁴ Edward Mendelson, Auden's editor and literary executor, has encouraged a less insistent but no less problematic bifurcation of Auden's oeuvre. In his introduction to *Selected Poems* (2007), Mendelson claims that "Auden's continuing subjects were [...] the special tasks and problems of the present moment of his own life and the world around him—problems that took erotic or political form in his early poems, ethical or religious form in his later ones" (*SP* xv), as if Auden never occupied himself with problems that took erotic *and* ethical form, erotic *and* religious form.

The early queer / later Christian narrative of Auden's corpus began with his most supportive readers: American gay male poets of the mid to late twentieth-century. James Merrill's epic poem *The Changing Light at Sandover* (which features Merrill's and his

⁴¹ Or, more precisely, the early Brit (until 1939), the American (from 1940-1948), and the later internationalist (1948-1973). After 1948, Auden spent his summers outside the United States. He moved back to England in 1972.

⁴² Aidan Wasley writes that "Auden begins as a firebrand [...] and ends his career as a devoutly apolitical aesthetic and cultural conservative," 164.

⁴³ As Alan Jacobs puts it, "[s]ome of Auden's commentators have written extensively and sympathetically about the Christian elements in his later work, while maintaining a discreet silence about the embarrassing matter of his homosexuality. Other, more recent critics have written extensively and sympathetically about his homosexuality, while maintaining a discreet silence about the embarrassing matter of his Christian faith," Alan Jacobs, *What Became of WYSTAN*, 73.

⁴⁴ Randall Jarrell, *The Third Book of Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 115.

partner David Jackson's Ouija board communications with Auden's ghost) addressed Auden's sexuality before any biography or monograph did.⁴⁵ At the same time, it recreated Auden as regretful of his conversion. Praising Merrill's and Jackson's occult practice, Auden recants his Christian beliefs:

GREEN
MY DEARS WITH ENVY I COULD CURSE MY HIGH
ANGLICAN PRINCIPLES IN OXFORD DAYS
THE TABLES TAPPED OUT MANY A SMART OR EERIE
RHYTHM UNTIL OUR POLITICS TOOK OVER
THEN THE ABSORBING LOVES & THEN THE DREARY
WASH CONFESSION DON'T U SEE THE CHURCH
MY DEARS THE DREARY DREARY DEAD BANG WRONG
CHURCH & ALL THOSE YEARS I COULD HAVE HELD
HANDS ON TEACUPS⁴⁶

Merrill's Auden opposes the "dreary wash" of Anglicanism to the "absorbing loves" that preceded his return to the church. Likewise James Schuyler, one of Auden's New York School votaries, lamented Auden's conversion (as he saw it) from psychoanalysis to Anglicanism.⁴⁷ One might conclude from Merrill's and Schuyler's accounts that after his conversion Auden discarded his sexuality like an outmoded jacket: the later poems offer nothing in the way of queer inspiration.

Auden's own offhand comments to friends about the sinfulness of queer eros make it tempting to accept the critics' and poets' bifurcation of his oeuvre.⁴⁸ But (as I show in chapter two) a closer look at such comments reveals that appealing to norms of shame and sin actually allows Auden to assume a posture of shamelessness in his work. The sin of queerness, like the sin of converting to America, becomes a platform for

⁴⁵ Gwiazda, 29.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Gwiazda, 88. Jackson and Merrill used a teacup to spell out words on the Ouija board.

⁴⁷ Andrew Epstein, "Auden and the New York School Poets," *W. H. Auden Society Newsletter* 22 (November 2001): 26.

⁴⁸ In October 1947, Auden told Alan Ansen that he had "come to the conclusion that it's wrong to be queer," quoted in Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 268.

critiquing the stagnant ideas and stultifying relational forms of the “Establishment.”⁴⁹ In other words, shame gives a defiant edge to Auden’s theological ethics.

Auden’s comments about Christian poetry, on the one hand, and his comments about love poetry, on the other, might also explain why some critics have been shy about reading his post-conversion work as (at least in part) a queer Christian project. In a later essay on the relationship between Christianity and art, Auden confessed that devotional poetry made him “uneasy” (*DH* 485). Devotion to a *person* in a *love poem* “is quite in order” because a reader knows that if the poet had fallen in love with someone else “his feelings would be exactly the same.” Devotion to a *god* in a *religious poem* fails to make its point, though, because “the Proper Name proves nothing” about a poet’s love for one god rather than another. Auden employed similar logic with respect to his love poems. He left the gender of their beloved “you” ambiguous; he refused to reprint them in gay anthologies.⁵⁰ But we can ignore these worries without compunction. Many of Auden’s later poems both imply homoerotic longing and presuppose a Christian viewpoint, a fact that *Queering the City of God* will make clear.⁵¹

⁴⁹ In 1963, Auden wrote to Christopher Isherwood that “[t]hough I believe it sinful to be queer, it has at least saved me from becoming a pillar of the Establishment,” quoted in Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 455-456. Auden’s comment to Isherwood involves a bit of self-delusion. As Lytle Shaw notes, the New York School poets recognized Auden as a member of the *literary* establishment. In 1964 Frank O’Hara worried that anything he might say in a letter to Mike Goldberg would end up in “Auden’s definitive edition” of Goldberg’s correspondence, quoted in Shaw, *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 60. Auden had already produced several such “definitive editions”: Kierkegaard, Goethe, Baudelaire, Van Gogh, Henry James, Ernst Toller, and Frederick Rolfe, as well as anthologies of light verse, Norse verse, and Elizabethan verse. But whether or not Auden overstated his outsider status, my point holds: Auden’s rhetoric of shame creates a performance of shamelessness.

⁵⁰ See Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homoeroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 168-169.

⁵¹ In particular, Auden’s paeans to the limestone moors where he grew up amount to *gay devotional poetry*. “*Amor Loci*” (1965), for example, praises God by elegizing Rookhope, an old mining town in County Durham, England. The speaker’s love for the deserted, disintegrating mines “offers” him “a vision” of “Love” that “does not abandon” (*CP* 779-780). “Industry” and “Mr. Pleasure” have given up on the utterly useless land—it has no “Cheap Power,” no startling vistas for “romantic” backpackers, no opportunities for buying “sex” or a Bordeaux wine (*CP* 779). Using the commodification of sexual

Yet another reason why scholars neglect the queer concerns of Auden's later work has to do with the poet's penchant for revision. Auden rewrote his politically charged poetry of the '30s to line up, first, with his suspicion of writerly involvement in direct political action and, second, his rejection of Marxism and liberal humanism. Sometimes he opted to axe rather than rewrite. As Auden explains in the foreword to *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*, "[s]ome poems which I wrote and, unfortunately, published, I have thrown out because they were dishonest, or bad-mannered, or boring" (CSP 15). Hence poems like the pro-Republican anthem "Spain" (1937), which Auden came to regard as "wicked" (CSP 15), did not appear in any of Auden's collections during his lifetime.

Edward Mendelson has addressed the difficulties that Auden's penchant for revision presents by offering two editions of his poetry based on contrasting editorial principles. *Selected Poems* (2007) returns to earlier versions of poems that Auden rewrote and recovers poems that Auden disowned. *Collected Poems* (2007) "honors his final intentions" (CP xxi). In the introduction to *Selected Poems*, Mendelson suggests that "[f]or most readers this book will be a First Auden, and the edition of his *Collected Poems* that was published posthumously according to his final intentions may be recommended as a Second" (SP xxvi). (Mendelson's volume *The English Auden* [1977], a collection of poetry and prose [including previously unpublished work] that predates Auden's arrival in America, offers yet a Third.)

pleasure to indicate Rookhope's uselessness, the persona triangulates *nostos*, *eros*, and *agape*—homecoming, sexual love, and divinity. It is hard not to see lovelorn Auden in the description of God's "Love" as "smeared, shrugged at, abandoned / by a frivolous worldling" (CP 780). He continued to love Chester Kallman after the latter confessed to infidelity and ended their relationship. So the final stanza adds another layer to the analogy: an unfaithful lover, like a ghost town, can help a person understand God.

But there are problems with Mendelson's claims about what *Collected Poems* actually collects; likewise, with his claims about what *Selected Poems* actually selects. *Collected Poems* does not always honor Auden's final intentions. On the difficulties of editing Auden, Mendelson has written that

[a]nyone who edits 30,000 lines of poetry finds he must resolve hundreds of minor problems, and must do so in the knowledge that, no matter how diligent he is, he is certain to commit blunders. In a textual tradition as complex as Auden's, there are inevitably cases where diligence is not enough and an editor cannot avoid using his own judgment. Most such problems arose in *New Year Letter*, where Auden made different revisions to his original typescript when preparing the British and American editions, and later forgot about the British revisions when he reprinted the American text.⁵²

Auden actually preferred the American text to the British, and *Collected Poems* mutes the queer design of "New Year Letter" by following the British text in one crucial instance (as we will see in chapter two). Nor does *Selected Poems* quite "mak[e] available the preferred original versions of some thirty poems that Auden revised later in life," as the back of the book declares. It returns to the first *book* publications. And when it thus eclipses earlier *journal* publications of "At the Grave of Henry James," for example, it eclipses the queer concerns of the poem (as we will see in chapter four). Bringing order to the messy textual histories of many of Auden's poems, and bringing the queer commitments of Auden's later work to light in the process, is a chief concern of *Queering the City of God*.⁵³

⁵² Edward Mendelson, "Editing Auden," *New Statesman* (17 September 1976): 377.

⁵³ *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden*, of which Mendelson is the series editor, promises to present "[a]ll of Auden's poems, with variant readings" (CP xxi). Thus readers should eventually have easier access to the variant readings of "New Year Letter" and "At the Grave of Henry James" that I discuss.

IV. GOSSIP & GOSPEL

A handful of readers have looked at the relationship between Christianity and gay desire in Auden's love poems,⁵⁴ and they, too, subscribe to the facile "two Audens" myth: they posit an early philanderer and a later husband.⁵⁵ Their readings focus on Auden's construction of romantic love (eros) as a preparation for spiritual love (agape), a human image of the divine. But almost no one looks beyond poems that explicitly address romantic love to ask how gay desire inflects the ethical questions at the heart of Auden's later work: What does "building the Just City" involve (*DM* 65)? How might artists offer a non-coercive account of the task?⁵⁶ From the 1940s on, Auden saw these questions as inescapably *theo*-ethical, which is to say that their very formulation needed to be grounded in a religious story.⁵⁷ Auden found such narrative-based presuppositions

⁵⁴ See especially Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan*, 73-95.

⁵⁵ Edward Mendelson writes that Auden's "early poems are for intense love affairs that end quickly; the later poems are for marriage," *Early Auden* (New York: The Viking Press, 1981), 22. But Auden's posthumously printed poems "Glad," "Aubade," and "Minnelied" belie Mendelson's claim. The persona of "Aubade" (1964) "takes a street-car, happy / after a night of love" (*CP* 746). The speaker of "Minnelied" (1967) notes to his "Dearest" that "[w]hen one is lonely [...] even a call-boy can help" (*CP* 747). And "Glad" (1964) celebrates a relationship that is neither a marriage nor a transitory love affair. While he lived in Kirchstetten, Auden slept with a young Viennese auto-mechanic in exchange for money. They slept together for over a decade, even after the boy married. The relationship that started out "*Strich and Freier*" (hustler and client) became one of mutual affection: "A romance / In full fig it ain't, / Nor a naked litch either" (*CP* 746).

⁵⁶ I say "almost" because Richard Bozorth comes close. *Auden's Games of Knowledge* argues that homosexuality figures in Auden's religious poetry in a couple of key ways. First, Auden develops a "queer theodicy" in which "divine love mirrors the unspeakability of homosexual love." Hence "Friday's Child" (1958) emphasizes the humiliation of Jesus and the silence after Jesus's death, 222. Second, "crookedness" or "sexual deviance" symbolizes "the contingency that necessarily conditions the human search for divine truth," 223. Consider, for example, the self-interested "anglers" who bait "with the wrong request" in "The Waters" (1940), 228. Likewise in "In Praise of Limestone" (1948), "homoerotic fantasy" constrains the speaker's imagination of the love of God and the life of the world to come, 224. Thus Bozorth explores the *theological* uses that Auden makes of gay subjectivity: how does his poetry picture God? I am more interested in the *theo-ethical* uses: how does his poetry picture the church, the city, and the responsibilities of the poet to both?

⁵⁷ Auden came to this position through reading the philosopher R. G. Collingwood. See, for example, "Romantic or Free?" (1940), a commencement address that Auden gave at Smith College: "no thinking or voluntary behavior is possible without making some absolute presuppositions, or acts of faith. The intellectual will regard it his social responsibility to state what these presuppositions are, and to revise or restate them should fresh knowledge render them no longer absolute in their old form" (*Prose ii* 67). The "Preface" to *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944) asserts that neither "[s]cience" nor "[a]rt" (*SM* 3) but

in the Christian creeds and the life of the church—first Anglicanism and much later, when his Episcopal parish adopted a modernized liturgy that he found repellent, Russian Orthodoxy.⁵⁸ And as I have already begun to suggest, his later poetry answers these theo-ethical questions through the trope of the coterie.

My choosing the term “coterie” as a way to talk about the queer anti-imperialist theological ethics of Auden’s later poetry may come as a surprise for at least a couple of reasons. First, readers more readily attach the label to Auden’s early work. For example, Auden’s *Poems* (1928) implies a coterie readership: the poet Stephen Spender (Auden’s friend) printed the manuscript privately; moreover, the text covertly thematizes homosexuality by using the language of Mortmere, a fantasy world that the novelist Christopher Isherwood (a friend of both Auden and Spender) created as an undergraduate at Cambridge and later depicted in *Lions and Shadows* (1938).⁵⁹ Similarly, scholarship about Auden tends to describe the poet’s association in the 1930s with Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, and C. Day Lewis as a coterie (called variously “the Auden Group,” “MacSpaunday,” and “the Pylon Poets”).⁶⁰

And a second reason why my choice of “coterie” may come as a surprise is that Auden’s later essays offer a rich vocabulary of community, one that might look like a

religion, the “ripeness” of the “silence / On the other side of the wall” (*SM* 4), helps people bridge the awful distance “[b]etween Shall-I and I-Will.” See also my discussion of Auden’s conversion in chapter two as well as my further discussion of Collingwood’s influence on Auden in chapter five.

⁵⁸ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 518-519.

⁵⁹ Christopher Isherwood, *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties* (New York: New Directions, 1977). See Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 18-53. Lytle Shaw singles out *The Orators* (1932) as a key influence on Frank O’Hara’s coterie poetics. The text uses the coterie mythology of Mortmere, thematizes “cells and collectives,” and imagines “alternative kinship structures,” Shaw, 59, 61. But Shaw leaves out the fact that *The Orators* implies that same-sex eros leads to disordered forms of community—either fascistic or isolating. For a brief account of homosexuality as an evasion of real community, see Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 110-111. For an account of the link between same-sex eros and fascism in *The Orators*, see Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 112-115.

⁶⁰ For an account of Auden’s association with Spender, MacNeice, and Day Lewis during the 1930s, see Beret E. Strong, *The Poetic Avant-Garde: The Groups of Borges, Auden, and Breton* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 123-210.

more apposite way of talking about queer anti-imperialist sociality than the seemingly anti-democratic concept of “coterie.” In “The Rewards of Patience” (1942), Auden distinguishes between “a community,” which he defines as “a society of rational beings united by a common tie in virtue of the things that they all love”; and a “public,” which he defines as “a disintegrated community [...] a crowd of lost beings united only negatively in virtue of the things that they severally fear” (*Prose ii* 154). “Nature, History and Poetry” (1950) refines the earlier taxonomy. Auden adds the word “crowd,” which refers to an aggregation of people who share no more than the basic fact of “togetherness.”⁶¹ A “society,” now distinct from a “community,” refers to “a system which loves itself”; it requires the presence of “all its component members” in order to function (Auden gives the example of a string quartet). A “community,” on the other hand, remains the same regardless of an increase or decrease in members; it refers to “rational beings united by a common love for something other than themselves” (*Prose iii* 227).

But my use of the term “coterie” accounts for both potential queries. First, much of Auden’s later work bears the traditional hallmarks of coterie writing (e.g., the address to a close friend that provides the organizing principle of “New Year Letter” [1940]; the personal dedications affixed to so many of his later poems, like the poems that make up the sequence “Thanksgiving for a Habitat” [1965]; the reference to “Chester” in “The Garrison” [1969]; or the textual variants that Auden inscribed into the copies of his books that he gave to friends).⁶² Through such hallmarks of coterie writing, Auden self-

⁶¹ Hence in “Sext” (1954), the third section of the sequence “Horae Canonicae,” the speaker declares that “the crowd rejects no one, joining the crowd / is the only thing all men can do” (*SP* 230).

⁶² I discuss two instances of such personal inscriptions below in chapters one and two, respectively: *The Age of Anxiety* (1947) and *The Double Man* (1941).

consciously creates a quasi-institution that unites the intimacy of communities (or in his later parlance, societies) with the political praxis of publics, a linkage that requires a word that falls outside Auden's taxonomy of sociality. Auden had an extraordinary fondness for taxonomies,⁶³ and his later poetry does afford us other terminological options in addition to "coterie" (a point to which I will return after I give an overview of the chapters that make up this study). As I will argue, though, these other terms can clarify Auden's theological ethics of friendship only if we organize them under the conceptual rubric of "coterie."

Which brings us to the second reason why I have chosen the term "coterie" as the conceptual rubric. Auden's later work thematizes a more specifically queer close-knit circle than that named by his own relatively vague taxonomy of sociality ("public," "crowd," "society," "community"). Lytle Shaw has shown that, for Frank O'Hara, a New York School disciple of Auden, "coterie" afforded a way "to recode kinship structures."⁶⁴ The "appropriated, superimposed, chosen, and contingent principles" of "coterie" as a form of cultural transmission subvert the hereditary and heteronormative principles of "the organic family."⁶⁵ It follows, then, that "[c]oterie [...] is as much an idea about the social possibilities of affinity as it is a concrete sociological fact."⁶⁶ The "coterie" provided a similar oppositional tool for Auden, as I argue in each of the five chapters of *Queering the City of God*.⁶⁷ Taking Shaw's lead, I mean "coterie" in a simultaneously

⁶³ The annotations to "New Year Letter" (1941), for example, are full of them. And for a seminar on Shakespeare that he taught at Swarthmore in 1943, Auden created a chart categorizing the various dualisms / oppositions that plague the postlapsarian world and that only "The City of God" can reconcile (*Sea* xvi).

⁶⁴ Shaw, 29.

⁶⁵ Shaw, 37.

⁶⁶ Shaw, 6.

⁶⁷ In terms of Auden's own taxonomy of sociality, a family would constitute a "society," a group that loves itself and that requires the presence of all members to preserve its designation. A coterie would

more expansive yet more nuanced sense than the mere pejorative charge of anti-democratic in-group rhetorical practices.

Chapter one examines a shift in Auden's coterie poetry. Whereas in fact his early work (e.g., "A Summer Night" [1933]) worries that the contented complacency of private coteries restricts social change, Auden's post-conversion poetry (e.g., "*We, too, had known golden hours*" [1950]) imagines a public oppositional role for marginal coteries. The poetry constructs coteries as quasi-institutional queer churches where civic renewal and re-imagination begins. Auden's theo-ethical account of queer friendship as an instrument of social justice, I argue, subversively rewrites mainstream attacks on gay networks (like the perpetually circulating conspiracy theories of "gay freemasonry" and "gay espionage") as affirmations. Auden thus positions himself against Christian theological as well as secular political attacks on the ethics of friendship.

After chapter one establishes the broad narrative of (a) Auden's take on the equivocal ethics of friendship and (b) his post-conversion change of heart regarding coteries, chapter two zeroes in on Auden's first American book, the little-known volume *The Double Man* (1941), arguing that Auden's conversion to America—as much as his conversion to Christianity—made possible his rehabilitation of the coterie. The emigration created a platform for the shameless pariah-prophet. "New Year Letter," the book's central poem, uses the syncretic ecclesiology of the lay Anglican poet and novelist Charles Williams to depict a small Long Island group of European exiles and sexual outlaws as exemplars of democracy. Finding community in difference, the queer émigrés

constitute an amalgamation of "society" and "community": it mimics kinship even as it replaces the naturalized bond of family with the queer bond of affect; it organizes itself around love for something outside itself (art, politics).

embody a prophetic critique of the various fascisms and nationalisms taking hold of Europe.

After I make a case for reading Auden's post-conversion oeuvre as a queer, theologically-driven dismantling of the Christian, Kantian, and Cold War suspicions of friendship (chapter one), and after I argue that Auden's emphasis on his shameful status as an expatriate and a gay man give a shamelessly defiant edge to his theo-ethical apologies for friendship (chapter two), I turn my attention to what I call "the erotics of coterie" in chapter three. Reading *The Age of Anxiety* (1947) alongside (a) the late essays and interviews of Michel Foucault and (b) *Ravelstein* (2000), Saul Bellow's *roman à clef* about the philosopher Allan Bloom, I argue that Auden constructs the coterie as a reformulated erotic practice. In this way, Auden's later poetry anticipates a tradition of older gay male writers who mine the history of friendship as a resource for inventing subversive forms of relationality that make life less lonely for aging queers.

The first three chapters thus show that Auden's post-conversion poetry portrays a reformulated erotic practice of friendship created by gay citizens, émigrés, and exiles as key to the task of "building the Just City" (*DM* 65). Focusing on the influence of Henry James on Auden, chapter four is an interlude between the literary concerns of the first three chapters and the theological concerns of the fifth chapter. It turns from the coterie to the communion of saints, briefly exploring friendship between the living and the dead. The erotic wartime pilgrimage "At the Grave of Henry James" (1941) canonizes the titular sexual and national outsider in both the spiritual and literary senses of the word, naming James's work an influence on Auden's ecclesial coterie. At once a supplicant

and a suitor, the poet invites James into a spiritual collaboration that mimics the queer Christic friendships in James's short fiction.

Looking at how gay desire inflects the theo-ethical questions at the heart of Auden's later work, then, turns out to complicate the received view of the Christian Auden as decidedly unqueer and "devoutly apolitical."⁶⁸ In fact, recuperating the link between same-sex eros and democratic renewal in Auden's later work entails reconstructing the history of what Robert Caserio calls the "citizen queer" in literary modernism.⁶⁹ Turn-of-the-century Anglo-American writers established a tradition of treating "homosexuals as ideal members of any republic."⁷⁰ Take, for example, Edward Carpenter and Ronald Firbank, to name just a couple of queer British writers who inspired Auden's later work. Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1896)—which (as I argue briefly in chapter two) influences the construction of homosexuality in *The Double Man* (1941)—regards gay desire as the secret to "true Democracy" because it builds cross-class alliances.⁷¹ Moreover, the "double nature" of gay men and women gives them the ability to reconcile straight men and women by explaining "the two sexes" to each other.⁷² And Firbank's *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1924)—which (as I discuss in chapter three) provides the epigraph to one of the sections of Auden's long poem *The Age of Anxiety* (1947)—portrays homosexuality and art as anti-imperialist. Gay florists in the imaginary kingdom of Pisuerga evince "a liberty that is superior to the economic

⁶⁸ Wasley, 164.

⁶⁹ Robert L. Caserio, "Queer Modernism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 206.

⁷⁰ Caserio, "Queer Modernism," 207. The figures Caserio cites as part of the tradition of queer modernism's "alliance of same-sex love with egalitarian possibility" include Walt Whitman, John Addington Symonds, Frederick Rolfe, Edward Carpenter, Oscar Wilde, Ronald Firbank, Lytton Strachey, T. E. Lawrence, and Christopher Isherwood.

⁷¹ Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (New York: Mitchell and Kennerley, 1921), 107.

⁷² Edward Carpenter, 36.

and state structure they adorn.”⁷³ Auden never appears in literary critical genealogies of “citizen queer.” But to read his later work as I do means to recognize it as a Christian contribution to an otherwise non-Christian literary tradition—an otherwise *secular* literary tradition, save for the influence of Eastern spirituality on Edward Carpenter’s *Towards Democracy* (1883)—that sees gay citizens as the key to healthy democracy.⁷⁴

Not only does rereading Auden to recover the queer commitments of his Christian poetry have implications for how we view modernist literary history. I hinted at the beginning of this introductory chapter that it also has implications for current controversies in queer theory and theology, like what role abjection should play in gay

⁷³ Caserio, “Queer Modernism,” 208. See also Robert L. Caserio’s reading of *The Flower Beneath the Foot* in “Artifice and Empire in Ronald Firbank’s Novels,” *Western Humanities Review* 51 (1997): 227-235.

⁷⁴ Robert L. Caserio reads *Letters From Iceland* (1937), Auden’s poetic collaboration with his friend Louis MacNeice, as “Auden’s inward conversations, collaborations, and conflicts with two, indeed with three, preceding generations of gay elders,” namely, Edward Carpenter, Frederick Rolfe, W. Somerset Maugham, and T. E. Lawrence. See “Letters and Iceland: W. H. Auden and Generational Differences among Gay Modernists,” in *W. H. Auden: A Legacy*, ed. David Garrett Izzo (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2002), 198. For Caserio, “Auden’s absorbed relation to his gay fathers [...] makes clear that [...] he attempts to reduce their claims for homosexuality’s heroism to [a] more modest scale,” 217. A verse paragraph near the end of “Letter to Lord Byron” could serve as an example of Auden’s tempering the queer heroism of his gay predecessors:

The Great Utopia, free of all complexes,
The Withered State is, at the moment, such
A dream as that of being both the sexes.
I like Wolf’s *Goethe-Lieder* very much,
But doubt if *Ganymede*’s appeal will touch
—That marvellous cry with its ascending phrases—
Capitalism in its later phases. (*EA* 109)

Citing Hugo Wolf’s art song about Ganymede, and alluding to Edward Carpenter’s theory of gay men and women as forming an intermediate sex, Auden expresses skepticism about homosexuality’s ability to undermine social and economic injustice. To try to vindicate Auden’s apparent underwriting of state power, Caserio reminds the reader that the poem layers intergenerational as well as intragenerational perspectives: Byron’s, Auden’s, and MacNeice’s. But I submit that we should take seriously the skepticism of the passage; it lines up with Auden’s general pre-conversion, pre-emigration position on utopian projects: he saw them as “fantasies that evade the task of the present moment,” Mendelson, *Early Auden*, 172. Only after Auden’s conversion to Christianity does his poetry begin to invoke the oppositional power of gay love and queer alliances unreservedly. (Even *The Orators* links homosexuality to fascism.) Ecclesiology offered him a narrative of egalitarian possibility. As Auden’s targum on Galatians 3:28 puts it, “in [the church] there is neither Jew nor German, East nor West, boy nor girl, smart nor dumb, boss nor worker, Bohemian nor bourgeois, no elite of any kind” (*Prose ii* 250). In a very real sense Auden’s work gets *queerer*, *more radical*, after he converts.

politics and whether theological ethics requires the descriptive and moral category of “nature.” Hence chapter five puts Auden in conversation with contemporary Christian moral and political philosophy to construct a theo-ethical alternative to the antisocial turn in queer theory. Through close readings of *For the Time Being* (1944)—Auden’s modern-day retelling of the infancy narratives from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke—and “Thanksgiving for a Habitat” (1965)—a paean to the farmhouse in Kirchstetten where Auden summered for fifteen years with his lifelong companion and erstwhile lover, Chester Kallman—I argue that the need for such a corrective arises from (a) the heterosexism of Christian moral philosophy and (b) the unimaginative limits that queer theory’s antisocial turn places on abjection as a creative practice of spiritual, ethical, and political resistance.

In the conclusion I will argue for the urgency of gesturing toward a queer theological ethics, indicating why queer theory and literary studies ought to reflect seriously on current discussions in academic theology. In addition to the obvious fact that such reflection facilitates more sophisticated engagement with deeply theological writers like Auden, I am interested in how theology—particularly Auden’s own Anglican tradition—might answer David Halperin’s call to find alternatives to the pathologizing, disciplinary language of psychology and psychoanalysis for thinking about and describing gay subjectivity.⁷⁵ As evidenced by the camp spiritual style that Auden cultivates in poems like his Christmas Day letter to Chester Kallman (to which I will

⁷⁵ Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, 38.

briefly turn in a moment), Christianity can serve as the basis for a non-psychological queer language of love.⁷⁶

V. COMING TO TERMS: GAY LOVE, QUEER ETHICS

Biographically speaking, Auden's tumultuous relationship with Chester Kallman provided the terms in which he understood the Christian story. Auden met Kallman, a Brooklyn student 14 years his junior, at a poetry reading in April 1939. That summer the couple took a long trip across the United States that Auden called their honeymoon. They wore rings; Auden considered their relationship a marriage. Two years later, Kallman informed Auden that he had cheated on him and that he would never have sex with him again. (They maintained a close albeit sexless partnership for the rest of Auden's life.) Grief reinforced Auden's new religious convictions.⁷⁷

An epistolary prose poem that Auden gave Kallman on Christmas day in 1941 (five months after their marriage ended) attests to Kallman's role in Auden's faith.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ I here take inspiration from Halperin's remarks on Catholic kitsch (*What Do Gay Men Want?*, 104). As we will see in the conclusion, though, my turn to Auden's camp spirituality—which is grounded as in a serious commitment to Anglo-Catholic theology—and my turn to contemporary Anglican academic theology for a non-psychological queer language of love proceeds along different lines than Halperin's observation of the Catholic-kitsch-inflected tradition of abjection as creative resistance in writers like Genet.

⁷⁷ Auden officially reaffirmed his Anglican faith a little over a year after his honeymoon with Chester, in October 1940, fully nine months before Kallman ended his sexual relationship with Auden in July 1941. Yet Auden's spiritual autobiography—a short contribution to the anthology *Modern Canterbury Pilgrims and Why They Chose the Episcopal Church*, ed. James A. Pike (New York: Morehouse Goreham, 1956)—makes oblique reference to Kallman's infidelity as one reason for the poet's Christian belief. Auden was driven to a murderous rage, “forced to know in person what it is like to feel oneself the prey of demoniac powers, in both the Greek and the Christian sense, stripped of self-control and self-respect, behaving like a ham actor in a Strindberg play” (*Prose iii* 579). Mendelson reports that after revealing his affair to Auden, Kallman fell asleep and “half-woke to feel Auden's hands on his neck. He pushed them aside and went back to sleep,” *Later Auden*, 175. Auden's lyric “Nocturne II” (1953) concludes with the supplication, “Shine lest tonight any / In the dark suddenly, / Wake alone in a bed / To hear his own fury / Wishing his love were dead” (*SP* 210).

⁷⁸ For the full text of Auden's Christmas Day, 1941 letter, see Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 182-183.

Richard Bozorth has observed that Auden's letter "reads every figure of the nativity story in terms of his relationship with Kallman."⁷⁹ More precisely, the text reads not just the characters of the nativity but also the central Christian doctrines (the trinity, the incarnation, and the resurrection) in terms of Auden's experiences with Kallman. Arthur Kirsch has repeatedly stressed the fact that the letter "is an elegy, not an epithalamium."⁸⁰ Edward Mendelson similarly reads the letter as Auden's way of making sure that Kallman did not "miss the point" of *For the Time Being* (1944), a modern restaging of the infancy narratives from the gospels of Matthew and Luke—namely, that Joseph's barroom worries about Mary's faithfulness to him represent Auden's jealousy.⁸¹

Kirsch's and Mendelson's readings ignore the form of the prose poem, though, a feature of the text that brings it closer to worship than elegy. Following a strict pattern of anaphora, caesura, and epistrophe, the text reproduces exactly the repetitive structure of litanies, public call-and-response prayers of supplication: "*Because* [of something you have taught me or caused me to feel or because of some feature you possess]; / *As this morning I think of* [something about the Christian faith], *I think of you*" (emphasis added).⁸² Like an icon or a monstrance, Kallman facilitates Auden's contemplation of God; Auden's contemplation of God, in turn, reminds him of his erstwhile lover. The liturgical form clinches the point, making eros itself a spiritual discipline. More than

⁷⁹ Bozorth, *Auden's Games of Knowledge*, 284.

⁸⁰ Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, 26. In his edition of *The Sea and the Mirror*, Kirsch again writes that "[t]his remarkable letter is an elegy, however, not an epithalamium" (*SM* xviii).

⁸¹ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 182. By the time he gave Kallman the Christmas Day letter, Auden had written about half of *For the Time Being*. Auden identified "The Temptation of St. Joseph" as one of his works depicting "the Crisis" in "l'affaire C," ALS to Alan Ansen, 27 August 1947, Berg.

⁸² Take, for an example with which Auden would have been very familiar, the structure of the Great Litany in the *Book of Common Prayer*: "That it may please thee to [bless us in a particular way], / *We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.*"

mourning the end of a sexual relationship, then, the Christmas day letter *celebrates* gay love as an especially felicitous mode of Christian devotion.

The letter suggests a couple of ways in which, for Auden, gay love amounts to an apt mode of Christian devotion. First, living counter to a norm leads to spiritual knowledge: “Because in the eyes of our bohemian friends our relationship is absurd; / As this morning I think of the Paradox of the Incarnation, I think of you.” By participating in a queer Christian marriage—and thereby at once undermining and upholding bohemian values—Kallman and Auden serve as a gloss on the odd dogma of a creator-god-qua-created-person. And second, the spiritual discipline of sex trains the lovers’ attention on their embodied god.⁸³ Kallman’s and Auden’s “resentment against” their own bodies anticipates Auden’s remark to a friend six years later that “all homosexual acts are acts of envy.”⁸⁴ But here the Anglican vow to “worship” his lover with “my body” transforms Auden’s envy of Kallman into adoration of God’s body. Making a sexual pun on a word that in religious contexts refers to Jesus’s humanity, the letter gestures towards a reading of gay shame as charism: Auden’s “resentment against being small” makes him think of “the Manhood.”

A similar taxonomy informs the construction of gay subjectivity as a spiritual faculty in Auden’s published poetry. Sometimes the focus is on shame and the frustrations of embodiment as the engine of the charism. In such instances (e.g., parts of “In Praise of Limestone”) I use the word “gay,” for the most part avoiding the

⁸³ Like the earlier poem “Leap Before You Look” (1940), the letter constructs Kallman as a potential convert: “I believe that if we only have faith in God and in each other, we shall be permitted to realize all that love is intended to be.”

⁸⁴ Quoted in Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 268. As Mendelson explains, “all such acts are based on the envy of a partner’s greater strength [...] Heterosexual partners, in Auden’s implicit contrast, can have strengths that the other does not have at all, and that each can therefore give the other.”

pathologizing, essentializing, and psychologistic connotations of the term “homosexual.” At other times the focus is on living counter to a norm as the engine of the charism. Thus (for example) I have chosen the term “queer” over “gay” to describe the design of “New Year Letter,” following similar moves by Robert Caserio, Richard Bozorth, and Douglas Mao.⁸⁵ “Queer” gives us better purchase on “New Year Letter,” a text that rejects the identitarian commitment of nationality, understands subjectivity as a discursive process rather than an essential property,⁸⁶ and resists liberalism’s insidious suppression of difference (as I will show).

To this explanation of terms I must now add that, over the course of my argument for why we ought to reconstruct the modernist literary history of “citizen queer” to include Auden’s later theo-ethical apologies for friendship, I will, in addition to the term “coterie,” employ several different terms from Auden’s poetry that are roughly equivalent to “coterie.” Each term emphasizes a slightly different aspect of the coterie’s vocation. As we will see in chapter one, the “*suburb of dissent*” refers to the prophetic dimension of the coterie’s vocation (*Nones* 7); and “the Homintern,” a portmanteau of “homosexual” and “Comintern” (the abbreviation of the Communist International, also known as the Third International, an organization that began in Moscow in 1919 and lasted until 1943), underlines the shameless defiance of Auden’s writing about gay friendship during the Cold War (*Prose iii* 184-188). As we will see in chapter three, “the green world” calls attention to the coterie’s work of preserving and handing down its

⁸⁵ For a reading of *The Orators* alongside Auden’s essays of the 1930s and early 1940s as elevating the “shamanic role” of “queers” and other political outsiders “of critically queer disposition,” see Douglas Mao, “A Shaman in Common: Lewis, Auden, and the Queerness of Liberalism,” in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 218-232.

⁸⁶ “New Year Letter” argues that “each great I / Is but a process in a process / Within a field that never closes” (*DM* 27); that “we are conscripts to our age” (*DM* 53); and that “the powers / That we create with are not ours” (*DM* 69). No one is autonomous: “we are changed by what we change” (27).

insights (*Age* 49). And as we will see in chapter four, “the Great Good Place” gives an eschatological significance to the already politically valuable quasi-institution of the coterie (*SP* 130). In spite of the fact that Auden had a penchant for taxonomies, he was a poet and not a systematic theologian: organizing these various terms under the conceptual rubric of “coterie” allows us to throw light on the different facets of his theological ethics of friendship.

I want to address the silences of *Queering the City of God* before I close. First, from time to time I will have reason to bring up Auden’s biography. Nevertheless, this is first and foremost a literary-critical and theological study of Auden’s theorizing of the practice of friendship, not a biography of Auden’s friendships. Therefore, I offer no discussion of events that do not make it in some (however remote) way into his later poetry.⁸⁷ Second, except for brief mention in the notes, I have, in the interest of space, left out discussion of Auden’s opera libretti, which make up a significant portion of his post-emigration, post-conversion literary output. Moreover, I by no means offer an exhaustive account of Auden’s later poetry. Instead, I have chosen to focus largely on longer poems and poetic sequences (*The Age of Anxiety*, *For the Time Being*, “New Year Letter,” *The Sea and the Mirror*, “Thanksgiving for a Habitat”). I see my treatment as building on the work of Richard Bozorth, who focuses primarily on Auden’s lyrics of the 1920s and ’30s. I hope that, as Bozorth so wonderfully puts it, “[i]f such responses indicate the limits of this study, [...] they also point to its suggestiveness and utility.”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ To name an example that, had Auden written about it, would have been relevant to the topic of this study: the demise of Auden’s friendship with Benjamin Britten. Alluding to his friendship with Britten, Auden said, “If I am loyal to my friends it is only because nobody I know has been as lucky as I have in the friends he has made. Only from one (he is famous and you can probably guess his name) have I been estranged, and that is a constant grief to me.” Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, 375. For more details on the history of Auden’s estrangement from Britten, see Humphrey Carpenter, 323-324.

⁸⁸ Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 17.

CHAPTER ONE | THE EQUIVOCAL ETHICS OF FRIENDSHIP

Having just finished his BA at Cambridge, Rickie Elliott, the protagonist of E. M. Forster's novel *The Longest Journey* (1907), complains to his friend Stuart Ansell that no institutions exist to recognize the value, or to encourage the longevity, of their undergraduate friendship:

“I should say you've been fortunate in your friends.”

“Oh—that!” But he was not cynical—or cynical in a very tender way. He was thinking of the irony of friendship—so strong it is, and so fragile. We fly together, like straws in an eddy, to part in the open stream. Nature has no use for us: she has cut her stuff differently. Dutiful sons, loving husbands, responsible fathers—these are what she wants, and if we are friends it must be in our spare time. Abram and Sarai were sorrowful, yet their seed became as sand of the sea, and distracts the politics of Europe at this moment. But a few verses of poetry is all that survives of David and Jonathan.

“I wish we were labelled [*sic*],” said Rickie. He wished that all the confidence and mutual knowledge that is born in such a place as Cambridge could be organized. People went down into the world saying, “We know and like each other; we shan't forget.” But they did forget, for man is so made that he cannot remember long without a symbol; he wished there was a society, a kind of friendship office, where the marriage of true minds could be registered.

“Why labels?”

“To know each other again.”¹

The “irony of friendship” that Rickie Elliot calls attention to is its simultaneous significance and invisibility, its importance for the friends who enjoy it and its irrelevance to the rest of society. The modern Western world, with its sharp division

¹ Forster, *The Longest Journey* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1922), 78. See also David M. Halperin's reading of this passage (on which my own discussion leans) in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 75.

between the public sphere of politics and the private sphere of affects, looks down on the persistence of friendships like Rickie's and Stuart's: men ought to scrap such boyish undergraduate loyalties in order to take on fully the professional and familial responsibilities of adulthood.

To the modern Western mind, such boyish undergraduate loyalties pose a threat to the democratic polity. Forster's famous credo makes plain why: "[I]f I had to choose between betraying my country and my friend," he writes in *What I Believe* (1939), "I hope I should have the guts to betray my country" (a credo that we will revisit at length in the next chapter).² Male friendship looks like a threat to civil society because the particular—which is to say exclusive and elective—ties of friendship undercut the Kantian mandate of universal benevolence.³ In other words, democracy depends on unconditional mutual regard, a sentiment that the chosen bonds of friendship undermine.⁴ Hence Foucault suggests that what disturbs people about homosexuality is not gay sex, but gay friendship and the queer culture to which it gives rise (a point that I will take up in chapter three); and hence George Steiner, alluding to Forster's credo above in an explicitly anti-gay exposé of Anthony Blunt, a British art historian and Soviet spy, famously regards friendship between men with hateful suspicion (a point to which we will return later in this chapter).⁵

It is *male* friendship that poses the threat to civil society because, as Rickie Elliot knows, men must grow up and enter the democratic public sphere, the only "legitimate

² E. M. Forster, *What I Believe* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1939), 8.

³ Mark Vernon, *The Meaning of Friendship* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 136.

⁴ Alan Bray *The Friend* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 2; Vernon, 138.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. I: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 136-138; George Steiner, "The Cleric of Treason," *The New Yorker* (8 December 1980): 158-195.

site of the male collective,” a place that has no use for schoolboy friendships.⁶

Friendships between women, by contrast, pose no threat because the Enlightenment political dictates that repudiate friendship between men happen to classify women as private: there is no pressure on women to grow up. Moreover, friendship between women is presumed to be always interruptable by women’s relations with men. That is, unless female friendships explicitly exclude men, as in lesbian networks.⁷

In addition to the modern secular democratic suspicion of friendship, some strains of Christian theology treat friendship as suspect. Such theologies emphasize family metaphors in the New Testament: Christians must forsake the bond of friendship, which is transient and exclusive, for the more lasting and inclusive sociality of brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ.⁸ Theologies that do endorse friendship, on the other hand, focus on the celebrations of friendship in the Gospel of John: e.g., the author of the Gospel, styling himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 20:2); Jesus, weeping at the tomb of Lazarus (John 11:35); Jesus, telling his disciples that there is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13).

Friendship has not always had such a bad reputation, though. Before the Enlightenment, friendship enjoyed public significance in political and ecclesiastical spheres. To name one political example, for Aristotle, the justice of a democracy

⁶ David Caron, *My Father & I: The Marais and the Queerness of Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 205.

⁷ Caron continues: “That women do not face exactly the same pressure to repudiate their community of female friends is due to the fact that they have been privatized *as a group* in the first place. No maturity is necessary, and female group friendship is as (deceptively!) easy to dismiss as a sewing circle, a Tupperware party, or a gossip network,” 205. But as Bray points out, with the advent of feminism, female friendship has become “increasingly” a “public matter,” 2.

⁸ For an account of Augustine’s and Kierkegaard’s suspicion of friendship as too exclusive and too transient, see Andrew Sullivan, *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 240-243; and Vernon, 129-132. For an account of Aelred of Rievaulx’s defense of friendship as central to Christian discipleship, see Bray, 254-261; and Vernon, 183-185.

depends on the extent to which its citizens are friends, supporting each other and pursuing common interests and values together (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1155a25, 1159b25-1160a10).⁹ And to name one ecclesiastical example, in medieval and early modern England, friends would pledge commitments to each other by receiving the Eucharistic together, a bond that could heal disputes between families or reconcile rival factions in the church.¹⁰ Accordingly, civil and religious institutions existed to recognize and support friendships: e.g., the ancient Greek quasi-institution of the symposium, an “all-male drinking party,” as David Halperin describes it,¹¹ or medieval and early modern Christian burial monuments celebrating a sworn friendship between two people. There is no historical consensus, then, about “the equivocal ethics of friendship,” as Alan Bray puts it.¹²

Auden’s oeuvre reflects the ethical ambiguity of friendship. On the one hand, as Alan Jacobs has noticed, “no other major poet dedicates so many poems to his friends,” a quasi-institutional means of publicly canonizing a commitment between friends.¹³ (What’s more, Auden’s friendship inspired many memoirs.)¹⁴ As I argue in this chapter, Auden’s poetry formalizes gay male friendship as a quasi-institution with public value—a queer church that I will interchangeably refer to as the coterie, the suburb of dissent,

⁹ Similarly, in Plato’s *Symposium*, Pausanias says that eros between men is of inestimable “value to the city as a whole and to the citizens” because eros “compels the lover and his loved one alike to make virtue their central concern” (185c), trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett).

¹⁰ This is one of the central stories that Alan Bray’s monumental history *The Friend* tells.

¹¹ Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 113.

¹² Bray, 10.

¹³ Alan Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan: Change and Continuity in Auden’s Poetry* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 68.

¹⁴ To name some examples: Alan Ansen, *The Table Talk of W. H. Auden*, ed. Nicholas Jenkins (New York: Sea Cliff Press, 1989); Thekla Clark, *Wystan and Chester: A Personal Memoir of W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995); Dorothy J. Farnan, *Auden in Love* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Charles Miller, *Auden: An American Friendship* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1983); and A. L. Rowse, *The Poet Auden: A Personal Memoir* (London: Methuen, 1987).

and the Homintern.¹⁵ He thus defends the ethics of friendship against the Christian theological as well as secular political attacks that I have just summarized. Moreover, he does so in surprising ways: (1) he responds to the Cold War denunciation of gay networks as spy rings by corroborating the attack and rewriting it as an affirmation, and (2) the ethical praxis of the queer church of the Homintern includes the erotic. But early in his career, Auden himself was equivocal about the ethics of friendship. A good liberal humanist, he saw private friendship as contributing nothing to the public sphere. Having flirted briefly with Marxism, he also saw the exclusive love of friends in a coterie as a temptation to classism and quietism. And, as will become clear in the next two chapters, doubts about the privilege of his Homintern would linger even after he began to write poignant and pointed apologies for friendship.

This chapter, then, traces a shift in Auden's poetry after his conversion: from his prior dismissal of coterie as politically suspect (which I discuss in the first section of this chapter), to his embrace of friendship as a form of queer spirituality with potential for prophetically critiquing and remaking the city (which I discuss in the remaining sections). There are, I argue, at least two explanations for Auden's change of heart about the ethics of friendship—one theological, one political. (1) Christianity gave Auden a vocabulary for understanding queer networks as erotic schools of virtue. For example, Ischia, a Neapolitan island featuring Catholic pageantry and transactional sex, frees its English gay summer residents from their capitalistic sins of productivity and power, forming these queer expats in the virtues of humility and faith (the burden of the second section of

¹⁵ I say "quasi-institution" because, as will become clear by the end of *Queering the City of God*—especially after my discussion of "Thanksgiving for a Habitat" (1965) in chapter five—Auden's coterie poetry, rather than institutionalizing the coterie, aims to invent new forms of relationality (like the coterie) and new ways of formalizing those relationships (like the aforementioned practice of dedicating nearly every poem to a friend).

this chapter).¹⁶ Moreover, the New Testament, with its picture of the network of agape resisting the Roman Empire, gave Auden a framework for understanding small affective collectivities as politically valuable (a fact that I will put aside for the time being and unpack in detail in chapters two and five). (2) After the Nazis rose to power, Auden gave up on the promise of liberal democracy (or the Marxist revolution, for that matter) to cure social evils; he lost faith in the very kind of politics that doubts the ethical value of friendship (the burden of the third section of this chapter).

I. SUBURBS OF DISSENT

“*We, too, had known golden hours*” (1950) propounds a vision of the coterie as a site of prophetic critique and civic renewal. It is a dedicatory poem: it precedes the table of contents in *Nones*; in the place where a title would normally appear, it bears the dedication, “To Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr” (*Nones* 7).¹⁷ The poem opens with a celebration of Auden’s paradisiacal community with the Niebuhrs.¹⁸ They had “*danced,*” “*body and soul [...] in tune,*” as their “*tongues grew witty and gay*” among “*the wise and good.*” (Dancing is a recurrent image in Auden’s oeuvre. With its suggestion of a positive experience of the body—something that eluded Auden—dancing generally connotes all things Edenic, Trinitarian, or matrimonial when it appears in an Auden text.) Divine grace goaded and sustained their intimacy: they “[h]ad felt the intrusive glory / Which tears reserve apart.” The pluperfect tense dampens the celebratory tone, though

¹⁶ As well as the camp virtues of innocence, pleasure, and charm.

¹⁷ The poem was printed entirely in italics, and my quotations here follow the original typography.

¹⁸ Auden befriended the Niebuhrs in New York City, dining frequently at their home from 1940s on. As I mentioned in the prologue, Auden also participated with them in the ecumenical theological discussion group The Third Hour.

(“*had known*,” “[*h*]ad danced,” “[*h*]ad felt”). And when the pluperfect morphs into the past conditional (“*would [...] have sung*”), the reader begins to sense a real weed in this Eden. They “*would in the old grand manner / have sung from a resonant heart. / But ...*” In other words, they might have said important things in a serious way, were it not for a decidedly ungodly invasion of uncultivated language.¹⁹

After the adversative conjunction, the poem describes the political debasement of “[a]ll sane affirmative speech.” The text sets up an opposition between “*the promiscuous crowd*,” along with “*editors*” and demagogues who “*befuddle the crowd*” with “*spells*” that reduce language to “*a horrid mechanical screech*,” on the one hand; and the coterie, the “*we*” of the poem, on the other. (Recall from the introductory chapter Auden’s taxonomy of groups: a “*crowd*,” unlike a “*community*,” refers to an aggregation of people who share no more than the basic fact of “*togetherness*” [*Prose iii* 227].) The coterie must trade “*the grand manner*” for “*the wry, the sotto-voce, / Ironic and monochrome*”; it is the only “*civil style*” that has “*survived*” the “*pandaemonium*,” “*the promiscuous crowd[’s]*” awful co-opting of “*words like peace and love*.” Critics read the dedicatory poem as Auden’s apology for the prosy levity of his later work—for the very style that characterizes *Nones*.²⁰

I submit that the poem also makes an ethical claim about the public role of the coterie. The last four lines present a syntactic ambiguity:

*And where should we find shelter
For joy or mere content*

¹⁹ I take “the grand manner” to refer to Matthew Arnold’s definition of “the grand style” in poetry: “*when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or severity a serious subject*,” *Thoughts on Education Chosen from the Writings of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Leonard Huxley (New York: MacMillan, 1912), 84.

²⁰ Edward Mendelson, “The European Auden,” in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 55.

*When little was left standing
But the suburb of dissent.*

The full stop clashes with the interrogative syntax, so that the poem threatens to leave its own question unanswered even as it proposes an answer: “*the suburb of dissent*” is either the place where “*we find shelter*,” or it is one of the few things “*left standing*” when other places that did offer shelter have been destroyed. The syntactic ambiguity describes the ethical precariousness of coteries. It acknowledges the temptation of coteries to *ignore* rather than *reform* the destruction around them. The syntactic ambiguity thus serves to trouble the coterie’s conception of “*shelter*” and to show the coterie its proper *telos*.²¹ Rather than enjoy the “*mere content*” of dinners inspired by “*Escoffier*,”²² the coterie should create a real “*shelter*” from the “*pandaemonium*” by becoming “*the suburb of dissent*,” a place where people rescue language from the abuses of “*the promiscuous crowd*.” (Auden would eventually make the same argument in defense of the poet’s vocation.)²³

If one rereads “*We, too, had known golden hours*” in light of the syntactic ambiguity of its conclusion, one sees that the poem divides coteries into what I call coteries of “*dissent*” (the reformers) and “*Escoffier*” coteries (the escapists). The first

²¹ Lest I resemble the hapless critic mentioned by Auden in the Foreword to *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*—who “made a great to-do about what was in fact a typographical error” (CSP 16)—I must point out that subsequent versions of “*We, too, had known golden hours*” only slightly diminish some of the suggestive ambiguity by replacing the full stop with a question mark.

²² Georges Auguste Escoffier was an early twentieth-century French gourmet known as “*le roi des cuisiniers et le cuisinier des rois*” [“the king of chefs and the chef of kings”]. See Pellegrino Artusi, Murtha Baca, and Stephen Sartarelli, *Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), lvii.

²³ In a lecture in 1968, Auden speaks “in the name of all my fellow-citizens of the Republic of Letters, that holy society which knows no national frontiers, possesses no military hardware, and where the only political duty incumbent on all of us at all times is to love the Word and defend it against its enemies.” He goes on to distinguish between two forces that corrupt language: the “Idle Word,” which one speaks or reads out of boredom (e.g., “[c]ocktail-party chatter” and “journalism”); and “the Black Magician,” who uses words to dominate others (e.g., “[p]olitical and religious propaganda”), “The Idle Word, The Black Word,” *ALA Bulletin* 62.4 (April 1968): 403-406.

half of the poem (up to the adversative conjunction at line 13) describes the Escoffier coterie. The second half of the poem describes the city's ruination by demagogues (lines 13 to 20); the unadorned, sardonic language that the coterie ought to use (lines 21-24); and the dissenting role that the coterie ought to play (lines 25-28). Rereading Auden's dedicatory poem in this way, one can see it as a joke and an exhortation. Auden pokes fun at his own Escoffier tendencies "*in the grand manner*," using overwrought abstractions ("*golden hours*," "*noble dish*," "*true loves*," "*the wise and good*," "*resonant heart*") that exist in an exaggerated relationship of contrast with the city's ruination ("*debased*," "*promiscuous crowd*," "*mechanical screech*"). He then exhorts himself to inhabit "*the suburb of dissent*" using the more restrained idiom that he prescribes for it ("*shelter*," "*joy or mere content*").²⁴

With its worry about the redemptive role of the coterie, "*We, too, had known golden hours*" recalls Auden's much earlier poem "Out on the lawn I lie in bed" (1933), later titled "A Summer Night" after a poem by Matthew Arnold. Dedicated to Geoffrey Hoyland (master of the Downs School, a college preparatory school where Auden taught from 1932-1935), the poem describes a mystical experience of neighbor-love that Auden shared with Hoyland and two other colleagues in 1933. As they chatted together on the lawn after dinner, they perceived an unexpected rush of *caritas*.²⁵ Alan Jacobs has

²⁴ John Fuller speculates that the conclusion of the dedicatory poem to the Niebuhrs echoes a quote from E. M. Forster's essay on T. S. Eliot in *Abinger Harvest* (1936), *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 405. Of Eliot's deflated anti-hero Prufrock, Forster writes that "[h]ere was a protest, and a feeble one, and the more congenial for being feeble. For what, in the world of a gigantic horror, was tolerable except the slighter gestures of dissent?" *Abinger Harvest* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1964), 90. The allusion to Prufrock via Forster would resolve the syntactic ambiguity of the poem's conclusion and underline my reading of it as Auden's mocking himself for his Escoffier tendencies.

²⁵ In 1964, Auden revisited the event in his introduction to Anne Fremantle's *The Protestant Mystics* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964). The introduction reuses the mystical language of "*We, too, had known golden hours*" to characterize what happened that summer night as "a Vision of Agape" (*FA* 70): "I

argued—perhaps a bit too strongly—that the poem regards coteries as “morally and politically indefensible.”²⁶ (Crucially, though, Jacobs uses the misleading phrase “local culture” rather than coterie, a problem that I will address in a moment.) The speaker worries about the injustices that make his “[l]ucky,” egalitarian “ring” of “colleagues” possible (*SP* 30) as well as the “dangerous temptation to social quietism” that such privilege creates.²⁷

As oblivious to penury and war as the blank moon above them, the chatting colleagues form an Escoffier coterie. Stanzas that Auden later cut from the poem (when he titled it and republished it in his collections) make the classism that sustains their intimacy especially apparent:

The creepered wall stands up to hide
The gathering multitudes outside
Whose glances hunger worsens;
Concealing from their wretchedness
Our metaphysical distress,
Our kindness to ten persons.

And now no path on which we move
But shows already traces of
Intentions not our own,
Thoroughly able to achieve
What our excitement could conceive,
But our hands left alone.

For what by nature and by training
We loved, has little strength remaining:
Though we would gladly give
The Oxford colleges, Big Ben,
And all the birds in Wicken Fen,
It has no wish to live. (*SP* 32)

felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine. For the first time in my life I knew exactly—because, thanks to the power, I was doing it—what it means to love one’s neighbor as oneself” (*FA* 69, emphasis mine).

²⁶ Jacobs, *What Became of WYSTAN*, 55.

²⁷ Jacobs, *What Became of WYSTAN*, 56.

The colleagues love the familiar: “Oxford colleges, Big Ben.” Their easy ethic of “kindness to ten persons” reveals them as selfish, selective in their altruism. (The phrase recalls the novel by E. M. Forster with which I opened this chapter. *The Longest Journey* [1907] celebrates just the sort of Oxbridge friendship that Auden’s poem depicts. During his callow Cambridge years, Rickie Elliott “believes in humanity because he knows a dozen decent people.”²⁸) But a power more capable than the coterie suffuses it with better “[i]ntentions,” reminding the colleagues how to love the “outside.” (The “wretchedness” of the “gathering multitudes” echoes the “huddled masses” and “wretched refuse” of the American poet Emma Lazarus’s ironic welcome to immigrants arriving in New York City, “The New Colossus” [1883].²⁹ Thus Auden’s poem wants to dismantle barriers of nation as well as of class.)

As a subtle portrait of a divine power’s operations on a group of friends, “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” offers an inkling of Auden’s later theology of queer community as an instrument of social justice. The equal “ring,” for example, alludes to the early Christian love-feast, where the faithful would eat dinner together and then sing, arrange themselves in a ring-formation, share the kiss of peace, and do spiritual exercises.³⁰ Such hints of a queer spirituality remain theoretical, though. The group never puts its mystical experience of *agape* into practice. They can “conceive” of God’s love, but their “hands” leave it “alone.” Even so, the experience of neighbor-love *within* the coterie has moved the speaker to *rebuke* the coterie for not carrying neighbor-love “outside” the “wall.” A word that reappears in “*We, too, had known golden hours*” indicates the scandal of their

²⁸ E. M. Forster, *The Longest Journey*, 75.

²⁹ Emma Lazarus, *Selected Poems*, ed. John Hollander (New York: Library of America, 2005), 58.

³⁰ Fuller, 149.

“[I]ucky” community (*SP* 30): like a flood, a social revolution will break “through the dykes of our *content*,” and it will “[h]old sudden death before our eyes” (*SP* 32, emphasis mine). The speaker of the poem accuses the group of having nourished mere “river-dreams” that “long hid the size / And vigours of the sea.” Their contentment has restricted—and their small dreaming, obscured—social change.

The poem thus articulates a vaguely Marxist political critique of friendship. Marxism, like some strains of Christian theology and like modern Western political thought, rejects the exclusive, particular love of friendship: where some strains of Christian theology oppose friendship to the idea of brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ, and where Kantian ethics opposes it to universal benevolence, Marxism opposes friendship to comradeship. Auden briefly flirted with Marxist ideas at the beginning of the 1930s, enough to earn him a reputation as a Marxist, but he never actually became a Marxist. He was something of a Marxist *manqué*: about a year before he wrote “Out on the lawn I lie in bed,” Auden told a friend, “No. I am a bourgeois. I shall not join the C.P.”³¹

Although “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” castigates the complacent coterie for impeding social progress, the poem hopes (in each of its printed versions) that the coterie may somehow participate in the germination of a new order. But unlike “*We, too, had known golden hours*,” it concludes with a vague supplication about, rather than a specific prescription for, the coterie’s role in achieving social justice:

But when the waters make retreat
And through the black mud first the wheat
In shy green stalks appears;
When stranded monsters gasping lie,

³¹ Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 153. See also Jacobs, *What Became of WYSTAN*, 57.

And sounds of riveting terrify
Their whorled unsubtle ears:

May this for which we dread to lose
Our privacy, need no excuse
But to that strength belong;
As through a child's rash happy cries
The drowned voices of his parents rise
In unlamenting song.

After discharges of alarm,
All unpredicted may it calm
The pulse of nervous nations;
Forgive the murderer in his glass,
Tough in its patience to surpass
The tigress her swift motions. (SP 32-33)

In other words: May coterie require no defending; may *this* happy circle “belong” to *that* biblical vision of shalom. (The retreating of “the waters” recalls Psalm 77:16; the “shy green stalks” recall the 1928 Anglican hymn, “Now the green blade riseth.”)³² Note the optative mood of the stanzas: *May* our circle be an ancestor of the new order where “stranded monsters gasping lie”; *may* we bring calm, forgiveness, patience, and peace to the “nervous nations.” (The “tigress” likely alludes to Wilfred Owen’s “Strange Meeting,” in which soldiers “will be swift with the swiftness of the tigress.”)³³ What, then, allowed Auden eventually to make the firmer, clearer injunction of “*We, too, had known golden hours*”—that the coterie *must* function as “*a suburb of dissent*,” a critical “*shelter*” from uncritical, ideologically driven corruptions of language?

We could trace the narrative of Auden’s evolving thoughts about coterie even further back, starting with his cryptic poetry of the late 1920s. Readers disagree about whether to read the telegraphic, elliptical style of *Poems* (1930) as a secret code for a

³² Auden later rewrote the last two stanzas for clarity: “May these delights we dread to lose, / This privacy, need no excuse”; “All unpredicted let them [i.e., the delights] calm / The pulse of nervous nations” (CP 118-119).

³³ *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 35.

coterie. Edward Mendelson argues that “[r]eviewers and critics missed the point when they inferred from the poems’ elusive privacy the existence of a coterie who shared the meanings and got the jokes; Auden’s friends were as much in the dark as everyone else was” (*SP* xix). For Richard Bozorth, by contrast, Auden’s earliest poems divide his audience into the initiated (Auden’s circle of gay literary friends, including the poet Stephen Spender and the novelist Christopher Isherwood) and the uninitiated (everyone else). The poems “tell the uninitiated they are just that” by drawing on Spender’s and Isherwood’s code words for gay desire.³⁴ And the poems employ “tropes of espionage” to portray “the closeted homosexual and the homosexual poet.”³⁵

If we accept Bozorth’s account, I think we can conclude two things. One, Auden’s sense of what a coterie might (or should) look like changed after his conversion to Christianity. Ever suspicious of Escoffier coteries, he began to imagine a coterie of dissent—a coterie with a public role. And two, it is his pre-conversion conception of coteries as private language games that Auden rejected when he said, in an “Address on Henry James” to the Grolier Club in 1947, that “the brilliant salon, the defiant revolutionary group in the cheap café, the costly romantic tie, all the old charms and cozinesses have vanished forever, and every attempt at their reconstruction is a fake and doomed to failure” (*Prose ii* 302). Unlike each of these three collectivities, Auden’s post-conversion conception of coteries recognizes the fundamental “aloneness” of every person in modern industrial societies (as we will see in the next chapter) and the

³⁴ Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge: Poetry and the Meanings of Homosexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 24.

³⁵ Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 20. Reading Auden’s early tropes of espionage as a practice of gay self-fashioning (and as a practice of self-conscious coding) becomes especially interesting in light of the discourse of the “Homintern” that Auden adopts after his emigration and conversion, a trope that I will discuss later in this chapter.

consequent responsibility of communities to guard against fascistic restorations of “the old charms and cozinesses.”³⁶

The afterlife of “Out on the lawn I lie in bed”—as “A Summer Night”—shows us another way of reading the poem, one that brings it more in line with Auden’s post-conversion depictions of queer community as sacramental (e.g., “New Year Letter,” as we will see in the next chapter). In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes of discovering the poem via a *New York Times* obituary dated 23 July 1988. The unsigned obituary quotes the fourth stanza of the poem in memory of a man who had died the previous day (presumably of AIDS, as the year and the anonymity of the memorial suggest):

That later we, though parted then
May still recall these evenings when
Fear gave his watch no look;
The lion griefs loped from the shade
And on our knees their muzzles laid,
And Death put down his book.³⁷

The obituary reads the poem as a prayer that this privileged opportunity may turn out to have fortified the coterie durably for the real trials that lie ahead. Auden’s revisions to “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” for *Collected Poetry* (1945) downplay the indictment of coterie, encouraging appropriations like the obituary’s. Dropping the class analysis of stanzas 10–12 entirely, the rewrite no longer rebukes the coterie for the naiveté of its “kindness to ten persons” on the wealthy side of the ivy “wall.” It retains the reference to the dispute over the Polish Corridor, though: the colleagues still “do not care to know, /

³⁶ In the “Address,” Auden goes on to say that “each must go his way alone, every step of it, learning for himself by painful trial and shaming error, and never resting long on any triumph, but soon proceeding to risk total defeat in some fresh or more difficult task” (*Prose ii* 303).

³⁷ Quoted in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 181.

Where Poland draws her Eastern bow” (*CP* 118). Thus the coterie no longer plays a role in a system of oppression; it simply offers respite from newspaper headlines about global “violence.” The variant analogies for the moon’s blank stare—an “orphan” in the original (*SP* 31), a “butcher” in the revision (*CP* 118)—reinforce the different emphases of the two versions.

But to return to the question at hand: what explains the ethical shift from the vague hope of “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” to the clear imperative of “*We, too, had known golden hours?*” If we believe Alan Jacobs, Auden concluded by 1940 that “all dreams of universal or even national unity” were “fundamentally absurd,”³⁸ and he therefore decided “to cultivate local knowledge and local attachments.” Contrasting what he calls Auden’s exaltation of “locality and particularity” in “New Year Letter” (1941) with T. S. Eliot’s repudiation of “the insular and the parochial” in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1921),³⁹ Jacobs goes as far as calling Auden “one of the more interesting, if largely unacknowledged, predecessors of the contemporary communitarian movement.”⁴⁰ Duly noting that different thinkers have poured wildly divergent meanings into the catch-all term “communitarianism,” Jacobs gives a broad definition: communitarianism prefers a small polity of tight-knit affective bonds to large organizations like national governments and multinational corporations.⁴¹

Jacobs’s argument about Auden has a number of problems—not the least of which is the contrast that he draws between a purportedly cosmopolitan Eliot and a purportedly communitarian Auden. Part of the trouble with the argument is that Jacobs

³⁸ Jacobs, *What Became of WYSTAN*, 51, 53.

³⁹ Jacobs, *What Became of WYSTAN*, 66.

⁴⁰ Alan Jacobs, “Auden’s Local Culture,” *The Hudson Review* 47.4 (Winter 1995): 54.

⁴¹ Jacobs, *What Became of WYSTAN*, 50.

contrasts Auden’s supposedly communitarian portrayal of friendship in “New Year Letter” with Eliot’s supposedly cosmopolitan theory of literary tradition in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In other words, Jacobs treats these two phenomena—friendship, on the one hand, and theory of literary tradition, on the other—as if they were close enough in kind to allow for a meaningful contrast.⁴² But a more meaningful question to ask would be, “How do Eliot’s and Auden’s views of literary tradition differ?” Or, “How do Eliot’s and Auden’s representations of community differ?”

Regarding the first question, a quick glance at “New Year Letter”—with its Augustan rhyming octosyllabic couplets, its frequent code-switching (from English to German, French, and Latin), and its crazy annotations referencing ancient as well as modern texts from a variety of disciplines and cultures—shows clearly that Auden rejects any “insular and parochial” conception of literary tradition. Moreover, in essays written around the time of “New Year Letter,” Auden shares Eliot’s conception of a transhistorical, transnational literary tradition. For Eliot, tradition entails, not “following the ways of the immediate generation before us,” but rather “feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his [i.e., the writer’s] own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.” In other words, tradition “involves” a writer’s “perception, not only of the pastness of the

⁴² Jacobs’s comparison reads in full: “what most clearly distinguishes Auden from Eliot is the fact that Eliot’s chosen tradition is universal and objective: the “ideal order” of *all* great works of art, the forerunner of Northrop Frye’s archetypically organized “imaginative universe.” It by definition cannot be confined to a place; it repudiates the insular and parochial—opprobrious terms which in its dialect are synonymous with the local. But as we have already seen, for Auden it is precisely the limited particularity of the gathering at Elizabeth Mayer’s home that enables those people to come together as a genuine, if tiny, *civitas*” (66).

past, but of its presence.”⁴³ Likewise, in “Criticism in a Mass Society” (1941), Auden argues that

[i]nstead of working within the limits of one regional or national esthetic tradition, the modern artist works with a consciousness of all the cultural productions, not only of the whole world of his day, but also of the whole historical past [...] If we talk of tradition today, we no longer mean what the eighteenth century meant, a way of working handed down from one generation to the next; we mean a consciousness of the whole of the past in the present. (*Prose ii* 92)

Auden echoes Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” almost word for word.

And as for the second question—“How do Eliot’s and Auden’s representations of community differ?”—no one who has read *After Strange Gods* (1934), Eliot’s infamous anti-Semitic plea for cultural homogeneity, could contrast Eliot and Auden in the way that Jacobs does. Indeed, Auden’s modernized retelling of the nativity story mocks the most notorious passage from *After Strange Gods*, where Eliot insists that “reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable” for reviving or establishing a tradition or a way of life in the American South.⁴⁴ The narrator of *For the Time Being* (1944) observes that Caesar’s “recent restrictions / Upon aliens and freethinking Jews”—the reason for the census requiring the holy family to travel to Bethlehem—“are beginning / To have a salutary effect upon public morale” (*CP* 373).⁴⁵

Furthermore, Jacobs overlooks the fact that “New Year Letter” exalts “locality and

⁴³ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 38.

⁴⁴ T. S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), 20.

⁴⁵ Auden also privately rebuked Eliot for the political vision of *After Strange Gods*, writing him that “[s]ome of the general remarks, if you will forgive my saying so, rather shocked me, because if they are put into practice, and it seems quite likely [they will be], would produce a world in which neither I nor you I think would like to live.” Quoted in Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 150n.

particularity” not to celebrate *local culture*—a phrase that connotes the *local color* of literary regionalism—but rather to promote interaction among *different cultures*:

And all real unity commences
In consciousness of differences,
That have needs to satisfy
And each a power to supply.
We need to love all since we are
Each a unique particular
That is no giant, god, or dwarf,
But one odd human isomorph [.] (*DM* 69)

Simply put, the poem promotes a multiculturalist vision of “[d]iversity in unity” (*DM* 34).

Thus a more sensible way of contrasting Eliot and Auden—and one that is central to my argument about Auden’s vision of the coterie as a place of prophetic civic renewal—is to say that Auden’s “*suburb of dissent*” is cosmopolitan where Eliot’s “Community of Christians” is not. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), Eliot imagines a group of “consciously and thoughtfully practicing Christians, especially those of intellectual and spiritual superiority,” who will counteract the tendency of a Christian government toward “manipulation” and the tendency of its citizens toward “superstition.”⁴⁶ In “New Year Letter,” Auden proposes almost the opposite: an international, interfaith coterie as a model of reasoned disagreement.

Chief among the problems with Jacobs’s account, then, is its misleading use of the word “local” to describe Auden’s post-emigration ethics and the culture of his chosen communities. Auden in fact turned away from nationalisms because of their tribalist logic, because of their *exaltation of the local*. Rather, the culture of his “*suburb[s] of*

⁴⁶ T. S. Eliot, *Christianity & Culture* (New York: Harcourt, 1976), 28

dissent” was cosmopolitan and multilingual.⁴⁷ For example, the one demographic feature shared by every member of the Long Island-based coterie depicted in “New Year Letter” was their status as outsiders. The group consisted of three British émigrés (Auden, the composer Benjamin Britten, and the tenor Peter Pears), a Jew (Chester Kallman), two gay couples (Auden and Kallman, Britten and Pears), and a German refugee (Elizabeth Mayer, the coterie’s host).⁴⁸ The poem treats the queer life of these “aliens in New York” as a school of virtue (*DM* 50): a cross-gender, cross-generational, and mixed-orientation coterie⁴⁹ constitutes a social practice that resists the idolatry that nationalism demands (*DM* 48), training each of the friends in the virtues of love (*DM* 48), humility (*DM* 68), “reverent frivolity” (*DM* 47), and “faith balanced by doubt” (*DM* 47).⁵⁰

To characterize the networks of intimacy in which Auden works out his post-emigration ethics, and to do so in a way that remains faithful to the details I have just presented, we need a word that implies physicality and particularity without the insularity connoted by “local.” Borrowing from the philosopher Charles Taylor, I propose the term “incarnational.” For Taylor, “incarnational” approaches to ethics and spirituality integrate “the body, history, the place of individuals, contingency, and the emotions.” To apply it to Auden’s work, “[e]mbodied feeling” becomes “a medium” for what the

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Mayer was a German immigrant. Reinhold Niebuhr was the son of German immigrants, and his wife Ursula grew up in England.

⁴⁸ Mayer was a lapsed Lutheran, but she fled Germany with her Jewish husband, the psychiatrist William Mayer, and their children when the Nazis rose to power. See Humphrey Carpenter, 275.

⁴⁹ Mayer was 24 years Auden’s senior, and Auden regarded her as a surrogate mother when his own mother died in 1941; Kallman was 14 years younger than Auden. Humphrey Carpenter, 257, 275.

⁵⁰ As we will see in chapter five, the “*suburb of dissent*” qua religiously-inflected cosmopolitan school of virtue depends on a view of traditions as ongoing dialectical arguments with competing interpretations of the world, a notion that looks forward to the work of the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. Alan Jacobs notes the similarity between Auden and MacIntyre in passing, but doesn’t unpack or interpret the parallel (*What Became of WYSTAN*, xviii, 117).

members of his coteries “recognize as rightly bearing an aura of the higher.”⁵¹ The term “incarnational” stands in opposition to “excarnational,” which describes ethical systems that discount the role of emotions and desires. Put differently, excarnation refers to “the steady disembodiment of spiritual life, so that it is less and less carried in deeply meaningful bodily forms, and lies more and more ‘in the head.’”⁵²

I will have more to say about “New Year Letter” in the next chapter, and more to say about virtue ethics and incarnationality in chapter five, but for now it is important to note that Jacobs’s discussion of the poem omits all of the details that I included in the previous paragraph. Jacobs even goes so far as to say that Auden “maintain[s] his community in no place but his own mind.”⁵³ The claim effectively excarnates Auden’s “suburb[s] of dissent,” a move that allows Jacobs to ignore the queer specificity of Auden’s so-called “local culture.”⁵⁴

Jacobs acknowledges that communitarianism normally requires its adherents to return home. He resolves the obvious contradiction in Auden’s biography by claiming that “there was no place in England which Auden could think of as home,” that Auden

⁵¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 288.

⁵² Taylor, 771.

⁵³ Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan*, 67.

⁵⁴ Under the chapter title “Local Culture,” Jacobs quotes the last two stanzas of the six-stanza lyric “The Garrison” (a poem that, as we saw in the introductory chapter, details Auden’s life with Chester Kallman in Kirchstetten). Jacobs thus leaves out the stanzas that identify the first person plural as Kallman and Auden. The “we,” as far as Jacobs’s epigraph is concerned, could be anyone, not two gay companions and “the choir we sort with” (CP 846). Jacobs separates Auden’s gayness from his communitarianism, restricting all discussion of Auden’s sexuality to one chapter on his love poems (*What Became of Wystan*, 73-95). Considering that Jacobs elsewhere refers to Auden’s sexuality with a genteel homophobia—Jacobs calls Auden a “practicing homosexual” in a magazine article (“Auden and the Limits of Poetry,” *First Things* [August/September 2001], <<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/auden-and-the-limits-of-poetry-10>>) and a “lifelong homosexual” in his edition of *The Age of Anxiety* (Age xiii)—one wonders if de-gayng Auden’s post-conversion ethics is a calculated move on Jacobs’s part. Although Auden’s poetry portrays his queer networks in Christian terms, he employed a strategy similar to Jacobs’s in his personal life, keeping his queer and his Christian communities largely separate, a point that I will revisit in chapter three. See Miller, 81, 84; as well as Robert L. Chapman, “Auden in Ann Arbor,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 17.4 (Fall 1978): 519.

left England “because the English intelligentsia rejected and scorned the convictions he had come to find essential.”⁵⁵ In fact, Auden left England precisely because it *was* home.⁵⁶ He wanted to escape the tribalist regime of the local, and America promised a rootless life. Moreover, when Auden left England, he had not yet settled on the Christian convictions that would invite scorn from some British intellectuals.⁵⁷

Jacobs also misreads the role of Christian theology in the ethical shift from Auden’s early lyric “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” to the much later “*We, too, had known golden hours.*” Jacobs claims that, because some strains of Christian theology express a deep suspicion of friendship’s exclusivity, Auden’s conversion explains nothing about his rehabilitation of the coterie.⁵⁸ In fact, though, Auden rescues friendship from Christianity’s suspicion of it by using the language of Christian ritual and belief to describe the nature and purpose of the coterie. Auden gives us a fresh understanding of coteries as queer churches where civic renewal and re-imagination begins.

⁵⁵ Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan*, 66.

⁵⁶ “English life is for me a family life, and I love my family but I don’t want to live with them,” Auden said. Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, 243. Auden’s introduction to Henry James’s *The American Scene* includes a covert explanation of why Auden left England in the form of a hypothetical biography of any budding European writer. The text asserts that indolence is “[t]he great danger for the European writer,” because unlike their American counterparts, European writers begin as apprentices of an established literary tradition: “It was easier for him to write fairly well, but much harder to write as well as he possibly could, because he was a cultural *rentier* [...] He had in fact to become by art what the American writer is by nature, *isolated*, and perhaps the only advice as to how to achieve this that *his* wise uncle could have given was: ‘Get out, or get drunk, or get ill’” (*Prose ii* 281).

⁵⁷ For example, in a piece written for *Yale Review* in 1960, Thom Gunn accuses Auden of “High Church snobbery” that “tends to repress the active intelligence, replacing it with the habit of continual trifling,” in *W. H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Routledge, 1983), 423.

⁵⁸ Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan*, 57.

II. THE CHURCH OF MAD CAMP

“In Praise of Limestone” (1948) identifies Ischia as the site of just such a queer ecclesial “*suburb of dissent*.” Two gay visitors—an Englishman and his “dear”—encounter a culture of physical pleasure that opposes imperial ambition.⁵⁹ (The term “coterie” and the phrase “*suburb of dissent*” apply to Auden’s poems about Ischia because, as we will see, through such details as the dedications and the first person plural perspective, the poems recreate the lively artistic, intellectual, and spiritual community that Auden enjoyed with other English-speaking gay visitors to the island.)⁶⁰ Ischia is a “region / Of short distances and definite places” where each spring fills “a private pool for its fish” and carves “[i]ts own little ravine” (*SP* 189). The “eyes” of the people who grew up there have “[a]djusted to the local needs of valleys” (*SP* 190). Living in such a “dilapidated” place “calls into question / All the Great Powers assume” (*SP* 191): that a country powerful enough to preserve its independence from other countries deserves the worship of its citizens. (“Out on the lawn I lie in bed,” by contrast, conceives of privacy as irresponsible. Because the colleagues enjoy each other’s company behind the “creeped wall,” they can ignore the social problems around them.) And Ischia’s “map camp” helps the Englishman discover the affirmation of the body inherent in his own Anglican faith (*SP* 190). The poem thus indirectly articulates what I will call a Christological cosmopolitanism: (1) since we are embodied, relational creatures and not

⁵⁹ The poem addresses “my dear” in the middle; and “Dear,” at the end. Dropping the first person possessive from the appellation “Dear” at the end of the poem, “In Praise of Limestone” employs the “technique of a delayed declaration of intimacy” that Edward Mendelson observes in Auden’s earlier poems “Law Like Love” (1939) and “Atlantis” (1941). Mendelson notes that ‘My dear’ was commonly used among English upper-middle-class male friends, without sexual connotations, until around the middle of the [twentieth] century, but ‘dear’ was used among sexual or family intimates.” See Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 167.

⁶⁰ Remember that, as I noted in the introductory chapter, Ischia was the place where Auden’s and Kallman’s fruitful collaboration with the gay German composer Hans Werner Henze began.

pure fleshless minds, sacramental “goods” like culture provide a key resource for hermeneutical reflection on divine revelation, but (2) since we are all “sinners,” no culture is “wholly good,” so responsible theological inquiry and reflection depends on cross-cultural exchange.⁶¹

The argument of “In Praise of Limestone” unfolds ethnographically. A British expatriate explains Italy to readers who share his northern European vantage point. (The commands to “[m]ark” and “[w]atch” invite outsiders to look in [*SP* 189].) The Englishman invokes a series of contrasting groups: “the inconstant ones,” who admit their humanness and never leave the responsive rock that dissolves in water (*SP* 189); “the best and worst of us,” saints and despots who, refusing to admit their limitations, follow the call of indissoluble rocks like granite and gravel; and “the really reckless,” who forsake community for the ocean (*SP* 190). “Immoderate” landscapes (the “blazing fury” of a crater or the “infinite space” of a desert or the jungle’s “monstrous” fungi and insects) lure adamantine personalities; Ischia (“[w]here everything can be touched or reached by walking”) generates humbler, more flexible personalities (*SP* 190).

The southern Italian psyche looks *queer* to the English ethnographer. The Ischians refuse to aspire to ethical perfection. The shady squares and narrow backstreets of the limestone valley encourage an easygoing homo-social intimacy that accepts human error. Urchins chase a scientist away from his study of nature and back to the ambiguous realm of people. I take the “lively offers” of these “gamins” to refer to the prevalence of transactional sex on the island: young Ischian men would sell sex to older (mostly

⁶¹ The quotes in this paragraph are from a notebook in which Auden laid out plans for an essay on religion and theology. The Berg, Holograph notebook, 1966-67.

English-speaking) male tourists.⁶² But Ischia’s ethos of manipulative seduction goes beyond the sexual. The island’s *genius loci* is a feckless mama’s boy for whom work means “the power to charm.” No one asks him to change—he knows “[t]hat for all his faults he is loved” (*SP* 189). (Perhaps to avoid narrowly sexual readings of Ischia’s queer charm, Auden bowdlerized the description of the boy in later editions of the poem. The “nude young male who lounges / Against a rock displaying his dildo” becomes “the flirtatious male who lounges / Against a rock in the sunlight” [*CP* 538].) A whole “band” of such “rivals” for the attention of “Mother”—i.e., the personified island, or the maternal instinct that makes any lover indulgent—creates a culture of shameless inconstancy (*SP* 189). Richard Bozorth notes that Auden here “wears his Freudianism more lightly” than in his early poems (a shift that I will discuss in more detail in the conclusion): the maternalized landscape is “a trope for the comfortable fit between body, soul, and world,” a “camp Freudianism in the spirit of Auden’s habit of referring to himself among friends as ‘Mother,’” “not a discourse for diagnosing” a “psychosexual disorder.”⁶³ The Ischians keep no secrets; they take life lightly; they worship an operatic God; they suffer “stereotypically Italian demises,” as Bozorth puts it, such as “pimp[ing] / Or deal[ing] in fake jewelry or ruin[ing] a fine tenor voice / For effects that could bring down the house” (*SP* 190).⁶⁴

The Englishman’s description of a backwater where everyone delights in petty schemes looks like acid condescension at first—hardly praise at all. But Ischia has made

⁶² See Humphrey Carpenter, 363-364, 386-387.

⁶³ Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 245-246.

⁶⁴ Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 248. For more on “In Praise of Limestone” as part of the “modern homoerotic cult of the Mediterranean,” see Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 247-248. See also Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art, and Homosexual Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 1993), 69-100.

the speaker realize that, like scientists who ignore the human order and poets who evacuate it of its sacred meaning,⁶⁵ *he* has the wrong ethic:

I, too, am reproached, for what
And how much you know. Not to lose time, not to get caught,
Not to be left behind, not, please! to resemble
The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water
Or stone whose conduct can be predicted, these
Are our Common Prayer, whose greatest comfort is music
Which can be made anywhere, is invisible,
And does not smell. (SP 191)

The speaker confesses his mistakes to his lover, who knows them only too well. They all boil down to the fact that he has tended to make the determinist's petition, the Common Prayer (the allusion to the Anglican order of service is ironic) of people who would like to find salvation in this life: "[n]ot to lose time, not to get caught," not to experience a resurrection of the body that seems more like animal repetition than redemption. Unlike such people for whom time will not be redeemed, Ischia's naked sunbathers and tricking gamins exude patience and candor.

What looks queer to the English ethnographer thus proves spiritually instructive. Like each "[c]ounterfeit" reality that (as we saw in the introductory chapter) the queer traveler visits in "Atlantis" (1941), Ischia can help its visitors "recognise the true" (SP 126) if they accept it at face value. For the Englishman, then, celebrating the Italians' belief in a counterfeit reality—their mercenary charm, their culture of physical pleasure—becomes a charism. He usually shrinks from the messiness of sex, naming "music" his "greatest comfort" because it "can be made anywhere, is invisible, / And

⁶⁵ The secular poet that "In Praise of Limestone" snidely describes as "[a]dmired for his earnest habit of calling / The sun the sun, his mind Puzzle" refers to Wallace Stevens, who called his own "The Comedian as the Letter C" an antimythological poem (SP 191). See Fuller, 409. For an extended comparison of the construction of religious belief in the poetry of Stevens and Auden that takes the allusion to Stevens in "In Praise of Limestone" as its starting point, see Tony Sharpe, "Final Beliefs: Stevens and Auden," *Literature & Theology* 25.1 (March 2011): 64-78.

does not smell” (*SP* 191). (That the Englishman prefers what “does not smell” is a hint at the wrongness of his ethic and the rightness of Ischia’s rebuke: Auden’s oeuvre contains numerous references to smell [or lack thereof] as an index of moral health [or trouble]. In *The Age of Anxiety* [1947], a dictator “smells of the future, / Odorless ages, an ordered world” [*Age* 14], a passage to which I will return in chapter three. “Under Which Lyre” [1946], which, like “In Praise of Limestone,” appears in *Nones* (67-70), includes the injunction not “to make love to those / Who wash too much” [*SP* 187]. And in a much later “Epithalamium” [1965] for his niece, Auden describes marriage as a “diffy undertaking [...] to us, whose dreams are odorless” and for whom “what is real / seems a bit smelly” [*SP* 288].) But the Italians’ uncomplicated comfort with their own bodies assuages the Englishman’s discomfort, helping him to swap his ironic version of the Anglican prayer book for the real one.

The Englishman’s healing experience of Ischia’s counterfeit reality provides a commentary on the hope of the Christian creeds, as the conclusion of “In Praise of Limestone” shows. Switching from the ethnographer’s mode to the lover’s, the speaker confides in his “[d]ear” what the island has taught him:

[...] Insofar as we have to look forward
 To death as a fact, no doubt we are right: But if
 Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead,
 These modifications of matter into
 Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains,
 Made solely for pleasure, make a further point:
 The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,
 Having nothing to hide. Dear, I know nothing of
 Either, but 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. (*SP* 191)

Richard Bozorth reads the passage as a demythologized treatment of Christianity,⁶⁶ “a gay fantasy” of the Garden of Eden “as a realm of free sex” that recognizes its “fantasy of [a] home free of frustrated desire and guilt” as “only a fantasy.”⁶⁷ But “In Praise of Limestone” does something even more radical than *queering orthodoxy*: it reclaims the early Christian insistence on the resurrection of the body to tease out *orthodoxy’s compatibility with queerness*. If, after the fact of death that we all face, we rise as physical people, not just as disembodied spirits, three (overlapping) points follow. One, contrary to Gnostic heresy, our bodies present neither an evil that we must overcome nor a mere irrelevance that we can ignore. Two, death will not erase our stories in all their queer specificity—it will merely transfigure them. A stone defined by its faults symbolizes “a faultless love / Or the life to come,” where Jesus still has scars.⁶⁸ And thus, three, blessedness consists not in perfection but in innocence. Like the artistic process that modifies “matter into / Innocent athletes,” forgiveness and resurrection free us to be shamelessly ourselves.

The contemporaneous poem “Ischia” (1948) offers a similar thanks to the island for bringing Auden’s perspective in line with that of its native residents. Auden dedicated the poem to Brian Howard, another gay exile from England in Ischia who prompted Auden to write the poem by accusing him of lacking “visual sense.”⁶⁹ Like “In Praise of Limestone,” “Ischia” paints a picture of backward desuetude: occasionally a visitor “sighs for a Brooklyn / where shirts are silk and pants are new” (*CP* 542); the

⁶⁶ I here mean “demythologized” in more or less the sense that Rudolf Bultmann, a twentieth-century German Lutheran New Testament scholar and theologian, gives the term: “demythology” refers to the project of restating biblical stories like the incarnation and resurrection in the language of Heideggerian existentialism. See Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament & Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁶⁷ Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 248, 250.

⁶⁸ John 20:20; Rev. 5:6.

⁶⁹ Humphrey Carpenter, 358.

island's patron saint may or may not elicit a blood sacrifice every year (*CP* 543). And it paints a picture of sensual pleasure: the island's "short but shapely dark-haired men," its wine, its honey, and its hot springs that "improve the venereal act" offer "a cure" to exiles like Auden. Such pleasures make the exiles "believe that our / lives are as welcome to us as / loud explosions are to your saints" (*CP* 542). Moreover, the culture of embodied enjoyment on the ramshackle island "correct[s]" the "injured eyes" of the speaker and his "dear friends," who come from "soiled productive cities." Ischia "train[s]" them "to see / things and men" in a "perspective" that refuses "to admit how much the sword decides." It trains them to turn away from writing odes for "the conqueror" (perhaps an allusion to Mussolini) and to write odes for St. Francis of Assisi instead (*CP* 541). It trains them, in the words of "In Praise of Limestone," to base their allegiances on more humane principles than those of "the Great Powers" (*SP* 191). Not unlike the coterie depicted in "New Year Letter," Ischia is an erotic school of virtue. (I will have more to say about my choice of the word "erotic" in chapter three.)

"Ischia" and "In Praise of Limestone" contradict Jacobs's description of Auden's communitarianism as placeless, as nowhere "but his own mind."⁷⁰ Moreover, these celebrations of "private pool[s]" and "local needs" show why using the word "local" to describe Auden's post-emigration ethics and the culture of his communities actually distorts Auden's project: the local is not parochial. Because Ischia is a world of limestone imperfection, its particular locality is more open to difference than the granite of the Swiss Alps. And the Englishman prone to Gnosticism and liberal ambition takes seriously the Neapolitan correctives of Catholic pageantry, hot springs, and transactional sex. Superimposing the limestone statues of beautiful men on the Anglican creeds, he

⁷⁰ Jacobs, *What Became of Wystan*, 67.

dialectically incorporates the decidedly un-British culture of Ischia into his spirituality. Nor does he do so alone, it must be said, but with fellow British gay exiles like the dedicatee of the poem “Ischia.” In other words, Auden grounds his ethics in the concrete communal life of multiple particular places.⁷¹

My correction of Jacobs thus points us to an important conclusion. Insofar as the queer church of Ischia’s “steep stone gennels” (*SP* 189) teaches the English ethnographer to resist the Great Powers, to recognize the goodness of his body, and to replace his determinist’s petition with the Christian creeds, “In Praise of Limestone” propounds a theo-ethical cosmopolitanism based on a Christological account of culture. By “Christological account of culture,” I mean that Auden concludes, from body-affirming doctrines like the incarnation and the resurrection, that (a) our status as embodied, relational creatures (as opposed to pure fleshless rationality) affects how we interpret revelation, creeds, etc.; and (b) culture is thus a key sacramental resource for hermeneutical reflection on revelation, creeds, etc. Different places—“definite places” (*SP* 189)—tell different stories that can adumbrate the kingdom of God in different ways. If one understands culture and place Christologically, the reason for espousing a theo-ethical cosmopolitanism becomes clear: as Auden would later put it in a notebook containing plans for an essay on religion and theology, “since man is created by God a culture-making creature, culture is itself a good, since he is a sinner, there is no culture

⁷¹ Ten years later, when Auden stopped summering in Ischia and bought a farmhouse in Kirchstetten, he gave a much less sentimental portrayal of Ischia’s backward desuetude. “Good-bye to the Mezzogiorno” (1958), though thankful to southern Italy, describes the people as “without hope”; and their decadence, as a way of anaesthetizing themselves to “all the metaphysical threats” (*SP* 250).

which is wholly good.”⁷² Therefore, cross-cultural exchange is crucial to responsible theological inquiry.

In the undated essay “Postscript: Christianity & Art,” Auden makes pronouncements about Christianity and culture that might seem to conflict with my reading of “In Praise of Limestone.” He dismisses “all works of art which make overt Christian references” because “[t]hey seem to assert that there is such a thing as a Christian culture, which there cannot be. Culture is one of Caesar’s things” (*DH* 458). But what Auden rejects here is the *opposite* of theo-ethical cosmopolitanism: namely, a Christian tribalism, the idea that an explicitly Christian culture (or an explicitly Christian work of art) has “gospel authority” over other cultures (or works of art). He remarks that “[t]he only kind of literature which has gospel authority is the parable, and parables are secular stories with no overt religious reference.” The point of the “Postscript,” then, is not to deny the sacramentality of culture but to urge reticence on the part of Christian writers—a point that Auden repeated throughout his later years⁷³—and to caution against giving worldly power to Christianity.

III. THE HOMINTERN

After his conversion to Christianity, not only does Auden position himself against Christian theological attacks on the ethics of friendship, but he also positions himself against secular political concerns about friendship’s ethical value. To recap briefly, the

⁷² The Berg, Holograph notebook, 1966-67.

⁷³ See “The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning” (1958), which ends with the lines “love, or truth in any serious sense, / Like orthodoxy, is a reticence” (*CP* 619); and the essay “Writing,” where Auden quotes an unnamed bishop as saying that “[o]rthodoxy is reticence” (*DH* 21).

modern—which is to say, Enlightenment—secular suspicion of friendship stems from the fact that, as a particular and exclusive love, friendship militates against the Kantian mandate of universal benevolence.⁷⁴ Democracy depends on unconditional mutual regard, a sentiment more closely approximated by the given bonds of family than the chosen bonds of friendship.⁷⁵ E. M. Forster conveys the political suspicion of friendship well in his infamous motto, “if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country” (a statement that I will revisit in more detail in the next chapter).⁷⁶

To that brief recap I will now add the historical link between the end of friendship as a politically useful and socially accepted practice and the emergence of homophobia. Until the eighteenth century, friendship played a significant role in the public sphere: in England, for example, Eucharistically-sealed friendships between two men or two women united different families in extended household networks and provided a symbolic ritual for resolving ecclesiastical conflicts. Moreover, after the eighteenth century, the life of the body changed significantly: where activities like sleeping in the same bed together used to cement friendships (hence the term “bedfellow”), they now took place solely within the marital space. Consequently, the social meaning of bodily intimacy changed significantly, from a way to secure friendship in public (e.g., the kiss of peace at mass), to a purely private sexual matter between opposite-sex spouses.⁷⁷ When extended household networks fell away and the private institution of the family became the basic

⁷⁴ Vernon, 136.

⁷⁵ Bray, 2; Vernon, 138.

⁷⁶ Forster, *What I Believe*, 7-8.

⁷⁷ Interestingly, Charles Taylor’s discussion of excarnation (see above as well as chapter five) makes nary a reference to Bray.

social unit, friendship between men—and the possibility of same-sex desire that for the first time it signified—started to look threatening.⁷⁸

It is this homophobic strain of the secular political suspicion of friendship that Auden positions himself against. Read in their original historical context, Auden's poetic celebrations of Ischia, for example, defy a Cold War fear about gay men. By celebrating a refuge for gay exiles from the "Great Powers" (*SP* 191), Auden brazenly answers the accusation that gay men form a lawless, anti-patriotic subterranean network that cuts across divisions of class, age, ethnicity, and nation; and that this network wields a "power that [is] somehow illegitimate because its members [are] predominately gay men."⁷⁹ In earlier decades this fear took the form of a "gay freemasonry" accusation; during the Cold War, it took the form of a "gay espionage" accusation; and in later decades it would take the form of a "gay mafia" accusation. (Coincidentally, the same year that Auden published "In Praise of Limestone" and "Ischia" in *Nones* [1951], the island briefly became the center of the emerging "gay spy" narrative after a British double agent working for the Soviet Union tried to contact Auden.)⁸⁰ Auden's post-emigration, post-conversion coterie poetry defends homosexuality against the many versions of this conspiracy theory by corroborating them and rewriting them as affirmations.

⁷⁸ Bray, 218; Foucault, *Ethics*, 171; Vernon, 177.

⁷⁹ Gregory Woods, "The 'Conspiracy' of the Homintern," *Gay and Lesbian Review* (May-June 2003): 11.

⁸⁰ In May 1951, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, two of the infamous Cambridge Five, defected to the Soviet Union when Maclean was exposed as a double agent. Before leaving London, Burgess tried to contact Auden a number of times to no avail; Auden was in transit to Ischia. According to rumor, Burgess wanted to seek refuge with Auden. A tumult of reporters and police greeted Auden upon his arrival in Ischia, and a friend intending to visit Auden in Ischia was mistaken for Burgess and arrested in Naples. Auden had no knowledge of Burgess's impending defection; Burgess probably just wanted to divert attention to Ischia as he made his way to Moscow. Auden responded to the situation by publicly refusing to renounce his friendship with Burgess. For more on the whole episode, see Auden's description of it (*Prose iv* 67); see also Humphrey Carpenter, 368-370; and Bozorth, *Auden's Games of Knowledge*, 1-3.

Paranoia about an antisocial network of gay men has preoccupied the Anglo-European literati from the Wilde trials to the present. Proust made the worry famous in the fourth volume of *A la recherche du temps perdu* [“In search of lost time”]. The first section of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (1921), a thirty-page disquisition on “*des hommes-femmes, descendants de ceux des habitants de Sodome qui furent épargnés par le feu du ciel*” [“the men-women, descendants of those inhabitants of Sodom who were spared by the fire of heaven”],⁸¹ likens gay men to “*les Juifs*,” especially “*les dreyfusards*,” “*rassemblés à leurs pareils par l’ostracisme qui les frappe*” [“Jews,” especially “Dreyfusards,” who are “assembled with their own sort by the ostracism that afflicts them”];⁸² and to “*une franc-maçonnerie bien plus étendue, plus efficace et moins soupçonnée que celles des loges*” [“A freemasonry much more extensive and efficient and less suspected than that of the lodges”].⁸³ Their “*identité de goûts, de besoins, d’habitudes, de dangers, d’apprentissage, de savoir*” [“identity of tastes, needs, habits, dangers, apprenticeship, knowledge”]⁸⁴ creates subversive cross-class alliances: “*dans cette vie romanesque, anachronique, l’ambassadeur est ami du forçat*” [“in this anachronistic novelistic life, the ambassador and the prisoner are friends”].⁸⁵ Similarly, the opening of Gide’s *L’immoraliste* (1902) asks of its queer protagonist, “[*e*]n quoi Michel peut-il servir l’Etat?” [“can Michel serve the state?”]⁸⁶ The book posits a conflict between same-sex desire and state loyalty.

⁸¹ Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. III, ed. Jean-Yves Tadié (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1988), 3.

⁸² Proust, 17, 21, 18. The Dreyfusards were or supporters of Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish French army officer falsely accused of treason in 1894.

⁸³ Proust, 18.

⁸⁴ Proust, 18.

⁸⁵ Proust, 19.

⁸⁶ André Gide, *L’Immoraliste* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1958), 13.

The paranoia about an antisocial network of gay men has wielded a particularly strong grip on the English imagination. From the 1910s to the early '30s, the Bloomsbury Group—a modernist collective of writers, artists, and philosophers including Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant—came under attack by writers like D. H. Lawrence and Roy Campbell, who reviled the Group’s “insidious disease,” their rejection of “the essential blood contact between man and woman,” as Lawrence put it.⁸⁷ From the late 1930s through the Cold War, the accusation tended to focus on coteries as Soviet spy rings—witness the portmanteau “Homintern,” a camp joke that arose in Auden’s circles to refer to a supposed international cabal of gay artists.⁸⁸ And British literary critics—from George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) to Valentine Cunningham in *British Writers of the Thirties* (1989)—have centered their phobic dismissals of gay cultural alliances on Auden.⁸⁹

Auden’s own piece “*La Trahison d’un Clerc*” [“The Treason of a Priest”] (1942), a scathing rejoinder to Van Wyck Brooks’s anti-modernist polemic “Primary Literature and Coterie Literature” (1941),⁹⁰ includes a nice summary of the accusation against coteries as queer (“perverse,” “highbrow”), antisocial (celebrants of the “death-drive”), and anti-patriotic (“expatriate”). Auden quotes another critic (Dwight Macdonald of the *Partisan Review*) to summarize Brooks’s thesis:

⁸⁷ Quoted in Julie Ann Taddeo, *Lytton Strachey and the Search for Modern Sexual Identity: The Last Eminent Victorian* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, 2002), 45, 121. In 1931 Roy Campbell lambasted the Bloomsbury Group in his long satirical poem *The Georgiad*.

⁸⁸ The origin of “Homintern” is disputed. In *Memoirs of a Bastard Angel*, Harold Norse writes that “[t]he word *Homintern*, which I coined in 1939, is attributed to Auden [...] A takeoff on *Comintern* (Communist International), it was meant to convey the idea of a global homosexual community” (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1989), 77.

⁸⁹ Indeed, a large cartoon of Auden is centered on the front page of Woods’s “The ‘Conspiracy’ of the Homintern.” English literary critics aim their coterie-phobia at Auden’s friendship with Stephen Spender and Christopher Isherwood.

⁹⁰ Van Wyck Brooks presented “Primary Literature and Coterie Literature” as a talk at Columbia University in September 1941 (*Prose ii* 524).

The [...] “coterie” writer, on the other hand, is a thin-blooded, niggling sort of fellow, whose work reaches “a mere handful of readers.” His stuff has brilliant “form” but lacks “content.” He is “a mere artificer or master of words” who perversely celebrates the “death-drive” instead of the “life-drive.” He is a doubter, a scorner, a sceptic, expatriate, highbrow and city slicker. His work is pessimistic and has lost contact with The People and The Ideas of Greatness. (*Prose ii* 149)

Brooks identifies Proust, Joyce, and Eliot as examples of his conception of the coterie writer. Auden’s criticism of Brooks pulls no punches: “Mr. Brooks in his minor way, like Hitler in his major, are punishments for the sins of which all of us who have grown up in a liberal-democratic capitalistic culture are guilty” (*Prose ii* 149). In other words, Auden sees Brooks’s attitude as characteristic of people reared in a liberal-democratic capitalistic culture. Such a culture trains people to believe several propositions, says Auden: (a) people are born equal and free, a truth attributable to (b) the natural goodness of humankind; and (c) when a person *knows* the good, she automatically *wills* the good; so (d) because our knowledge increases with time, so, too, progress must increase with time. When an “over-sensitive and not very bright individual” like Brooks surveys the world and sees, to his chagrin, that it does not conform to his creed about progress, he flees into the sanctum of art, calling any artist who expresses skepticism about progress a bad artist (*Prose ii* 149-150).

The title of Auden’s excoriation of Brooks alludes to Julien Benda’s *La Trahison des Clercs* (1927), a book that censured nineteenth- and twentieth-century German and French intellectuals for their nationalism and racism. (On the other hand, Benda supported traditional Christianity’s internationalism, a very Auden-like move.) As we will see in chapter four, “At the Grave of Henry James” (1941) also alludes to Benda’s book. The speaker implores James to “make intercession / For the treason of all clerks,”

that is, to pray for “all writers living or dead” who need forgiveness on account of their unrelenting “vanity.” The poem tempers the tone of the review by implicating the coterie writer in the sins of liberal-democratic capitalistic culture: we who creatively resist the melioristic creed remain guilty of an “arrogant / Spirit” (*SP* 132), the poem confesses.

Almost forty years after Auden’s “*La Trahison d’un Clerc*” appeared in *The Michigan Daily*, George Steiner inverted the title for his account of the British art-historian and Soviet spy Anthony Blunt. Steiner’s “The Cleric of Treason” (1980) makes an even more explicitly homophobic and insistently anti-intellectual version of Brooks’s chauvinistic complaint. Steiner attributes Blunt’s betrayal of England to his antiquarianism (which “can compact a man’s mental and nervous powers to the pitch of ecstatic fury”) and his homosexuality (or, as Steiner calls it, “the freemasonry of golden lads”).⁹¹

Auden defiantly styles his own oeuvre as an affirming corroboration of accusations like Brooks’s and Steiner’s by explicitly self-identifying as a member of the Homintern in an essay on his gay predecessor, Oscar Wilde: “A Playboy of the Western World: St Oscar, the Homintern Martyr” (1950). Published the same year that Auden wrote “*We, too, had known golden hours*” (the lyric about the prophetic vocation of the coterie qua “*suburb of dissent*” that we encountered at the beginning of this chapter), “A Playboy of the Western World” draws a connection between gay shame and the eschatological imagination. According to Auden, Wilde needed everyone to love him “for himself alone” (*Prose iii* 185), “as he really was” (*Prose iii* 186), because he felt guilty about his sexuality. Auden explains Wilde’s shame with a generalization: “a

⁹¹ Steiner, “The Cleric of Treason,” 184, 183. “The Cleric of Treason” has enjoyed a long publication life. It has appeared most recently in *George Steiner at the New Yorker* (New York: New Directions, 2009), 13-46.

person with a need to be loved universally is frequently homosexual” (*Prose iii* 185).⁹² And Auden argues that Wilde’s intense need for acceptance drove his central project: “to portray the Garden of Eden as a spot quite different from the pagan island of the blessed” (*Prose iii* 187); in other words, to imagine it as including everyone, even, or perhaps especially, “the weak, the ugly, the poor, the old, the stupid” (*Prose iii* 188). Auden thus suggests that in Wilde’s case the experience of gay shame inspired a picture of social justice. “Given his nature,” Auden concludes, “it is not suprising that this subject,” i.e., a vision of an inclusive Eden, “should have excited Wilde to write a masterpiece,” namely, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (*Prose iii* 188). The campy title of Auden’s essay, “St Oscar, the Homintern Martyr,” establishes a spiritual lineage that casts Auden’s oeuvre as continuing Wilde’s subversive project of imagining a queer Eden.⁹³

Perhaps, then, another simple explanation for Auden’s change of heart about coteries is that when the Nazis rose to power he gave up on the promise of liberal democracy (or the Marxist revolution, for that matter) to cure social evils. In other words, he lost faith in the very kind of politics that doubts the ethical value of friendship. As we began to see in Auden’s rejoinder to Van Wyck Brooks, and as we will see in more detail in our reading of “New Year Letter” (1941) in the next chapter, Auden’s post-conversion work paints liberalism in a negative light: far from achieving the universal benevolence envisioned by Kantian ethics, liberalism in fact turns people into competitive, hyperrational machines of productivity and consumption (*DM* 55-58). So

⁹² See “September 1, 1939,” where Auden alludes to a comment in Nijinsky’s diaries that Diaghilev wanted “to be loved alone” (*SP* 96).

⁹³ In keeping with the vocabulary of Auden’s essay on Wilde, I here use the word Eden. Note, though, that in Auden’s writings, “Eden” sometimes functions as shorthand for nostalgia. See “*Caliban to the Audience*” (*Sea* 45) as well as Auden’s critical autobiography, “Reading” (*DH* 6-7). When trying to articulate a redemptive queer social vision that transcends nostalgia, Auden more often uses phrases like “the City of God,” “the Just City,” and Henry James’s “the Great Good Place.”

what in the 1930s struck the idealistic liberal humanist Auden as a zone of elitist insular intimacy protected from the harsh realities of the world,⁹⁴ in the 1940s began to appear to the disenchanted Auden more like a much-needed conspiracy against the liberal-democratic capitalistic nation state—a conspiracy that could in the end benefit democracy by refashioning it into something more just. Indeed, “New Year Letter” makes the radical suggestion that America remake itself in the image of Auden’s coterie of queer émigrés.

V. LOOKING FORWARD

Now that we have established the broad narrative outline of Auden’s change of heart regarding the ethics of friendship, we can begin to refine our picture by zeroing in on two of Auden’s major American works: “New Year Letter,” the centerpiece of Auden’s first American book, *The Double Man* (1941); and Auden’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Age of Anxiety* (1947). Looking at “New Year Letter” in the next chapter, I will argue that Auden’s emphasis on his own shameful status as an expatriate and a queer gives a shamelessly defiant edge to his theo-ethical apologies for friendship. And looking at *The Age of Anxiety* in chapter three, I will argue that Auden’s coterie constructs queer friendship as a reformulated erotic practice.

⁹⁴ I say “liberal humanist” rather than Marxist because, as I mentioned earlier in the chapter, although Auden flirted briefly with Marxism in 1932, he never actually joined the Communist Party.

CHAPTER TWO | SAINT WYSTAN'S SHAME

The later Auden remains a discomfiting figure for lesbian and gay studies. After he returned to the Anglican fold in 1940, Auden considered same-sex eros “sinful, though he fully intended to go on sinning” (as Christopher Isherwood remembers).¹ He continued to proclaim the sinfulness of gay relationships even as the Church of England softened its position on the matter.² And in a letter to a friend in 1970, he dismissed the Gay Liberation Front that formed after the Stonewall riots. The letter’s sexological jargon accentuates Auden’s conceptual distance from a post-Stonewall reader: “I’m no advocate of the purely Uranian society myself. I mean, *I* certainly don’t want to live *only* with queers,” he confessed,³ using the Victorian anglicization of “Urning,” Karl Heinrich Ulrich’s term for a female psyche in a man’s body.

But Auden put his negative views on gay desire to affirming uses. Consider, for example, his 1944 review of Henry James’s *Stories of Writers and Artists*. I will look at the review in a bit more detail in chapter four, but for now note the paradoxical

¹ Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 299. Just how much stock we should place in Isherwood’s statement remains an open question, though, one that I will revisit in chapter four and in the conclusion.

² Auden found the Church of England’s growing acceptance of homosexuality puzzling. In March 1954 the Moral Welfare Council of the Church of England issued a report recommending the overturning of laws penalizing gay sex. Auden shared the following reaction with a friend: “Have you seen the C of E report on homosexuality? In its wish to be fair, it falls into the odd position of declaring that only the act is sinful which is, of course, heretical and, from a practical point of view, ineffective. Nobody, where there is mutual consent and pleasure, can possibly feel an act is wrong: if it is, the reason must lie in the personal relationship which desires the acts,” ALS to Wendell Stacy Johnson, 26 June 1954, Berg.

³ Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, 433.

construction of queer desire as a weakness and a blessing: the review elevates marriage as “the highest and hardest” vocation and implicitly labels queerness a “disability.” Yet a writer must consider that particular disability a “guardian angel”: if “physical or psychological troubles” make “marriage impossible,” they protect a writer’s “gift” from competing “responsibilities” (*Prose ii* 244). Auden took the same paradoxically affirming approach to the matter of queerness as a sin, welcoming his perceived abjection. A 1963 letter to Isherwood reworks the logic of his comments on Henry James’s sexuality: “[t]hough I believe it sinful to be queer, it has at least saved me from becoming a pillar of the Establishment.”⁴ Prestige, not sex, is the real sin. Every version of “Letter to Lord Byron” singles out prestige as a poet’s greatest temptation. It is “treason,” for it worships “Normality,” the “Goddess of bossy underlings,” with a liturgy “[r]eeking of antiseptics.” Prestige cleans away the gift of “neurosis” that enables a poet to critique the Establishment (*CP* 108).

I say all of this to point out an opportunity for inquiry: what could Auden add to queer theory’s explorations of shame as a positive ethical framework? Michael Warner argues in *The Trouble with Normal* (1999) that shame has the potential to create non-identitarian communities. “Queer scenes are the true *salons des refusés*,” he writes, “where the most heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy by their common experience of being despised and rejected in a world of norms that they now recognize as false morality.”⁵ And queer studies has recently turned to the pre-Stonewall era to “search for viable forms of queerness as alternatives to standardized, and standard-

⁴ Quoted in Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 455-456.

⁵ Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 35-36.

enforcing, gayness.” Scholars have reclaimed embarrassing figures from the past to resist gay pride’s bourgeois discourses of “normalization” and “identity-affirming” authenticity.⁶ But no one has considered Auden’s work as a possible resource.

Aside from biographers who excavate the sexual contexts of Auden’s work, scholars read him mainly as a poet of universal human values.⁷ Recently, Richard Bozorth has made a persuasive case against universalizing interpretations of Auden’s poetry.⁸ Still, the readings that *do* acknowledge the queer concerns of his post-emigration, post-conversion oeuvre tend toward hagiography or humiliation. Dennis Paddie praises “the existential saint” for “refus[ing] to take onto himself the mantle of [queer] oppression,”⁹ while Paul Dean phobically asserts that Auden “ended in” spiritual “darkness.”¹⁰ In contrast to the lionizing or stigmatizing practices of commentators like Paddie and Dean, I will consider what Auden’s poetry actually *does* with shame.

Asking these questions of Auden’s first major American poem—the version of “New Year Letter” in Auden’s much-neglected volume *The Double Man* (1941)—reveals a link between queer shame and expatriation.¹¹ When Auden credited his “sinful” queerness with protecting him “from becoming a pillar of the Establishment,” he added,

⁶ David Caron, “Shame on Me: Or the Naked Truth About Me and Marlene Dietrich,” in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 128.

⁷ Even Timothy Murphy’s *Reader’s Guide to Gay and Lesbian Studies* asserts that in his “texts about same-sex relationships, Auden’s work remains universal both in its purpose and its impact” (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2000), 63.

⁸ Richard Bozorth, “Auden: Love, Sexuality, Desire,” in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 175-187.

⁹ Dennis Paddie, “Cool Distance: Auden’s ‘Gay’ Version of Christian Spirituality,” in *W.H. Auden: A Legacy*, ed. David Garrett Izzo (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill Press, 2002), 57, 59.

¹⁰ Paul Dean, “Mr. Auden & Miss God,” *The New York Sun* (13 October 2005), <<http://www.nysun.com/arts/mr-auden-miss-god/21439/>>.

¹¹ For a similar meditation on the connections between disidentifying with heteronorms and disidentifying with citizenship, see David Caron, *My Father & I: The Marais and the Queerness of Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 16-20.

“it might not even have done that if I hadn’t bolted to America.”¹² Thus the shame of “one unsocial English boy” (*DM* 22)—as “New Year Letter” describes the young Auden—cleared the ground for a defiant shamelessness. Sailing from Southampton to New York City in 1939, Auden consciously placed himself in a line of writers who lived against the grain:

Great masters who have shown mankind
An order it has yet to find,
What if all pedants say of you
As personalities be true?
All the more honor to you then
If, weaker than some other men,
You had the courage that survives
Soiled, shabby, egotistic lives,
If poverty or ugliness,
Ill-health or social unsuccess
Hunted you out of life to play
At living in another way. (*DM* 18)

In Auden’s case, though, too much success drove him out of England; he wanted freedom from the stifling aesthetic and ideological expectations that literary acclaim entailed, from the antiseptic effects of prestige. After the outbreak of World War II, British writers publicly attacked him for deserting his country in wartime.¹³ He responded by declaring in “New Year Letter” that even if he continued to feel a connection to the Pennines (*DM* 51-52), “such a bond is not an Ought” (*DM* 53). Meanwhile, he met frequently with

¹² Quoted in Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 456. Auden made a similar comment about the British double agent Guy Burgess (for more on Burgess’s story, see chapter one above): “I know exactly why [he] went to Moscow. It wasn’t enough to be a queer and a drunk. He had to revolt still more to break away from it all. That’s just what I’ve done by becoming an American citizen. You can become an Italian or a French citizen—and that’s all right. But become an American citizen and you’ve crossed to the wrong side of the tracks. I found even the nicest people in Oxford tried to forget I’d ever done such a thing. I had to keep reminding them by starting sentences with ‘Speaking as an alien ...’” Quoted in Robin Maugham, *Escape from the Shadows* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), 203.

¹³ Humphrey Carpenter, 290-291. A comment that Anthony Powell made to Kingsley Amis after Auden died reveals the extent of these writers’ disgust. Powell, who in 1940 wrote a short satirical poem attacking Auden and Isherwood for leaving England (Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 116), reportedly said upon reading Auden’s obituary, “I’m delighted that shit has gone. It should have happened years ago ... scuttling off to America in 1939 with his boyfriend like a ... like a ...” He was too angry to end his thought. See Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 180.

other exiles and sexual outlaws (homosexuality was still illegal throughout the U.S. in 1940, as it remained until 2003) at the Long Island home of Elizabeth Mayer, a German refugee and patron of the arts whom he met through Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears.¹⁴ America had begun to look like “the great Rome / To all who lost or hated home” (*DM* 63)¹⁵—for Auden, a refuge from the role of “mouthpiece” for the British literary left.¹⁶

At the same time Auden returned to the Anglican faith of his childhood, a decision that clashed with his explanation for leaving England: “to live deliberately without roots.”¹⁷ But “New Year Letter” fuses Anglican theology and American politics to articulate a post-roots ethic for “mankind’s *imperium*” (*DM* 48), one that does not depend on the coercive myths that fueled World War II: “local customs” or “bonds of blood and nation” or “chances of a neighborhood / Or class or party” (*DM* 65). The poem propounds a model of democratic conflict based on the syncretic ecclesiology of the lay Anglican poet and novelist Charles Williams. A public thank-you to Elizabeth Mayer, “New Year Letter” depicts her outsider coterie as a “real republic” (a phrase that anticipates Auden’s later shorthand for Williams’s account of the Christian church).¹⁸ Finding community in difference, the émigrés resist the autocratic logic of nationalism. The poem’s cosmopolitan remix of Williams calls Americans (and expats in America) to

¹⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, 275.

¹⁵ Such jabs at England litter the text—e.g., the use of the phrase “splendid isolation” to describe the atomizing effects of industrial modernity (*DM* 55).

¹⁶ In an undated letter written circa February 1939, Auden responds to his father’s wish to see him “the mouthpiece of an epoch” by asserting that “the best art of any period [...] is usually rather disliked when it appears,” “An Unpublished Letter by W.H. Auden,” ed. Judith Priestman, *The Bodleian Library Record* XV.4 (April 1996): 325-329.

¹⁷ ALS to E.R. Dodds, 16 January 1940, in *W.H. Auden: ‘The Map of All My Youth,’ Auden Studies I*, ed. Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 109-111.

¹⁸ “Introduction,” in Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), vi.

a democracy that looks like Mayer's coterie.¹⁹ This chapter, then, takes a closer look at Auden's ecclesiological re-imagination of coterie, focusing on the role that gay shame and shamelessness play in the construction of what "New Year Letter" calls the "Just City."

A couple of points about my terminology. First, I do not use the term "shame" to read *feelings* into Auden. George Chauncey cautions wisely against such readings: "[t]o claim that all queers in the 1950s were the passive victims of shaming rituals or were governed or even incapacitated by an overwhelming sense of shame—as we typically do—is to misunderstand and condescend to them."²⁰ Rather, I use "shame" as a way to talk about how Auden's *ideas* give political power to the stigmatized—as a way to talk, in other words, about the shamelessness that comes out of shame. The historical record indicates that Auden did not *feel* ashamed of same-sex desire, even if some of his *ideas* have a shaming effect.²¹

¹⁹ "New Year Letter" first appeared as "Letter to Elizabeth Mayer" in the January and February 1941 issues of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Double Man* appeared in America two months before the less authoritative British version of the book (a point to which I will return). Thus "New Year Letter" first exalted Mayer's community of émigrés for a *largely American* readership. The poem portrays exiles as constituents of a pluralist America: "our democracy" (*DM* 42).

Not only did Auden first frame "New Year Letter" for an American audience, but he also increasingly treated American culture as his imaginative reference point when he revised the notes to "New Year Letter": in one annotation, the book replaces a quote from *Wuthering Heights* with an American folk song (*DM* 119-120); references to a poem by Vachel Lindsay as well as to Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton* (*DM* 82-83) and *The American Scene* (*DM* 144) are not present in the manuscript (Holograph notebook, Berg). The use of Henry James is fitting, for the Auden of "New Year Letter" is a reversal of the typical James character: a European escaping continental corruption to live as an American idealist.

²⁰ George Chauncey, "The Trouble with Shame," in *Gay Shame*, 282.

²¹ Chauncey notes that "[e]ven W.H. Auden praised Constantine Cavafy's unashamed celebration of his homosexual experiences in his 1961 introduction to a collection of the poet's Greek work," 281. That said, we would do well to remember that Auden did suffer the marginalizing effects of homophobia. Three examples: (1) the landlady of the Brooklyn Heights apartment where Auden lived while he wrote "New Year Letter" reportedly spied on him, "spending entire nights parked in her car outside the house, keeping an eye on the comings and goings of tenants whose activities had caused complaints," as Sherill Tippins notes in *February House* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006), 39. Given the illegal status of homosexuality in America in 1940, Auden had good reason to worry about the landlady's vigilance. According to Tippins, it was partly to get away from the "intrusive landlady" that Auden moved to the famous "February House" (which he shared with Jane and Paul Bowles, Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears,

Second, when I call Auden’s ethic “cosmopolitan,” I mean “critically cosmopolitan” in the sense that Rebecca Walkowitz uses the term. Critical cosmopolitanism unpacks Kant’s claim (in “What Is Enlightenment?”) that a cosmopolitan society leaves every citizen “completely free as well as obliged to impart to the public all his carefully considered, well-intentioned thoughts.”²² It questions the “social uses” and “political interests” of cosmopolitanism “in the past.”²³ “New Year Letter” notices, for example, the limits of Enlightenment “rights” language: the French slave trade peaked *after* the storming of the Bastille (*DM* 36, 109).

Critical cosmopolitanism also cultivates an ironic style to challenge rationalism and positivism: it expresses an anti-Enlightenment preference for “mad prophets” like Baudelaire and Blake over liberalism’s “Empiric Economic Man” (*DM* 55-58). “New Year Letter” nevertheless makes its queer arguments (e.g., its invention of a relational model that subverts the tribalism of nation and family) through a conservative form (the Augustan verse epistle).²⁴ Following some eighteenth-century epistolary conventions (the digressive wartime meditations on civic renewal, the personification of philosophical abstractions,²⁵ the typography,²⁶ the hudibrastics), and flouting others (the nobleman

Golo Mann, Gypsy Rose Lee, Oliver Smith, and Carson McCullers from October 1940 until he moved to Ann Arbor to teach at the University of Michigan in September 1941). (2) In 1942, the U.S. Army excluded Auden from military service because of his sexuality (see Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 207). And (3) in 1945, Auden denied Robert Duncan permission to publish an essay on the “homo-erotic patterns in his poetry” because he worried that any “public admission” of his sexuality would jeopardize his teaching career (see Woods, 247). Though published admissions might be trouble, Auden was careful to come out to a number of acquaintances in Ann Arbor, for example. See Charles Miller, *Auden: An American Friendship* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1983).

²² Quoted in Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 3.

²³ Walkowitz, 3.

²⁴ A queer thing to do in 1941.

²⁵ For example, “Yet Time can moderate his tone / When talking to a man alone” (*DM* 16).

²⁶ Proper nouns appear in small capitals.

addressee, the belletristic scorn for scholarly commentary,²⁷ the straightforward syntax and end-stopped lines), the poem subverts the Augustan tradition.²⁸ As I will show, it replaces an *organicist* civics of *reason* with an *egalitarian* civics of *empathy*.²⁹

I. ROOTS & MIRRORS

A major theme of Auden's post-emigration writing is the atrophy of local ethical bodies (family, neighborhood, parish) in the modern era. As "New Year Letter" puts it, "the machine has now destroyed / The local customs we enjoyed" (*DM* 65). Auden argued along lines that a reader familiar with Raymond Williams's survey *The Country and the City* will recognize as a recurrent feature of English literary history: the telephone and the automobile made personal relationships a matter of choice rather than chance; the printing press and the radio supplanted the epistemic role of communal

²⁷ The version of "New Year Letter" in *The Double Man* has 85 pages of annotation and a hodgepodge of "Modern Sources."

²⁸ Heidi Hartwig has recently read the collaborative opera libretti of Auden and Chester Kallman as queering the civic thematics of Augustanism, "W.H. Auden's Public Art: From Poetic Reticence to Operatic Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 29.4 (October 2009): 367-382. She argues that opera gives Auden "a more practicable means" to a public "homoerotic revisionism" than poetry (378, 380). The cross-art collaboration of composer, librettist(s), and singer lets Auden circumvent the socio-historical constraints on expressing same-sex love, because musical performance disarticulates a libretto. But Auden's opera collaborations actually provide *the same means* to a public homoeroticism as Auden's early coterie poems: they involve a code that only insiders would hear. Often the mute aspects of an Auden-Kallman libretto (epigraphs and stage directions) signal the opera's queering of prior traditions. To distinguish between poetic reticence and operatic performance also makes little sense in view of "Letter to Lord Byron," which amounts to a veritable "coming out" even in its later expurgated versions. Hartwig's reading of the libretti as a queer revision of the Augustan tradition is nevertheless a useful insight. "New Year Letter" anticipates the libretti's strategy.

²⁹ Eighteenth-century England saw the "providentially ordained, hierarchically ordered, and organically interconnected" Great Chain of Being as an "objective account of the world," "the natural order of things," David Cannadine, *The Rise & Fall of Class in Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 26-27. Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" is a prime example of this point of view.

traditions; and the global market weakened class affiliations. The city displaced the village, so a person no longer *learned* her values but *chose* them.³⁰

“New Year Letter” celebrates the personal freedoms of city life. It rewrites the urban trope of “the lonely figure walking the streets” as an image of discovery rather than confusion or contempt: every anonymous city-dweller has the worldmaking abilities of a novelist.³¹ And the poem praises America for accepting that “[a]loneness is man’s real condition, / That each must travel forth alone / In search of the Essential Stone” (*DM* 65-66). Douglas Mao thus rightly sees “the necessity of increasing individuation” as “one of Auden’s central convictions.”³²

At the same time, though, Auden regretted that (as he saw it) “communities” were no longer possible, only “collective masses” of “individuals” (*Prose ii* 92). He rejected the fascist response to the problem: Franco, Mussolini, and Hitler recuperated “habits of mind which were more or less adequate to the relatively closed society of the eighteenth century” (*Prose ii* 90) but which made no sense when every household had become “a

³⁰ This is the premise of “The Quest,” the sonnet sequence that follows “New Year Letter” in *The Double Man*. The “adventure” or “journey” (*DM* 167) begins in the fifth sonnet, “The City,” once the anonymous seekers have left their childhood “villages.” If the villages had “taught” them communal rules, the city “offered” them a grab bag of temptations, and every seeker “[f]ound” a different one “fit to govern him.” A shift in pronouns underlines the contrast between village unity and the city’s atomizing freedoms. The villages treat the seekers as a group—“their,” “they.” But in the city “they” become individuals—“each,” “he,” “his”: “[t]he city, though, assumed no such belief, / But welcomed each as if he came alone” (*DM* 169). See also Auden’s January 1940 essay “Tradition and Value” (*Prose ii* 51-53).

³¹ Lab technicians are “Kafkas” puzzling over an intractable “Near-distant Castle” of laws and facts. Operatives striking for “liberty and justice” in factories “know” that they are in “the *champ-clos* / And drawing-room of Henry James” and that “[l]ike any Jamesian character” they must “draw the careful line, / Develop, understand, refine.” Even every “subway face” is “the Pequod of / Some Ishmael hunting his lost love” (*DM* 66), an image that manages to avoid the typically dehumanizing work of synecdoche: the Pequod (not peaked) faces of Auden’s New York have narrative hope. For more on the trope of “the lonely figure walking the streets,” see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), 235, 240.

³² Douglas Mao, “A Shaman in Common: Lewis, Auden, and the Queerness of Liberalism,” in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 218.

completely foreign country” to the house next door.³³ For the same reason Auden rejected modernism’s obsession with national roots, particularly the “organicist nostalgia” of writers like Eliot, Lawrence, and Pound.³⁴ But what do ethics look like after roots? And how might people form knowable communities without narratives of “Blood and Soil” exceptionalism (*DM* 80)?³⁵ The questions preoccupied Auden from the 1940s on.

He rejected liberal humanism as an answer; Nazi Germany had demolished its rationalist foundations. In an extended detective-story analogy (where modernity is a “baffling crime” that neither democracies nor dictatorships have solved), “one inspector dressed in brown” (i.e., Hitler) “makes a nonsense of our laws” because he “makes the murderer whom he pleases / And all investigation ceases” (*DM* 23). Auden’s 1941 review of Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man* puts it more forcefully: “It

³³ ALS to E.R. Dodds, 16 January 1940, in *W.H. Auden: ‘A Map of All My Youth,’* 110.

³⁴ Paul Giles, *Atlantic Republic: The American Tradition in English Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 252. A note that Auden cut before publishing *The Double Man* summarizes his critique of fascism. He originally glossed the lines “[...] the machine has now destroyed / The local customs we enjoyed” with the following politico-historical argument:

Like all other creatures the life of Man
 In a closed society once began
 But at once his invention set about
 Finding Discovering ways to open it out,
 Though stubbornly he refused to admit
 What it was he was really doing to it
 And in all his politics pre-supposed
 A community that still was closed.
 Now political failure has forced us to face
 The fact that this is not the case
 But instead of concluding from this that we
 Had better accept our destiny,
 We get angry and frightened and try in vain
 To close society up again
 And every man’s hand is against his brother
 And we’re busy hating and killing each other.

The industrial revolution made a closed society impossible, a fact that countries like Germany and Russia refused to accept. Holograph notebook, Berg. See also “Romantic or Free?” (*Prose ii* 63-72).

³⁵ I borrow the phrase “knowable community” from Raymond Williams, 165.

has taken Hitler to show us that liberalism is not self-supporting” (*Prose ii* 131). As Auden later explained, Nazism’s

utter denial of everything liberalism had ever stood for was arousing wild enthusiasm [...] in one of the most highly educated countries in Europe [so] it was impossible any longer to believe that the values of liberal humanism were self-evident. Unless one was prepared to take a relativist view that all values are a matter of personal taste, one could hardly avoid asking the question, ‘If, as I am convinced, the Nazis are wrong and we are right, what is it that validates our values and invalidates theirs?’ (*Prose iii* 578)

He concluded that only religious belief could provide firm grounds for rejecting Nazism. “Either we serve the Unconditional,” he wrote in “Christmas 1940,” “[o]r some Hitlerian monster will supply / An iron convention to do evil by” (*EA* 460). As he recounted in “A Thanksgiving,” a short spiritual autobiography written the year he died,

[...] hair-raising things
that Hitler and Stalin were doing
forced me to think about God.

Why was I sure they were wrong?
Wild Kierkegaard, Williams, and Lewis
guided me back to belief. (*CP* 890)

One of the first theological works Auden read was Charles Williams’s *The Descent of the Dove: The History of the Holy Spirit in the Church*.³⁶ (The book appeared in 1939; Auden read it in February 1940 while drafting Part III of “New Year Letter.”)³⁷

More an apology for ecumenism than a survey of church history, *The Descent of the Dove* labels “schism” the “worst sin” and promotes an ecclesial ethic of inclusion and dialogue, reasoning that “[h]owever right a man’s ideas,” they would “go wrong if he nourished them by himself.”³⁸ Williams calls his anti-schismatic ethic “co-inherence”:

³⁶ Humphrey Carpenter, 283.

³⁷ Humphrey Carpenter, 285.

³⁸ Charles Williams, 38.

conflicting stances (e.g., asceticism and affirmation) should mutually co-inhere just as, for Williams, the church and God mystically co-inhere. To picture the practice, Williams borrows Montaigne's concept of "the double man" (hence Auden's title and epigraph): members of the church ought to believe with "the quality of unbelief," never ceasing to reevaluate their "hypotheses" in view of "other possibilities."³⁹

"New Year Letter" adapts the dialectical ethic of Williams' *ecclesia* for the secular *civitas*, imagining America as a polity of "belief-in-disbelief."⁴⁰ Auden's America would see its core values as presuppositions, not universal truths, and it would continually reexamine and revise its presuppositions in light of new information. Recognizing, then, that "[n]o route is truly orthodox," constituents with opposing viewpoints would facilitate the evolution of these core values by engaging in cooperative debate:

O once again let us set out,
Our faith well-balanced by our doubt,
Admitting every step we make
Will certainly be a mistake [...] (DM 47)⁴¹

Their self-skeptical "conference" (DM 25) would sustain an integrated cosmopolitan version of Williams's "redeemed City":

How readily would we become
The seamless live continuum
Of supple and coherent stuff,
Whose form is truth, whose content love,
Its pluralistic interstices
The homes of happiness and peace,
Where in a unity of praise
The largest *publicum*'s a *res*,

³⁹ Charles Williams, 193. The epigraph to *The Double Man* is actually a direct quote from Williams, 192. Since I am primarily engaged in literary critical questions and not in the history of ideas, my interest lies in how Auden uses Williams directly, not in recovering Montaigne's thought.

⁴⁰ Charles Williams, 193.

⁴¹ Auden again portrays exiles as members of a pluralist America (see note 19 above).

And the least *res a publicum*;
How grandly would our virtues bloom
In a more conscionable dust
Where Freedom dwells because it must,
Necessity because it can,
And men confederate in Man. (*DM 67*)⁴²

I will have more to say about this in chapter five. What's important to note now, though, is that the "Just City" of "New Year Letter"—seamless with interstices, neither rigid nor unruly—avoids abstraction, grounding itself in the particularities of real lives. Auden builds on the notion of the *res publica* from Roman law, literally "concrete thing" (*res*) "pertaining to the public" (*publica*). The largest *publicum* has the concrete quality of a *res*; likewise, the tiniest, most personal *res* concerns the *publicum*. In the "Just City," then, the personal (*res*) would shape the political (*publicum*), so autonomy and responsibility would interpenetrate (a point that we will revisit in more detail in chapter five).⁴³

Thus Auden insisted that (in his "Just City") aloneness and neighborliness would mutually coinhere: "[a]loneness is man's real condition" (*DM 65*), but "every day in sleep and labor / Our life and death are with our neighbor" (*DM 71*). The health of the *civitas* depends on their co-inhering because, as a note to the poem's distinction between "the public space" and "the inner space" (*DM 49-50*) explains,

New Facts will not be known
Until we part and live once more alone:
New Values not be found
Until we meet again on common ground. (*DM 122*)

⁴² The antepenultimate and penultimate lines that I have quoted here allude to Williams: "For this quotation, and for the source of many ideas in the poem, v. *The Descent of the Dove*" (*DM 153*).

⁴³ See Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002), 26.

Accepting her own responsibility for inquiry and self-scrutiny equips a person to participate in the cooperative debate that forms the essence of Auden's construction of democracy.

While Auden drafted the poem, he urged this theo-ethical vision on American readers in several essays for political magazines like *Common Sense* and *The Nation* as well as in talks at Smith College and Columbia University.⁴⁴ America had "no past," he told an interviewer in 1940. "No tradition. No roots—that is, in the European sense."⁴⁵ It "had worshiped no Virgin before the Dynamo, / Held no Nicea nor Canossa, / *Hat keine verfallenen Schlösser*" (DM 63).⁴⁶ Its relative newness suggested that

More even than in Europe, here
The choice of patterns is made clear
Which the machine imposes, what
Is possible and what is not,
To what conditions we must bow
In building the Just City now. (DM 65)

Because America had no roots to romanticize, Auden regarded it as favorable soil for a cosmopolitan ethic.

The task of establishing social justice in America echoes the promise of Spanish Republicans "[t]o build the just city" in "Spain 1937" (SP 56)—but with a theological reversal. The earlier plea mocks Christian eschatology ("O descend as a dove or / A furious papa or a mild engineer, but descend" [SP 55]); in the context of "New Year Letter," Auden's "Just City" reverently channels Williams's "co-inherence of the whole

⁴⁴ See "The Double Focus: Sandburg's Lincoln" (*Prose ii* 55-57), "Romantic or Free?" (*Prose ii* 63-72), "What Is Culture?" (*Prose ii* 72-73), "Mimesis and Allegory" (*Prose ii* 78-87), and "A Note on Order" (*Prose ii* 100-103).

⁴⁵ Quoted in Samuel Hynes, "The Voice of Exile: Auden in 1940," *Sewanee Review* 90.1 (Winter 1982): 34.

⁴⁶ "Has no old castles." The line comes from Goethe's poem "*Den Vereinigten Staaten*" ("*Amerika, du hast es besser*") in *Zahme Xenien (Gentle Epigrams)* IX. Auden quotes the German text at length in the notes (DM 146-147).

redeemed City.”⁴⁷ And the commitment to “the struggle” in “Spain 1937” contrasts with the emphasis on caution and balance in “New Year Letter.” Part II rebukes “Simon-pure Utopian[s]” who seesaw between extreme positions when one or the other fails (*DM* 41): e.g., early Christianity versus the Constantinian shift (*DM* 36), Wordsworth’s post-Terror conservatism (*DM* 36), “anarchists” and “Agrarian[s]” who reject “democracy” (*DM* 42). Tempting people to such seesawing is a “favorite strategy” of the Devil (*DM* 36). The poem applauds “the gift of double focus” instead, the ability to “synthesize” the “half-truths” of conflicting viewpoints (*DM* 42).

The “gift of double focus,” the key ingredient of Auden’s democracy, anticipates John Paul Lederach’s concept of “paradoxical curiosity.” A Mennonite sociologist and expert in peace studies, Lederach writes that paradoxical curiosity

approaches social realities with an abiding respect for complexity, a refusal to fall prey to the forced dualistic categories of truth, and an inquisitiveness about what may hold together seemingly contradictory social energies in a greater whole. This is not primarily a thrust toward finding the common ground based on a narrowly shared denominator. Paradoxical curiosity seeks something beyond what is visible, something that holds [...] even violently opposed social energies together. [...]

Rather than moving to immediate conclusions, paradoxical curiosity suspends judgment in favor of exploring presented contradictions [...] for the possibility that there exists a value beyond what is currently known that supersedes the contradiction.⁴⁸

Such an approach to conflict relies “on a capacity to mobilize the imagination.”⁴⁹ It requires intuition as much as cognition.

Lederach thus promotes metaphor as a crucial part of conflict transformation:

When I watch a metaphor, I take care not to approach it with instrumentalist purposes in mind. I approach it as a creation. The

⁴⁷ Charles Williams, xiii.

⁴⁸ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 36.

⁴⁹ Lederach, 36.

metaphor—like a movie, a painting, or a poem—invites interaction, probing, and echoes. [...] In conflict conversations I don't just listen for metaphors, I watch them. They take on lives of their own and they speak to the conflict, to the problems, and to the ways forward. Metaphors are like a living museum of conflict resources.⁵⁰

The analogy between metaphors and museums can help us better understand Auden's post-emigration perspective on the role of art in social change. Auden abandoned political poetry shortly after he arrived in New York City (as we saw in the introductory chapter). "New Year Letter" finds a social role for poetry that avoids political partisanship. Art "cannot say" what people "should do" because "it presents" the "[a]lready lived experience" of a "particular artist" (*DM* 17-18). A poet's "particulars" provide "[a]n abstract model of events / Derived from dead experiments" (*DM* 18). Every reader, then, must decide how to apply a poem to her life. Or, to put it in Lederach's terms, art "invites interaction."

If metaphors are a museum of conflict resources, an array of queer figures populates the main exhibit in "New Year Letter." First, the poem recruits negative images of homosexuality to picture the antithesis of cosmopolitan democracy. It homoeroticizes fascism's nationalist and organicist tenets with epithets like "the *Beischlaf* of the Blood" and "an *ordre du coeur*" (*DM* 32).⁵¹ In manuscript drafts, Auden glossed the second epithet with an anecdote about same-sex incest, the first queer figure of the text:

P, a young musician, has an elder brother of whom he is very fond. One day in Texas he felt a sudden wish to see him. All he knew was that ~~he was worki~~ his brother was working on a road-gang somewhere between Mexico city and the United States border, and that his nickname was Avocado. He set off on foot asking at every filling station if they knew of anyone called Avocado ~~working re-working~~ in the neighbourhood. In this

⁵⁰ Lederach, 72.

⁵¹ The "sexual intercourse of the Blood"; an "order of the heart."

way he traveled down the road for nearly four hundred miles until one evening on the outskirts of a small town some forty miles from Mexico City, he came to a hut and heard his brother singing inside with some friends and whores. His brother was so delighted to see him that he offered P his new girl. P wanted to sleep with his brother but had to take the girl so as not to disappoint him.⁵²

He dropped the anecdote for publication, replacing it with a gibe at the fragility of liberal values:

His father was a liberal politician and very anti-Nazi. His mother, who was divorced from his father, spent much of her time in Germany and was very anti-semitic [*sic*]. Yet, when he married a rich Jewess, his father was furious and his mother delighted. (*DM* 103)

The liberal politician's public anti-Nazi persona clashes with his reaction to his son's marriage; the mother's greed trumps her prejudice. The revision downplays the worry that gay love shares in fascism's self-love. But it does so to imply what Auden's essays of the same period make explicit: liberalism suppresses the differences it pretends to value.⁵³

Just as fascism enslaves people to the myth of "Blood-and-Soil" exceptionalism (*DM* 80), liberalism enslaves people to the myth of progress. "New Year Letter" argues that the Renaissance and the Enlightenment produced a new subjectivity: the sovereign, self-interested, hypercognitive "Empiric Economic Man" (*DM* 55), who believes in the "law" of "progress" (*DM* 127) and grounds his existence in the "rational incentive" of "[p]rofit" (*DM* 55). The liberal state thus makes "envy the one basis of all moral acts" rather than, say, cooperation and fellow-feeling (*DM* 91). The poem pictures the liberal subject's enslavement to the principles of progress and gain as an arid sexuality: "boys" suckle machines; "girls" marry typewriters; "old men" fall in love with bargain prices

⁵² Holograph notebook, Berg.

⁵³ For example, Auden rejected the normalizing function of education in liberal democracies in his review of Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book* (*Prose* ii 59-61).

(DM 58); “business men” become sexually impotent when the stock market crashes (DM 128). Far from freeing citizens to think for themselves, liberalism forces them to think along the same profit- and progress-fixated lines. They are “at liberty” only “[t]o starve or be forgotten” (DM 55).⁵⁴

As a metaphor for the erasure of difference that results from liberalism’s fixation on progress, “New Year Letter” presents a second queer figure after the homoerotic anecdote about fascism. Drawing an arrow from “*homo*” to “neuter” to “[u]npolitical” and “afraid,” the poem invokes a common homophobic dismissal of effete men:

All in their morning mirrors face
A member of a governed race.
Each recognizes what LEAR saw,
The *homo* THURBER likes to draw,
The neuter outline that’s the plan
And icon of Industrial Man,
The Unpolitical afraid
Of all that has to be obeyed.

But still each private citizen
Thanks God he’s not as other men. (DM 58-59)

“LEAR” refers doubly here. The citizen of a modern democracy knows what King Lear discovered on the heath: the “barbarism [...] implicit in the individualism [...] of the emergent Renaissance culture,” as Benjamin T. Spencer put it (quoting the “morning mirrors” passage from *The Double Man*) in a 1944 article on Shakespeare’s play. Each knows “the fallibility of the social institutions” that “keep human barbarism so insecurely in check.”⁵⁵ And far from the self-possessed participant that liberalism promises to make

⁵⁴ As we will see in chapter three, *The Age of Anxiety* (1947) makes the point even more emphatically. “Empiric Economic Man” earns a new name: “the new barbarian,” whose “mind” was “[m]othered by “[c]orporate companies” and “college towns” (*Age* 16). Under his dispensation of progress, no one has freedom: “all march in step / Led by that liar, the lukewarm Spirit / Of the Escalator” (*Age* 35).

⁵⁵ Benjamin T. Spencer, “*King Lear*: A Prophetic Tragedy,” *College English* 5.6 (1944): 306, 307.

of all citizens, each sees himself as epicene, upside down—like the line drawings of Edward Lear (for whom zoomorphism was a favorite method of social criticism) or James Thurber (for whom meek husbands and henpecking wives were a favorite subject).

My reading does not require that Thurber intentionally or explicitly depicted gay men in his cartoons. (He did not.)⁵⁶ By juxtaposing Thurber's and Lear's work, though,

⁵⁶ The word "*homo*" could, of course, function as shorthand for "*Homo sapiens*," a designation Thurber occasionally gives his characters—e.g., in "Courtship through the Ages" (1939). We can read the passage as polyvalent, though, because of the truncation of the phrase (and, for that matter, the lowercase "h"). Elsewhere (and around the same time) Auden uses "*homo*" to refer to a gay man—e.g., in "*The Queen's Masque*," by Bojo the Homo," which Auden wrote in 1943 for a group of friends in Ann Arbor (see the introductory chapter above as well as Humphrey Carpenter, 321-322). According to the *OED*, English speakers began to use the abbreviation "homo" for "homosexual" in the late 1920s.

Until now, the image of Thurber's "*homo*" in "New Year Letter" has received no attention apart from Benjamin Spencer's allusion and Nicholas Jenkins' discussion of Faber & Faber's editorial practices (see below). We can attribute the silence to the fact that most critics read the poem in Edward Mendelson's collected editions of Auden, which inadvertently bowdlerize the passage.

Shortly after *The Double Man* appeared in America, Faber & Faber printed a very different version of the book as *New Year Letter* in the U.K. In addition to several other significant differences that I will discuss in the last section of the chapter, the Faber & Faber version eviscerates the "morning mirrors" passage: it erases the polysemy of "Lear" and blurs the central image of the passage by rewriting "Each recognizes what LEAR saw, / The *homo* THURBER likes to draw" as "Each recognizes what *Lear* saw, / And he and *Thurber* like to draw," W.H. Auden, *New Year Letter* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941), 62. Auden's original version clarifies what Lear saw through apposition, so that Thurber's "*homo*" is a symbol of liberalism's failure. But Faber & Faber's revision turns the mention of Thurber into meaningless metric filler. Nicholas Jenkins blames the deletion of "*homo*" on Faber & Faber's typographer, Seán Jennett, *A Critical Edition of W.H. Auden's The Double Man* (D.Phil. dissertation, University of Oxford, 1996), 659.

Edward Mendelson's editions of Auden's *Collected Poems* (1976, 1991, 2007), which ostensibly represent Auden's final wishes, retain Jennett's awkward bowdlerization of the "morning mirrors" passage even though Auden did not use Jennett's rewrite when he assembled *Collected Poetry* (1945). *Collected Longer Poems* (1968) does use Jennett's variant, but correspondence between Mendelson and Faber reveals that Mendelson, not Auden, took charge of the editing of this volume. See Jenkins, *A Critical Edition*, 767-769. An unsigned textual note at the back of the volume indicates that Mendelson collated the "latest revised version of each poem with earlier versions [...] to include all revisions," *Collected Longer Poems* (New York: Random House, 1968), 354. The note further indicates that Mendelson based the text of "New Year Letter" in *Collected Longer Poems* on the twenty-first printing of *Collected Poetry* (1945), which appeared in 1967. But even the twenty-first printing uses *The Double Man* version of the "morning mirrors" passage. And so we must conclude that Mendelson's decision to follow the Faber reading for *Collected Longer Poems* and *Collected Poems* mistakenly treats *New Year Letter* as a "latest revised version" of *The Double Man*.

Auden's private correspondence supports that conclusion. A few months before the publication of *The Double Man*, Auden told a British friend that he would "send you a copy, if the invasion hasn't started, as it has changes from the English mss and, anyway, I'm sure the latter will be full of mistakes," ALS to Mrs. Dodds, 30 January 1941, Bodleian. And as Jenkins has shown, Auden delivered the manuscript of *The Double Man* to Random House three months *after* sending a typescript to London. Despite the fact that *The Double Man* appeared first, it contains many revisions that Auden made during the three-month interim. See *A Critical Edition*, 706-708. So Mendelson is wrong to suggest that Auden "forgot about the British revisions when he reprinted the American text," "Editing Auden," *New Statesman* (17 September 1976): 377.

“New Year Letter” redraws Thurber’s henpecked husbands as homophobic caricatures. A sonnet in *Another Time*, Auden’s previous book, reads Edward Lear’s work as intentionally, if quietly, queer.⁵⁷ Thus Auden remakes Thurber’s straight humor (pun intended) into a camp joke.

A third queer figure in “New Year Letter”—after the anecdote of same-sex incest and Thurber’s “homo”—also involves a mirror: people who lack “the gift of double focus.” The poem describes such people contemptuously as “either-ors [...] / Who find truth in a mirror” (*DM* 42)—their dogmatism stems from a failure of the self-other dialectic. The mirror metaphor recalls Freud’s interpretation of the homosexual as caught in an infantile state of primary narcissism.⁵⁸

But contradiction adorns the poem’s exhibit of queer figures. Thurber’s “*homo*” is not Auden’s, for “New Year Letter” reverses the image in the morning mirror to make the queer person’s abjection her empowerment. The poem presents a fourth figure, the coterie of queer émigrés, a network rooted in affect, choice, and cooperation that avoids either of two damaging social extremes: (a) “Empiric Economic Man” (*DM* 55) or (b) “Blood-and-Soil” fascism (*DM* 80). “New Year Letter” suggests that, *precisely because* queer love is non-normative and non-reproductive, it plays a crucial role in building a “Just City” that circumvents these extremes. It is to this idea that I now turn.

⁵⁷ *Another Time* (New York: Random House, 1940), 12. *Another Time* includes several other sonnets to queer predecessors and queer contemporaries. See also “A. E. Housman” (11), “Rimbaud” (18), “Herman Melville” (20), “The Novelist,” about Christopher Isherwood (33), and “The Composer,” about Benjamin Britten (35).

⁵⁸ See “Homotextuality: A Proposal,” Jacob Stockinger, in *The Gay Academic*, ed. Louie Crew (Palm Springs: ETC Publications, 1978), 141.

II. “AMERICA I’M PUTTING MY QUEER SHOULDER TO THE WHEEL”

Sixteen years before Allen Ginsberg wondered how he could possibly “write a holy litany” in America’s “silly mood,” Auden put his own shoulder to the wheel with praise and optimism.⁵⁹ Auden’s “great Rome” of possibility (*DM* 63) is a poignant contrast to Ginsberg’s “sinister” nation of atom bombs, prisons, and *Time Magazine*.⁶⁰ “New Year Letter” does qualify its paean to America, however. It candidly describes the tendency of Americans to relocate rather than to negotiate when conflicts arise (*DM* 64). It never forgets the alienating, isolating characteristics of New York City, seeing “man’s real condition” of “[a]loneness” as blessing and curse (*DM* 65). And it regrets that real freedom remains beyond the reach of most citizens.⁶¹ Like “America,” “New Year Letter” ends with a queer commitment to social justice. But where Ginsberg’s resolve smacks of rueful sarcasm, Auden concludes sincerely, prayerfully.

To understand how the final prayers of “New Year Letter” constitute a queer pledge to social justice, we must look at the poem’s departure from its Augustan models. Auden’s queering of the eighteenth-century verse epistle begins in the occasion of his poem: a gay man writing a thank-you note, in the form of “versified metaphysical argument,”⁶² to a straight married woman he regards as a surrogate mother (privately Auden nicknamed Mayer “Dearest and Best of Fairy Godmothers”).⁶³ As a rule

⁵⁹ Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 147.

⁶⁰ Ginsberg, 146.

⁶¹ In the notes to “New Year Letter,” Auden remarks that successful professional artists (like the members of his coterie) enjoy special freedom by virtue of their trade: “As citizens they are the *only* people for whom a capitalist democracy is a completely open society” since “*laissez-faire* economics really applies” to their relationship with the public (*DM* 78).

⁶² Auden, ALS to Elizabeth Mayer, 22 February 1940, Berg.

⁶³ Auden, ALS to Elizabeth Mayer, undated, Berg.

Augustan epistolary exchanges took place between men—though the dedication of “New Year Letter” to Mayer does call to mind Jonathan Swift’s “A New Year’s Gift for Bec.”⁶⁴

The poem’s gratitude to Mayer *seems* to rehearse Augustan gender imperatives.⁶⁵

Auden chooses an exclusively male tribunal of poets to judge the worth of his work:

Dante, Blake, Rimbaud, Dryden, Catullus, Tennyson, Baudelaire, Hardy, Rilke, Kipling

(*DM* 19-22). And only one woman makes Auden’s list of “Modern Sources”: Margaret

Meade [*sic*] (*DM* 161). So we might conclude from the fulsome praise of Elizabeth

Mayer that for Auden, men adjudicate while women soothe. We could also speculate

about how Mayer might have taken analogies that interpellate the reader as a straight

male misogynist—for example, the suggestion that “we” love “our lives” like “attractive”

but scheming “wives / Whom we adore but do not trust” (*DM* 46). And critics have seen

⁶⁴ And Pope, whom Auden identified as one of his “three main influences” along with Dante and Langland (*Prose ii* 92), had already departed from the convention by addressing epistles to his friend Martha Blount. But the general misogyny of “To a Lady on Her Birthday” and “Epistle to a Lady” hardly needs unpacking, and at least one critic argues convincingly that Pope’s specific praise of Blount in fact reinscribes her as an inferior object and reinforces eighteenth-century gender norms. See Ellen Pollak, *The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 96-127. Like Pope’s letters to Martha Blount, Swift’s poems to women—e.g., the birthday letters to Stella and “An Epistle to a Lady”—merely evaluate the women addressed. “New Year Letter” is less interested in sizing up Mayer’s femininity. The poem not only praises her, but presents her as a fellow-exile contemplating the problems of the day with Auden. Outside the text, though, Auden did play Pope to Mayer’s Blount, gushing to her about how she “would have delighted Goethe and shocked Baudelaire who expected *La Femme* to be ‘*naturally c’est-à-dire abominable*,’” ALS to Elizabeth Mayer, 1 January 1940, Berg. Auden told a mutual acquaintance that what drew him to Mayer was “*Das Ewig-Weibliche*,” the eternal womanly,” an allusion that he had used in “New Year Letter” to describe his experience of the Pennines (see Humphrey Carpenter, 276).

⁶⁵ One aspect of “New Year Letter” in particular imposes norms of gender and sexuality: the construction of mother England. One could argue that by thanking Mayer for nurturing a community of artists, Auden implicitly likens her to England-as-motherland and therefore reinscribes her as “*Das Weibliche* that bids us come / To find what we’re escaping from” (*DM* 53). Such a reading might harmonize with Auden’s later poem “In Praise of Limestone.” But here Auden queers the “bond” to the motherland, going as far as to imply that England is for him “lost or hated” (*DM* 63), so a comparison between England and Mayer has less force.

Mayer as Auden's Beatrice.⁶⁶ Focusing on Elizabeth Mayer as a Beatrice-figure, however, misses the queering of marriage that the poem's gratitude encodes.

The two passages that thank Mayer for her nourishing friendship deserve quoting at length. In the first (a little more than halfway through the poem), Mayer knits "ragged egos" into a wedding party:

Warm in your house, Elizabeth
A week ago at the same hour
I felt the unexpected power
That drove our ragged egos in
From the dead-ends of greed and sin
To sit down at the wedding feast,
Put shining garments on the least,
Arranged us so that each and all,
The erotic and the logical,
Each felt the *placement* to be such
That he was honored overmuch [.] (DM 43)

Switching back and forth between the memory of a recent Christmas celebration at Mayer's Long Island cottage and the present scene of writing the letter at Auden's Brooklyn Heights apartment, the poem sets up a contrast between past "wedding feast" and present solitude: Auden, "a tiny object in the night" (DM 47), watches the glinting lights of Manhattan and listens to the New Year revelry outside as he writes (DM 43). The expression of solitude spotlights the poem's elision of Chester Kallman. While Auden referred directly to Kallman in later poems (as we will see in a moment), and while in real life Kallman spent much of his time with Auden in the Brooklyn Heights apartment, there is no sign of him in the poem's writing-haunt (a blank I will soon fill).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ See Anthony Hecht, *The Hidden Law: The Poetry of W.H. Auden* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 241; and Lucy McDiarmid, *Auden's Apologies for Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 5, 79-86.

⁶⁷ Although Auden and Kallman honeymooned together during the summer of 1939 and wore wedding rings for a time, they did not share an apartment when they returned to New York at the end of August. Kallman was still an undergraduate at Brooklyn College. In fact, Auden and Kallman did not officially live together until Kallman went to graduate school in Ann Arbor, long after the sexual

In the second passage (at the end of the poem), Auden uses marriage imagery to praise Mayer:

Dear friend Elizabeth, dear friend
These days have brought me, may the end
I bring to the grave's dead-line be
More worthy of your sympathy
Than the beginning; may the truth
That no one marries lead my youth
Where you already are and bless
Me with your learned peacefulness,
Who on the lives about you throw
A calm *solificatio*,
A warmth throughout the universe
That each for better or for worse
Must carry round with him through life,
A judge, a landscape, and a wife.
We fall down in the dance, we make
The old ridiculous mistake,
But always there are such as you
Forgiving, helping what we do. (*DM* 70-71)

No actual marriage celebration took place at the Long Island cottage; Mayer's *friendship* bathes people in a sacramental glow. Mayer makes good the lacks of marriage.

As Lucy McDiarmid notes, the first passage echoes the wedding parables in Matthew 22:2-14 (where a king casts a man without proper wedding garments "into outer darkness") and in Luke 14:8-11 (where Jesus warns the Pharisees not to take the "highest" seat at a wedding); the second passage echoes "The Solemnization of Marriage" in *The Book of Common Prayer* ("for better or for worse").⁶⁸ The poem thus elevates Mayer to the role of helpmeet. But McDiarmid's account elides the coterie context of "New Year Letter," where the poem's evocation of wedding parties and marriage vows with a subtext of theological exile would have had special significance.

relationship between them had ended. Nevertheless, Kallman spent weekdays after class and weekends with Auden at the Brooklyn Heights apartment. See Humphrey Carpenter, 276-279.

⁶⁸ McDiarmid, 83, 85.

Two gay couples formed the core of Mayer's group: Auden and Chester Kallman, Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears.⁶⁹

If a reader listens for the poem's coterie inflections, the wedding and marriage metaphors actually suggest a queering of marriage. The poem queers marriage through expressions of exile that seemingly grant normativity to heterosexuality. Mayer's power to make "ragged egos" whole anticipates Auden's private confession to her a few years later (long after his romance with Kallman ended) that "[b]eing *anders wie* [sic] *die Andern* has its troubles," an allusion to Magnus Hirschfeld's film on homosexuality, *Anders als die Andern* (1919). Auden goes on to thank Mayer, as in "New Year Letter":

There are days when the knowledge that there will never be a place which
I can call home, that there will never be a person with whom I shall be one
flesh, seems more than I can bear, and if it wasn't for you, and a few—
how few—like you, I don't think I could.⁷⁰

The wording of Auden's grateful confession resembles the end of "New Year Letter":

We fall down in the dance, we make
The old ridiculous mistake,
But always there are such as you
Forgiving, helping what we do. (*DM* 70-71)

The image of falling down in the dance, moreover, hints at sexual otherness.

Throughout his oeuvre, Auden associates dancing with marriage, the co-inherence of the persons of the trinity, and a reconstituted Eden. In a hymn to the trinity a few lines before the final thank-you to Mayer, "New Year Letter" beseeches Christ, symbolized by the unicorn, "[t]o call thy true love to the dance" (*DM* 69). The last chorus of "For the

⁶⁹ A friend and housemate of Auden from the latter's University of Michigan days recalls that when Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears visited their house in Ann Arbor, Auden whispered, "Now there's a happily married couple." Miller, 57. Having worked together on song cycles, films, and poetic dramas since 1935, Auden and Britten began to collaborate on the operetta *Paul Bunyan* (1941) after they both settled in New York in 1939.

⁷⁰ ALS to Elizabeth Mayer, 20 February 1943, Berg.

Time Being” (Auden’s coded portrayal of “the Crisis” in “*l’affaire C*,” or Chester Kallman’s infidelity) with its final command to “[l]ove Him in the World of the Flesh; / And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy,” presents gay sex as a way of worshipping Christ (CP 400). “Compline” ends with a prayer for the freeing of the poet and (in another reference to Chester Kallman) “C (dear C),” along with “all poor s-o-b’s who never / Do anything properly,” so “[t]hat we, too, may come to the picnic / With nothing to hide, join the dance / As it moves in perichoresis” (CP 639).⁷¹ The recurrence of paradisaical and matrimonial dance imagery in Auden’s poetry displays his conflicted thinking about gay love: on the one hand (as the last chorus of “For the Time Being” shows) it could spark joyful spiritual discovery; on the other (as we see at the end of “Compline”) it could send the lovers into hiding.

“New Year Letter” captures both elements of Auden’s experience. The image of Elizabeth Mayer’s warm and revivifying Marian glow as a tonic for Auden’s lonely writing and missteps in dancing appears to essentialize same-sex eros as loss. But the poem in fact complicates the experience of queerness as exile and the status of heterosexuality as normative. In the “wedding feast” passage, Auden queers marriage by collapsing the hierarchical distinctions that render friendship less important.⁷² And in the final apostrophe to Mayer, Auden queers marriage by arguing that no one marries (no two can sustain a one-flesh ecstasy) but that everyone makes vows (we all choose to have obligations to people and places).

⁷¹ See Kirsch, 35, 44, 57, 137, 145.

⁷² On the day that Auden began his poem to Mayer, he told her in a private letter that “1939 was a very decisive year for me and one of its most important events was meeting you. I’m not going to say you can’t imagine what peace and joy you give to me every time, because you know it very well,” ALS to Elizabeth Mayer, 1 January 1940, Berg. He had also fallen in love with Chester Kallman in 1939.

We can thus read the passage's sober echo of the Anglican wedding service as a performative utterance enacting a queer double vow that denaturalizes heterosexuality and downplays romance—a coded vow of marriage to Chester Kallman in the context of a spoken vow of friendship to Elizabeth Mayer. Auden publicly dedicated *The Double Man* to Mayer (*DM* 5), and “New Year Letter” pays public tribute to her as a resource for those who would undertake the tough, unromantic work of marriage: “We fall down in the dance,” “you / help [...] what we do.” But Auden privately inscribed a copy of the book for Kallman: “To Chester who knows both halves.”⁷³ The public declaration fortifies the private inscription.⁷⁴

If we listen for these queer inflections, the allusions to the wedding parables invent an alternative to traditional models of kinship. And the coterie's rejection of received relational forms (like country and family) becomes an act of civil disobedience that points the way to civic renewal. Alone in his Brooklyn apartment, Auden reminds himself that he

must not [...]

[...] worship blindly the ornate

Grandezza of the Sovereign State.

Whatever wickedness we do

Need not be, orators, for you;

We can at least serve other ends,

Can love the *polis* of our friends

And pray that loyalty may come

To serve mankind's *imperium*. (*DM* 48)

The call to serve friends rather than the state echoes E. M. Forster's ethic of friendship in *What I Believe* (1939), an ethic that (as we saw in the previous chapter) fueled British fears about a treasonous network of gay men (or “Homintern,” as Auden jokingly

⁷³ Humphrey Carpenter, 310.

⁷⁴ I do not mean to suggest that Auden felt pressured to keep such a dedication secret. He dedicated his previous book to Chester Kallman. See *Another Time*, v.

referred to it), making critics like Valentine Cunningham and George Steiner so suspicious of homo-social coterie. Auden's ethic of "serv[ing] other ends" is self-consciously subversive: his *Double Man* is a double agent.

In its first description of Mayer's coterie, "New Year Letter" flags Forster's ethic as an influence. On the morning of the Nazi invasion of Poland, sunlight floods Mayer's Long Island cottage as the exiles listen to Buxtehude. The music makes

Our minds a *civitas* of sound
Where nothing but assent was found.
For art had set in order sense
And feeling and intelligence,
And from its ideal order grew
Our local understanding too.
To set in order—that's the task
Both Eros and Apollo ask;
For Art and Life agree in this
That each intends a synthesis,
That order which must be the end
That all self-loving things intend
Who struggle for their liberty,
Who use, that is, their will to be. (*DM* 16-17).

As the notes to "New Year Letter" explain, the injunction "[t]o set in order" alludes to Jacopone da Todi, a thirteenth-century Franciscan friar, "quoted by E. M. Forster in *What I Believe*" as saying "O Thou who lovest me, set my love in order" (*DM* 76). (Though Auden here redacts Forster's text, replacing "this love" with "my love" for clarity.)⁷⁵

Forster's arguments leave a visible watermark on the theo-ethical vision of the coterie in "New Year Letter." *What I Believe* is itself a coterie text: Leonard and Virginia Woolf, who along with Forster were key members of the Bloomsbury Group, published it as the first installment of their "Sixpenny Pamphlets" series at the Hogarth

⁷⁵ E. M. Forster, *What I Believe* (London: Hogarth Press, 1939), 20.

Press.⁷⁶ Identifying himself as “a liberal who has found his liberalism crumbling beneath him,”⁷⁷ Forster instead places his hopes for humanity in “personal relationships.”⁷⁸ He anticipates exactly George Steiner’s chauvinistic suspicion of such affect-driven, non-institutionalized relationships:

Personal relations are despised to-day. They are regarded as bourgeois luxuries, as products of a time of fair weather which is now past, and we are urged to get rid of them, and to dedicate ourselves to some movement or cause instead. I hate the idea of causes, and if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country. Such a choice may scandalize the modern reader, and he may stretch out his patriotic hand to the telephone at once and ring up the police.⁷⁹

But Forster rewrites the condemnation of coteries as an affirmation:

I believe in aristocracy though—if that is the right word, and if a democrat may use it. Not an aristocracy of power, based upon rank and influence, but an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and classes, and all through the ages, and there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory of our queer race over cruelty and chaos.⁸⁰

One could lift Forster’s description directly out of the introductory pages of Proust’s *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (1921)—the treasonous world of the “men-women” descendents of Sodom, where ambassadors and prisoners are friends, that we caught a glimpse of in the previous chapter—except for the fact that Forster praises what Proust’s narrator despises.

Like Forster’s “aristocracy of the sensitive,” Mayer’s coterie is a prototype of the “Just City.” Auden’s descriptions of the coterie upstage the radicalism of the biblical wedding parables to which they allude. Where Jesus shows the Pharisees how to dodge

⁷⁶ Forster published a different version of the essay as “Two Cheers for Democracy,” *The Nation* 147.3 (16 July 1938): 64-68. Forster reprinted the Hogarth Press version of the essay under the title “What I Believe” in his collection *Two Cheers for Democracy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1951).

⁷⁷ Forster, *What I Believe*, 21.

⁷⁸ Forster, *What I Believe*, 7.

⁷⁹ Forster, *What I Believe*, 7-8.

⁸⁰ Forster, *What I Believe*, 16-17.

humiliation, the coterie gives everyone unexpected honor. Where Jesus warns of exile for impropriety, these sexual and civic outsiders exalt “the least” among them. They embody a Williams-esque dialectic: “each and all, / The erotic and the logical” find a place (*DM* 43). (We can take Auden’s annotation of this line to mean that the coterie welcomes even the bourgeois: Auden notes that “[i]n *Le Bourgeois*, Soubart [sic] divides men into the erotics and the bourgeois” [*DM* 117].)

In a sense, then, “New Year Letter” rehabilitates the local ethical body—but instead of the (predetermined) family or the parish, the (adopted) coterie becomes a key ethical resource. It is, as I hinted at the end of the previous chapter, a queer communitarianism: it displays the benefits of proximity and intimacy without the drawback of insularity. At the end of the poem Auden asks a shape-shifting, half-Christian and half-Spinozan God (“Dove of Science,” “Ichthus,” “Wind,” “Voice,” “Clock and Keeper,” “Source,” “It without image”) to

Instruct us in the civil art
Of making from the muddled heart
A desert and a city where
The thoughts that have to labor there
May find locality and peace [.] (*DM* 70)

Auden wants locality that depends on mobility: people *make* (or choose) the sites of solitary reflection and cooperative labor where their thoughts *find* (or learn) neighborhood. The poem synthesizes communitarianism and cosmopolitanism.⁸¹

Auden made a remark several years later that further explains why a *polis* of queer love might serve as a good social model for the *imperium*. Commenting (in his 1948 introduction to *The Portable Greek Reader*) on Diotima’s discourse, Auden

⁸¹ See Alan Jacobs, *What Became of WYSTAN: Change and Continuity in Auden’s Poetry* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 66-67, and my discussion of Jacobs in chapter one.

politicizes his earlier argument about Henry James and the enabling disability of homosexuality:

If erotic passion can or ought to be transformed [from love of a beautiful individual to love of justice], then it was sound psychological insight on Plato's part and not simply the cultural pattern of erotic life in Greece that made him exclude the heterosexual relation [from the stages of the soul's growth], for the latter leads beyond itself, not to the universal, but to more individuals, namely the love of and responsibility for a family, whereas, in the homosexual case, since the relation of itself leads nowhere, the love which it has aroused is free to develop in any direction the lovers choose, and that direction should be towards wisdom which, once acquired, will enable them to teach human beings procreated in the normal way how to become a good society. For love is to be judged by its social and political value. (*Prose ii* 370)

Same-sex lovers have the freedom (and, as Auden's "should" implies, the responsibility) to channel their love into critical social thought. (In the next chapter we will see how *The Age of Anxiety* (1947) explicitly invokes the Platonic notion of same-sex lovers' being "pregnant in soul," birthing poetry and political thought [*Symposium* 208e-210b].)⁸²

To translate this claim about the ethical value of queerness into the language of "New Year Letter," the queer periphery can teach the imperial center how to become a good society because émigrés and outlaws escape the "*Verbürgerlichung* of / All joy and suffering and love" (*DM* 57) that happens under liberalism.⁸³ A note to "Empiric Economic Man" (*DM* 55)—Auden's phrase for the new calculating, hyperrational, self-interested subjectivity that liberalism has produced—indicates what the "*Verbürgerlichung*" might look like by enumerating the beliefs of Middletown (sociologists R.S. and H.M. Lynds' code name for Muncie, Indiana c. 1890-1925): "[t]hat progress is a law of life," that work and play can never overlap, "[t]hat education

⁸² I am relying on the translation by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1989).

⁸³ "The process of becoming bourgeois," i.e., "embourgeoisement."

and too much contact with books unfit a person for practical life,” “[t]hat ‘culture and things like that’ are more the business of women than of men,” “[t]hat a person is ‘queer’ who enjoys solitary leisure” (*DM* 127). Auden’s queer periphery unsettles these Middle American beliefs.

At this point Auden’s construction of queerness as an enabling disability starts to look like W. E. B. Du Bois’s account of racism in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul through the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the old selves to be lost.⁸⁴

The similarity is particularly striking if one agrees with Richard Bozorth that the epigraph to *The Double Man* indicates Auden’s preoccupation with “Christian sexual dictates” against homosexuality.⁸⁵ The epigraph reads, “We are, I know not how, double in ourselves, so that what we believe we disbelieve, and cannot rid ourselves of what we condemn” (*DM* iii). Such an interpretation would link “double focus” directly to gay

⁸⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver (New York: Norton, 1999), 10-11.

⁸⁵ Richard R. Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge: Poetry and the Meanings of Homosexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 222.

shame. We could then draw a parallel between queerness as a prophetic gift and the Moses-like “veil” of “second-sight.”⁸⁶

In addition to echoing Du Bois’s “double consciousness,” Auden’s “gift of double focus” recalls Edward Carpenter’s depiction of homosexuality as a boon to democracy in *The Intermediate Sex* (1896). An English socialist poet and early gay activist, Carpenter argues that the “double nature” of gay men and women gives them the ability to reconcile straight men and women by explaining “the two sexes” to each other. Prefiguring Auden’s defiant embrace of the Homintern (which we encountered in the previous chapter), Carpenter creatively rewrites the threat of a secret queer network as an affirmation. Queer people have “a certain freemasonry of the secrets of the two sexes which may well favour their function as reconcilers and interpreters.”⁸⁷ Moreover, precisely because gay desire builds cross-class alliances, it bolsters “true Democracy.”⁸⁸

Whether or not we use *The Souls of Black Folk* or *The Intermediate Sex* as an optic for reading “New Year Letter,” the poem reproduces the phobic logic of the mirror to shatter it. It overturns the Freudian association of queerness with narcissism and non-reproductivity: the relationship that “leads nowhere” becomes most fertile, “develop[ing] in any direction”; procreative lovers merely generate more instances of themselves. Auden thereby gives the post-Stonewall reader an alternative to antisocial reclamations of shame (a point that I will take up in more detail in chapter five). Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004) epitomizes the antisocial turn in queer theory. While Edelman recognizes the “all-pervasive, self-congratulatory, and strategically misrecognized” narcissism

⁸⁶ Du Bois, 10-11.

⁸⁷ Edward Carpenter, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (New York: Mitchell and Kennerley, 1921), 36.

⁸⁸ Edward Carpenter, 107.

inherent in pronatalism, he embraces the “wholesale rupturing of the social fabric” that conservatives attach to the sterility of queerness.⁸⁹ For him, queerness attains its ethical value insofar as it resists the “secular theology” of “reproductive futurism” on which civil society depends.⁹⁰ By figuring childless queers as intellectually fecund teachers of self-propagating straights, Auden’s reclamation of shame offers a middle way for readers who want to resist heteronorms without giving up their faith in the social.

But *how* would the queer periphery teach the imperial center? How can the coterie speak to Middletown? Another way of putting the question is to ask how “New Year Letter” might kindle in its reader what Douglas Mao calls “the queer angle of view,” meaning the “critical consciousness” that could help build the “Just City” by animating the civic dialectic.⁹¹ (A key question, given the poem’s caveats about the propensity of Americans to migrate when conflict happens and given the émigré-coterie’s awareness of its own privilege [DM 43]. It is a question to which *The Age of Anxiety* [1947] perhaps gives a more satisfying answer, as we will see in the next chapter.)

The multivocality of “New Year Letter” forces us to ask *in whom* “New Year Letter” *could* kindle a queer angle of view. Auden sets no explicit limits on the epistle’s potential readership:

May such heart and intelligence
As huddle now in conference
Whenever an impasse occurs
Use the good offices of verse;
May an Accord be reached, and may
This *aide-mémoire* on what they say,
This private minute for a friend,
Be the dispatch that I intend;

⁸⁹ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 13, 14.

⁹⁰ Edelman, 12, 2.

⁹¹ Mao, 231.

Although addressed to a Whitehall
Be under Flying Seal to all
Who wish to read it anywhere,
And, if they open it, *En Clair*. (DM 25)

The letter serves as a formal memorandum of the war and an intimate note to Mayer; Auden addresses it to the British government with the seal attached but not closed, hoping that anyone who forwards the letter to its final destination can read it in ordinary language and not in cipher. The fusion of intimacy and publicity democratizes Auden's coterie. Still, Auden's insistence that readers can access the annotated text "*En Clair*" should give us pause: how do the polyglot poem and its polymorphous commentary negotiate the tension between empowering and excluding readers?⁹²

And the Augustan form of the poem poses a related problem. Auden's frequent code-switching (from English to German to French to Latin) and his mining of a range of academic specialties for metaphors (embryology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, theology) *do* reproduce the cosmopolitan ethos of Mayer's Long Island cottage.⁹³ The notes to "New Year Letter" *do* "set up" an "internal doubling" that looks forward to a postmodern poetic by qualifying the body text with questions, anecdotes, taxonomies, quotations, and more poems in a variety of forms.⁹⁴ And we *can* see the arrangement of *The Double Man* as transatlantic bricolage: the short "Prologue" and "Epilogue," written in syllabics, employ a "New World" technique that Auden learned from Marianne Moore

⁹² On the one hand the code-switching reflects the fact that Auden's New York community often spoke in German because it was "the language of our friends, the refugees," James Stern, "The Indispensable Presence," in *W.H. Auden: A Tribute*, ed. Stephen Spender (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 126. On the other hand the (sometimes lengthy) untranslated quotations of Goethe, Pascal, Baudelaire, Rilke, Wagner, Origen, and Augustine as well as the unmodernized quotations of Chaucer and Langland seem to undermine Auden's democratic critical ethics. Auden himself misspelled a number of the quotations and had to ask Mayer for help with a German squib he composed for the notes. See ALS to Elizabeth Mayer, 10 June 1940, Berg.

⁹³ Nicholas Jenkins "Auden in America," in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, 43.

⁹⁴ Rainer Emig, *W.H. Auden: Towards a Postmodern Poetics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 151.

and later described as “very difficult for an English ear to grasp” (*DH* 297); “New Year Letter” and “The Quest” represent “Old World” forms.

But Auden could have created transatlantic effects without reaching back to Augustan models that teem with organicist nostalgia.⁹⁵ The verse epistles of Dryden and Pope and Swift mourn the civil war’s disintegration of a traditional agricultural society that binds “higher and lower orders [...] to one another through ancient ties.”⁹⁶ They do not turn to organicism as a mere “myth” for “genuine community”—they “demand an actual return to that organic or traditional order.”⁹⁷ In addition to asking about the poem’s inclusivity, then, it is also worth asking what Auden’s neo-Augustanism means in a book that worries about the fascist recuperation of eighteenth-century “habits of mind.” I will now turn my attention to answering these questions.

III. NO AUDENARY AUGUSTAN

My own view is that Auden revives the Augustan verse epistle not nostalgically but ironically. “New Year Letter” holds that “all real unity commences / In consciousness of differences” (*DM* 69). Auden’s essays of the same period long for a truly “open” society in which “[t]he concept of normality disappears” (*Prose ii* 95). Through its neo-Augustan formal features, the poem invites the reader to develop such ethical consciousness. Patrick Deane has written that the poem’s Augustan conventions “seem to work affectively to produce in the reader a non-rational sympathy with the

⁹⁵ See William C. Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment: The Poetics of the Eighteenth-Century Verse Epistle* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 53-54.

⁹⁶ Dowling, 79.

⁹⁷ Dowling, 82.

poem's world-view." "New Year Letter" exercises its "ideational power" through "a potentially endless procession" of rhyming couplets that mimics the Hegelian logic of the poem.⁹⁸ Dean does not go far enough. I submit that the poem constructs an anti-rationalist epistemology—a queer angle of view—by exploding its Augustan models.

"New Year Letter" modifies the style of Augustan poetry, first, in that the syntax of the poem breaks its hudibrastic restraints. As readers like Jenkins and Mendelson have noted, "New Year Letter" loosens the neoclassical couplet—and not just by virtue of choosing tetrameter over pentameter.⁹⁹ Take, for example, the following lines from Swift's "Death and Daphne":

Their President, in Scarlet Gown,
Harangu'd, and welcom'd him to Town.

BUT, *Death* had Bus'ness to dispatch:
His Mind was running on his Match.
And, hearing much of *Daphne's* Fame,
His *Majesty of Terrors* came,
Fine as a Col'nel of the Guards,
To visit where she sat at Cards:
She, as he came into the Room,
Thought him *Adonis* in his Bloom.
And now her Heart with Pleasure jumps,
She scarce remembers what is Trumps.¹⁰⁰

Each line contains one end-stopped unit of thought; a sentence usually consists of one or two lines (at most four); rhyme-pairs punctuate the sentences as well as the verse paragraph that concludes at "to Town." By contrast, the lines of "New Year Letter" are heavily enjambed. Sentences sprawl over as many as 34 lines (e.g., the concluding prayer, "O Unicorn among the cedars" to "*O da quod jubes, Domine*" [DM 69-70]). And

⁹⁸ Patrick Deane, *At Home in Time: Forms of Neo-Augustanism in Modern English Poetry* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 77.

⁹⁹ Jenkins, "Auden in America," 44; Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 100-101.

¹⁰⁰ *Gullivers Travels and Other Writings*, ed. Ricardo Quintana (New York: Random House, 1958), 523.

the poem ends sentences and verse paragraphs between rhymes, undercutting the use of rhyme as aural punctuation (e.g., “The old Year dies a noisy death. // Warm in your house, Elizabeth” [DM 43]). The sprawling syntax departs from the restrained, cerebral tone of Augustan poetry.

Warping a major eighteenth-century English verse form provides a non-discursive means of critiquing the primacy of reason in Enlightenment thought. Like the later “Memorial for the City” (dedicated to, and written in a form he learned from, Charles Williams), “New Year Letter” faults “the Rational City” of the eighteenth-century for its homogenizing, meliorist drum-march “of a clear idea” and its attack on “mystery” (CP 591-592). In the notes Auden praises Nietzsche for “debunk[ing ...] our liberal fallacies” and exposing the tyranny of the Greek and Enlightenment overemphasis on reason (DM 91-92, 138). The poem argues that an ethical solution to the current international crisis lies in prayer and intuition as much as (if not more than) reason: “all our intuitions mock / the formal logic of the clock” (DM 30); “[c]locks cannot tell our time of day / For what event to pray” (DM 75). Broken hudibrastics clinch the point.¹⁰¹

“New Year Letter” also departs from its Augustan models through its annotations. John Fuller has suggested that the annotations to Pope’s *Dunciad* are “similarly deployed contributive material.”¹⁰² The point of the *Dunciad*, though, is to poke fun at the limits of scholarship—hence the mock-epic’s ridiculous apparatus. Pope annotates the notes and

¹⁰¹ Critics have spilled a lot of ink over the question of what poems serve as models for Auden’s unconventional hudibrastics. Jenkins suggests Emerson’s “Each and All” and “The Problem.” See “Auden in America,” 45. Michael Murphy suggests Marvell’s “Upon Appleton House.” See “Neoclassicism, Late Modernism, and W.H. Auden’s ‘New Year Letter,’” *Cambridge Quarterly* 33.2 (2004): 111. Anthony Hecht suggests Blake’s “The Everlasting Gospel,” 212. But none of these poems *stretches* or *remixes* the octosyllabic couplet in the way I have described. Oscar Wilde’s epigrams make a better candidate. Just as Wilde’s epigrams reverse the mores they cite, Auden’s couplets disrupt the patterns of reasoned argument on which they draw.

¹⁰² John Fuller, *W.H. Auden: A Commentary* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 321.

attributes much of the annotation to the pedants he attacks in the body text.¹⁰³ The notes to “New Year Letter” do quarry a “laughably eclectic” list of “Modern Sources,” as Rachel Wetzsteon has observed.¹⁰⁴ But the laughable eclecticism constitutes a serious act of ethical self-fashioning. It is ideological drag: the Episcopalian costumed in Voltaire, Wagner, and Nietzsche (or the nonbeliever trying on Charles Williams and Kierkegaard for size) exhibits camp’s equation of “sincerity” with “intellectual narrowness.”¹⁰⁵ The citationality has a sincere ethical goal that can only be achieved by insincerity: it “refuses [...] the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling.”¹⁰⁶ The notes practice belief-in-disbelief.

And unlike the contempt for scholarly commentary evident in Pope’s apparatus, the display of erudition in Auden’s notes has a pedagogic design. Reflecting on the fact that modernist writers controlled the reception of their work through glosses, John Whittier-Ferguson remarks,

[i]n our century the note is often assumed to be a democratic addition to the text, encouraging rather than exclusive, and more accessible than the annotated material. This assumption regularly runs counter to the nature of apparatus, which lends itself to elliptical or abstruse commentary addressed to a smaller audience than the text proper.¹⁰⁷

T. S. Eliot’s gnomic, teasing annotations to *The Waste Land*, for example, frustrate more often than they elucidate. The notes to “New Year Letter” are an exception to the

¹⁰³ As Joseph Levine shows in his account of the quarrel between the wits (i.e., Augustan poets) and the learned men (i.e., scholars), “[e]ver since Swift had ridiculed the forms of modern learning in *A Tale of a Tub*, the learned commentary had come to look more and more ludicrous to the wits. Footnotes epitomized their concern that the grace and elegance of polite literature were likely to be buried beneath the erudition of the drones,” *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), 205.

¹⁰⁴ Rachel Wetzsteon, *Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden’s Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 91.

¹⁰⁵ Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966), 288.

¹⁰⁶ Sontag, 287.

¹⁰⁷ John Whittier-Ferguson, *Framing Pieces: Designs of the Gloss in Joyce, Woolf, and Pound* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7.

modernist rule. They read like a notebook or a reading diary—sketches for future essays and poems. (An early reviewer of *The Double Man* described the writing as that of a “student, notebook in hand.”)¹⁰⁸ In that respect the notes would seem to make all possible readers qua audiences irrelevant. But a closer look reveals more than ethical self-fashioning. The notes also preach their practice of “double focus.”

The notes fall into six main types. Just a few of them cite or explain material in the body text. Some of the notes ask rhetorical questions—e.g., Auden glosses the Devil’s “favorite strategy” of “treat[ing] babe and bathwater the same” with the question, “Are not most neuroses the consequence of so drawing a false general conclusion from a true particular instance (the traumatic experience)?” (*DM* 36, 108). (A Socratic question that nudges the reader into “double focus.”) Some of them are exercises in criticism—e.g., Auden’s take on poetry as an excellent vehicle for “double focus,” since “poetry might be defined as the clear expression of mixed feelings” (*DM* 116). Some of them are religious reflections on the order of Pascal’s *Pensées*—e.g., a definition of “evil” as schism and “good” as an “act” that “lessons or removes” the “disharmony” (*DM* 105-106).¹⁰⁹ (Or “double focus” in black-and-white terms.) Some of them are teacherly anecdotes—e.g., the story of the liberal anti-Nazi father and the anti-semitic mother (*DM* 103). Some of them are scraps of doggerel—e.g., a quatrain opines that a person’s ability to convince others exists in indirect proportion to her own conviction (*DM* 120).

¹⁰⁸ Louise Bogan, “Briefly Noted,” *The New Yorker* (12 April 1941): 84.

¹⁰⁹ Auden in fact first wrote some of the material that ended up in the notes to “New Year Letter” for *The Prolific and the Devourer*, a prose catechism modeled on Pascal’s *Pensées* and Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, during a trip across the States in the summer of 1939. For a detailed comparison of *The Prolific and the Devourer*—which was posthumously published—and *The Double Man*, see Jenkins, *A Critical Edition*, 919-937.

We might even go so far as to say that the annotations *activate* “the gift of double focus” in the reader. A striking example occurs when “New Year Letter” puts a half-truth into the Devil’s mouth: reason cannot save us, so we ought to throw out the “killjoy” (the intellect) and “[r]ecover [...] the *Beischlaf* of the blood” (*DM* 32). A note to the passage offers a paean to the queer angle of view:

The critical intelligence
Undermines the State’s defence [*sic*],
While the loyal heart refuses
To reform the State’s abuses;
Yet all Being needs the blind,
All Becoming the unkind. (*DM* 102)

The note equips the reader to find the Devil’s error: that while reason cannot save us, we ought not to throw it out entirely. Without the note, a reader could misinterpret the poem as rejecting “critical intelligence” entirely. Even *Auden scholars* miss the point. Rainer Emig writes that the poem’s “advocation of [...] ‘*Beischlaf* of the blood’ smacks of D. H. Lawrence, if not of the blood-based ideology of fascism.”¹¹⁰ Patrick Deane likewise quotes the passage without attributing it to the Devil.¹¹¹ Most recently, Aidan Wasley misattributes the passage *and* misreads the poem as a total rejection of reason. Failing to trace the endorsement of “the *Beischlaf* of the blood” back to its source, Wasley takes it to refer to “a passionate, humane embrace”—not the incestuous tribalism of fascist regimes. Thus for Wasley “New Year Letter” names love “the force that compels” the poet, “not intellect,” when in fact the poem promotes a balance of both in the form of “double focus.”¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Emig, 153-154.

¹¹¹ Deane, 71.

¹¹² Aidan Wasley, *The Age of Auden: Postwar Poetry and the American Scene* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 15.

Teaching the reader how (not what) to think, the notes complement the poem's theory of art as an "abstract model" for the reader to apply. And equipping Middletown to practice "double focus," they line up with Auden's post-emigration pronouncements about the role of art and literary criticism. He saw art as "one of the most powerful means of transforming closed communities into open ones" because it could envision new possibilities for the reader (*Prose ii* 493). Likewise he saw the critic's instructional task as a matter of social justice "because the situation of all individuals, artist and audience alike, in an open society is such that the only check on authoritarian control by the few, whether in matters of esthetic taste or political choice, is the knowledge of the many" (*Prose ii* 93). Auden also had egalitarian critical convictions about "the popular" and "the *avant garde*" (*Prose ii* 99), imagining a Pennsylvania coal miner "learn[ing] to see himself in terms of the world of Ronald Firbank" and "an Anglican bishop find[ing] in *The Grapes of Wrath* a parable of his diocesan problems" (*Prose ii* 93).

IV. POPE'S GHOSTS

Despite the fact that *The Double Man* marks a pivotal moment in Auden's corpus and in the story of literary modernism, it has received almost no attention from critics or scholars. Part of the reason for this silence is the book's invisibility: it went out of print within two years.¹¹³ That Faber & Faber printed a bowdlerized,¹¹⁴ Anglicized¹¹⁵ version of the book in the United Kingdom as *New Year Letter* also contributes to the invisibility

¹¹³ Bloomfield and Mendelson, *Bibliography*, 48. The book was published in one edition of 2,000 copies.

¹¹⁴ See note 56 above.

¹¹⁵ As we will see in a moment.

of *The Double Man*: extant copies of *New Year Letter* outnumber *The Double Man* three to one,¹¹⁶ and many critics focus on *New Year Letter* rather than *The Double Man* without explaining their choice—they discuss neither how the books differ nor the consequences of privileging one for study. (Besides obscuring *The Double Man*, such a decision suggests that the critics do not know or understand the differences between the texts. One of them, for example, mistakenly refers to *The Double Man* as a reprinting of *New Year Letter*.)¹¹⁷

Auden himself bears some of the blame for the book's invisibility. For *Collected Poetry* (1945) he reshaped his corpus along New Critical principles, erasing the social and historical contexts of his work. He dispersed the contents of *The Double Man* into contexts that gave them radically new meanings: he dropped the annotations to "New Year Letter"; on top of that, he repurposed pieces of verse from the notes as stand-alone poems. Critics almost always look at the poem in this stripped-down form.¹¹⁸

The primacy that critics thereby give to Auden's final intentions implies what Edward Mendelson calls the "gothic-tower" model of the process of authorship. In "The Two Audens and the Claims of History," Mendelson observes that when an editor selects either an early or a late version of a poem as copy-text, she chooses "between two models

¹¹⁶ See Bloomfield and Mendelson, *Bibliography*, 49. *New Year Letter* appeared in England two months after *The Double Man* appeared in America.

¹¹⁷ Giles, 250.

¹¹⁸ Consider what violence a New Critical hermeneutic does to an occasional coterie poem like "New Year Letter." It ignores the poem's epistolary epistemology: "If in this letter that I send / I write 'Elizabeth's my friend,' / I cannot but express my faith / That I is Not-Elizabeth" (*DM* 30). Naming a real-life sender-receiver relationship, the poet affirms his faith in a shared external world of signifiers and signifieds. The burden of the poem is to understand—and by understanding, possibly to repair—that warring world in the context of a specific friendship.

of the act of authorship.”¹¹⁹ We can make the same point about critics who rule out other versions of a text for study. Adherents of the “gothic-tower” model see an author’s original conception as a “rough sketch” that revisions animate and clarify.¹²⁰ By contrast, adherents of the “fading-coal” model prize an author’s original conception and mistrust revisions: “the more distant the poet grows from conception, the less well the poet comprehends it.”¹²¹ Critics have tended to take a “fading-coal” approach to Auden’s ’30s poetry, preferring the political engagement (first tentatively Marxian and subsequently liberal humanist) of the original versions to the revisions and excisions that Auden later made to his canon in light of his retreat from partisan politics and conversion to Christianity.¹²² But it is precisely the transformational quality of Auden’s wartime epistle as it appears in *The Double Man* that demands a third model of the process of authorship, one that favors neither the original conception nor the final intention.

I call it the “living-guts” model, choosing a messier image from Auden’s own poem “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” to highlight the messy practicalities of authorship. Written shortly after Auden arrived in New York City, and less than a year before he began “New Year Letter,” the poem admits that no writer has complete control over the meaning of his work (here a bitter admission, since the poem depicts the dead Yeats as “scattered among a hundred cities / And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections / [...] punished under a foreign code of conscience” [*SP* 89]). Authoring does not end with the

¹¹⁹ Edward Mendelson, “The Two Audens and the Claims of History,” in *Representing Modernist Texts: Editing as Interpretation*, ed. George Bornstein (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991), 157.

¹²⁰ Mendelson, “The Two Audens and the Claims of History,” 159.

¹²¹ Mendelson, “The Two Audens and the Claims of History,” 164.

¹²² A prime example of such a critic is Frank Kermode. In *History and Value*, Kermode dismisses Auden’s “meddlings and recantations” as “imperceptive renunciation” and finds him “lacking in the sense other men might have that they needed at least to seem consistent in their opinions, or to give plausible reasons for changing them,” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 73, 80.

poet who conceives and revises, because a poem itself is an ongoing event—“A way of happening, a mouth” through which new magazine and book appearances and new readers speak new meanings in new circumstances: “The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living.” (The synecdoche amplifies the bitterness of the admission: “mouth” recalls “mouthpiece.”) Poetry “survives / In the valley of its saying,” where authorship survives the author—where, as Jerome McGann puts it, an “author’s wishes, the physical texts, and a host of other [...] relationships all cooperate” in a work’s authority.¹²³

So the “living-guts” model locates the process of authorship in the social and institutional relations of a text’s composition, publication, and reception—not only in the words of the poet but also in the mouths and guts of amanuenses, printers, editors, marketers, and reviewers. Adherents of the “living-guts” model might choose to study any incarnation of a work by Auden, looking for what its conditions of production reveal about its cultural moment and the poet’s evolving aesthetic and ideological commitments. Noticing how a reprint of a work changes what it means—the pirating of a privately circulated poem, or a scholarly edition that adopts an author’s last revisions as copy-text but stamps the date of initial composition on every poem, say—could help us queer the construction of Auden as a poet of universal human values.¹²⁴

The Auden of “New Year Letter” onward, unlike the Auden of “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” would sympathize with such a notion of textuality. He chose typeface, layout,

¹²³ McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 89.

¹²⁴ Not that one model necessarily excludes the others: the case of Thurber’s “*homo*” (see note 56 above) shows that taking a “living-guts” editorial approach can make it easier to assess accurately what counts as an author’s last revisions.

and even paper with care.¹²⁵ But he also happily defined reading a poem as dismembering and scattering its textual body: if the “meaning” of a poem resides in “the outcome of a dialogue” between the text and “the response” of the reader (as his 1967 lecture “Words and the Word” suggests) and if, therefore, a poem will have a different significance “for each reader who responds to it,” poetry escapes the charge of “black magic” or propaganda (*SW* 130). The model thus recognizes that a critic who recovers an invisible text, too, participates in its authorship: foregrounding another incarnation of the work would tell a different story.

The story I have chosen to tell begins and ends with shame. When scholars and critics privilege the British version of “New Year Letter,” they perpetuate a “regime of censorship,” to borrow Richard Bozorth’s phrase for what happens when scholars and critics forget the personally inscribed texts that Auden circulated among his friends and lovers.¹²⁶ Random House’s *The Double Man* and Faber’s *New Year Letter* have crucial differences largely because of a contractual fiasco. Auden intended to publish the British edition of *The Double Man* with John Lehmann at the Hogarth Press (to replace a travel book on America that Lehmann had commissioned), forgetting that to do so would breach his contract with T. S. Eliot at Faber.

Eliot discovered Auden’s mistake through a Hogarth Press announcement. Not wanting to publish a book that another press had advertised, Eliot changed the title without consulting Auden (shortening the poem’s title to “Letter”), silently emended a

¹²⁵ For example, Auden chose a Victorian typeface and layout for *The Age of Anxiety* (1947) to underline the poem’s “baroque” quality (Humphrey Carpenter, 347). Auden argued unsuccessfully for Random House to print *The Double Man* on “shiny paper like a textbook,” a material feature that might have settled the question of what kind of relationship the book establishes with its reader. Quoted in Jenkins, *A Critical Edition*, 648.

¹²⁶ Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge*, 24.

phrase in “The Prologue” from “the Double Man” to “the invisible twin,”¹²⁷ and expurgated the proto-queer imagery of “New Year Letter.”¹²⁸ Eliot’s changes disrupt the book’s conceptual unity, obscuring its dialectical theology as well as its self-consciously transatlantic aesthetic. His ear had become thoroughly English by now; Eliot botched the syllabic form of the “Prologue.” The Faber imprimatur (its minimalist uniform book design) also muffles the Americanness of *The Double Man*. *New Year Letter* thus misses the Anglican-American synthesis of Auden’s project.¹²⁹

To read “New Year Letter” in Auden’s subsequent collections also implicates the scholar-critic in suppressions more hidden than the obvious fact of omissions like “Spain, 1937.” As Anthony Hecht has suggested, Auden probably devised the non-chronological New Critical arrangement of *Collected Poetry* (1945) as a clever way to thwart hostile reactions to his post-emigration work—like Randall Jarrell’s negative review of *The Double Man*.¹³⁰ To Jarrell, the preachy neo-Augustinism of “New Year Letter” signals “the decline and fall of modernist poetry”:

In 1931 Pope’s ghost said to me, “Ten years from now the leading young poet of the time will publish, in *The Atlantic Monthly*, a didactic epistle of about 900 tetrameter couplets.” I answered absently, “You are a fool”; and who on this earth would have thought him anything else?¹³¹

Pronouncing “New Year Letter” a “strained,” “pale,” and “diluted” poem that “lacks the necessary finality of presentation,” Jarrell remembers wistfully the Egyptian “fleshpots”

¹²⁷ Humphrey Carpenter, 303.

¹²⁸ See note 56 above.

¹²⁹ On top of all this, Auden made many changes to the manuscript he submitted to Random House after his agent sent a second manuscript to Faber. He gave interpretive titles to the sonnets of “The Quest” sequence (like “The Preparations,” “The City,” “The First Temptation,” and “The Garden”), added the list of “Modern Sources,” and expanded the notes to “New Year Letter.”

¹³⁰ Hecht, 2.

¹³¹ Randall Jarrell, in *W.H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Routledge, 1983), 312.

of Auden's "earlier poetry at its best."¹³² Auden responded, like Henry James, by rereading his own work under a regime of shame.¹³³ In the preface to *Collected Poetry* (1945) he divides his canon into four categories that echo Jarrell's criticism: "the pure rubbish," "the good ideas which his incompetence or impatience prevented from coming to much," "the pieces lack[ing] importance," and "those poems for which he is honestly grateful" but which are so few that a collection of them would be "too depressingly slim" (*CP45* vii).

Yet Auden saw the recuperation of Augustan poetics as an outgrowth of modernism—not its decline and fall. Close-reading Pope (three years before "New Year Letter"), he recognized the origins of literary modernism: "[t]here is no vagueness here. There are the images of contemporary life. This poetry, not Wordsworth's, is the ancestor of 'the patient etherized on the table,' of Beaudelair [*sic*]" and Flaubert and Mallarmé.¹³⁴ "New Year Letter" bears witness to that genealogy. It articulates an ethics of writing that recalls Ezra Pound's injunctions (in the 1917 polemic "A Retrospect") against vagueness. Verbal ornament serves the Devil's purposes:

To say two different things at once,
To wage offensives on two fronts,
And yet to show complete conviction,
Requires the purpler kinds of diction,
And none appreciate as he
Polysyllabic oratory.
All vague idealistic art
That coddles the uneasy heart
Is up his alley, and his pigeon
The woozier species of religion,
Even a novel, play or song,

¹³² Jarrell, 314.

¹³³ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*," reprinted in *Gay Shame*, 49-62.

¹³⁴ Auden, "Pope," in *From Anne to Victoria: Essays by Various Hands*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London: Cassell and Company Limited, 1937), 104, 102.

If loud, lugubrious, and long;
He knows the bored will not unmask him
But that he's lost if someone ask him
To come the hell in off the links
And say exactly what he thinks.
To win support of any kind
He has to hold before the mind
Amorphous shadows it can hate [.] (DM 35)

Social justice demands linguistic precision. A mini *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), the passage draws a subtle but crucial line between demagoguery and “double focus” while the poem’s neo-Augustan style upsets the difference between purple and direct. “New Year Letter” may not be the “austere” poetry that Pound expected “to see written during the next decade or so,” but it shares his distaste for “perdamnable rhetoric.”¹³⁵

Indeed, “New Year Letter” mounts an attack on the perdamnable rhetoric of liberal humanism that works somewhat like Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and T. S. Eliot’s “Gerontion.” Vincent Sherry has read the formal experimentation of Anglo-American modernist writers as a critique of the rationalist, meliorist language used to justify the Great War. The poetry of Pound and Eliot contorts syntax and logic to deconstruct the “speech and episteme” of English liberalism.¹³⁶ “New Year Letter” employs a different technique in service of a similar principle: at the start of World War II, Auden’s loose, ironic hudibrastics expose the failure of liberal reason to prevent a Hitler.

The poem’s insistence on “double focus” could easily explain the technique: as a note on “the great error” of the Romantics puts it, “[t]he answer to those who do noble actions from base motives is not [...] to try to do base actions from noble motives, nor is

¹³⁵ *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 12, 11.

¹³⁶ Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 160.

a parody of order unmasked by a deliberate chaos” (*DM* 134-135). In addition, I see a connection between the neo-Augustan aesthetic of “New Year Letter” and the poem’s shameless embrace of shame—its treatment of stigma as a prophetic gift. We can understand the verse form as a “radical act of public misappropriation,” to borrow Judith Butler’s name for the “decontextualizing and recontextualizing” of hate speech so “that the conventional relation between word and wound might become tenuous and even broken over time.”¹³⁷ Like the term “queer” itself, Auden’s hudibrastics are Janus-faced, looking backward to England’s organicist “history of injury” as they look forward to the “urgent and expanding political purposes” of a cosmopolitan America.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 100.

¹³⁸ I quote here from Judith Butler’s article “Critically Queer” in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 228.

CHAPTER THREE | THE EROTICS OF COTERIE

So far I have made a case for reading Auden's post-conversion oeuvre as a queer, theologically-driven dismantling of the Christian, Kantian, and Cold War suspicions of friendship (chapter one). And I have argued that, inasmuch as his poetry emphasizes his shameful status as an expatriate and a gay man, it gives a shamelessly defiant edge to his theo-ethical apologies for friendship (chapter two). A theme throughout my recovery of the queer politics driving Auden's Christian poetry has been that Auden depicts the coterie as a queer church where civic renewal begins. But I do not mean to imply that Auden found queer community at church. On the contrary, he often kept his queer circle and his Christian circle separate.¹ Nor do I want to suggest that Auden's depiction of queer networks looks like a de-gayed, asexual church social.²

Rather, I argue that Auden propounds an erotics of coterie. That is, his poetry conceives of the coterie as (1) a reformulated erotic practice with (2) incarnational prophetic implications. Turning to friendship as a corrected erotic practice, Auden (3) anticipates a tradition of gay male writers who mine the history of friendship as a

¹ As, for example, when he was a visiting professor of English at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor from 1941-1942. See Charles Miller, *Auden: An American Friendship* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1983), 81, 84; as well as Robert L. Chapman, "Auden in Ann Arbor," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 17.4 (Fall 1978): 519.

² Not that calling something "church" means it lacks erotic content. As the gay artist Daniel Goldstein remembers in David Weissman's and Bill Weber's documentary *We Were Here: The AIDS Years in San Francisco* (2011), when he used to frequent San Francisco's bathhouses, he and his friends called it "going to church."

resource for inventing forms of relationality that make life less lonely for older queers who no longer participate in the dating scene: Allan Bloom, Alan Bray, Michel Foucault, Andrew Sullivan, and Mark Vernon, among others. Reading Auden's later poetry alongside the tradition that it anticipates can (a) help us see more clearly exactly how it treats friendship as a reformulated erotic practice and (b) help us better understand the mechanism by which Auden's erotics of coterie generates a subversive ethic.

When I say, "a resource for inventing forms of relationality that make life less lonely for older queers," it might sound to the reader as if I am talking about sublimation, that "pseudoscientific" and "semi-miraculous faculty" for turning bodily desires into intellectual, artistic, and spiritual desires, as Allan Bloom describes it.³ It thus might also sound as if I mean to suggest that the erotics of friendship always rests fundamentally on a desire for genital sex. On the contrary, I want to distance my discussion of Auden's erotics of coterie, and the tradition of gay men writing about friendship that it anticipates, from both of those assumptions. That is, I want to insist on a capacious understanding of the erotics of friendship: it can involve affects as seemingly disparate as grief, or a crush, or the wish to insert oneself into the happiness of family life. As Pausanias says in Plato's *Symposium*, eros is complicated (183d).

Alan Bray, for example, movingly describes his study of premodern Anglican burial monuments shared by friends as a way of maintaining a relationship with his own friends who had died of AIDS: "I think I was seeking among the tombs of the dead those lost friends; I would not let them go: and, with the guiding hand of scholarship and the eye of a historian, against all expectations I found such friendship there in those

³ Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 411.

monuments.”⁴ (As we will see in the next chapter, Auden makes a not dissimilar pilgrimage to the grave of a dead friend whom he never personally knew: his patron saint, Henry James.) And the pop-philosopher Mark Vernon, a former priest in the Church of England, describes his “passionate” friendship with the sculptor Guy Reid in terms of Plato’s account of erotic love as “shared understanding,” i.e., the joint pursuit of wisdom (a notion that, as we will see, inflects both Auden’s and Allan Bloom’s understanding of the erotics of male friendship).⁵

Auden provides yet another example of a slightly different kind of friendship qua corrected erotic practice. As he explained to his straight friends, when Chester Kallman broke off their romance, and their relationship changed into that of “parent and child,” friendship became Auden’s way of inserting himself into the happiness of married life.⁶ Recall the poignant letter that he wrote to Elizabeth Mayer (discussed in the previous chapter):

Being *anders wie* [sic] *die Andern* [different from others] has its troubles. There are days when the knowledge that there will never be a place which I can call home, that there will never be a person with whom I shall be one flesh, seems more than I can bear, and if it wasn’t for you, and a few—how few—like you, I don’t think I could.⁷

Recall also the conclusion to “New Year Letter” (1941), where Auden thanks Elizabeth Mayer publicly for her friendship. Her warm and revivifying Marian glow is a tonic for Auden’s loneliness (*DM* 70-71).

The turn to friendship on the part of older gay men has incarnational prophetic implications, then, because these writers cannot simply inhabit given forms of

⁴ Alan Bray *The Friend* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 5.

⁵ Mark Vernon, *The Meaning of Friendship* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 65-66.

⁶ Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 26. See also Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 307.

⁷ ALS to Elizabeth Mayer, 20 February 1943, Berg.

relationality, like courting or marriage. In a world hostile to gay love, they have to create new ways of sharing life together and supporting each other. As Andrew Sullivan puts it,

the trajectory of a homosexual life often places, in a way unique to itself, a focus on friendship that many heterosexuals, to their great loss, never quite attain. In fact, I think the primary distinction between homosexuals and heterosexuals in our society is [...] that homosexuals, by default as much as anything else, have managed to sustain a society of friendship that is, for the most part, unequaled by almost any other part of the society.⁸

In particular, the social imperatives of the closet make friendship a crucial part of a gay person's identity-formation, more crucial than family:

For a gay child or adolescent doesn't really have a friend in the true sense of the term until he has a friend who knows and accepts the fact that he is gay. When he finds this friend, who is almost always gay himself, the relationship has a significance often far deeper than the first friend a heterosexual child discovers. Because, in a way, it is only when the gay child finds this first true friend that he can really exist at all. [...]

So the first true friendship, for the homosexual child, is often a revelation. It is simultaneous with the establishment of identity. Whereas most heterosexual children become themselves most transparently in the context of their family, gay children, more often than not, only truly become themselves in the context of their first, true, friends.⁹

⁸ Andrew Sullivan, *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 230-231.

⁹ Sullivan, 231-232. To my mind, though, Sullivan's treatment of friendship and the closet here places a cruel onus on the gay person. To quote Michael Warner in *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), Sullivan perpetuates the

[c]ommon mythology [that] understands the closet as an individual's lie about him- or herself. Yet queers understand, at some level, that the closet was built around them, willy-nilly, by dominant assumptions about what goes without saying, what can be said without a breach of decorum, who shares the onus of disclosure, and who will bear the consequences of speech and silence—by all of what Erving Goffman, in *Stigma*, calls “the careful work of disattention.” Speech is everywhere regulated unequally. This is experienced by lesbians and gay men as a private, individual problem of shame and closeting. But it is produced by the assumptions of everyday talk. (180)

See also David M. Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 34-38; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwich, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 2008).

Gay friends create new ways of life and systems of support (like the reformulated erotic practice of the coterie), then, in part because their families have alienated them. But if gay culture is a society of friendship, it benefits straight people inasmuch as it expands their relational possibilities, too. According to Sullivan, it can open straight life “to the possibilities of intimacy and support that friendship offers” and even perhaps revive “friendship as a social institution,” an idea that Foucault brings up again and again in his late essays and interviews.¹⁰ Thus (for Auden, at any rate) the queer periphery constitutes a place not just for *critiquing* but also for *remaking* the social center (as we saw in the previous two chapters).

In this chapter, I will unpack all three of the claims I have just made—that Auden conceives of the coterie as (1) a reformulated erotic practice with (2) incarnational prophetic implications, and that his conception of the coterie (3) anticipates a later tradition of older gay men who turn to the history of friendship as a resource for imagining new forms of eros besides dating and marriage—by discussing Foucault as well as Allan Bloom, professor of philosophy and author of the best-selling jeremiad *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), alongside Auden’s Pulitzer Prize-winning long poem *The Age of Anxiety* (1947).¹¹

Politically and philosophically speaking, Bloom and Foucault differ wildly: whereas Bloom remained completely silent about his gayness in all of his printed works, Foucault’s work more or less catalyzed the discipline of queer theory.¹² Moreover, Bloom’s writing treats eros as the key to a person, while Foucault’s work problematizes

¹⁰ Sullivan, 233-234; Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. I: Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 136-137, 153, 160; and Vernon, 154.

¹¹ *The Age of Anxiety* won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1948 (*Age* xli).

¹² See Halperin, *Saint Foucault*.

the conflation of desire and identity.¹³ But their thought converges in a profound way: they talk at great length about intergenerational male friendship, investing it with enormous political value. I should perhaps place “talk” in quotes, for in addition to Foucault’s late interviews and Bloom’s *Love and Friendship* (1993), a book that he dictated as he was dying of AIDS, I here rely on *Ravelstein* (2000), Saul Bellow’s *roman à clef* about Bloom, which puts the arguments of *Love and Friendship* in the context of (a) Bloom’s attraction to men and (b) what Bloom understood to be his real calling, teaching philosophy.

Because of the oddity of my channeling a thinker’s ideas through a memoir masquerading as a novel, I will say a few words by way of explanation before I continue the argument of this chapter. *Ravelstein* is universally acknowledged as a not-at-all disguised portrait of Allan Bloom. Indeed, because the novel outs Bloom, it caused a stir when it was published.¹⁴ (That is not to say that Bloom led a closeted life—in fact, he was out among his colleagues, students, and friends. He simply never wrote about his sexuality, nor mentioned it in any public lecture.) A recurrent theme in the novel-memoir is that Bloom asked—nay, *obliged*—Bellow to write a book about him after his death, a book that would not stint on any details, especially the sexual ones. “I’m laying this on you as an obligation,” Abe Ravelstein (i.e., Allan Bloom) says to Chick (i.e., Saul

¹³ In a discussion of Diotima’s discourse, Bloom rebukes modern students for their unwillingness “to justify their sexual tastes or practices.” For him, the *Symposium* presents a better model for talking about sexuality than his students’ declaration of a “*de facto* equality among all preferences and practices,” for the *Symposium*, he says, forces one to think about the relationship between desire and character: Socrates et al. “are making their confessions and, unawares, showing whether they are serious or frivolous persons. It is impossible in reading the *Symposium* not to judge men’s quality by their erotic practices and the way they celebrate them,” 434. By contrast, Foucault says in “Love and Friendship” that we ought to “distrust [...] the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of “Who am I?” and “What is the secret of my desire?,” 135. These discrepant philosophical moves, we will see, drive their corresponding interest in the political value of friendship.

¹⁴ See Christopher Hitchens, “The Egg-Head’s Egger-On,” *London Review of Books* 22.9 (2000): 21-23.

Bellow).¹⁵ “I want you to show me as you see me, without softeners or sweeteners.”¹⁶ As if to clarify the scope of “as you see me,” Ravelstein (Bloom) corrects Chick’s (Bellow’s) portrait of a mutual friend: “Ravelstein, after he had read my sketch of Kogon, said that I should have commented on his sex life—a major omission, he believed. He told me authoritatively, ‘You’ve missed it—Kogon is attracted to men.’”¹⁷ For Bloom, as I mentioned a moment ago, people’s erotic longings constitute the key to their character.¹⁸

But that is not to say that Bloom, for whom the *Symposium* was a kind of bible, conflates erotic and sexual longing. As I rely on Bellow’s memoir qua novel about Bloom, I am mindful of a problem: if de-gayng a gay writer presents a critical temptation and danger, so, too, does sexualizing everything having to do with loving and longing.¹⁹ In his own writing, Bloom painstakingly teases out the fine distinctions between the erotic and the sexual. For him, there is, in addition to an “eros of bodies,” an “eros of souls”²⁰—i.e., “an irresistible attraction,” “a passionate, exclusive attachment that stems entirely from a supra-physical involvement of two consciousnesses.”²¹ Note that Bloom calls the “eros of souls” not a *non-physical* but a *supra-physical* relationship. In other words, it involves, not a condemnation or a transformation of sexual desires, as in sublimation, but an altogether different kind of bodily feeling that, according to Bloom, need not necessarily originate in sexual desire. (In this respect Bloom’s “eros of souls” looks forward to Charles Taylor’s discussion of incarnation and excarnation, to

¹⁵ Saul Bellow, *Ravelstein* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 129.

¹⁶ Bellow, 133.

¹⁷ Bellow, 133-134.

¹⁸ Bellow, 140.

¹⁹ Moreover, consider D. A. Miller’s point that outing a writer after his death can resemble “police entrapment,” *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1992), 18.

²⁰ Allan Bloom, 411.

²¹ Allan Bloom, 410.

which I will turn in chapter five.) Not only does Bloom find Freud's notion of sublimation preposterous (as I mentioned earlier), but he also finds it damaging, for it reinforces people's disbelief in passionate friendship.²²

Bellow's novel is relevant for my purposes, then, not because it titillates the reader with secrets, but because it puts the ideas I have just outlined in the context of Bloom's life as a teacher who loved men.²³ (Still, Bellow's novel is an admittedly problematic resource: we get a gay man's thoughts about eros via a straight man who exhibits a relentless genteel homophobia—not unlike that of the queer philosopher-teacher about whom he writes.)²⁴

To return to the argument of this chapter, Auden's construction of intergenerational male friendship as a reformulated erotic practice in *The Age of Anxiety* anticipates Bloom and Foucault;²⁵ reading *The Age of Anxiety* alongside these later thinkers brings out the subversiveness of the sociality pictured in this least-read of all of Auden's major works.²⁶ *The Age of Anxiety* concerns four strangers who befriend each other one night at a bar on Third Avenue in Manhattan during World War II (*Age* 9, 19):

²² Allan Bloom, 411.

²³ In fact, Bellow's novel deftly avoids any temptation to titillate the reader by refusing to psychologize Ravelstein. We never get Chick's musings on Ravelstein's psychical interiority. We never even hear Chick speculating on such things: "we aren't doing psychobiography here," the novel asserts (17). What we get is a hilarious portrait of the external—which is by no means to say superficial—details: the passion and intensity that Bloom brought to his interactions with people; his candor; his ornate, expensive Chicago apartment; his penthouse luxury suite in Paris; his endless telephone conversations with politically powerful former students; his love of gossip; etc. Moreover, the novel lays bare the social fragility of friendship that has been a recurring theme throughout *Queering the City of God*. "There are no acceptable modern terms for the discussion of friendship," Chick complains (94).

²⁴ One quick example: "There were very few indications in his private quarters of Ravelstein's sexual preferences. One had no reason, in any respect, to suspect him of irregularities of the commoner sort—the outlandish seductive behaviors of old-fashioned gay men. He couldn't bear the fluttering of effeminate men" (99).

²⁵ It must be said, though, that neither thinker names Auden as an influence, a fact that only lends urgency to the project of recovering Auden's rightful place in modernist literary histories of "citizen queer."

²⁶ See *Age* xi-xii, xl.

Quant, a shipping clerk; Malin, a medical intelligence officer in the Canadian Airforce; Rosetta, a buyer for a department store; and Emble, who has recently enlisted in the U.S. Navy. Though Auden sets the poem during World War II, the apocalyptic anxiety of the Cold War haunts its pages. Heading home after the four new friends have parted ways, Malin thinks to himself,

Both professor and prophet depress,
For vision and longer view
Agree in predicting a day
Of convulsion and vast evil,
When the Cold Societies clash
Or the mosses are set in motion
To overrun the earth,
And the great brain which began
With lucid dialectics
Ends in horrid madness. (Age 104-105)²⁷

During the night, the four new friends find humble but creative ways to disrupt that militarist apocalypticism. Thus barroom companionship, I argue, serves as an adaptation of the lofty coterie for Everyman. My reading will focus mostly on Quant and Malin, two aging queers who find a balm for their loneliness in the companionship of their new friends.²⁸

²⁷ Incidentally, the first use of “the Cold War” in reference to the conflict between the U.S. / NATO and the Soviet Union that the OED cites is from March 1946.

²⁸ The text gives ample evidence that Malin and Quant are aging. When the four temporarily split up, the narrator reports that “[t]hey divide thus, youth with youth and age with age. To the left go ROSETTA and EMBLE, to the right, QUANT and MALIN” (Age 53). As we will see, Malin is evidently old enough to be Emble’s father (Age 68-69). And Quant makes frequent references to his declining body, describing himself as “with grizzled chin, / Sans youth or use” (Age 73).

Malin is the more straightforwardly gay of the two characters (forgive the pun): he explicitly expresses sexual desire for Emble. But I am not alone in reading Quant as gay: Gerald Nelson notices that he is “an aging homosexual widower” in *Changes of Heart: A Study of the Poetry of W. H. Auden* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1969), 81. It appears that Quant spent his marriage wishing his wife were dead (Age 71). Quant, we will see, prefers the company of men to women; moreover, he has a predilection for rough trade and a penchant for camp phrases. Susannah Gottlieb describes Quant’s desires as “hilariously disordered and deliciously varied” in *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 117.

But before I proceed with my discussion of Auden's queer ecclesial "*suburb[s] of dissent*" as a reformulated erotic practice, I need to comment on a feature that somewhat distinguishes the transnational, intergenerational, mixed-orientation collective depicted in the *Age of Anxiety* from a coterie.

I. GROUP FRIENDSHIP

For the most part, the community at the center of *The Age of Anxiety* more nearly approximates David Caron's notion of "group friendship" than it fits the bill of a coterie. In *My Father & I: The Marais and the Queerness of Community* (2009), Caron defines "group friendship" as "bonds [...] created by the external and temporary circumstances that brought these people together, not by decisions made by individual members of the groups and not by a preexisting common trait, be it an essence or any other form of identity defined by sameness." Classmates, teammates, and army buddies are examples of group friendship; Caron calls them "*copains*," or, etymologically speaking, people who happen to share bread together, companions. The coterie, on the other hand, consists of "*amis*," or, etymologically speaking, people who love each other—who, like the "we" of "New Year Letter" (1941) or "*We, too, had known golden hours*" (1950) or "In Praise of Limestone" (1948), are drawn to *each other*, to the kind of passionate exchange they can enjoy by virtue of *who they are together*.²⁹ Hence, in what is perhaps the most famous essay about friendship, Montaigne explains his love for La Boëtie not by giving a

²⁹ Here I am mapping the "we, the inconstant ones" of "In Praise of Limestone" onto the speaker and his "dear" (SP 189, 191) as well as the tight-knit group of gay exiles on Ischia that, in the context of Auden's other poem about the island, "Ischia" (1948), becomes a clearer referent of the poem. See chapter one.

sketch of what they talked about or the things they did together but by saying, simply, “*parce que c’était lui, parce que c’était moi*” [“because it was him, because it was me”].³⁰ “That’s the whole difference,” Caron explains: “whereas *amis* must love each other, *copains* need only love bread, or whatever it is that they share in lieu of bread.”³¹ I would add that the label “coterie” (my term, not Caron’s) usually identifies the *amis* as artists or intellectuals by profession. The bar-*copains* of *The Age of Anxiety*, though, have much less highbrow occupations than the coterie-*amis* of “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” (1933) or “New Year Letter” or “*We, too, had known golden hours.*” And, I might also add, the three men in *The Age of Anxiety* do (or have done) military work (Quant used to serve in the army [*Age* 73]). Unlike the defiant artists of the texts that I discussed in the previous chapters, these men participate directly in the violent apparatus of the state.

The bar-*copains* all happen to be “displaced” people (*Age* 3): Rosetta hails from England; Malin, from Canada; Quant, from Ireland; and Emble, from the Midwest (*Age* 4-5). Rosetta is Jewish (*Age* 98-102). Quant and Malin, as I have already indicated, are queer. What brings the four together, though, is not their shared status as exiles, but their need to flee for a moment from “the universal disorder of the world outside” and to retreat into “an unprejudiced space in which nothing particular ever happens” (*Age* 3), that is, their need for a drink: the text describes them as “fugitives,” “in flight” from “the world” (*Age* 78); a night at the bar gives them an escape from the “bright clear day” of “work” and “war” (*Age* 106). They talk (for 108 pages, in Anglo-Saxon alliterative

³⁰ Montaigne, *Essais choisis: A Dual-Language Book*, trans. Stanley Applebaum (Mineola, NY: Dover: 2007), 106. But NB: the translations I provide here are my own.

³¹ David Caron, *My Father & I: The Marais and the Queerness of Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 197.

verse) until dawn. Whether the group will ever reconstitute itself again seems unlikely: by the morning, the timorously bisexual Emble has passed out on Rosetta's bed (although the group puts on a wedding masque, Emble and Rosetta never consummate their "casual" crush [*Age* 88]); and Quant and Malin, the two aging queers, have "parted and immediately forgotten each other's existence" (*Age* 98, 103). In this respect, these four bar-*copains* resemble Caron's characterization of "group friendship" as transitory, concerned with "sharing rather than transmission," lacking a future or a purpose beyond itself.³² (The one exception to this is the relationship between Malin and Emble, which, as will we see shortly, does concern itself with sharing and transmission, at least from Malin's perspective, and thus more nearly approximates the *amitié* of coterie.) And thus the idle divagations of the bar-*copains* also differ from Auden's "New Year Letter" to his coterie-*amie* Elizabeth Mayer: whereas the bar-*copains* enjoy drinks together with no thought for recording and disseminating their conversations for posterity, Auden writes his letter to Mayer "under Flying Seal to all / Who wish to read it anywhere" (*DM* 25) so that anyone might use the letter as a resource for thinking about how to do community more justly (as we saw in chapter two).

Still, in the course of a discussion about Auden's construction of the ethical value of coterie-*amitié*, it makes sense to bring up the group of bar-*copains* depicted in *The Age of Anxiety*, for at least five reasons. (a) Their "common hope" and "common goal" may simply be to get drunk, take a night walk through the city, and make it safely back to Rosetta's apartment (*Age* 52, 57), but they have extraordinary conversations along the way. For example, they lament the sort of person that industrial capitalist societies create, namely, "the new barbarian," "bred" by "factories" and schooled by "[c]orporate

³² Caron, *My Father & I*, 203.

companies” (*Age* 16) so that he develops a “market-made” subjectivity (*Age* 34). Such societies, the four know, have allowed the devil to become all too real, a totalitarian dictator:

Lord of this life. He looks natural,
He smiles well, he smells of the future,
Odorless ages, an ordered world
Of planned pleasures and passport-control,
Sentry-go, sedatives, soft drinks and
Managed money, a moral planet
Tamed by terror: his telegram sets
Grey masses moving as the mud dries.
Many have perished: more will. (*Age* 14)

In addition, the four bar-*copains* share their personal histories (*Age* 23-42) and try to imagine a better world—variously figured as “some / Nameless Eden” (*Age* 38),³³ “the Good Place” (*Age* 39), “the Quiet Kingdom” (*Age* 46), and “a green world” (*Age* 49)—a society free from “press-applauded public untruth” (*Age* 35) and the “vile civilities vouched for by / Statisticians” (*Age* 35-36). Like Auden’s tonier “*suburb[s] of dissent*,” then, the bar-*copains* are concerned with resisting what “In Praise of Limestone” calls “the Great Powers” (*SP* 191), the demagogues who, as “*We, too, had known golden hours*” puts it, “*befuddle the crowd*” with “*spells*” that reduce language to “*a horrid mechanical screech*” (*Nones* 7).

Moreover, (b) the bar-*copains* interpret their time together, however brief, as a countercultural practice. With the tongue-in-cheek dead seriousness of camp, Quant silences the barroom radio and announces that the four new friends have formed a social organization to discuss heady matters like “*HOMO ABYSSUS OCCIDENTALIS*” (i.e.,

³³ As we saw in chapter one, Auden sometimes uses the moniker “Eden” to indicate nostalgia. Here, though, Malin “pines for some / Nameless Eden where he never was” (*Age* 38).

Western man, a creature of the abyss). Quant gives the organization several queer-themed names:

Listen, Box,
And keep quiet. Listen courteously to us
Four reformers who have founded—why not?—
The Gung-ho Group, the Ganymede Club
For homesick young angels, the Arctic League
Of Tropical Fish, the Tomboy Fund
For Blushing Brides and the Bide-a-wees
Of Sans-Souci, assembled again
For a Think-Fest [.] (*Age 21*)

A “Gung-Ho” collective of carefree “Bide-a-wees” (a Scots phrase meaning “stay awhile”), the four new friends are serious about their pleasure. The geographical and sexual displacement respectively signified by “the Arctic League / Of Tropical Fish” and “the Tomboy Fund / For Blushing Brides” indicates the countercultural ethos of their “Think-Fest.” But the queerest and campiest of the names that Quant comes up with is “The Ganymede Club / for homesick young angels.” According to the Greek myth, since Ganymede was the most beautiful of all boys, Zeus, disguised as an eagle, abducted him to serve as cupbearer on Mount Olympus. All of the gods liked Ganymede except Hera, Zeus’s wife, who jealously saw Ganymede as a rival for her husband’s affections. Plato comments on the paederastic angle of the myth in the *Laws* (636d) and in the *Phaedrus* (255c). (The shipping clerk’s knowledge of Greek myth is explained by the fact that “he had spent many hours one winter in the Public Library reading for the most part—he could not have told you why—books on Mythology” [*Age 4*].) It is interesting that an image evocative of intergenerational gay male affection should occur to Quant as a way to capture the ethos of the group, for, as we will see, the much older Malin develops a (mostly unreciprocated) sexual interest in the much younger Emble. (The narrator tells

us that Emble is a college sophomore, so he must be somewhere between 18 and 20 [*Age* vii, 5].)

And there is yet another queer clue in the text that lends weight to reason (b) for bringing up the bar-*copains* in a discussion of Auden's construction of the ethical value of coterie-*amitié*: (c) a quote from Ronald Firbank's comic novel *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1924) provides the epigraph to the fifth section of *The Age of Anxiety*, in which the group spontaneously stages a wedding between Rosetta and Emble. The epigraph reads, "'Oh, Heaven help me,' she prayed, 'to be decorative and to do right'" (*Age* 87). The prayer more or less sums up the takeaway message of Firbank's campy, mannered novel: the cosmopolitan culture in a flower-shop staffed by gay Muslim teen migrant workers functions as an ethical corrective to the damaging classism of Pisuerga, an imaginary southern European hereditary monarchy.³⁴ To be decorative, then, *is* to do right.

Auden originally wanted to use the Firbank quote as the epigraph to the whole poem, but he feared that readers would misunderstand it. "I think it [the Firbank epigraph] very serious," he told a friend, "but no one else will unless I write an essay to explain why."³⁵ Fourteen years after the publication of *The Age of Anxiety*, Auden delivered the explanatory essay in the form of a radio talk. "Ronald Firbank and an Amateur World" (1961) characterizes Firbank's vision of "the earthly paradise" as a place where the most serious things—religion and sex—become lighthearted amateur games (*Prose iv* 336). Auden unpacks that characterization by distinguishing between professional activities, on the one hand, which involve "ambition and conscience" and

³⁴ For a wonderful close-reading of the novel, see Robert L. Caserio, "Artifice and Empire in Ronald Firbank's Novels," *Western Humanities Review* 51 (1997): 227-235.

³⁵ Quoted in *Age* xxxiii.

“care” (*Prose iv* 336); and amateur games, on the other, where “[t]here is no obligation, natural or moral, to play, and there is an absence of care” (*Prose iv* 335). Professional activities are marked by “necessity”: “[f]ailure” at them “causes physical and mental suffering” (*Prose iv* 336). Amateur games are marked by gratuity (*Prose iv* 335).

So how does the epigraph from *The Flower Beneath the Foot* relate to the four bar-copains in *The Age of Anxiety*? Having shared their personal stories and gotten seriously drunk, they find themselves in the middle of a Firbankian game, playing their way toward his earthly paradise of amateur merriment: they are the “Bide-a-wees / Of Sans-Souci” (*Age* 21). The omniscient narrator who occasionally punctuates their verse-chat to offer clarifying details tells us that

So it was now as they sought that state of prehistoric happiness which, by human beings, can only be imagined in terms of a landscape bearing a symbolic resemblance to the human body. The more completely these four forgot their surroundings and lost their sense of time, the more sensitively aware of each other they became, until they achieved in their dream that rare community which is otherwise only attained in states of extreme wakefulness. (*Age* 46)

The four share a dream-vision based on the *Zohar*, or *The Book of Splendor*, a thirteenth-century Kabbalistic text that links the ten *sefirot*, or attributes of God, to parts of the human body (part three). (Unlike in the *Zohar*, where the ninth *sefirah* corresponds to the phallus, the body in Auden’s adaptation has breasts but no genitals. And Auden maps not the *sefirot* but various countercultural communities onto parts of the human body: a monastery set apart from “armed cities” corresponds to the breasts [*Age* 49]; an inn that serves as a bolt-hole for cross-class alliances between “detectives” and “thieves”

corresponds to the hands [*Age* 52].)³⁶ “For amusement’s sake,” the four bar-*copains* “run a race” down a street lined by yew trees (*Age* 64). Then they take a cab to Rosetta’s apartment (part four), where they stage a make-believe wedding between Rosetta and Emble (part five). After all of this, the narrator reports that

Alcohol, lust, fatigue, and the longing to be good, had by now induced in them all a euphoric state in which it seemed as if it were only some trifling and easily rectifiable error, improper diet, inadequate schooling, or an outmoded moral code which was keeping mankind from the millennial Earthly Paradise. Just a little more effort, perhaps merely the discovery of the right terms in which to describe it, and surely absolute pleasure must immediately descend upon the astonished armies of this world and abolish for ever all their hate and suffering. (*Age* 93)

Through their silliness, they accomplish the serious work of escaping (in however momentary and however illusory a way) the tyranny of “the armies of this world”; that is, they resist “the Great Powers” (*SP* 191).³⁷

Auden underlines the point by assigning a serious ritual significance to their wedding game: “[i]n times of war even the crudest kind of positive affection between persons seems extraordinarily beautiful, a noble symbol of the peace and forgiveness of which the whole world stands so desperately in need” (*Age* 88). Furthermore, by couching their Firbankian game in Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse (rather than, say, realist drama), Auden mimics the preciousness of Firbank’s writing. And Auden originally extended that preciousness to the bibliographic code of his poem: he “took a close interest in the appearance of the book,” Humprey Carpenter tells us, and “chose a small,

³⁶ See Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of the Kabbalah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 65, 77, 107, 117, 123; Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 251; and *Age* 131.

³⁷ See Caron, *My Father & I*, 204-205.

elegant, Victorian typeface.”³⁸ *The Age of Anxiety* thus upsets the links among earnestness, authenticity / sincerity, and ethical significance. Instead, the poem attaches ethical significance to style, make-believe, and frivolity (a point that I will revisit in the concluding chapter when I consider Auden’s turn away from psychoanalysis as a tool for describing subjectivity).

From (b) the group’s interpretation of their time together as in some sense countercultural and (c) Auden’s construction of the world of the bar-*copains* as a Firbankian game, we can conclude that (d) *The Age of Anxiety* opens up the coterie as a countercultural practice for people who travel in less rarefied circles and to less exotic places. In other words, the poem gestures towards a way that ordinary folk—shipping clerks as opposed to Pulitzer Prize-winning poets—might take up the queer relational practices of the coterie. Not only that, but it gestures towards a way that people who are directly caught up in the violence of the nation-state might practice small acts of creative resistance. Quant (the former U.S. soldier), Emble (the recent enlistee in the U.S. Navy), and Malin (the medical intelligence officer for the Canadian air force) defy the Enlightenment Western secular democratic dictates about male friendship. According to these heteronormative imperatives, male friendship should only happen in childhood, the army, and prison. As David Caron puts it, “the public sphere is supposed to be the only legitimate site of the [grown-up] male collective.”³⁹ That is because private male friendship is viewed as a threat to the procreative domain of straight marriage. But Quant, Malin, and Emble *never swap army stories*, and instead play a paradisiacal

³⁸ Humphrey Carpenter, 347. Unfortunately, Alan Jacob’s recent scholarly edition of the poem was unable to reproduce the typeface, though it does include a facsimile page from the first edition (*Age* xlix-l).

³⁹ Caron, *My Father & I*, 205.

Firbankian game in which the military has no place (though, as we will see, Quant and Malin put more heart into the game than Emble).

Thus *The Age of Anxiety* finds a solution to one of the main problems posed by Auden's depiction of the coterie in "New Year Letter" (1941): how can the coterie speak to Middletown? That is, how can a text about elites, written in the polyglot idiom of elites, kindle a queer angle of view in its ordinary readers?

Recall that "New Year Letter" calls Mayer's coterie "our privileged community" (*DM* 43). In the manuscript Auden originally wrote "[o]ur fortunate community." But he penciled a Flaubert quote (from Francis Steegmuller's biography *Flaubert and Madame Bovary*) in the margin of his notebook in reproach: "Don't let's pity ourselves."⁴⁰ The revision (of "fortunate" to "privileged") alludes to an expanded version of the rebuke, included in the annotations to "New Year Letter" in *The Double Man*: "We are the privileged. Our minds are lit by gas. There are so many people who are shivering in attics without even candles" (*DM* 117). Even without the allusion to Flaubert, the revision of "fortunate" to "privileged" underlines Auden's continuing discomfort with coteries—as well as his lack of a clean conscience about his own privilege. "Fortunate" (from the Latin *fortuna*, a personification of luck as a goddess) denominates chance the agent of one's happiness. (Auden was quite fond of the personification of fortune, referring frequently to "Dame Kind" in his poetry, his personal notebooks, and his correspondence.) By contrast, "privileged" (from the Middle French *privilegier*, "to grant indulgences") implicates a whole system of injustice in one's happiness. In the previous chapter I argued that one way in which "New Year Letter" addresses this problem is through the pedagogical design of the poem's annotations.

⁴⁰ Holograph notebook, Berg.

While *The Age of Anxiety* is a very difficult poem to make sense of,⁴¹ it arguably comes up with a more satisfactory answer than “New Year Letter” to the elitist exclusivity of the coterie by portraying the bar scene as a queer collectivity. For the same reason, *The Age of Anxiety* reworks an even earlier text by Auden. Alan Jacobs and Edward Mendelson both notice that *The Age of Anxiety* revisits the scenario of the early lyric that I discussed in chapter one: “Out on the lawn I lie in bed” (1933), a text that worries about the privileged complacency of coteries. Instead of the earlier lyric’s four “equal,” “[l]ucky” scholars enjoying a mystical union in “the sexy airs of summer” (*SP* 30), *The Age of Anxiety* portrays four strangers getting drunk together on the night of All Souls (*Age* 6, 46, 93), i.e., the 2 November Christian festival marking the “universal democracy of sinners under judgment” (*Age* xxxi), as one of Auden’s favorite historians puts it.⁴²

And now, to return to my claims that (1) the queer collectives in Auden’s later poetry constitute a reformulated erotic practice and that (2) this reformulated erotic practice anticipates a tradition of older gay men who mine the history of friendship for inspiration as they seek to invent post-dating and non-marital relational forms.

II. TINKLEBELL, THE TEACHER, & THE NAVY BOY

Alluding to a phrase made famous by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Susannah Gottlieb rightly notices that “the entire erotic dynamic” of *The Age of Anxiety* “exists as an affair

⁴¹ Presumably one of the main reasons why it is the least read of all of his major works. Edward Mendelson writes that parts of the poem have “baffled even Auden’s most sympathetic readers,” *Later Auden*, 250.

⁴² See *Age* viii; and Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 248. The historian is Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy.

‘between men.’⁴³ True, the four celebrate a pretend cross-gender wedding between Rosetta and Emble. But throughout the poem Emble evinces a mix of sexual malaise and coquettishness toward men and women alike. “So, fully conscious of the attraction of his [Navy] uniform to both sexes,” the narrator tells us at the beginning of the poem, “he looked round him, slightly contemptuous when he caught an admiring glance, and slightly piqued when he did not” (*Age* 6). Later, Malin gets the impression that Emble enjoys Malin’s desire for him. Malin says of Emble: “Girlishly glad that my glance is not chaste, / He wants me to want what he would refuse” (*Age* 69). And finally, after his mock wedding to Rosetta, Emble passes out, “[t]oo aloof to love.” Rosetta wonders aloud to Emble’s snoring body, “Did you lose your nerve / And cloud your conscience because I wasn’t / Your dish really?” (*Age* 98) In fact, Rosetta is nobody’s dish: Malin, as we know, fancies Emble. And Quant decidedly prefers the company of the other men.⁴⁴ Like Malin, Quant seems to fancy Emble, but the text is less explicit about Quant’s interest in the young man.⁴⁵ At any rate, as Gottlieb puts it, Rosetta is sexually

⁴³ Gottlieb, 118.

⁴⁴ When the four of them split up temporarily (for the second time) during their *Zohar*-like dream-vision (so that they can all explore the terrain of their vision more fully), they “cast lots” to determine “who shall accompany whom.” They resort to casting lots because they know they would never be able to come to an agreement about the pairings. Quant is “disappointed” that he gets paired with Rosetta, “thinking of another” (Emble, perhaps?) and muttering to himself, “This bodes badly” (*Age* 67). When the four then split into pairs and Quant is alone with Rosetta, he reflects that their “needs belong to / Separate systems that make no sense to each other: / She is not my sister and I am not her friend” (*Age* 69).

⁴⁵ The crucial moment signifying this possibility occurs when the four of them pair off (for the first time) during their *Zohar* dream-vision journey, and each of them reacts to the arrangement of couples. During this first temporary parting, Rosetta and Emble form one of the pairs (“youth with youth”) and Malin and Quant the other (“age with age”). Quant’s reaction: “I know what will happen, / Am sincerely sorry” (*Age* 53). He can’t be sorry to have lost an opportunity to get closer to Rosetta, for the next time the group splits into pairs, he expresses disappointment at getting paired with her (*Age* 67). A more plausible explanation for his being “sincerely sorry,” then, is that he predicts that Rosetta and Emble will come to (sort of) fancy each other, and he’s sorry because he envies the opportunity she has to get closer to Emble. The plausibility of this reading is strengthened by a parallel that the text sets up between Quant and Ovid’s Orpheus, a detail that I will unpack in a moment. (It could simply be the case that he just doesn’t want to hang out with Rosetta alone, though.)

“out of place” in the group, dominated as it is by Quant’s and Malin’s same-sex affections.⁴⁶

Group friendship, I have suggested, provides a balm for the loneliness of these two aging queers: each in his different way treats friendship as an erotic practice. For Quant—who has a vividly queer sexual imagination, as we began to see from the names he comes up with for the group—a night at the bar provides an opportunity to vent his desires by sharing raunchy personal anecdotes. For Malin, spending time with Emble provides an opportunity to mold the younger man intellectually and spiritually—that is, it provides an occasion for a pedagogical eros that Malin understands in terms of the pederastic erotics of male friendship in Plato’s *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*.⁴⁷ I will examine each character in turn, first Quant, then Malin.

Quant has a predilection for rough trade, a penchant for camp phrases (as I hinted at earlier in the notes), and a passion for raunchy stories. Toward the beginning of the poem, he tells his new bar-*copains* a story about “the long / Visitor’s voyage” he once made to “Venus Island” (*Age 28*), a place with “cupids on stilts, / Their beautiful bottoms breaking wind” and “[g]entlewomen [...] morosely stitching / Red flannel scivvies for heroic herms,” i.e., statues of Hermes with erect phalli (*Age 29*). He was “[e]lated” there.

Quant remembers

a brick bath-house where burghers mixed
With light-fingered ladies and louche trade,
Dancing in serpents and daisy chains

⁴⁶ Gottlieb, 118.

⁴⁷ Note that the Plato-inspired pedagogical / philosophical dimension of Malin’s self-described unchaste attraction to Emble is not representative of ancient Greek pederasty (*Age 69*): “paedagogy was not, even among the honorable members of that *beau monde*, the essence of paederasty. Despite modern appearance-saving claims to the contrary, the erotic excitement and bittersweet longing aroused in Athenian men (whether low- or high-minded) by attractive boys do not seem to have been primarily of a philosophic nature and, when frustrated, obviously required something other than a purely Platonic means of expression,” Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, 92.

To mad music. (*Age* 29)

Similarly, Quant recounts a time when, working as a busboy, he envisioned one of the patrons in the restaurant as “a siren with six breasts” (*Age* 26). In addition to recounting his own sexual adventures and fantasies, Quant interprets his experiences through the lens of homoerotic Greek myths: a widower, he sees a reflection of himself in Ovid’s “[k]ind Orpheus,” who “sinned against kind” (*Age* 37).⁴⁸ In Ovid’s version of the myth, Orpheus forswears women after the death of his wife Eurydice, “start[ing] the practice among the Thracian / tribes of turning for love to immature males and of plucking / the flower of a boy’s brief spring before he has come to his manhood” (10.83-85).⁴⁹ Moreover, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* feature a song by Orpheus about none other than the aforementioned Ganymede (10.155-161), one of Quant’s stock myths.⁵⁰

The parallel between Quant and Orpheus reveals Quant’s regaling the bar-*copains* with Greek myths and sexual escapades as a reformulated erotic practice. A typescript draft of Quant’s last speech underlines the parallel between the two queer widowers. After Quant and Malin have parted ways at dawn, Quant trips onto his doorstep, crying out to himself as he almost falls:

Why, Miss ME, what’s the matter? Must you go woolgathering?
At least you might look as if you liked what I sing to you.
One would think you would be thankful, but all you think of is
 woodge-woodge
With the other hacks ... After all I’ve forgiven you.
Once I was your wonder. How short-winded you’ve gotten.
Come, Tinklebell, trot. Let’s pretend you’re a thoroughbred.
Over the hill now into Abraham’s Bosom. (*Age* 141)

⁴⁸ Note that here the kind / kind homograph destabilizes the category of the natural. Indeed, like Virgil and Ovid, Quant envisions a decapitated Orpheus continuing to sing, “[d]inning the doom into a deaf Nature / Of her loose chaos” (*Age* 37). We will look at Auden’s treatment of the natural as a problematic ethical category in detail in chapter five.

⁴⁹ See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), 386.

⁵⁰ Raeburn, 389.

(“Woolgathering” means daydreaming; “woodge-woodge” refers to sexual activity;⁵¹ “hack” is a slang word for a sex worker.) For the final published version, Auden cancelled lines 2-4 from the passage. The typescript draft thus establishes the sexual content of Quant’s daydreaming a bit more clearly. But the especially significant word for our purposes is “sing.” Like the widower Orpheus singing about the beautiful boy Ganymede, Quant actually sings many of his riffs on the Greek myths and his sexual anecdotes (*Age* 41, 88, 96, 103-105). In the presence of his bar-*copains*, the “tired old widower” so painfully self-conscious about his physical decrepitude (*Age* 4, 44, 69, 73) improvises a jukebox tune and several ballads, making up songs based on his lonely woolgathering to entertain his bar-*copains*.

If the company of the bar-*copains* also provides a balm for Malin’s loneliness, it does so in a way that differs significantly from Quant’s experience. That is because the night at the bar becomes a reformulated erotic practice for Malin chiefly through his interactions with Emble. And, as I mentioned briefly above, Malin’s interactions with Emble more nearly approximate coterie-*amitié* than bar-companionship. That is to say, Malin understands his interactions with Emble as being about *transmission* as well as *sharing*. Malin understands his time with Emble as having a larger purpose than time alone with a cute boy. Malin pays close attention to the boy—you could say that he peers into the boy’s soul. And he wants to mold that soul. An even more accurate vocabulary to describe Malin’s feelings for Emble than the French *copain / ami* distinction, then, would be the classical Greek *eros / philia* distinction: *philia* depends on equality and reciprocity,⁵² but an aging lover’s *eros* for a boy (we will see) feeds the aging lover

⁵¹ See Jacobs’s note, *Age* 141-142.

⁵² Sullivan, 193.

spiritually and ethically, and becomes an opportunity to transmit wisdom and virtue, whether or not the boy reciprocates.

Like Bloom, Foucault, Sullivan, and Vernon, Malin turns to the history of friendship to guide his interactions with Emble. Malin takes inspiration from the ancient Greek culture of male friendship. Cycling alone with Emble during the group's *Zohar*-like dream-journey through various countercultural communities (part three), Malin begins to interpret his interactions with Emble through the lens of Plato's *Symposium* (an example of the ancient Greek quasi-institution of the all-male party that I mentioned in chapter one)⁵³:

As we cycle silent through a serious land
For hens and horses, my hunger for a live
Person to father impassions my sense
Of this boy's beauty in battle with time.

These old-world hamlets and haphazard lanes
Are perilous places; how plausible here
All arcadian cult of carnal perfection,
How intoxicating the platonic [*sic*] myth. (*Age 68*)

Moments later Malin adds that

The aim of eros is to create a soul,
The start of its magic is stolen flesh. (*Age 68*)

And then:

Girlishly glad that my glance is not chaste,
He wants me to want what he would refuse:
For sons have this desire for a slave also. (*Age 69*)

The "platonic myth" that exhilarates Malin in this scene comes from Socrates' presentation of Diotima's discourse on love as soul-pregnancy, or what I will call soul-fathering (206b-206e, 208e-210e); the discussion of pederasty by Pausanias (181c, 184c-

⁵³ For the discussion that follows, I rely on Alexander Nehamus and Paul Woodruff's translation of the *Symposium* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1989).

184e, 185c); and Alcibiades' tale of unrequited love for Socrates (218c-218d, 219d, 222a).

Diotima's discourse centers on the ladder of "loving boys correctly" that lovers must climb in order eventually to behold "the Beautiful itself," i.e., the changeless, transcendent form or idea of beauty (211c, 211e). During the stages of this mystical ascent to love, the lovers "are pregnant in soul" and give birth to ideas rather than children: poetry as well as insights about politics, justice, and virtue (209a-209e). The ladder of love has a pedagogical dimension inasmuch as the soul-pregnant and idea-siring lover seeks "to educate" his beloved (209c). To the pedagogical dimension of Diotima's notion of soul-pregnancy, the speeches of Pausanias and Alcibiades add a pederastic dimension. Put differently, Pausanias' and Alcibiades' discussions of pederasty bring out the quality of soul-fathering inherent in soul-pregnancy. Which is to say, according to them, the older lover should father the soul of his younger beloved, helping him to become a wise and virtuous citizen.⁵⁴

From the Diotima-like logic that Malin applies to his self-described unchaste feelings for Emble, we can infer that, in the scene from *The Age of Anxiety* quoted in the previous paragraph, the "arcadian cult of carnal perfection" refers to the "platonian myth" of the ladder of loving boys correctly. Malin's "hunger for a live / Person to father" infuses his feelings about "this boy's beauty" with passion. Like Diotima's picture of a soul-pregnant and idea-siring lover, Malin wants to "create a soul." And he does manage to engage in a bit of soul-fathering (albeit in a campy, Firbankian way) over the course of the night. Witness his two father-of-the-groom-like speeches at the wedding masque: (1)

⁵⁴ "Love's value to the city as a whole and to the citizens is immeasurable," says Pausanias, "for he compels the lover and his loved one alike to make virtue their central concern" (185c).

a cautionary character sketch of Emble for Rosetta, the sagacity of which suggests that Malin has indeed peered into Emble's soul (*Age 92*); and (2) hilariously graphic sex advice for Emble, the tone of which indicates that Malin predicts unhappy sex for the couple (*Age 93*).⁵⁵

In addition, like the sentiments of the wisdom- and virtue-seeking lovers described by Pausanias, Malin's feelings for Emble do not amount to a disembodied intellectual and aesthetic ecstasy. Rather, what Malin imagines himself having with Emble is a corrected erotic practice of "carnal perfection" (*Age 68*); even if the friendship excludes sex, it is still sexual, for Malin's "glance is not chaste" (*Age 69*), and his "groin groans" for Emble (*Age 71*). As I have insisted a couple of times thus far, and as I will have cause to mention again, this is not to say that the desire (however remote or misunderstood or self-condemned) to have sex must always accompany the erotic. But sexual attraction—albeit without the intention to have sex—forms part of the dynamic between Malin and Emble and hence part of Malin's reformulated erotic practice of friendship.

The horses that Malin spots while cycling with Emble evoke another Platonic gloss on Malin's feelings. Perhaps the horses trigger Malin's thought of the Greek philosopher, for in the *Phaedrus* Socrates describes the human soul as a charioteer (i.e., the intelligence that perceives the changeless, transcendent forms of, e.g., justice and beauty) steering two horses, one obedient and one unruly (*Phaedrus* 246a-b, 247d).⁵⁶ In

⁵⁵ Malin uses the adjectives "stiffly" and "staid" to describe Emble's participation in sex with Rosetta. The emphasis on the lack of an adventurous, easygoing spirit here underlines the poem's earlier hints at Emble's timorous bisexuality.

⁵⁶ All citations of the *Phaedrus* refer to Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff's translation (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1995).

any case, it is worth recapping the whole allegory, for it sheds light on Malin's corrected erotic practice of friendship with Emble.

According to the cosmology of the allegory, the human soul qua charioteer needs to grow sturdy wings in order to fly back to the heaven from which it has fallen (*Phaedrus* 248e). Beauty nourishes the soul's wings; ugliness shrinks them (246e). Some souls are better able than others to recollect the heavenly reality of the forms. For such a soul, encountering a beautiful boy triggers a memory of the forms, shocking them into a kind of madness (249d). Gazing on the beautiful boy "waters the growth of his wings" (251b). In the absence of the boy, though, the wings wither to stumps; scabs form where the wings are supposed to sprout (251d). The aforementioned obedient and unruly horses pull the soul of the lover this way and that as he wants, and yet resists the desire, to have sex with the boy—until the lover beats the unruly horse into submission, and the unruly horse dies of fright at the sight of the beautiful boy (253d-254e). At this point the boy, impressed by what the man can teach him about beauty and truth and the gods, "lets the man spend time with him" (255b). But he feels no eros for the lover. This is the classical pattern of eros: the beautiful beloved does not reciprocate the aging lover's feelings. The "backlove" that the boy develops for the lover in the *Phaedrus* is unexpected (255e).⁵⁷

True to the classical pattern of eros, it hardly matters to Malin that Emble does not reciprocate his longing—that Emble merely thinks of Malin as a "companion," a bread-sharing *copain* (*Age* 68). It is enough that Emble likes spending time alone with Malin; it

⁵⁷ On a related note, in the *Symposium*, Pausanias indicates that in the erotics of male friendship in ancient Greece, "yield[ing] too quickly" to a lover's "suits" is considered "shameful" (184a). That the younger beloved is, according to custom, not supposed to chase the older lover makes for part of the humor of the cute boy Alcibiades' speech in *The Symposium*, where he recounts Socrates' many refusals of his erotic advances (see especially 217a-217d).

is more than enough that Emble seems happy to be the object of Malin's eros. Malin can still enjoy his corrected erotic practice of soul-fathering. That is to say, like the lover whom Diotima describes, he has made "contact with someone beautiful," and so "he conceives and gives birth to what he has been carrying inside him for ages. And whether they are together or apart, he remembers that beauty" (209c). Hence—like one of the "little monks" in a "green world," who "[g]et up in the dark" to translate a "vision into / The vulgar lingo / Of armed cities" (*Age* 49)—the beautiful boy-loving Malin stands at dawn atop a Christianized version of Diotima's ladder, enjoying an eschatological vision of God's "World to come" (*Age* 108).

Perhaps, then, it is the spiritual dissimilarity of the reformulated erotic practice of soul-fathering, on the one hand, and that of woolgathering, on the other, that explains why Quant seems by comparison so much sadder when he crashes into his doorstep in the morning: the happiness of turning sexy woolgathering into funny songs lasts only while your audience is there to listen and laugh (*bar-copain* sharing); by contrast, soul-fathering fortifies one for the lonely trials ahead (*coterie-ami* transmission).

Malin's Plato-inspired soul-fathering of Emble fits the pattern of Auden's relationship with Chester Kallman after Kallman ended their romance (toward the end of the summer of 1941).⁵⁸ "Canzone" (1942)—part of "the published record of l'affaire C"⁵⁹—alludes to the allegory of the chariot in the *Phaedrus*, placing Auden in the role of the lover-pedagogue: "[t]he hot rampageous horses of my will, / Catching the scent of

⁵⁸ And not just Auden's relationship with Kallman—apparently there were other younger men in Auden's life with whom he enjoyed a sort of father-son friendship, e.g., Keith Callaghan. See Dorothy J. Farnan, *Auden in Love* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 157-158.

⁵⁹ ALS to Alan Ansen, 27 August 1947, Berg. The list does not include anything from *The Age of Anxiety*, which was published in July 1947, a month before Auden sent his list to Ansen. See Humphrey Carpenter, 347.

Heaven, whinny” (*CP* 329). Indeed, as Arthur Kirsch puts it, “the relationship” between Auden and Kallman was “more that of parent and child” after the summer of 1941.⁶⁰ And as Auden’s own Christmas Day epistolary prose poem to Kallman puts it (1941), Auden regarded Kallman, who was 14 years younger than Auden, as “intellectually a son”—albeit also “emotionally a mother” and “physically a father,” so that Auden came to understand “the Holy Family” through his chosen family with Kallman.⁶¹ The Christmas Day letter captures a key part of Auden’s erotics of coterie: through the reformulated erotic practice of friendship, queers without legal or biological means to enjoy the support of kinship structures can choose family.

Moreover—and this is one of the most crucial (and critically neglected) theological commitments of Auden’s later poetry, the point to which each of the previous chapters leads in a different way—these chosen families expand the relational possibilities for straight people, too.⁶² As we saw in the previous chapter, Auden’s introduction to *The Portable Greek Reader* (1948) supports Diotima’s exclusion of straight love from the stages of the soul’s growth on the grounds that body-pregnancy has less “social and political value” than soul-fathering. In other words, the biological sterility of gay love makes it more spiritually fecund than straight love. Gay lovers have time to acquire the wisdom and virtue needed in order “to teach human beings procreated in the normal way how to become a good society” (*Prose ii* 370). A text like *The Age of Anxiety* adds to Diotima’s discourse the caveat that childless queers overflow with better ideas—and what Foucault will call “richer, more interesting and creative” relational

⁶⁰ Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, 26.

⁶¹ For the full text of Auden’s Christmas Day, 1941 letter, see Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 182-183.

⁶² See Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

practices—because of the need to survive outside of “the protected forms of family life.”⁶³

By finishing a sentence about Auden’s erotics of coterie with a quote from Foucault, I want to suggest that, in addition to having a place in a history of the literary modernist “citizen queer,” Auden’s oeuvre also belongs in a story about later twentieth-century developments in queer theory and philosophy. I will quickly unpack that claim here by putting Allan Bloom’s and Michel Foucault’s treatment of friendship in conversation with Auden’s. (Chapter five will add to the line of inquiry in a couple of ways. I will build on the insights with which I end this chapter—more on that below. And I also will show how, by relying on the work of R. G. Collingwood, a twentieth-century British philosopher, Auden’s poetry provides answers to a constellation of major philosophical and theological problems, namely, the construction of nature and its relationship to grace as well as to ethical deliberation and hermeneutical reflection.)

As I mentioned above, Bloom and Foucault invest intergenerational male friendship with political value, albeit each through a different philosophical and vocational move. Guided by his study of Plato and his quasi-religious belief that eros explains a person, Bloom formed deep friendships with his students, successfully training them for positions of political power (e.g., advisor on U.S. national security and defense policy).⁶⁴ By contrast, Foucault’s late essays and interviews argue that dismantling the psychologistic notion of a gay essence frees us to elaborate a gay style, an ethics or art of living centered on friendship.⁶⁵ In particular, the question of contemporary

⁶³ Foucault, *Ethics*, 172.

⁶⁴ I am speaking here of Paul Wolfowitz, who under the pseudonym Philip Gorman makes thinly disguised appearances throughout *Ravelstein*.

⁶⁵ Foucault, *Ethics*, 135-136, 146.

intergenerational male friendship, a relationship without conventions, provides an opportunity for reflecting on the poverty of western modernity's "relational world" in contrast to antiquity.⁶⁶ In the next section I will treat each thinker in turn, first (and more extensively) Bloom, the votary of Diotima's ladder; then (briefly) Foucault, who spotlights the urgency of understanding the history of friendship.

III. EROS OF SOULS

"... *nos âmes s'entretiennent.*"

—Montaigne⁶⁷

In the 1940s, Auden created a delightfully irreverent parlor game called "Purgatory Mates." The object was to choose a pair of living (or dead) authors who hated (or surely would have hated) each other, and whose purgatorial punishment would be each other's company. Proceeding to paradise would require their learning to love each other. Examples of Auden's own pairings include Tolstoy and Oscar Wilde; T. S. Eliot and Walt Whitman.⁶⁸

The lives of W. H. Auden and Allan Bloom inspire a modification of Auden's parlor game. I like to imagine the two of them walking the glassy, gold streets of the City of God together, chain-smoking, refining their ideas about the beautiful and the good. If

⁶⁶ Foucault, *Ethics*, 136, 158.

⁶⁷ "Our souls converse." Montaigne, 106.

⁶⁸ See Tony Sharpe, "Final Beliefs: Stevens and Auden," *Literature & Theology* 25.1 (March 2011): 64.

memoirs, pseudo-memoirs, and biographies are to be trusted, Auden and Bloom were both larger than life, full of charming idiosyncrasies: Auden lectured in carpet slippers, for example, and Bloom trembled with intensity when he spoke. They both liked to organize what they knew into comprehensive systems: Auden, as we have seen, had a penchant for making taxonomies and charts; Bloom kept in daily telephone contact with some of his more politically powerful former students, partly to advise them, partly to “update and maintain” his massive reserves of “historical and political information,” i.e., “to fit up-to-the-minute decisions in the Gulf War” into a political history stretching back “to Plato and Thucydides.”⁶⁹ More significantly, Auden and Bloom were alike drawn to conservative thought: Auden, to theological orthodoxy; Bloom, to political and cultural conservatism. They both lived in exile from their given families: Auden, from the stifling “family” atmosphere of the patria that reviled his queerness and his faith;⁷⁰ Bloom, from a father whom he despised, “a toy ogre, a huffy little man, and a neurotic disciplinarian.”⁷¹ They both lived with a younger gay man in a chosen family of father and son.⁷² Both rejected the politics of gay pride.⁷³ They shared a commitment to loving what they called the *polis* of their friends.⁷⁴ And while Auden depicted soul-fathering in *The Age of Anxiety*, Bloom treated soul-fathering as a calling and a lifestyle.⁷⁵

Love and Friendship lays out the ideas behind Bloom’s lifestyle of soul-fathering. As I have said before, the book laments modernity’s deficient and overwhelmingly

⁶⁹ Bellow, 60.

⁷⁰ Humphrey Carpenter, 243. Though as I explained in chapter one, Auden gave no serious thought to Christianity until after immigrating to America.

⁷¹ Bellow, 60-61.

⁷² Bellow, 69, 177, 140-141.

⁷³ Humphrey Carpenter, 433; Bellow, 160.

⁷⁴ *DM* 48; Bellow, 52.

⁷⁵ “He never presented himself as a philosopher,” Bellow writes. “[P]rofessors of philosophy were not philosophers. He had had a philosophical training and had learned how a philosophical life should be lived. That was what philosophy was about, and this was why one read Plato” (173).

psychological vocabulary of love, a lexicon that effectively eliminates the relational category of passionate friendship. Bloom wants to recover an erotics of thought, the pleasure of communal philosophical inquiry that older lexicons once made possible.⁷⁶ In the treatment of Diotima's mystical ladder of love that concludes the book, Bloom happily declares, "There is no Greek word for sex, that late-nineteenth-century invention of sterile and timid imitations of science."⁷⁷ Such an erotics of thought demands a queer lifestyle. This is because, according to Bloom, who makes a queer hero out of Plato,⁷⁸ "[p]arents and families distort a child's eroticism by directing it toward the kind of spouses and offspring that are suitable to their projects. The family in principle prefers age to wisdom, and surrounds itself with all kinds of sacred terrors. Both intellectual and political freedom seem to depend upon some kind of break with it."⁷⁹ (Recall Auden's exile from England: if he wanted to grow as a poet, he had to escape the ideological expectations that his home country placed on him.) The biological family, inimical to wisdom and virtue, has no place in Bloom's philosophy.

Indeed, as *Ravelstein* shows, biological families have no place in the actual world of friendship that Ravelstein (Bloom) builds out of his philosophy.⁸⁰ Bellow's novel describes the practice of soul-fathering through which Bloom built his "set," his "disciples," his "close group" of former "students" who gave him "frequent reports" over the telephone on matters of political intrigue and national security.⁸¹ Bloom referred to

⁷⁶ Bloom, 432.

⁷⁷ Bloom, 435.

⁷⁸ Bloom writes that "the *Republic* really destroys the family. The unqualified authority of the ancestral is abolished in this city. Fathers and mothers hardly exist, and they can be ruled by their wise children," 440.

⁷⁹ Bloom, 441.

⁸⁰ From now on, I will simply say "Bloom" in my commentary for ease of reading, though I will continue to use "Ravelstein" in direct quotations from the novel.

⁸¹ Bellow, 10.

the unconventional pedagogy through which he built his circle as “the binding of souls.” He thought it irresponsible to try to separate teaching from eros, so his process of soul-binding placed “unusual emphasis ‘on the affects’—on love, not to beat around the bush.”⁸² The first lesson for the men? To rid themselves of their parents. “He hated his own family and never tired of weaning his gifted students from their families.”⁸³ He tried to rescue his students from the “disastrous misconceptions” they had inherited from their “mindless parents.”⁸⁴ Bellow tells us that Bloom’s “role” for his students “became, bit by bit, that of a father.”⁸⁵ Gradually he acquired a Socrates-like reputation for corrupting the youth; some fathers cautioned their sons to stay away.⁸⁶

Thus “driven by longing,” “in real earnest” about the Platonic “quest” for the mystical insights that eros could yield,⁸⁷ Bloom the self-described “bugger-familias” created a philosophical and political coterie. Bellow drives the point home by comparing Bloom’s “band” to the famous (and homophonous) Bloomsbury Group:

It was as natural that Ravelstein should need to know what went on in Downing or the Kremlin as it had been for Virginia Woolf to read Keynes’s private report on German reparations. Possibly Ravelstein’s views or opinions sometimes worked their way into policy decisions, but that wasn’t what mattered. What mattered was that he should remain in charge somehow of the ongoing political education of his old boys.⁸⁸

To be cut off from his informants in Washington and Paris, from his students, the people he had trained, the band of brothers, the initiates, the happy few made him extremely uncomfortable.⁸⁹

⁸² Bellow, 82.

⁸³ Bellow, 50.

⁸⁴ Bellow, 50.

⁸⁵ Bellow, 27.

⁸⁶ Bellow, 58.

⁸⁷ Bellow, 82.

⁸⁸ Bellow, 103, 12. And this after writing just a couple of pages earlier that “Ravelstein didn’t think well of the Bloomsbury intellectuals. He disliked their high camp, he disapproved of queer antics and of what he called ‘faggot behavior,’” 8.

⁸⁹ Bellow, 103.

After the queer alienation of his childhood, Bloom develops a longing for eros, a passionate calling to soul-fathering, a commitment to the quest for the beautiful and the good. (Though Bloom educated women, he could not think of them as potential philosophers, Bellow tells us. And some of his pedagogical friendships with men included sex.)⁹⁰ Like Auden, Bloom organizes a *polis* around that erotic commitment, a recoding of kinship based on the eros of souls rather than blood. And for Auden and Bloom alike, the reformulated erotic practice of the *polis* provides not just spiritual and intellectual but also emotional support: “something like relatives,” as Bellow puts it.⁹¹

Finally, because Bloom’s coterie trades in politics, journalism, and philosophy—whereas Auden’s trades in poetry and opera—Bellow’s representation of it makes more strikingly apparent a mission that Auden’s portrayal of queer networks also shares: to open the eyes, or awaken the *verbürgerlichten* souls, of Middletown’s empiric economic men (*DM* 57, 127-128, see also my discussion of “Middletown” and “Empiric Economic Man” in the previous chapter). Bellow’s literary sketch of Ravelstein’s “band” of “initiates,” with its (thinly disguised) Paul Wolfowitzes and Francis Fukuyamas, makes public the political significance of Bloom’s semi-private, quasi-institutional erotics of coterie. And yet in this respect there is something much more radical about Auden, the soul-father forerunner. Auden (literally) publicizes the political significance of his quasi-institutional erotics of coterie by writing about his friends and dedicating his theo-ethical apologies for friendship to his friends—by, that is, loving his alien and alienated friends

⁹⁰ Bellow, 140, 12.

⁹¹ Bellow, 158.

in public,⁹² and thus poetically spitting in the faces of the Anthony Powells and the George Steiners of the world.⁹³

Inasmuch as Auden's later poetry publicly names forms of sociality that exist outside the modern institutions of kinship—e.g., “The Ganymede Club for homesick young angels” (*Age 21*), with its campy, Firbankian barroom games and countercultural dream-visions and Platonic soul-fathering—Auden looks forward to Foucault's absorption, in his late essays and interviews, with what he calls “the problem of friendship.”⁹⁴ Because gay relationships lack legal protection and social recognition, a main feature of gay life is the ongoing project of inventing new relational supports. For Foucault, a quick glance at the history of friendship shows how “impoverished” the modern “relational world” is.⁹⁵ He thus argues that instead of trying to acquire the legal benefits of marriage by fighting for a right to marry, queers ought to “imagine and consider a new relational right that permits all possible types of relations to exist.” Such a relational right would not inhibit the ongoing invention of other, newer relational forms.⁹⁶ What's more, it would “enrich” the relational lives of straight people, too, allowing them to create “their own schema of relations.”⁹⁷ It sounds like a riff on Auden's reading of Diotima's discourse: marginalized queers resourcefully invent new modes of living together, and offer a gift to straight people in the process.

⁹² For example: “If now, two aliens in New York, / We meet, Elizabeth, and talk / Of friends who suffer in the torn / Old Europe where we both were born” (*DM* 50).

⁹³ As I mention in a note in the previous chapter, Anthony Powell reacted to Auden's death by saying to Kingsley Amis, “I'm delighted that shit has gone. It should have happened years ago ... scuttling off to America in 1939 with his boyfriend.” Richard Davenport-Hines, *Auden* (New York: Pantheon, 1996), 180. See chapter one for my account of George Steiner's coterie-phobia.

⁹⁴ Foucault, *Ethics*, 170.

⁹⁵ Foucault, *Ethics*, 158.

⁹⁶ Foucault, *Ethics*, 163.

⁹⁷ Foucault, *Ethics*, 160.

IV. FEELING BACKWARD

Foucault's late essays and interviews tell queers to ask, not, "Who am I, given my desires?" but rather, "How should I live?"⁹⁸ Foucault asks us to replace the scientific project of looking for the etiology of homosexuality with the ethical project of becoming gay. The sociological and political picture of gay subjectivity that emerges from Foucault's discussion of friendship resists pathologizing, psychological explanations of homosexuality: instead of abnormal desires, gay subjectivity involves creative, practical responses to abjection. Yet at the same time, Foucault's model of gay subjectivity acknowledges both the vulnerability and the glory of queer life. In fact, according to this model, vulnerability *is* part of the glory of queer life, for it creates "the possibility for creative life," as Foucault puts it.⁹⁹

Auden's later poetry, I submit, constructs gay subjectivity in a similar way. Which is to say, the story of Auden's coterie poetry is also a story about queer affects: prophetic, redemptive socialities emerge from the bad feelings of shame (as we saw in our reading of "New Year Letter" in the previous chapter) and loneliness (as we have just seen in our discussion of *The Age of Anxiety*) that sometimes characterize queer life. Auden does not gloss over these feelings; rather, his erotics of coterie addresses them directly. Negative affects like grief and alienation as well as shame and loneliness form the bedrock of his coteries. Such feelings are a queer variant of the "morphon full of guilt / Whence all community is built," as "New Year Letter" calls it.¹⁰⁰ For Auden, only "sensibility," "style," and "love"—i.e., practices of "responsibility"—can turn this

⁹⁸ Foucault, *Ethics*, 136.

⁹⁹ Foucault, *Ethics*, 160.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Caron, *My Father & I*, 159; and Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 35. A "morphon" is a morphologically distinct biological creature.

“cryptozöon with two backs” away from violence (*DM* 59-60). And the practices of “sensitivity,” “style,” and “love” constitutive of Auden’s coteries—or hominterns, bar-*copains*, suburbs of dissent, green worlds and, as we will see in the next interlude-chapter, great good places—do not *ignore* but rather *incorporate* bad feelings: falling down in the dance, mourning, exile, alienation, lonely woolgathering, discomfort with messy bodies and smelly sex. As we will soon see, this is what makes Auden’s later poetry so vital to contemporary discussions in queer theory and theology.

CHAPTER FOUR | INTERLUDE: THE BACHELOR & THE STRANGE YOUNG MAN

So far in *Queering the City of God* we have considered Auden’s ethics of coterie by looking at the various communities organized on the principle of friendship that populate his later oeuvre—suburbs of dissent, green worlds, islands and bars. But what about friendship with the dead you never personally knew? I began the previous chapter by alluding to Alan Bray, the historian of friendship who writes movingly of undertaking the history of friendship in medieval and early modern England as a way of mourning friends he had lost to AIDS. “In retrospect,” he writes, “I think I was seeking among the tombs of the dead those lost friends; I would not let them go.” Bray’s book examines (among other things) shared burial monuments in English churches that celebrate (mostly) same-gender friends (from the eleventh to the nineteenth century). His thesis is that through such institutions as Eucharistically-sealed, sworn friendships and shared burial monuments, friendship played a publicly significant role in settling conflicts between families and within the church. Bray “found such friendship” as the ones he personally mourned “there in those monuments.”¹ Indeed, he describes monuments that seek the prayers of the living faithful who behold them; such inscriptions establish

¹ Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2003), 5.

friendship between the living and the dead and hold up the friendship of the dead as a model for the kinds of relationships that ought to subsist among the living.²

The monuments that Bray describes perform the Christian belief in the communion of saints that links the living to the faithful departed. Such a belief prepared Auden for the idea of friendship with the dead. And such ghostly friendship, primarily in the form of a kind of spiritual mentorship, haunts Auden's post-conversion poetry. One famous example is "New Year Letter" (1941), where Auden sits in judgment before a tribunal of his poetic elders (Blake, Dryden, Catullus, Tennyson, Baudelaire, Hardy, Rilke, Kipling [*DM* 21-22]). Turning from the coterie to the communion of saints, then, I want to focus briefly in the present interlude, before I turn to matters theoretical and theological, on just one of Auden's ghostly friendships, namely, his relationship with his queer precursor, Henry James. It is this relationship that the title of the interlude signals, with James as the "bachelor," and Auden "as the strange young man." The significance of these names will soon become clear.

Auden's older queer double, likewise an expatriate but in the opposite transatlantic direction, is named "the bachelor" in an early journal version of Auden's famous wartime elegy, "At the Grave of Henry James" (1941). There is an erotic charge to the scene. Like a nervous suitor, Auden approaches James's grave "awkwardly" (SP 128).³ Recognizing the tombstone, Auden feels "a flushed assault." Seeing him is the one beautiful thing, the one "*donnée*" (a Jamesianism) in this "doubtful hour" of war. The nervous suitor asks, "dear addicted artist, / Assent to my soil and flower." The

² Bray, 271.

³ But see my discussion below about the multiple versions of this poem.

phrase “[a]ddicted artist” connotes James’s passionate and exclusive commitment to his craft.

Auden qualifies the potentially damning phrase by (rather queerly) likening James to a nun:

your heart, fastidious as
A delicate nun, remained true to the rare noblesse
Of your lucid gift and, for its own sake, ignored the
Resentful muttering Mass. (*SP* 131)

The sketch of James as a nun looks forward to the picture of James that Auden produces in “Henry James and the Dedicated” (1944). In that essay, Auden derives an anti-marriage ethic from James’s life and works. James divides humanity into the elect, who make vows to a calling; and the philistines, who are obsessed with marriage, “dedicated to the prestige of the immediate selfish moment” (*Prose* ii 243). The moral teaching of all of James’s writing is, according to Auden, that if one has an intellectual or artistic gift, one must stay true to it by remaining “single and, if possible, celibate” (*Prose* ii 244). Hence “At the Grave of Henry James” pictures James’s creative gift as his androgynous lover: “you [...] / Who opened such passionate arms to your *Bon* when It ran / Towards you with Its overwhelming reasons pleading / All beautifully in Its breast?” (*SP* 140). Such a gift, James believes, demands an aesthetic version of the monastic vow.

In the essay, Auden flatly declares, “I agree with him” (*Prose* ii 244). But in the earlier pilgrimage to James’s grave, the awkward suitor seems to be seeking reassurance about his vows from the “dear addicted artist”:

Perhaps the honor of a great house, perhaps its
Cradles and tombs may persuade the bravado of
The bachelor mind to doubt

The dishonest path ...⁴

Perhaps the familial and financial privileges of married life—represented by the “great house” with its “[c]radles and tombs”—have sometimes caused James to regret his vocation? The suitor is self-consciously “vexed with / My little inferior questions” (*SP* 130). But he continues, making plain his need for reassurance from James, especially now in this wartime climate where a writer’s professional misstep—e.g., writing a piece of demagoguery instead of poetry (as Auden thought he had done with “Spain” (1937)—could cost lives:

Now more than ever when torches and snare-drum
Excite the squat women of the saurian brain
Till a milling mob of fears
Break in insultingly on anywhere, when in our dreams
Pigs play on the organs and the blue sky runs shrieking
As the Crack of Doom appears,

Are the good ghosts needed with the white magic
Of their subtle loves. War has no ambiguities
Like a marriage; the result
Required of its *affaire fatale* is simple and sad,
The physical removal of all human objects
That conceal the difficult. (*SP* 130)

It’s a terribly euphemistic way of putting it, but the point is clear: if Auden hadn’t made a queer vow to art, there wouldn’t be the danger of his inciting the masses for what would later be revealed as the wrong reasons. Marriage is at least ambiguous, the queer suitor declares: it is not altogether evil, like war. He asks James to preside over his writing, to be the “the disciplinary image” that will “preserve” him from the “vague incitement” of the “muttering Mass.” In other words, he asks James to prevent him from ever again writing a poem like “Spain” (1937).

⁴ “At the Grave of Henry James,” *Horizon* III.18 (June 1941): 381. These lines were cut from all book versions of the poem.

One of the most striking features of the queer ghostly friendship between the bachelor (James) and the suitor (Auden) is the way that it recodes models of literary influence. Auden canonizes James in both the literary and the spiritual senses of the word,⁵ but in a much richer, more complicated way than straight male Freudian models of authorial influence.⁶ At once supplicant and seducer, the poet invites James into a spiritual collaboration that mimics the queer Christic friendships in James's short fiction.⁷ The collaboration places James in a Christ-like—or, even better, a Holy Spirit-like role: “O dwell, ironic at my living centre,” Auden asks. That would seem to elevate James into a father-like role, something that could be reconciled with the standard straight male models of literary influence. But in the very next line, Auden says, “Half ancestor, half child” (*SP* 129). Thus the entire supplication reads, “O dwell, ironic at my living centre, / Half ancestor, half child.” It truly is a friendship-based, communion-of-saints model of literary influence that the poem suggests, for it involves conversation, exchange, reciprocity, *mutual influence*. To put it in the language of the previous chapter, it is as if the bachelor and the suitor are collaboratively soul-pregnant; or at any rate, the suitor wants them to be. He wants them to *soul-father each other*. The text of “At the Grave of Henry James” thus becomes a kind of soul-child, sired by the bachelor and birthed by the suitor.

⁵ Auden canonizes James in the literary sense of the word, inasmuch as James's reputation dwindled in the early decades of the twentieth century. Because of his ornate prose and his Anglophilia, he had virtually no reputation until Auden and other literary modernists created something of a Jamesian renaissance, starting in the 1930s with T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. See David Garrett Izzo, “The Henry James Revival of the 1930s,” in *Henry James Against the Aesthetic Movement*, ed. David Garrett Izzo and Daniel T. O'Hara (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006): 13-34

⁶ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁷ Especially “The Great Good Place” (1900) and “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903), texts to which “At the Grave of Henry James” refers.

In this way, Auden extends his ecclesial coterie to the dead, and expands his vocabulary of the culture of friendship to include James's "Great Good Place," a parable depicting the life to come as a Grand Chartreuse-like monastery populated only by men who call each other brothers. The suitor closes the poem by asking for intercessory prayer from James, "because there is no end to the vanity of our calling" (*SP* 132). The suitor does not appear to have received the reassurance he sought regarding celibacy and dedication; that will have to wait for a later poem in which Henry James makes a cameo appearance, "Caliban to the Audience," the third chapter of *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944), Auden's reply to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. James makes a cameo appearance inasmuch as Caliban, in James's florid style, ventriloquizes a message from Shakespeare about the ethics to, among others, the "strange young man," i.e., would-be young artists. Caliban's speech pictures the lonely, ambitious life of the "strange young man": "Lying awake at night in your single bed, you are conscious of a power by which you will survive the wallpaper of your boardinghouse or the expensive bourgeois horrors of your home" (*Sea* 36). The monologue lists the sacrifices, the sexual frustrations, and the anxieties that characterize the life of the dedicated artist, and holds alongside these an imaginary alternative life history in which the artist indulges them: "Such genuine escapes, though, might have [...] even involved" the strange young man "with the police." Here is the bachelor James's comfort for the queer suitor, the strange young man: art constitutes a means to queer self-fashioning without getting involved with the place.

Auden has an extensive amount of material devoted to Henry James. To begin, Henry James's writing about America makes a veritable sub-theme of "New Year

Letter,” and James pops up repeatedly in the annotations to the poem in *The Double Man* (1941). The two other poetic treatments of James include the aforementioned “At the Grave of Henry James” (1941)—which will make the main subject of this brief meditation on queer influence and ghostly friendship—and “Caliban to the Audience” (1944). Auden devoted several essays and lectures to James: in addition to “Henry James and the Dedicated” (1944), which I discussed in chapter two; an introduction to James’s *American Scene* (1946); and an “Address on Henry James” (1946).

There are many, many books that discuss James’s writing along queer or homoerotic or gay lines.⁸ None of the critical writing about Auden as a gay poet investigates Henry James’s influence.⁹ Moreover, none of the scholarship that *does* explore the relationship between Auden and James thinks to explore the question of queer influence.¹⁰ Rachel Wetzsteon’s recent study of Auden’s literary influences, *Influential Ghosts*, discusses “At the Grave of Henry James” at length but never once mentions James’s and Auden’s shared status as queer outsiders. Neither does her study explore how queer influence might be operating in Auden’s extensive writing about James.¹¹ Perhaps we can attribute the critical silence about the queer affinities between Auden and

⁸ John R. Bradley, *Henry James’s Permanent Adolescence* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); *Henry James and Homoerotic Desire*, ed. John R. Bradley (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999); Eric Haralson, *Henry James and Queer Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Hugh Stevens, *Henry James and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Wendy Graham, *Henry James’s Thwarted Love* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Leland S. Person, *Henry James and the Suspense of Masculinity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

⁹ Even Richard Bozorth’s seminal study on homosexuality in Auden’s lyric poetry never once brings Henry James up.

¹⁰ See, for example, Adam Parkes, “Collaborations: Henry James and the Poet Critics,” *The Henry James Review* 23.3 (Fall 2002): 283-293.

¹¹ Rachel Wetzsteon, *Influential Ghosts: A Study of Auden’s Sources* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

James to Nadia Herman Colburn's comment that "sometimes" Auden simply "falls through the cracks—neither fully English nor American, modernist nor postmodernist."¹²

In any case, the relationship between Henry James and W. H. Auden is a queer ghostly alliance that, I submit, becomes especially clear when one reads the first version of "At the Grave of Henry James" that Auden printed in two different magazines—one an American journal; the other, British—in the summer of 1941.¹³ I have here offered a small gesture by way of rectifying that critical silence, in the form of a brief meditation on the version of the poem that appeared in Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*.¹⁴

¹² Nadia Herman Colburn, "Bibliographic Essay and Review of Auden Studies," in *The Cambridge Companion to W.H. Auden*, ed. Stan Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 241.

¹³ "At the Grave of Henry James" was first published in England in *Horizon* III.18 (June 1941): 379-383; and soon after published in America in the *Partisan Review* VIII.4 (July / August 1941): 266-270. The initial publication of the poem thus constitutes a performance of post-national collaboration: Auden, a British expat in the U.S., writes a prayer to James, an American expat in the U.K., and each writer's chosen and home countries publish the poem. In addition, Edward Mendelson notes that part of the original social meaning of the poem was a larger battle that was taking place at the time in the *Partisan Review* about the canonization of American literature as a precursor to English and European literary modernism, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1999), 165. Auden almost included "At the Grave of Henry James" in *The Double Man*—which came out a few months before these journal publications: see John Fuller, *W. H. Auden: A Commentary*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 397. Auden in fact didn't include the poem in a book until *CP45*, at which point he cut out four stanzas and stripped it of some of its queer details (which I will discuss below). Auden then stripped it down even more, cutting an additional 14 stanzas. The extensive omissions from *CP45* to *CSP* remove (a) the wartime context of the poem, (b) all of the stanzas that characterize Auden's approach to the grave as that of a supplicant who wants help thinking through the thorny ethical task of writing poetry that meditates non-propagandistically on justice, (c) many of the stanzas that characterize Auden's approach to James's Grave as that of a queer suitor, (d) all of the stanzas that portray James as a kind of queer saint or queer Christ, (e) and thus much of the religious content of the poem. The most interesting editorial takeaway here is that, as Auden makes vast cuts over several decades, "At the Grave of Henry James" gets both less Christian and less queer. The *CP45* version has been reprinted in *SP* (128-132); the *CSP* version has been reprinted in *CP* (308-310).

¹⁴ The publication of "At the Grave of Henry James" in Cyril Connolly's magazine points to another *material* coterie story to tell in addition to the *spiritual* coterie story that the poem tells about James and Auden: namely, the story of the culture of friendship that characterized Cyril Connolly's editing of *Horizon*. (Auden's friend Stephen Spender, for example, was the magazine's unofficial associate editor.) Michael Shelden has told that story in *Friends of Promise: Cyril Connolly and the World of Horizon* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989).

CHAPTER FIVE | REREADING AUDEN: TOWARD A QUEER THEOLOGY OF THE RESPONSIBLE SELF

So far we have reread Auden's post-conversion work against the grain of scholars, critics, and poets who divide his oeuvre into an early queer Auden and a later unqueer Christian. In the introduction I argued that Auden's Christian poetry constructs gay subjectivity as a spiritual faculty, a theo-ethical guide, a prophetic call. Each of the three previous body chapters took up a key moment in Auden's conceptualization of a calling that aligns the charism of same-sex eros with anti-imperialist prophetic critique: chapter one interpreted Auden's account of queerness and queer community in *Nones* (1951) as an affirmative rewrite of standard attacks on gay networks (the conspiracy narratives of "gay freemasonry" and "gay espionage"); building on the insight from the first chapter that Auden's poetry tends to couch queer community in ecclesial language, chapter two looked at how "New Year Letter" (1941) uses the syncretic ecclesiology of the lay Anglican poet and novelist Charles Williams to depict a small Long Island group of European exiles and sexual outlaws as exemplars of democracy; chapter three examined Auden's "erotics of coterie"; and chapter four reflected briefly on the queer ghostly friendship between Auden and Henry James. The story I have told so far is more or less a cumulative one, and in order fully to appreciate the theological arguments to which I now turn, the reader will need to have read the previous chapters.

As I will argue in this chapter, complicating the received view of later Auden turns out to aid the tasks of queer theory and theology. What's more, it can help post-Stonewall readers imagine a *via media* between poles of the American culture wars. To show the theo-ethical utility of reading against the grain of Auden scholarship, I will use highlights from Auden's later poetry to arbitrate two unlikely conversation partners: Jean Bethke Elshtain, a feminist political theorist appointed by George W. Bush to the President's Council on Bioethics, on the one hand; and the anti-redemptive, antisocial turn in queer theory, as exemplified by Lee Edelman and Heather Love, on the other.

In *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (2008), Jean Bethke Elshtain propounds "the responsible self" (incarnational, loving, and dialogic) as a more ethical alternative to "the sovereign self" (Gnostic, voluntaristic, and asocial).¹ Through close readings of two lyrics from Auden's sequence "Thanksgiving for a Habitat" (1965)—a paean to the farmhouse in Kirchstetten where he summered for fifteen years with his lifelong companion and erstwhile lover, Chester Kallman—I will construct a queer theology of "the responsible self." Such an elaboration of Elshtain's work accomplishes at least two things: (1) it offsets queer theory's propensity for "self-sovereignty," but (2) it also critiques Elshtain's heterosexist bias.

Complicating the received view of later Auden, it turns out, can also help with the trans project of uncoupling gender presentation from chromosomal / morphological (i.e., medically assigned) sex. I will use *For the Time Being* (1944)—Auden's modern-day retelling of the infancy narratives from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke—to moderate another unlikely dialogue among Elshtain and two contrasting affirmations of gender

¹ Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 219, 229; 159-160.

variance: the body theology of Justin Tanis, a transgender Christian pastor, and the gender theory of Kate Bornstein, a playwright, performance artist, and self-styled “sublebrity in the pantheon of America’s queer and postmodern subcultures.”²

Rereading Auden to throw light on body theology and gender theory shows why Christians need to do ethics “incarnationally”—i.e., why Christians need a sacramental, relational, tradition- and revelation-based approach to ethical deliberation. Simply put, I will build on Elshtain’s ideas to construct a gender-variance-affirming queer theology of the responsible self, but I will depart from her methodology, arguing that it conflicts with her ethics. On the one hand, Elshtain cautions against abstracting ideas from the practices, habits, and character of the communities that espouse them; but on the other, her heterosexist picture of responsibility depends on the very sort of move she cautions against: Elshtain treats “nature” and the “natural” as self-evident and universal norms for ethical reflection. By contrast, as I will show, *For the Time Being* adumbrates a more theo-ethically coherent methodology.

I. QUEER THEORY’S ANTISOCIAL TURN

Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004) epitomizes the antisocial turn in queer theory. For Edelman, queerness has ethical value only insofar as it resists the “secular theology” of “reproductive futurism” on which civil society depends—a theology that takes the

² Kate Bornstein, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), xv. To clarify the way I use a few key terms: as Evin Taylor puts it in a contribution to Kate Bornstein’s anthology *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*, the term “transgender” refers to “individuals who change, cross, or live beyond gender,” while the term “cisgender” refers to “those whose gender identity, role, or expression is considered to match their assigned gender by societal standards” (Seal Press: Berkeley CA, 2010), 268. “Transsexuality,” as the historian Joanne Meyerowitz explains, refers to “the quest to transform the bodily characteristics of sex via hormones and surgery,” *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 5.

form of “poptimism” in America, i.e., secular hymns like Whitney Houston’s mawkish refrain, “I believe the children are our future.”³ Engaging a breathtaking variety of interlocutors (Hitchcock, Dickens, George Eliot, Plato, Augustine, Kant, Lacan, John Paul II, and Cornel West, among others), Edelman shows the duplicitous ways that straight culture exploits the figure of the innocent, vulnerable child to disenfranchise queer people who will (so the political right says) corrupt that innocence.

Heteronormative procreativity and the future-oriented political narratives that it underwrites pretend to selflessness disingenuously, for childbearing offers a parent “universal confirmation of” her “standing as an adult and [...] accrual of social capital in the only future’s market [*sic*] that ever really counts,” i.e., children.⁴ Through her offspring, a parent stakes a claim in the future. She reproduces *herself*.

Edelman counsels that, in view of the “all-pervasive, self-congratulatory, and strategically misrecognized” narcissism inherent in pronatalism, queer people should embrace the “wholesale rupturing of the social fabric” that conservative thinkers attach to the sterility of queerness.⁵ To do otherwise—by, say, taking up Larry Kramer’s call to desexualize gay identity; or by, like Dan Savage, constantly extolling the virtues of parenting—empties queerness of its power to challenge “compulsory reproduction” and the fascistic rhetoric of compassion for the child.⁶

Heather Love builds on Edelman’s work. In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), Love “traces a tradition of backwardness in queer representation and experience,” focusing on “disconnection, loss, and the refusal of

³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 12, 2-3, 47, 143.

⁴ Edelman, 156-157n.

⁵ Edelman, 13, 14.

⁶ Edelman, 40, 47, 75, 157n.

community” in queer Anglo-American modernist literature (Walter Pater, Willa Cather, Radclyffe Hall, and Sylvia Townsend Warner).⁷ She does so because, she argues, “histories in queer representation” and “writing about queer politics” have not “adequately addressed” such “bad,” backward feelings.⁸ Love concludes the book by propounding a politics of queer negativity based on the closeted, antisocial, lonely, grieving “figures” of “damaged or refused agency” she has read. Where Edelman wants *no* future, Love wants a *backward* future. “I am interested,” she writes, “in trying to imagine a future apart from the reproductive imperative, optimism, and the promise of redemption.”⁹ Love wants a politics roomy enough—a future backward enough—for people wary of progress who refuse to ignore or make good on feelings like “rage, self-hatred, shame, despair, and apathy.”¹⁰

In an earlier version of her chapter on queer historiography—presented at a landmark conference on gay shame at the University of Michigan in 2003—Love explains that she avoids the impulse to rewrite the queer past in positive terms because, by overlooking the ways that figures from the past resist our rescue, such revisions collude in the shaming of gay shame. In other words, the shame of having a shameful lineage forms part of a larger range of bad feelings that, according to the bluster of gay pride, queers should not feel; but bad feelings make us want social change, so we ought to pay attention to them.¹¹

⁷ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 146.

⁸ Love, 160.

⁹ Love, 147.

¹⁰ Love, 151. See also 163.

¹¹ Heather Love, “Emotional Rescue,” in *Gay Shame*, ed. David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 256-258, 263.

II. QUEER THEORY & SELF-SOVEREIGNTY

Edelman's and Love's compelling arguments against liberal humanist conformity notwithstanding, their work exemplifies the problems of what Jean Bethke Elshtain calls "radical self-sovereignty."¹² To reveal the self-sovereignty of queer theory's antisocial turn, I will first present, without commentary, Elshtain's account of self-sovereignty. (It is not my purpose here to assess, for example, whether or not her claims about the soft self-sovereignty of feminist theology hold.) I will then show (a) how Elshtain provides a helpful vocabulary for critiquing queer theory, but (b) how that vocabulary needs reworking if queer theorists and their allies are to use it profitably.

The Sovereign Self (Excarnation)

Elshtain defines "self-sovereignty" in relation to divine- and state-sovereignty. Just as the sovereign God is singular and voluntaristic (in contrast to the plural, dialogic, loving God of the trinity); and just as the sovereign state is characterized by complete self-determination; so, too, the sovereign self is independent and voluntaristic.¹³ A sovereign self is a mini-sovereign state clashing with other mini-states, a demi-god for whom "the sovereign God stands as a provocation: man must himself become a God against the Creator God in order to strip himself of any indebtedness, whether to Creator or other persons."¹⁴ Sovereign selves eschew vulnerability and reciprocity.¹⁵ (The philosopher Martha Nussbaum, currently Elshtain's colleague in the Divinity School at the University of Chicago, famously takes up a similar theme. In two books on the role

¹² Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 219.

¹³ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 159.

¹⁴ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 160.

¹⁵ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 162, 164.

of disgust in legal judgments, Nussbaum argues that misogyny and homophobia rely on macho constructions of the straight male body as impermeable and not subject to influence or reciprocity.)¹⁶

For Elshtain, examples of the push for self-sovereignty in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries include eugenicist policies that aim to eradicate vulnerability. In addition to the obvious example of Nazi bio-politics, Elshtain points to the more recent examples of (1) Peter Singer, who supports infanticide and euthanasia of persons with disabilities; and (2) arguments for abortion based on “value theory,” which impute value to life using the “cost-benefit calculus” of “neoclassical market economics” and thus have “implications [...] concerning the ill and the infirm.”¹⁷ Beyond eradicating bodily weakness, self-sovereignty also eradicating the vulnerability of relationship—to the past, refusing “to acknowledge our indebtedness” and breaking “the links between generations”;¹⁸ to the present, ignoring our dependence on others, “family, friends, and, yes, strangers”;¹⁹ and to the future, not taking “generations to come” into account.²⁰

Self-sovereignty usually involves a rationalist move that Charles Taylor calls “excarnation.”²¹ In *A Secular Age* (2007), Taylor deems “excarnational” any theory or practice that de-centers the role of the body in knowing “something higher” (e.g., God) or

¹⁶ See *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); and *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also Nussbaum’s earlier treatment of the *Phaedrus*, where Plato promotes the mania and risk of eros as a crucial source of insight for philosophers, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 200-233.

¹⁷ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 215.

¹⁸ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 224, 225.

¹⁹ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 166.

²⁰ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 224.

²¹ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 174, 232.

in making ethical choices.²² Taylor sees excarnation as the central feature of “[m]odern enlightened culture”:

We tend to live in our heads, trusting our disengaged understandings: of experience, of beauty (we can’t really accept that it’s telling us anything, unless about our own feelings); even the ethical: we think that the only valid form of ethical self-direction is through rational maxims or understanding. We can’t accept that part of being good is opening ourselves to certain feelings; either the horror at infanticide, or agape as a gut feeling.²³

Embodied feeling is no longer a medium in which we relate to what we recognize as rightly bearing an aura of the higher; either we do recognize something like this, and we see reason as our unique access to it; or we tend to reject this kind of higher [*sic*] altogether, reducing it through naturalistic explanation.²⁴

Sovereign selves often employ just such a disembodied anthropology, privileging pure thought over love and pure self over relationship.²⁵ Taylor identifies the embodied spiritual practices of yoga, cenobitic life, and art as ways of resisting excarnation (more on the last item later).²⁶

Elshtain divides self-sovereignty into two types—hard and soft—that she illustrates with examples from feminism. On the one hand, Elshtain decries the nineteenth-century American Suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the twentieth-century existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir as hard self-sovereigns. Elizabeth Cady Stanton held the classist, racist belief that women manual laborers and the “unlettered and unwashed” should remain disenfranchised.²⁷ She took an excarnational view of personhood, viewing family relationships as “incidental,” not fundamental to a

²² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 288.

²³ Taylor, 555.

²⁴ Taylor, 288.

²⁵ Elshtain, 174.

²⁶ Taylor, 613.

²⁷ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 183.

definition of the self.²⁸ An even more excarnational thinker than Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Simone de Beauvoir regarded the female body as lacking the “integrity” and “significance” of the male body. She therefore argued that women ought to try to free themselves from the “tyranny” of their biology by, for example, having their breasts removed.²⁹ Elshtain reads Stanton as a hard self-sovereign insofar as Stanton “disenthrall[s]” and “disencumber[s]” the self from the claims that other people (family, friends) might make on its freedom. Elshtain reads Beauvoir as a hard self-sovereign because Beauvoir reaches for autonomy by erasing biological femaleness.

On the other hand, Elshtain criticizes the soft self-sovereignty of feminist theology. According to her reading, feminist theology replaces the reductionist view of God as male with an equally reductionist view of God as female. Instead of finding God “in the concreteness of [the] traditional Christian story that starts with a baby, a male baby, born in a manger,”³⁰ feminist theologians find God “at the altar of the self,” since “God as ‘she’ is a direct mapping of the self onto God.”³¹ Elshtain also takes feminist theology to task for rejecting Christian *askesis* on the grounds that it oppresses women, who have “historically” been “forced to self-relinquishment.”³² Elshtain considers feminist theology an example of soft self-sovereignty because—again, according to her reading—it exalts the self not by reaching for autonomy but by divinizing a humanity stripped of the presence of threatening differences.³³ And in doing so, it discourages men’s performance of masculinity in one of two ways. Either it “sees the female as

²⁸ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 184.

²⁹ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 187.

³⁰ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 219.

³¹ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 218.

³² Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 219.

³³ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 218.

eventually triumphing.” Or it “calls for resocializing away from gendered categories,”³⁴ embracing a utopian androgyny. Note how Elshtain’s taxonomy of self-sovereignty invokes a stereotypically binary view of masculinity and femininity: Beauvoir’s masculinizing self-sovereignty is *hard*; feminist theology’s de-masculinizing self-sovereignty is *soft*.

The Responsible Self (Incarnation)

As an alternative to the sovereign self, Elshtain propounds “the responsible self,” variously called “sovereignty with limits” or “sovereignty as responsibility.”³⁵ Unlike the sovereign self, the responsible self grows in the context of affective bonds.³⁶ The responsible self prioritizes love over pure Cartesian thought.³⁷ Reciprocity and vulnerability, rather than independence and voluntarism, characterize “sovereignty as responsibility.” A responsible self aspires neither to the autonomy of hard self-sovereignty nor to soft self-sovereignty’s subsuming of people into a fascistic stew of sameness.³⁸ Responsible selves eschew abstraction. They listen to history,³⁹ they worry about futurity,⁴⁰ and they honor the irreducibility of the human person.⁴¹

Elshtain’s alternative to hard and soft self-sovereignty—to “pridefulness” and triumphalism, on the one hand, and “inappropriate self-loss” and abjection, on the other—accounts poignantly for the most vulnerable people among us: a polity that equates selfhood with sovereignty makes no room for “persons who cannot reason

³⁴ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 219.

³⁵ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 228.

³⁶ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 229.

³⁷ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 230.

³⁸ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 236.

³⁹ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 224.

⁴⁰ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 226.

⁴¹ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 237.

because of inborn mental incapacities.”⁴² But her proposal of freedom with limits overlooks the plight of neurotypical people for whom sovereignty remains legally precarious (e.g., women and minorities). The ethical ideal of the responsible self becomes possible only when a legal guarantee of sovereignty exists.

A Useful Vocabulary for Critiquing Queer Theory

So long as we qualify Elshtain’s insights about “self-sovereignty,” “the responsible self,” and “excarnation” with the caveat that an ethical ideal of responsibility depends on a legal guarantee of sovereignty, they provide a helpful vocabulary for sorting out the problems with queer theory’s antisocial, anti-future, anti-redemptive turn. To put the matter briefly, Lee Edelman and Heather Love promote a collectivist “politics of refusal,”⁴³ an embrace of negativity and death, that exhibits the telltale signs of soft self-sovereignty: *ressentiment*, the expressivist primacy of feeling, triumph through abjection rather than positive transformation.⁴⁴ Their work contains many admirable features. For example, as we saw above, they offer powerful critiques of the conformist pieties of gay pride. Yet for all that Edelman and Love offer to admire, they insist on a very narrow range of possibilities for critiquing heterosexism: unless queers abdicate responsibility to the body politic—with its reproductive imperative and its demand for good feelings and narratives of rescue—queer resistance can do no better than perpetuate heteronormativity’s terms.

Hence Lee Edelman’s slogan, *No Future*. Provocatively celebrating queerness as a refusal to aspire to a future, let alone believe in a redemptive one, Edelman deliberately

⁴² Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 227, 230.

⁴³ Love, 146.

⁴⁴ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 172-173, 204-205, 218.

and programmatically makes what Elshtain would call an “abject surrender” to the death drive.⁴⁵ Nowhere does Edelman’s defiant embrace of negativity become clearer than in the sharply divergent ways that Edelman (2004) and Elshtain (2008) read a text that they both happen to cite: P. D. James’s dystopian novel *Children of Men* (1992), a depiction of mass infertility.

Edelman calls attention to the novel’s sexual polemic. No child has been born for 26 years. The protagonist laments that “sex totally divorced from procreation has become almost meaninglessly acrobatic.” Edelman rejects this “pro-procreative ideology” as self-absorbed and “sentimental.”⁴⁶ According to Edelman, civil society fetishizes children, the emblem of futurity, because they give meaning to social reality. The fetishization of children takes heterosexist form insofar as “the biological fact of heterosexual procreation bestows the imprimatur of meaning-production on heterogenital relations.”⁴⁷ Queer sex destroys meaning and undoes “social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself.” (If the reader finds Edelman’s views of the potential of queer sex to break with meaning-production somewhat romanticized, Edelman has a response: queerness has come to mean nothing for the political left—“nothing,” that is, “more than a sexual practice in need of demystification.”)⁴⁸ Why do children—and, by extension, procreative sexuality—give meaning to social reality? In light of what Elshtain has to say about sovereignty and responsibility, Edelman’s answer looks counterintuitive. We fetishize children, he says, because they hold “the promise of a

⁴⁵ Elshtain, 236.

⁴⁶ Edelman, 12, 113.

⁴⁷ Edelman, 13.

⁴⁸ Edelman, 28.

natural transcendence of the limits of nature itself.”⁴⁹ We bypass our own mortality through our children. It is as if Edelman proleptically turns Elshtain’s notion of radical self-sovereignty on its head: not technologies that free us from the tyranny of our biology, but rather good old-fashioned vanilla *childbearing itself* represents the real dream of self-transcendence.

Elshtain reads the novel less critically, saying nothing about its depiction of sex but calling attention to the disintegration of interpersonal relationships:

People are despondent, chagrined, violent [...] People disown commitments and responsibilities to, and for, one another except for whatever serves some immediate purpose—what I want—by contrast to anything that is given. [...] religion, except for a cult of state worship, is forbidden. People thought they had eliminated evil [...] and all the churches in the 1990s moved from “a theology of sin and redemption” to a “sentimental humanism.” In the name of compassion, the elderly, no longer needed or wanted, are conducted to a state-sponsored ceremony of group suicide called the Quietus. [The protagonist] concludes that we are diminished, we humans, if we live without knowledge of the past and without hope for the future. The old prayer, that I may see my children’s children and peace upon Israel, is no more, and without the possibility of that prayer and the delicate entanglement of our lives with such fructifying possibilities, the world ceases to be.⁵⁰

Notice that Elshtain, like Edelman, uses the word “sentimental”—only for her, the *lack* of futurity’s “fructifying possibilities” leads to sentimentalism. And if we reread Edelman’s take on *Children of Men* through the lens of Elshtain’s, what he labels narcissism starts to look more like charity. We need “hope for the future” not because it produces copies of us (children) but because, without a story larger than ourselves (call it a “secular theology”),⁵¹ we become self-serving.

⁴⁹ Edelman, 12.

⁵⁰ Elshtain, 225-226.

⁵¹ Edelman, 12.

Edelman rejects James's heterosexism with good reason (an issue I will take up in Elshtain momentarily). But, as Leo Bersani puts it in a blurb on the back of Edelman's book, "we could perhaps reproach him [...] for not spelling out the mode in which we might survive our necessary assent to his argument." Or, to recast Bersani's tongue-in-cheek jibe in a serious way, Edelman refuses to imagine a future-oriented queer politics that transforms the social without merely reproducing "the familiar forms of a durable liberal humanism."⁵² He refuses to imagine life-affirming queer critiques like Auden's "New Year Letter," where, as we saw in chapter two, the periphery remakes the center rather than blending into it.⁵³

Heather Love's "politics of the past" seems to make more hopeful and constructive moves than Edelman's uncompromising negativity, giving "the politics of gay pride" a much-needed corrective.⁵⁴ Love examines the bad feelings in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century queer self-representations—"nostalgia," "regret," and "bitterness"⁵⁵ as well as "shyness," "heartbreak," "despair," and "shame."⁵⁶ Stories of past queer suffering offer "relief" from the pressures of pride-rhetoric, according to which gays and lesbians "have no excuse for feeling bad."⁵⁷ Such stories also equip us to see the persistence of homophobic structures in the present, preventing criticism and politics from devolving into unwarranted optimism. And by refusing to tame the sad queer past into conformity with our own notions of progress, we allow it to challenge the ways that mainstream gay politics excludes people. Love thus establishes a connection

⁵² Edelman, 105-106.

⁵³ For an excellent reading of Edelman along these lines, see R. Benjamin Bateman, "The Future of Queer Theory," *Minnesota Review* 65/66 (Fall 2006): 171-175.

⁵⁴ Love, 21, 147.

⁵⁵ Love, 4.

⁵⁶ Love, 146.

⁵⁷ Love, 146.

between our willingness to let the past say something to us on its own terms and our ability to see “the call of gay normalization” as a call to break ties with “the most vulnerable” and “the least presentable,”⁵⁸ i.e., “the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of unmentionable others.”⁵⁹ Listening to the past helps us resist that call.

Yet *Feeling Backward* ultimately downplays the idea that queers need to pay attention to our shame because it reveals the gap between what we hope for and what we actually have. Instead, the book calls the very practice of hope, the very goal of transformation, into question. Love argues that, just as the politics of gay pride pressures people to ignore their bad feelings, so queer studies pressures scholars “to make use of bad feelings.”⁶⁰ But putting bad feelings to good political use—even if we define “good” as “antihomophobic” rather than, say, “anti-shame”—worries Love for a couple of reasons: (1) it forces us to ignore or distort the past, and (2) it pathologizes people with an attachment to solitary queer pleasure, i.e., those who refuse queer togetherness, and who, consequently, never see their subjectivity adequately accounted for in queer politics.⁶¹ Not unlike Edelman, then, Heather Love surrenders abjectly as she advocates a “collective movement” of “isolates”—like the self-hating, antisocial, closeted, grieving queer writers on whom she centers her book—who refuse to make something positive out of queer pain.⁶²

⁵⁸ Love, 30.

⁵⁹ Love, 10.

⁶⁰ Love, 151. See also 18.

⁶¹ Love, 19, 147.

⁶² Love, 147.

I do not mean to rule out abjection as a possible starting-point for any ethic of responsibility. On the contrary, there exist many exquisitely ethical accounts of abjection, like David Halperin's reading of Jean Genet:

It is less a matter of triumphing over your adversaries than a process of making yourself unfindable by those who would destroy you—through discovering in the very act of surrender and abasement the erotic and spiritual means of your own transformation and transfiguration.

That is how abjection works, or how it is imagined to work, according to Genet. That is how it produces in social pariahs an inverse saintliness.⁶³

Halperin's account treats abjection as a visible aesthetic practice that people devise in response to social trauma, rather than an invisible psychological symptom that inheres in an individual. In other words, rather than a *state* of damage or wounding or ruin, abjection is a *creative resistance* to straight culture's

unshakeable faith in the efficacy of its own power to persecute, its conviction that its victims really are destroyed when it tries to destroy them, and that our occasional ability to slip through the web of those inflictions—by finding a source of exaltation and personal transfiguration in an oblique relation to the very suffering that they would cause us—is not a creative response to social violence, is not a testimony to the power of queer fantasy, is not a possible basis for queer solidarity, but just another sign that there is something deeply wrong with us.⁶⁴

Abjection qua creative resistance could provide another way of summarizing my readings of W. H. Auden so far: in "Atlantis" (1941), the closet becomes a place of prophetic revelation when, having to pass among straight people, a gay seeker acquires the ability to inhabit other people's subject positions, thus learning how to think more clearly about what a just society might look like (see the introductory chapter above). And the construction of homosexuality as an enabling disability in "New Year Letter" (1941)

⁶³ David M. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 76.

⁶⁴ Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, 78.

subverts the Freudian diagnosis of homosexuality as narcissism, emphasizing the intellectual, spiritual, and artistic fecundity of gay relationships; moreover, the poem depicts sexual outlaws as escaping the bourgeois-ification of affect that happens to most people under liberalism (see chapter two above).

Auden's later poetry emphatically does not shy away from the darker aspects, the drearier affects, of queer life: shame (as we saw in chapter two), loneliness (as we saw in chapter three). His poems insist neither on papering over nor on removing those affects. But his later oeuvre does insist that the loneliness and shame of queer life provide exactly the right circumstance in which to take up the ever-urgent, endless project of remaking "soiled productive cities" into "the Just City" (*CP* 541, *DM* 65). Which is to say, Auden takes up that project neither by transmuting shame into pride, nor by eradicating loneliness, but by loving the *polis* of his alien and alienated friends in public (*DM* 48, 50). In other words, Auden takes up the project of remaking the social center by writing about the kinds of prophetic, redemptive socialities that, for him, the bad feelings of life on the periphery produce: coteries, Hominterns, bar-*copains*, suburbs of dissent, green worlds and great good places.

But Love's account of abjection—which focuses on "damaged" and "ruined" subjectivity and demurs at the "alchemizing" of "queer suffering" that words like "exaltation" and "transfiguration" imply—comes across as little more than quietism by a fancier name.⁶⁵ She never imagines a backward-feeling albeit forward-thinking queer politics without liberal-humanist conformity, maintaining instead a vision as narrow as Edelman's: activism that "consists in evasion, latency, refusal, and in turning [the

⁶⁵ Love, 4, 147, 162.

Marxist critic Wendy] Brown's injunction [to hope for a better future] back on itself."⁶⁶ Love's commitment to self-sovereignty via self-loss—coming from an American literary critic at a time when gay marriage remains illegal in most of the United States and homophobic bullying continues to drive American teenagers to suicide—looks as irresponsible as Elshtain's waxing about responsibility when female autonomy remains precarious.

A Framework with a Heterosexist Bias

We have just seen how Elshtain's work on the sovereign self provides a helpful vocabulary for thinking through the problems with queer theory's rejection of political narratives of futurity and redemption. A careful reading of Elshtain, though, shows that her critique of hard and soft self-sovereignty comes at too great a cost for queer scholars and their allies: she takes a complementarian view of gender; she makes a heteronormative link between sexuality and procreativity; and she prizes received relational forms above the invention of new ones. Destabilizing gender, de-linking sexuality and procreativity, and inventing new relational forms are, for her, excarnational practices.

That Elshtain takes a complementarian view of gender becomes clear in her discussion of soft self-sovereignty. A complementarian view of gender regards the division between male and female roles as important; it may or may not take an essentialist view of maleness and femaleness.⁶⁷ While Elshtain does not subscribe to

⁶⁶ Love, 152.

⁶⁷ By which I mean that some versions of complementarianism try to pin down essential biological differences between men and women, while others do not.

draconian gender essentialism,⁶⁸ she does maintain the importance of gender division. She attacks projects that erase “the basic difference [...] between males and females” or that “resocializ[e] away from gendered categories.” For her, such projects represent “the temptations of self-sovereignty.”⁶⁹ Elshtain thus disregards a key contribution to queer thought: namely, the politics of gender performativity, i.e., the insight that acts of masculinity and femininity *constitute* rather than *express* gender, so Elshtain is wrong to treat these categories as naturally given.⁷⁰

That Elshtain makes a heteronormative link between sexuality and procreativity—rejecting theories and practices that “eliminat[e] any biological need for sex to be associated with procreation”⁷¹—poses a problem for queer sexualities and queer families. Elshtain calls the possibility of one woman’s artificially inseminating another “a dream of radical self-transcendence.” The possibility bothers Elshtain because, citing the feminist theorist Alison Jaggar, she imagines women using such technology “to increase [their] control over their bodies, and thus over their lives.”⁷² As I suggested above, though, an ethical ideal of reciprocity depends on a legal guarantee of autonomy. Calling Jaggar’s vision “a dream of radical self-transcendence” comes across as irresponsible when such a legal guarantee for women remains precarious. At any rate, Elshtain neglects the pertinent, real-world example of lesbian couples who choose artificial insemination as a

⁶⁸ Elshtain dismisses “the silliness about men being from Mars and women from Venus,” *Sovereignty*, 253n.

⁶⁹ Elshtain, 219.

⁷⁰ Cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993). In other words, a stable, coherent male or female identity does not lie beneath a given person’s aggregate of masculine or feminine performances. Rather, gender is culturally constructed through the repetition of performances that, by virtue of the citationality of gender discourse, come to signify a seemingly essential, ontologically coherent identity category.

⁷¹ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 219.

⁷² Quoted in Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 213.

way of expressing their love in new life. A queer Christian account of such families would see artificial insemination and sperm donation as gifts of grace. It would see such open, creative love as a reflection of the Creator God. It would point to the many babies in the bible whom the world said should not exist, whose lives required supernatural intervention: Moses, John the Baptist, and Jesus, to name a few.⁷³

Elshtain's elision of gay parenting smacks of a heterosexist bias when we consider it in light of the fact that she prizes received relational forms above the invention of new ones. For Elshtain, pace Augustine, family life—a given institution, i.e., a form of relationship that we inhabit rather than invent—contributes to the right functioning of society. Intimate bonds undergird society as a whole: “there is a flow between the concrete beginnings of the household and that more vast arena, the *mundus* or world. Each layer of relational identity contributes to the ordering or disordering of the whole.” Elshtain asserts that *given* bonds do so better than *chosen* ones when she goes on to define “concrete”: “This is more than a sentiment or an abstraction about something. *Concrete* means embodiment in some institutional or relational form that has some sturdiness and capacity for perdurance.”⁷⁴ Elshtain thus discredits the ethical value of queerness, which (as we have seen in the previous chapters) seeks to canonize or ritualize new forms of relationality, i.e., to make relationships outside of existing institutions and find new ways of formalizing them.⁷⁵

⁷³ I am indebted to Casey Pick, the Programs Director of the Log Cabin Republicans, for these insights about artificial insemination.

⁷⁴ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 240.

⁷⁵ See two key interviews with Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” and “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will,” in *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, vol. I: Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 135-140, 157-162.

Must we conclude, then, that Elshtain's framework necessarily condemns all queer projects as excarnational? Or could we use her framework to construct an incarnational queer theory? Elshtain cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an example of what navigating the Scylla and Charybis of hard and soft sovereign selves looks like: rejecting Nazi bio-politics, which based its "dream" of bodily "perfection" on the "*Urwille*" of the German "*Volk*," "Bonhoeffer steers a course between radical transcendence over the 'natural' and complete submission within a collective view of nature—the two routes traveled by sovereign selves."⁷⁶ What might such a middle road look like for self-identified queers?

The related question of what such a middle road might look like for women also deserves careful thought, since Elshtain finds examples of hard and soft self-sovereignty in feminism. Elshtain concedes that feminist theology's grounds for rejecting Christian *askesis* have some truth; otherwise feminist theology "would lack any evocative power whatsoever. The problem appears when this view is magnified and absolutized out of proportion."⁷⁷ But her concession raises the question of what a proportionate, non-magnified, non-absolutized critique of female oppression would look like. The last chapter of her earlier book *Public Man, Private Woman* (1981) gives an indication of what Elshtain thinks a middle road for feminist political theory might look like. In short, it would recognize the crucial role of family life in producing responsible, ethically engaged citizens; at the same time, it would call received ideas about what constitutes family (e.g., that the husband must be the primary wage-earner) into question.⁷⁸ The

⁷⁶ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 220, 221, 222.

⁷⁷ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 219.

⁷⁸ Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 332.

problem for our purposes is that, for Elshtain, some received ideas about family remain immune to critique: namely, that two people of the same gender ought not parent a family together.

Elshtain merely implies her opposition to same-sex parenting in *Sovereignty* (as the above example of two women conceiving a child together suggests). Elsewhere she explicitly opposes it. In her short polemic “Against Gay Marriage” (1991), Elshtain argues that the intergenerational sociality of heterosexual family life is more valuable to the body politic than “homosexual unions.” For her, the latter are “by definition childless,”⁷⁹ and trying to make them otherwise through reproductive technology “is antiregenerative, linked as it is to a refusal to accept any natural limits.”⁸⁰ More recently, Elshtain co-edited a volume of essays opposing the legalization of gay marriage (2006).⁸¹

Given the promise that Elshtain’s work shows for clarifying the problems of the anti-redemptive, anti-future, antisocial trends in queer theory, but given also the heterosexist bias in Elshtain’s critique of projects that rely on some version of a hard or soft sovereign self, I will now turn my attention to exploring what an incarnational queer theory of the responsible self could look like. And just as Elshtain finds modern incarnationality in “[o]ur incarnational writers,” e.g., “the poet Czeslaw Milosz and the

⁷⁹ Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Against Gay Marriage,” in *Same-Sex Marriage: Pro and Con*, ed. Andrew Sullivan (Westminster, MD: Knopf, 2004), 59. The piece originally appeared in the 22 October 1991 issue of *Commonweal*.

⁸⁰ Elshtain, “Against Gay Marriage,” 58. Throughout her career, though, Elshtain has supported the civil rights (to privacy, non-discrimination in employment and housing, and protection from harassment) of gay people. See, for example, “Homosexual Politics: The Paradox of Gay Liberation,” *Salmagundi* 58/59 (Fall 1982-Winter 1983): 252-280.

⁸¹ *The Meaning of Marriage*, ed. Robert P. George and Jean Bethke Elshtain (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing Company, 2006). In addition, Elshtain has co-edited two volumes for two non-profits on the state of the family in America: (1) for Family Service America, now Alliance for Children and Families, she co-edited *Rebuilding the Nest: A New Commitment to the American Family*, along with David Blankenhorn and Steven Bayme (Milwaukee, WI: Family Service America, 1990); (2) and for the Institute for American Values, she co-edited *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America*, along with David Popenoe and David Blankenhorn (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996).

novelist Marilynne Robinson,⁸² so, too, I will locate the kernel of a queer incarnationality in the later poetry of W. H. Auden.

III. A RESPONSIBLE QUEER

“A responsible queer” sounds like an oxymoron, a capitulation to liberal norms dressed in drag. After all, “responsibility” is a grown-up word, evoking things that generally fall outside of queer life: marriage, family, childrearing. As Judith Halberstam suggests, queerness means “the refusal of adulthood.”⁸³ Nevertheless, Auden’s post-emigration, post-conversion oeuvre provides an especially helpful place to begin thinking about what queer responsibility might mean, for from 1939 on the key question that preoccupied Auden was how to make meaningful community in a post-roots world—in other words, how to navigate the treacherous ethical waters of industrial modernity without careening into the Scylla and Charybdis of hard and soft self-sovereignty.

During his conversion and his first years as a Christian, Auden gravitated toward the work of Kierkegaard and Tillich, Protestant Christian existentialists who conceive of the person as a soul utterly alone before God. And Auden’s book reviews and lectures from the late 1930s and early 1940s repeatedly emphasize the fundamental aloneness of the modern subject. In a cosmopolitan world without class traditions, he writes, “[t]he individual who desires maturity must go on alone,” defining maturity for himself (*Prose*

⁸² Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 234.

⁸³ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 147. Similarly, David Caron describes queer group friendship as the “absence of a goal and any kind of social usefulness defined by the future. Flattened in an eternal present, animated only by their internal unruly relationality, that is, by sharing rather than transmission, they serve no purpose other than themselves and go nowhere in particular,” *My Father & I: The Marais and the Queerness of Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 203.

ii 19). Auden goes so far as to say that democracy depends on each citizen's recognition of her aloneness. He illustrates the point with a rather dehumanizing analogy from Kierkegaard: "So many people try to forget their aloneness, and break their heads and hearts against it. To use a simile of Kierkegaard's, 'Only those who accept their aloneness can be substantives or verbs: those who reject it remain merely adjectives, conjunctions, adverbs'" (*Prose ii* 70-71). The implication is that relational selves, like attributive or connective words, lack the subjective agency of verb-like sovereign selves. Auden gives poetic form to the point in "New Year Letter" (1941), where he writes that "[a]loneness is man's real condition, / [...] each must travel forth alone / In search of the Essential Stone" (*DM* 65-66). Auden even chides the theology of the Protestant Christian pragmatist Reinhold Niebuhr for failing to give a person "the sense[,] as Kierkegaard puts it, of always being out alone over seventy thousand fathoms" (*Prose ii* 109). Which is not to say that Auden espoused self-sovereignty, plainly and simply. Rather, as we saw in chapter two, "New Year Letter" laments the birth of the self-interested "Empiric Economic Man" (*DM* 55), holding up the queer coterie as a resource for an alternative model of the self, one that balances autonomy and reciprocity.

When he first made his way back to the church, Auden also subscribed to a dualistic view of the body—which is to say that his anthropology divided the person into mind and body (or flesh and spirit), holding the mind (or spirit) in higher regard. In his writing he frequently committed what "In Sickness and in Health" (1941) calls "[t]hat sin of the high-minded, sublimation" (*SP* 122). Auden's dualistic anthropology is evident in the very title of his first American book: *The Double Man* (1941). It is even clearer in *The Prolific and the Devourer* (1939)—a posthumously published, *Pensées*-like notebook

of spiritual musings that Auden assembled just before beginning to write “New Year Letter”—where Auden writes that “if we have a toothache, we seem to be two people, the suffering ‘I’ and the hostile outer world of the tooth. His penis never fully belongs to a man” (*Prose ii* 411). Accordingly, Auden looked for salvation in grand abstract theories rather than in the body or embodied relationships. Such body-repudiating dualism is, as Elshtain has shown, endemic to modern hard self-sovereignty. Arthur Kirsch attributes Auden’s dualistic take on embodiment to his discomfort with his own clumsy, short-sighted, grubby body.⁸⁴

But a few years after Auden returned to the church, his views on aloneness and embodiment changed decisively. From 1943-1949, references to “neighbor” and neighbor-love begin to appear in Auden’s prose with frequency (*Prose ii* 186, 230, 263, 302, 314, 359, 379); references to the subject’s fundamental aloneness disappear. Auden came to regard the existentialist philosophy exemplified by Kierkegaard as “a danger” because, as he reflected in an interview near the end of his life, “it’s a form of Gnosticism. It doesn’t pay proper attention to the body.”⁸⁵ Auden began to see salvation in the body and in sacrament. His poetic discussions of the body became more positive, framed explicitly in terms of Christian orthodoxy’s body-affirming doctrines of incarnation and resurrection: *For the Time Being* (1944) proclaims that because Jesus incarnates God and unites “Word” and “Flesh” (*CP* 389), we *find* God *in*, and *worship* God by *loving*, “the World of the Flesh” (*CP* 400);⁸⁶ “In Praise of Limestone” (1948)

⁸⁴ Arthur Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 29.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 277.

⁸⁶ In other words, sexual love is a way of worshipping God.

associates faith in the resurrection of the body with the anti-imperialist culture of unabashed physical pleasure on the island of Ischia.⁸⁷

To imagine the shape that an incarnational queer account of sovereignty with limits might take, I will look at two lyrics in Auden's later oeuvre that resist excarnation: "Tonight at Seven-Thirty" (1963) and "For Friends Only" (1964), two sections of the sequence "Thanksgiving for a Habitat" (1965), a paean to the farmhouse in Kirchstetten where Auden summered with his erstwhile lover Chester Kallman from 1958 until Auden's death in 1973. The construction of friendship as flexible and porous in both lyrics challenges the heterosexist bias in Elshtain's account of the responsible self.

"Tonight at Seven-Thirty" (an ode to dinner parties) and "For Friends Only" (an ode to the guest bedroom of Auden's farmhouse) explain why prioritizing friendship constitutes a queer way of life. Where spouses and family members dwell in relational forms that precede individual choice, friendships necessarily take place outside the obligations that structure heterosexuality. The elective nature of friendship makes it fragile; at the same time, Auden suggests, working at elective friendship equips people to resist stagnant ideas (e.g., tribalism, nationalism) in a way that the institutions of marriage and family (almost by definition) cannot.

As we learned in the previous chapters, the mode of extra-institutional relationship that most interested Auden was the coterie, or a close-knit circle of artistic and intellectual exchange. Lytle Shaw has shown that, for Frank O'Hara, a New York School disciple of Auden, "coterie" afforded a way "to recode kinship structures."⁸⁸ The

⁸⁷ For more on the body-affirming Christian orthodoxy of "In Praise of Limestone," see chapter one above.

⁸⁸ Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2006), 29.

“appropriated, superimposed, chosen, and contingent principles” of “coterie” as a form of cultural transmission subvert the hereditary and heteronormative principles of “the organic family.”⁸⁹ It follows, then, that “[c]oterie [...] is as much an idea about the social possibilities of affinity as it is a concrete sociological fact.”⁹⁰ The coterie provided a similar oppositional tool for Auden. Many of his most significant poems wrestle with or extol “coterie” as a queer way of life: “A Summer Night” (1933) worries that the contented complacency of coteries restricts social change; *The Age of Anxiety* (1947) rewrites “A Summer Night” to affirm the oppositional possibilities of friendship even among virtual strangers in a bar; in “New Year Letter” (1941), a small Long Island group of European exiles and sexual outlaws embodies a prophetic critique of fascism and nationalism; and the erotically-charged pilgrimage “At the Grave of Henry James” (1941) imagines a trans-historical coterie, a queer communion of saints.

“Thanksgiving for a Habitat” might seem an unlikely place to find an account of friendship as queer or of coteries as oppositional. For one thing, early readers of the sequence saw its clearest coterie signal—the personal dedications that Auden affixed to each section—as merely exclusionary.⁹¹ For another, the sequence teems with dogmatic pronouncements about etiquette: e.g., “to ‘borrow’ stamps / Is a mark of ill-breeding” (*SP* 279) and “[w]e may not be obliged—though it is mannerly—to bless / the Trinity” (*SP* 285). But gallantry constitutes one queer mode of self-fashioning.⁹² Moreover,

⁸⁹ Shaw, 37.

⁹⁰ Shaw, 6.

⁹¹ For example, John Updike complained that “what with the Kennedys, the Glasses, the Sinatra Clan, the friends of Norman Podhoretz, and the Pop-Camp-Hip crowd, there seem enough in-groups in the western world without a formal roll-call of Auden's acquaintanceship,” “Untitled Review,” in *W.H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 425.

⁹² The relationship between refinement and queerness goes at least as far back as the Decadent literary movement in fin-de-siècle England and France. Some scholars trace it back even further, unpacking the homoeroticism of medieval chivalry codes. See, for example, Richard E. Zeikowitz,

almost all of the sequence's pronouncements about etiquette occur in "Tonight at Seven-Thirty," which places limits on the expression of romance and family love precisely because it holds friendship in higher regard. And whether or not the reader knows the dedicatees, the dedication of "For Friends Only" to two people with the same last name and differently gendered first names gives bite to the poem's argument about the fragility of friendship in a heteronormative world.

Like much of Auden's coterie poetry (cf. especially "New Year Letter"), "Tonight At Seven-Thirty" celebrates coterie in ecclesial terms: Auden deems "Christ's cenacle" too big for a modern dinner party (*SP* 281). The word "cenacle" can mean either the room in which the Last Supper took place or a literary clique; in the context of "Tonight at Seven-Thirty," its two meanings collapse into one aesthetic, spiritual, and queer social form. The embodied, sacramental intimacy of a shared meal teaches the friends to look beyond their table, outside their circle:

For authentic
comity the gathering should be small
and unpublic:
at mass banquets where flosculent speeches are made
in some hired hall
we think of ourselves or nothing.

The word "comity," though, relates the "unpublic" coterie to the public work of internationalism: "comity" most often appears as part of the diplomatic concept of "the comity of nations," i.e., mutual recognition and mutual benefit. Auden's argument proceeds concretely and incarnationally: physical particularity—*this* house, *these* friends—teaches recognition, courtesy, and cooperation.

Homoeroticism and Chivalry: Discourses of Male Same-sex Desire in the Fourteenth Century (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

“Tonight at Seven-Thirty,” then, shares Elshtain’s Augustinian view of the “flow” between household and world, albeit with a crucial difference. Elshtain (as I have said) argues that “[e]ach layer of relational identity contributes to the ordering or disordering of the whole” only if the “beginnings” participate in “some institutional or relational form that has some sturdiness and capacity for perdurance.”⁹³ Only certain affective bonds (“beginnings”) have enough history behind them (“institutional”) to produce good citizens (“ordering of the whole”). With her criteria of “sturdiness” and “capacity for perdurance,” Elshtain all but names married life, family life, and monastic life. Auden, by contrast, sees *extra-* or *quasi-institutional relationships* as a better conduit for the ethical flow between household and world than *institutional relationships*. The intimacy of the coterie may be *elective* but it is not *exclusive*; friendship offers better instruction in “comity” than family does, teaching one to enjoy the company of people different from oneself. Hence the poem’s dinner-party etiquette:

[...] But a dinner party,
 however select,
 is a worldly rite that nicknames or endearments
 or family
 diminutives would profane: two doters who wish
 to tiddle and curmurr between the soup and fish
 belong in restaurants, all children should be fed
 earlier and be safely in bed. (SP 282)

Precisely because it transcends the animal partialities of family life, the coterie will admit outsiders: “pack-hunters do / dine *en famille*, it is true, / with protocol and placement, but none of them play host / to a stranger whom they help first” (SP 281). Friendship enlarges what “For Friends Only” calls “the circle of our affection” (SP 280). Romance and family life shrink it.

⁹³ Elshtain, 240.

Like “Tonight at Seven-Thirty,” an early manuscript draft of “For Friends Only” treats friendship as ethically superior to romance or family love. Auden included the draft on the back of a letter to Thekla Clark, an American expatriate whom he befriended while summering in Ischia and to whom he publicly dedicated the poem (along with her husband John). The poem makes its argument through an extended metaphor:

Though beginners find it easy, the language
Of friendship is in fact
Very difficult to speak well, a tongue
With no cognate resemblance whatever
To the galimatias of nursery and bedroom,
Court rhyme or rustic prose.

Its idioms, if used correctly,
Express as no others could
What matters, a care for the humane,
A concern for one another,
Absent or present, from breakfast meeting until
We part for the night.⁹⁴

The conceit of the demanding language of friendship suggests that the cultural models for *philia* are fewer, poorer, less accessible, less accepted than the scripts for eros or official panegyric. But because friendship cannot rely on the scripts that support heterosexual life, mastering it goes much farther in equipping the friends to practice neighbor-love (or love of the Other) than the experiences of romance or family can.⁹⁵

The published version of “For Friends Only” changes the second stanza entirely, to much more sober effect:

⁹⁴ Quoted in Thekla Clark, *Wystan and Chester: A Personal Memoir of W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 105-106.

⁹⁵ In her memoir, Thekla Clark remembers a night in Ischia when Auden confessed that he found the commandment to “Love thy neighbour” the most difficult one to obey. “This started a lengthy discussion involving tradition, literary sources, and history until I asked, ‘Wystan, just who is your neighbour?’ Everyone had an answer to that question, and we had arrived at ‘all humanity’ when Wystan answered, ‘Anyone who needs you’” (37). Cf. Auden’s poem “Like a Vocation” (1939)—titled “Please Make Yourself at Home” in *CP45*—which ends with the image of “[t]he one who needs you,” whose “weeping climbs toward your life like a vocation” (*CP* 255).

And, unless often spoken, soon goes rusty.
Distance and duties divide us,
But absence will not seem an evil
If it make our re-meeting
A real occasion. Come when you can:
Your room will be ready. (*SP* 280)

The revision makes no overt claims about friendship's ethical superiority to romantic or family love. Instead of calling attention to what makes friendship special, the *gay* poet—who, in a later section of “Thanksgiving for a Habitat,” describes himself as an “unwilling celibat[e]” (*SP* 284)—points out the fragility of friendship *to a married heterosexual couple*. In the letter to Thekla Clark containing the earlier version of “For Friends Only,” Auden writes, “I want your joint permission to dedicate it to you and John.” Asking *one member* of a straight married couple for their *joint* permission acknowledges the “duties” that “divide” friends.⁹⁶

The conditionals of the revised second stanza (“[i]f,” “when you can”) betray an attitude of resignation toward the fragility of friendship. Even the poem's defiant title takes on a quality of pathos in the context of the published version: a visiting family member might just as easily occupy a guest bedroom. As it rewrites the private gift, the publication of “For Friends Only” re-deploys the argument about friendship versus family in “Tonight at Seven-Thirty.” The very “duties” that buoy family life (note the accusatory sound of the plosive alliteration) keep Thekla and John away from Wystan and Chester, who (so the last two lines of the second stanza imply) can host them at any time. The contrast that the poem makes—between the insularity of Thekla's and John's marriage and the openness of Wystan's and Chester's queer friendship—poses a challenge to Elshtain's equation of sturdy, perdurable, given forms of intimate

⁹⁶ Quoted in Clark, 104.

relationship with civic order (not because marriage isn't perdurable, but because insularity isn't civic).

IV. THE RESPONSIBLE SELF & TRANSGENDER BODY THEOLOGY

Rereading Auden to flesh out the queer commitments of his Christian poetry not only calls Elstain's ideas about sexuality and intimacy into question. It also facilitates the construction of a gender-variance-affirming theology of the responsible self—what I will call a “trans theology” for short, since my argument focuses on transitioning (i.e., changing one's gender presentation) through hormone replacement and / or sexual reassignment surgery. The body theology of Justin Tanis shows that one can indeed reconcile transitioning with Elstain's distinction between responsible and sovereign modifications of the body. But, as we will see, such reconciling requires the pathologizing of gender variance. Kate Bornstein's account of transitioning as an act of invention rather than completion avoids the pathologizing of transsexuality, yet, as I will show, it remains vulnerable to an Elstain-like charge of self-sovereignty.

Auden can help us out of this impasse. After I explore in detail the ramifications of Tanis's and Bornstein's quite different accounts of transsexuality for a theological ethic of responsibility, I will turn to Auden's retelling of the New Testament infancy narratives. *For the Time Being* (1944) facilitates the construction of a trans theology of the responsible self by calling into question the reliance of Christian ethics on discourses of nature. The poem suggests that God's loving act of creation, not our abstractions about nature, should ground Christian ethics. In place of a pathologizing vocabulary of

the natural and the unnatural, then, the salient criterion for ethical deliberation becomes the Creator / creature distinction. Auden helps us replace an ethics of so-called natural law with an ethics of creation without nature.

Transformation I: Congruity & Healing

In her historical study of transsexuality in twentieth-century America, Joanne Meyerowitz cautions against treating transsexuals as “symbols of something larger than their own everyday selves.”⁹⁷ In particular, Meyerowitz wants “to avoid investing transsexuals of the past—a diverse group of people with a wide array of political views—with transhistorical symbolic weight.”⁹⁸ Scholars and activists have turned transsexuals into positive and negative symbols alike: some regard transsexuals as “symbols of transgression” and “emblems of liberatory potential”;⁹⁹ for others, transsexuals merely “reinscribe the conservative stereotypes of male and female.”¹⁰⁰ But to lump all transsexuals and trans-spectrum people together into one symbol mistakenly detaches them from their various social contexts—from “the language and cultural forms available to them,” through which “they articulated their senses of self.”¹⁰¹ Therefore a trans theology of the responsible self should begin by listening to the testimonies of transgender people themselves. Note that such an approach is consistent with Elstain’s desire for a feminist political theory “that incorporate[s] the self-understanding of the female subject as an essential feature of its overall logic of explanation.”¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Meyerowitz, 11.

⁹⁸ Meyerowitz, 12.

⁹⁹ Meyerowitz, 12.

¹⁰⁰ Meyerowitz, 11.

¹⁰¹ Meyerowitz, 12-13.

¹⁰² Elstain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, 302.

Incorporating the self-understanding of transgender people, a trans theology of the responsible self will reject the assumption that transgender experiences necessarily involve a Gnostic rejection of the body. “Rather than simply acting as if the body were not important,” writes Justin Tanis, a transgender Christian pastor, “we find our bodies and the meanings they convey deeply important.”¹⁰³ Indeed, Tanis’s theology calls to mind Charles Taylor’s rejection of religious practices that downplay the centrality of the body to religious knowing: “The only way we know God,” Tanis insists, “is as embodied people. Through our bodies’ capacities for sight, sound, emotion, thought, intuition, and other senses, we are able to experience the divine. The sacred comes to us through our bodies and within our bodies.”¹⁰⁴ Unlike excarnational practices that “demean” the body,¹⁰⁵ transitioning, according to Tanis, necessitates loving the body: “congruity” of “body” and “spirit,” as he puts it, “can come through loving the body enough to change it and mold it.”¹⁰⁶ Right away a person thinking along Elshtain’s lines might object that, even if such changing and molding flows from a loving acknowledgement of the importance of the body’s meaning, it nevertheless conflicts with an ethic of responsibility, for responsibility involves the surrender of the will. But Tanis actually regards the pursuit of congruity of body and spirit on the part of trans-spectrum folk as a divinely mandated calling. And, as I will show in more detail later, he couches that calling in the language of responsibility.

¹⁰³ Justin Tanis, *Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 163.

¹⁰⁴ Tanis, 164.

¹⁰⁵ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 210.

¹⁰⁶ Tanis, 163.

Tanis regards transgender as a vocation because trans people reveal different things about God than do cisgender people.¹⁰⁷ Trans people teach others to look for “truth beyond what seems obvious and expected.”¹⁰⁸ They call into question Manichean patterns of thinking, helping Christians “see beyond the dualisms, including the splits between life and death, female and male, spirit and body.”¹⁰⁹ And by traversing the division of male and female, trans people provide a human gloss on the divine trinity. Sarah Coakley, an Anglican systematic theologian and philosopher of religion, has described the doctrine of the trinity as a threeness that divinely ambushes twoness: in light of the trinity, gender becomes legible as plastic, not an immutable, oppressive binary.¹¹⁰ But we should consider that it also goes the other way around—that trans people reveal God’s creative love for a “dappled,” “brinded,” “pied” world, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Auden’s queer Catholic predecessor.¹¹¹ For Tanis, trans people have a “calling” to witness to the diversity of God’s creation.¹¹²

Still, as I indicated above, Elshtain frequently invokes the “natural” as an ethical criterion; a reader could use her work to argue that transitioning from male to female or vice versa through sexual reassignment surgery and hormone replacement amounts to “a dream of radical self-transcendence,” an attempt “to control nature.”¹¹³ But the word “nature” needs serious unpacking. In her descriptions of self-sovereignty, Elshtain takes

¹⁰⁷ Tanis, 134, 164.

¹⁰⁸ Tanis, 166.

¹⁰⁹ Tanis, 169.

¹¹⁰ Sarah Coakley, “Is There a Future for Gender and Theology?: On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task,” *Criterion* 47.1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 10.

¹¹¹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty,” in *Mortal Beauty, God’s Grace: Major Poems and Spiritual Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 2003), 25. For more on the homoeroticism of Hopkins’s devotional poetry, see Julia F. Saville’s *A Queer Chivalry: The Homoerotic Asceticism of Gerard Manley* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 2000) and Frederick S. Roden, *Same-sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 82-122.

¹¹² Tanis, 147, 166.

¹¹³ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 205.

“human nature,” “nature,” and the “natural” for granted, abstracting them from their places in specific theo-ethical traditions.¹¹⁴ She nowhere specifies or justifies any principles for positing or defining human nature. (An odd move, since Elshtain writes that her “history of ideas” approach to political theory “means, among other things, that one cannot abstract ideas from the textures, the warp and woof, of history.”)¹¹⁵ At one point she defines “the body” as “nature,” an equivalence that gets us no closer to appreciating how the naturalness of the body functions as an ethical criterion.¹¹⁶ One quick, lone reference to “the moral or natural law” at the beginning of her treatment of self-sovereignty suggests that, for her, natural law theory (or the use of reason to deduce moral rules from the observation of human nature), not revelation, decides what counts as “natural” or violates “nature.”¹¹⁷ Yet here, too, Elshtain takes the persuasiveness of the natural law tradition in Christian ethics for granted.

The problem becomes clearer if we look at Elshtain’s description of the responsible self. “The self I have in mind,” she writes, “seeks meaning and dignity and finds a measure of both not in total liberation from nature, nor in some utopian attunement and at-oneness with nature but, rather, in growing to become a full person according to our human natures.”¹¹⁸ Elshtain earlier defines “full person” as someone who has grown to become a mature member of society.¹¹⁹ She tries to avoid an ablist definition of full personhood by rejecting “therapeutic paternalism” in favor of the model of Jean Vanier’s L’Arche communities, where the so-called “normal” live “in covenant,”

¹¹⁴ See especially Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 210, 214, 220-221, 243.

¹¹⁵ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, xvi.

¹¹⁶ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 184.

¹¹⁷ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 160.

¹¹⁸ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 229.

¹¹⁹ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 228.

as equals, with the so-called “mentally handicapped.”¹²⁰ But what does “according to our human natures” mean? Elshtain gestures towards an answer by describing the responsible self as a social self: “[b]ecause that nature,” i.e., human nature, “is intrinsically social; because we are persons, not individuals; we must refrain from doing everything of which we are capable. If we refuse to observe a limit, we are destroyers, we become death dealers.”¹²¹ Anything *antisocial*, then, is *anti-human nature*. But how do we decide where the limits lie?

For Elshtain, observing the limits of nature means working within the parameters of “what was given us at birth”:

We experiment with our natures at our peril. By experimenting with our natures, I do not mean “attempting to forestall terrible illness,” say, or healing injury and so on. The reductionist argument often thrown in the face of one calling for limits is ridiculous stuff much of the time, to wit: “I see, well, because it means messing with our natures, I guess you would never have wanted pneumonia to be treated or a polio vaccine developed because that messes with nature.” One sees how beside the point such a riposte is. By assisting us in being as whole in body and spirit as we can be, *given what was given us at birth*, we are helping to complete our nature, not to alter it radically.¹²²

The stipulation of “given what was given us at birth” suffers from the same problem of vagueness as “nature,” “human nature,” and the “natural.” What does that limit mean for trans people? One could read Elshtain’s logic as prohibiting hormone replacement and sexual reassignment surgery if one saw transition not as *wholeness* and *completion* but as *radical alteration*.

Nevertheless, Elshtain’s comments about wholeness and completion dovetail with what Tanis has to say about transitioning:

¹²⁰ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 247.

¹²¹ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 230.

¹²² Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 231, emphasis added.

Achieving a sense of congruity between body and spirit is, for many, the goal of exploring gender transition or various gender expressions.¹²³

I refused to consider surgery until I had worked through my discomfort with my own breasts. I wanted to love them into another form, not hate them off my body. I felt it important that this process was about love and care, not about dysphoria and revulsion. I was subjecting my body—me—to surgery; the transformation was about healing, not illness; about hope, not despair; and about joy, not dysphoria. [...]

Honoring our bodies means listening closely to them and making choices that bring out the best in us. We must choose with care and take responsibility for our actions. Honoring our bodies means learning to love our embodied selves so much that we dress ourselves as we long to dress, we shape our bodies as we want them to be shaped, and we do it from a sense of well-being.¹²⁴

Rereading the passage from Elshtain in light of Tanis's description of transitioning, Elshtain's salient ethical criterion for telling the difference between what counts as "nature" and what violates "nature" seems to be "body-modification-as-power-grab" (eugenics or Simone de Beauvoir's masculinized woman) versus "body-modification-as-healing" (antibiotics). In this paradigm, hormone replacement and sexual reassignment surgery are, for people who perceive a mismatch between their chromosomal / morphological sex and their gender identity, acts of healing and completion—not body-repudiating, radically altering power-grabs.

In fact, Tanis's conception of transitioning as a calling to witness to the diversity of God's creation lines up almost perfectly with Elshtain's affirmation of "growing to become a full person according to our human natures."¹²⁵ Tanis repeatedly invokes the language of nature, authenticity, true selfhood, and responsibility. Since "[t]rans people commonly view gender variance within themselves as something that they cannot control," something "permanent," he concludes that being on the trans spectrum is

¹²³ Tanis, 169.

¹²⁴ Tanis, 174.

¹²⁵ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 229.

“natural.” According to Tanis, then, the problem with discourses about nature is that “society” tends “to codify the natural into categories” that conflict with God’s diverse creation. Thus Tanis simply broadens the scope of Elshtain’s category of the “natural.” Moreover, he posits a transgender “nature,” the “suppress[ion]” of which “causes great psychological and spiritual suffering.”¹²⁶ The journey and calling of trans people centers on “reconciling the inner and out parts of our nature.”¹²⁷ And for Tanis, the transgender experience amounts to the spiritual journey par excellence insofar as it involves “[t]he search for an authentic sense of self.”¹²⁸ Likewise transitioning amounts to the spiritual vocation par excellence because it involves “a summons to be or do something that reflects our true selves.”¹²⁹ In other words, the transgender vocation requires fundamentally a letting go of “masks” in order to move toward wholeness, congruity, purpose, and health.¹³⁰ Tanis frames the requirement as a responsibility toward other people: trans-spectrum folk have the “responsibility” to shed their masks and “explore fully” their God-given trans “nature” so that they “might live freely” and thus “serve God” and “others.”¹³¹

But this is just to put the matter in terms to which Elshtain could accede, instead of questioning the whole normative apparatus of the natural. Using Tanis’s description of transitioning as letting go of masks, admitting one’s true nature, and pursuing healing—

¹²⁶ Tanis, 145.

¹²⁷ Tanis, 170.

¹²⁸ Tanis, 24.

¹²⁹ Tanis, 150.

¹³⁰ Tanis, 151, 158, 175.

¹³¹ Tanis, 149, 159-160. Tanis’s explanation of how his trans experience helps him serve other people recalls the viewpoint of Edward Carpenter, an English socialist poet and early gay activist. In *The Intermediate Sex* (1896), Carpenter describes gay people as the “reconcilers and interpreters” of men and women “to each other,” *Sexology Uncensored: The Documents of Sexual Science*, ed. Lucy Bland and Laura Doan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 51, 48. Tanis writes of having “a sense” that he is “a more skilled pastor” because, having transitioned, he knows how congregations react differently to male and female pastors; moreover, his transition allows him to “empathize and understand experiences” from the perspectives of both men and women, 159-160.

along with Elshtain's uncritical extraction of ethical norms from "nature"—to develop a trans theology of the responsible self would strike some people on the trans spectrum as problematic for two reasons. (1) It medicalizes gender, which encourages transgender people to see themselves as "defect[s]" or "monster[s]." ¹³² (2) And while medicalizing transsexuality might be a good move politically, ¹³³ it forces transsexuality to conform to the illusions of cissexuality: (a) that we can discover a person's essence, and (b) that this essence maps neatly onto either side of a natural gender dichotomy. Instead of viewing transitioning through hormones and surgery as a matter of healing, some trans people would prefer to think of it as about *giving up* wholeness in order to call the illusions of cissexuality into question. For example, a female-to-male transsexual might want phallic augmentation without seeking to have his vagina closed up. As the transgender lawyer and activist Dean Spade reports, though, such FTMs have trouble finding sympathetic surgeons because "doctors [...] only seek to produce genitals that fit into one of two narrowly defined options." ¹³⁴

(Certainly some transsexuals *do* experience their gender as mapping neatly onto either side of a gender binary. And as the theologian Susannah Cornwall rightly remarks, transgender people "simply trying to get by" should not have to shoulder the burden of "solving" every fraught philosophical quandary about gender "on behalf of everyone else." ¹³⁵ A model of transsexuality as *giving up* wholeness in order to call the illusions of

¹³² Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 8, 12.

¹³³ For example, medicalizing transsexuality gives more people access to surgery and hormone replacement, because insurance companies will sometimes cover the costs. See Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 119.

¹³⁴ Quoted in Susannah Cornwall, "Apophysis and Ambiguity: The 'Unknowingness' of Transgender," in *Trans/formations*, ed. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood (London: SCM Press, 2009), 13.

¹³⁵ Cornwall, 29.

cissexuality into question thus carries the danger of disqualifying some trans people in favor of others, a point to which I will return shortly.)

Transformation 2: Sequins & Runways

The seminal autobiographical writings of Kate Bornstein, a playwright and performance artist, typify the conception of transitioning as a process of deliberately giving up rather than pursuing wholeness. Bornstein treats gender as a matter of “style” rather than a matter of essence or nature.¹³⁶ She identifies herself as a “transsexual lesbian” on the first page of her first memoir, *Gender Outlaw*.¹³⁷ Her gender identity gets more complicated from there. In a world where doctors assign gender at birth and transsexuals need to prove that they have an illness in order to pursue gender reassignment surgery,¹³⁸ Bornstein resists all the rules demanding people to identify strictly as female or male. “I love playing with genders,” Bornstein writes. “I love watching other people play with all the shades and flavors that gender can come in.”¹³⁹ According to Bornstein, equating gender variance with pathology naturalizes the male / female gender binary. Thus it locks people into a class system that legitimizes cismale privilege.¹⁴⁰ Self-consciously playing with gender, by contrast, destabilizes and denaturalizes the binary. Ultimately, it could shatter “the power dynamic between men and women.”¹⁴¹ For Bornstein, then, transitioning is about invention, not completion.

Bornstein maintains her conception of transitioning as playful invention throughout her oeuvre. A biographical note at the end of *Gender Outlaws: The Next*

¹³⁶ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 3, 72.

¹³⁷ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 3.

¹³⁸ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 22, 62.

¹³⁹ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 58.

¹⁴⁰ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 105-111, 113.

¹⁴¹ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 107.

Generation, Bornstein’s anthology of emerging trans-spectrum writers, describes her playing with genders as “gender anarchy.”¹⁴² In her most recent memoir, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger*, Bornstein calls herself an “exquisite blend of boy and girl,” with an emphasis on “girl.”¹⁴³ Furthermore, she differentiates the genders “boy” and “girl” from the genders “man” and “woman,” a distinction that reinforces Bornstein’s personal commitment to a playful, non-teleological style of gender that defies discourses of “nature” and the “natural.”¹⁴⁴

Fittingly, where Tanis uses medical metaphors for transitioning (healing, congruity, wholeness), Bornstein uses fashion metaphors (sewing, trying on, and modeling clothes). Through the language of accessorizing, she reclaims her own agency in gender performance. Bornstein refers to her first memoir as her “runway.”¹⁴⁵ It marks “a time when we’ve [...] begun sewing sequins into our cultural hand-me-downs.”¹⁴⁶ It replaces the “romantic stuff”¹⁴⁷—the old “tales of women trapped in the bodies of men or men pining away in the bodies of women”¹⁴⁸—with “the hard part”: questioning gender.¹⁴⁹

Because Bornstein conceptualizes transgender as a matter of invention rather than completion, one might ask why she includes corporeal transitioning in the queer enterprise of questioning gender: why not just change the social meaning of gender rather than the body? Bornstein admits that she originally opted for “genital surgery partially as a result of cultural pressure,” the idea that a so-called “real woman” must

¹⁴² Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*, 278.

¹⁴³ Kate Bornstein, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger*, 197, 227.

¹⁴⁴ Kate Bornstein, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger*, 244.

¹⁴⁵ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 4.

¹⁴⁶ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 13.

¹⁴⁷ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 13.

¹⁴⁸ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 12.

¹⁴⁹ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 14.

have a vagina. Even so, she would “do it again,” she says. “Knowing what I know now, I’m real glad I had my surgery [...] just for the comfort I feel with a constructed vagina. I like that thang!”¹⁵⁰ What’s more, in her autobiographical play, *Hidden: A Gender*, Bornstein treats surgical and hormonal transitioning as a logical extension of the less physically demanding forms of gender construction that everyone participates in, cis and trans alike, “every waking moment.”¹⁵¹ The character Kate sees her vaginoplasty as an important part of her “fluidly gendered” self-construction.¹⁵² She thereby challenges the heteronormative sexual ethics and cisprivileging gender politics of Doc Grinder, a cross between a “twentieth-century talk show host” and a “nineteenth-century medicine sideshow barker.”¹⁵³

As I mentioned briefly above, Bornstein’s take on transgender and transitioning has yet another difficulty: it carries the risk of disqualifying some trans people—namely, those who simply want to pass as men or women—in favor of others who, like Bornstein, see the gender binary as an illusion.¹⁵⁴ In a literary study of transsexual body narratives, Jay Prosser takes issue with “queer’s arrogation of transgender” in, e.g., the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler.¹⁵⁵ According to Prosser, when queer theory ascribes performativity to transgender—that is to say, when theory treats transgender as revelatory of the citational or imitative process by which “male” and “female” appear as identities¹⁵⁶—it (a) devalues the distinct aspiration of many transsexuals “to be non-

¹⁵⁰ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 119.

¹⁵¹ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 221.

¹⁵² Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 221.

¹⁵³ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 171.

¹⁵⁴ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 65.

¹⁵⁵ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 32.

¹⁵⁶ Prosser, 30-31.

performative, to be constative”¹⁵⁷ and (b) ignores “the materiality of the sexed body,” i.e., the “struggle” and the “desire” on the part of many transsexuals “for sexed embodiment as *telos*.”¹⁵⁸ Julia Serano, a contributor to Kate Bornstein’s anthology of new trans-spectrum voices, puts it more bluntly: “[i]f one more person tells me that ‘all gender is performance,’ I think I am going to strangle them.”¹⁵⁹ Serano suggests that, “[i]nstead of fictionalizing gender,” we “talk about the moments in life when gender feels all too real. Because gender doesn’t feel like drag when you’re a young trans child begging your parents not to cut your hair or not to force you to wear that dress.”¹⁶⁰ Bornstein acknowledges that many transsexuals disagree with her work.¹⁶¹ She places more value on the general project of asking questions about gender than on her own perspective.¹⁶²

Notwithstanding the two problems that I have just described, Bornstein’s approach to transitioning has much to offer a queer theology of the responsible self. It could accomplish the work of Tanis’s body theology—elucidating the doctrine of the trinity, challenging Manichean dualisms—without pathologizing transgender people. But her definition of gender variance as playful critique rather than painful disease might seem like the power-grab of a sovereign self. Elshtain would almost certainly see Kate Bornstein as an example of soft self-sovereignty, the obverse of Simone de Beauvoir’s masculinized woman. “I didn’t ‘lose’ my male privilege so much as I made a conscious decision to get rid of it,” Bornstein writes. “It took my becoming a woman to discover

¹⁵⁷ Prosser, 32.

¹⁵⁸ Prosser, 33.

¹⁵⁹ Julia Serano, “Performance Piece,” in Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*, 85.

¹⁶⁰ Serano, 88.

¹⁶¹ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 7-8, 64.

¹⁶² Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 14.

my ‘male behavior’—that is, exhibiting male privilege.”¹⁶³ Note, though, that unlike soft sovereign selves, Bornstein is not calling for the triumph of women or the abolition of gender categories. Rather, her “goal” is “a society free from the *constraints* of *non-consensual* gender.”¹⁶⁴ That is to say, she wants to create a third space outside the medicalized gender binary, where people (a) recognize gender as a performance, (b) choose their genders, and (c) play them fluidly and self-reflexively.

Bornstein’s third space circumvents the two possibilities for changing “our nature” that Elshtain foresees: transitioning amounts neither to healing (completing our nature) nor to power grabbing (radically altering our nature) but rather to an abnegation of both. In other words, in Bornstein’s third space, transitioning neither corrects a physical or psychological defect, an incongruity of body and spirit (on the one hand); nor does it commit the “hubristic overreach” or “excesses” of a sovereign self by assuming power at the expense of someone else (on the other). Instead, it challenges assumptions about what may count as “whole in body and spirit.”¹⁶⁵ And it does so in order to open up a responsible dialogue about gender and privilege.

Creation without Nature

So how would Bornstein’s approach to transitioning, which rejects the concept of nature altogether, fit a theology of the responsible self? One could, pace Nietzsche, question the idea that people can only make sense of the good through ethical norms. A Christian, though, must determine the good in light of the authority of the living God—a formidable ethical norm indeed. But to do so does not necessarily commit a Christian

¹⁶³ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 110.

¹⁶⁴ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw*, 111, emphasis mine.

¹⁶⁵ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 231.

theo-ethical framework to a definition of the person as having “a nature,” i.e., an essence that imposes or implies a limit or norm. After all, Christian theologians have come to agree that God has no nature: like ontological proofs of God, talk of a divine nature treats God as a kind of being among the totality of beings in the world. In other words, it reduces the Creator to a mere creature alongside us.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps, then, human creatures specially image God by virtue of not having a nature. In that case, the Creator / creature relationship would suffice for the ground of a theological ethic.

For example, Kathryn Tanner, an Anglican theologian, has recently read the doctrine of the *imago dei* through the lens of early church fathers to argue that “it is just human nature not to have a nature.”¹⁶⁷ Whereas other creatures (e.g., pigs and rocks) reveal God’s goodness in a limited way,¹⁶⁸ humans image the illimitably good God through their “plastic powers,”¹⁶⁹ their ability to form and transform themselves “with reference to a whole host of outside influences.”¹⁷⁰ Grace refers, not to an extraneous addition to a nature that can subsist without it, but rather to the creator’s constant self-gift to the creature, a gift that the creature always already enjoys.¹⁷¹ Thus, while a Christian theo-ethical framework can dispense with a view of the person as having a nature, it must

¹⁶⁶ See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, v. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951); and Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹⁶⁷ Kathryn Tanner, “Grace without Nature,” in *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology*, ed. David Albertson and Cabell King (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 369. She develops these ideas further in *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁶⁸ Tanner, “Grace without Nature,” 367.

¹⁶⁹ Tanner, “Grace without Nature,” 366.

¹⁷⁰ Tanner, “Grace without Nature,” 368.

¹⁷¹ Tanner, “Grace without Nature,” 371. Tanner relies on Henri de Lubac, who shows that “[t]he idea of pure nature [...] is implicated in a distinctively modern naturalism without any obvious compatibility with the Christian faith. In a naturalistic vein, the idea of pure nature suggests [...] the self-sufficiency of the natural apart from the God who creates and saves it,” Tanner, 369. Thus, according to Tanner, “Christian theology might follow the lead of the contemporary biological sciences,” particularly biogenetics, in rejecting the notion of a human nature, “while being all the more true to itself” (452n).

hold onto a view of humans as created. A queer theology of the responsible self will need to rethink creation by detaching it from the concept of nature.¹⁷²

For the Time Being (1944), Auden's modern-day retelling of the infancy narratives from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, presents one possible starting point for detaching creation from the concept of nature. The characters' encounters with God call their habits of reading nature into question. For example, in the Narrator's words, facing God's wrath unmask as *unreal* "the natural world where / The occupation of space is real and the final fact" (CP 351):

It's as if
We had left our house for five minutes to mail a letter,
And during that time the living room had changed places
With the room behind the mirror over the fireplace;
It's as if, waking up with a start, we discovered
Ourselves stretched out flat on the floor, watching our shadow
Sleepily stretching itself at the window. I mean
That the world of space where events re-occur is still there,
Only now it's no longer real; the real one is nowhere
Where time never moves and nothing can ever happen. (CP 352)

The natural world is *there* but *unreal*, suggesting that we must look elsewhere for information about how to live. Moreover, in "The Annunciation" we learn that the fall of humanity damaged our epistemic faculties (CP 355, 359). Hence the three wise men (a scientist, a historian, and a philosopher) give up empiricism and reason in favor of revelation in the form of the star of the nativity. They give up their naturalism "[t]o discover how to be human now" (CP 370). The scientist, who has "put Nature through / A thorough inquisition," finds that "She" offers no coherent, honest "answers" about how to live. "To discover how to be truthful now," he needs the star (CP 369).

¹⁷² For a concise overview of the history of "nature" in Western thought—from nature as justice in Greco-Roman antiquity, to nature as the will of God in Latin Christianity, to nature as necessity in Kant—see Lorraine Daston, "The World in Order," in *Without Nature?*, 19-30.

That *For the Time Being* cautions against extracting ethical norms from nature will become even clearer when I contrast Simeon's religious epistemology with Elshtain's approach to ethical deliberation. First, though, I want to call attention to the fact that Simeon explicitly distinguishes between nature and creation in his meditation on the incarnation. For Simeon, although "the Truth is indeed One," "Nature" has no "public" meaning; rather, people "have [...] many private illusions about" it (*CP* 390), as numerous as "the creatures in the very real and most exciting universe that God creates with and for His love" (*CP* 390). Simeon attaches the word "illusion" to "Nature"; and "real," to the "creatures" that God "creates." God's loving act of creation grounds "the very real," not our abstractions about nature.

V. DOING ETHICS INCARNATIONALLY

Applying Elshtain's concept of radical self-sovereignty—as she has articulated *it*—to queer theory shows that she sees "human nature" as self-evident. Elshtain chides "[g]enetic fundamentalism," by which she presumably means genetic engineering, for holding its discussions "in a zone sanitized of any normative accounts of human nature."¹⁷³ Elshtain, though, never explicitly grounds her many appeals to "human nature" in any normative account. She treats the categories "natural" and "unnatural" as normative for ethics, and as something that all people have immediate access to, outside the interpretive framework of different faith traditions. In addition to treating the "natural" as self-evident and immediately accessible to people regardless of their faith tradition, Elshtain implicitly links defiance of the "natural" with excarnation. Radical

¹⁷³ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 210.

self-sovereignty means, for Elshtain, refusing to stay within the “natural” limits that the body sets. And refusing to stay within those limits means repudiating the body.¹⁷⁴

Using writers as diverse as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Primo Levi, Albert Camus, Czeslaw Milosz, and Marilynne Robinson, Elshtain makes clear her belief that, in the secular space of a liberal polity, people of *different* or *no* faith traditions can come to consensus about what violates the limits of responsible self-sovereignty. One might think that Elshtain’s method of drawing on novels and poetry as well as theology to challenge excarnational philosophies and practices achieves a nice harmony of method and argument. After all, Charles Taylor argues that “aesthetic experience” is “[o]ne of the most important sites of resistance” to excarnation. Art remains one of the few places in modern culture “where embodied feeling can still be allowed to open us to something higher.”¹⁷⁵ But Elshtain excarnates the art and theology on which she draws by, for example, quoting Bonhoeffer and Camus on the “natural” and “human nature” without unpacking what either of them means by “nature,” let alone examining how each writer’s use of the concept depends on the rest of his intellectual, spiritual, and social commitments.¹⁷⁶ She is thus like the “vigilantes in the glades” whom Auden criticizes in “New Year Letter” (1941). They hope to find the key to an infallible “*codex gentium*” there, but “the *Lex Abscondita* evades” them:

Now here, now there, one leaps and cries
‘I’ve got her and I claim the prize,’
But when the rest catch up, he stands
With just a torn blouse in his hands. (*DM* 40)

¹⁷⁴ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 231.

¹⁷⁵ Taylor, 288.

¹⁷⁶ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 220, 243.

In other words, Elshtain treats the “natural” as a universal ethic that can be abstracted from a specific community’s practices and the character and virtues that those practices form in the community’s members.

Elshtain’s methodology, then, conflicts with her ethics. Her argument for an incarnational ethic proceeds excarnationally: insofar as Elsthain invokes the “natural” and the “unnatural” without unpacking “nature” or contextualizing it within the social practices of particular faith communities (like Catholic natural law theology),¹⁷⁷ and insofar as these fraught, unspecified categories determine her view of what counts as incarnational or excarnational, her work suffers from methodological (indeed, theological) incoherence. Elshtain writes that “authentic relationality” gives us “a sense of what is appropriate to, and achievable by, creatures like ourselves.”¹⁷⁸ But she overlooks the crucial, incarnational questions of *what* constitutes “authentic relationality” and *how* that leads to consensus about propriety—or what creatures like us are really *like*. Developing a sense of “what is appropriate” requires something more specific than “authentic relationality,” whatever that means. It requires a community of people who agree that distinguishing “the appropriate” from the “inappropriate” matters, and who recognize the authority of certain tools over others to help with the task.

What, then, might it mean for a Christian thinker like Elshtain to reason *incarnationally* about bodily proprieties? It might require that she apply the concept of “sovereignty within limits” by explicitly and reflexively using Christian revelation and ecclesial tradition as guides to reason. And it might require her participation in what

¹⁷⁷ My point here is not to endorse Catholic natural law thinking: indeed, it should be obvious from what I have written so far, and from how I proceed in the remainder of the paragraph, that I do not. My point is simply that Catholic natural law theory provides one example of how Elshtain could have grounded her undefined claims about nature.

¹⁷⁸ Elshtain, *Sovereignty*, 232.

Charles Taylor calls “the network of agape,” where corporate worship of the living God trains feeling. As Stanley Hauerwas puts it in *With the Grain of the Universe*, “the intellectual and moral transformation” that results from submitting our habits of speech to the discipline of “the God found in Jesus Christ [...] enables Christians to see the world as it is, and not as it appears [...] if we get our theology wrong, we get our world wrong.”¹⁷⁹ On such a reading, the ongoing relational training of being a Christian not only changes what a person sees in the world; it disciplines her faculty of sight. Reasoning *incarnationally* would at the very least, then, involve commitment to a community and its formative texts and practices. That is because, as Hauerwas learned from Alasdair MacIntyre, my ethical action becomes legible as such only if others recognize it as carrying on a narrative that they share with me, and I learn how to carry on that narrative by participating in the social practices that sustain it.¹⁸⁰

In *For the Time Being* (1944), Simeon gives an account of the incarnation that adumbrates just such a communal, sacramental, tradition- and revelation-based approach to ethical deliberation. According to Simeon, God’s self-revelation via enfleshment—i.e., God’s self-disclosure *to the world* as one particular human being *in the world*—entails a relational epistemology. We acquire knowledge about God not through ratiocination but revelation, not through proofs (ontotheology) but encounters (Christ, eucharist, the church). And these encounters mark the beginning of an intersubjective ethical story about grace—a story under way in lives formed (through corporate practices

¹⁷⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 183.

¹⁸⁰ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); and Stanley Hauerwas, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 202-213.

like confession, forgiveness, the passing of the peace, and prayer) by the virtues (faith, hope, and love) constitutive of grace.

According to Simeon, because the incarnation unites “Flesh” and “Word” with neither “a magical transformation” of the “Flesh” nor a “loss of perfection” of the “Word,” it has something to say about how imagination and reason ought to operate. The incarnation redeems “Imagination [...] from promiscuous fornication with her own images” (*CP* 389). In light of the embodied God, every person and situation takes on spiritual significance, not just those featured in literature and history. And the incarnation redeems “Reason [...] from incestuous fixation on her own logic” (*CP* 389). It demands suppleness and creativity on the part of reason because it is a “coinherence of the One and the Many.” It denies monism *and* pluralism, the one “indifferent” god of “the philosophers” *and* the many separate gods of the pagans. The word “coinherence,” which means something like “mystical interpenetration” (of, e.g., the three persons of the trinity), comes from the theology of Charles Williams, a lay Anglican writer of highbrow Christian thrillers whom Auden met in 1937 (see chapter two above). A letter that Auden wrote to a priest in 1956 sheds light on the implications of “coinherence” in Simeon’s meditation: “it does seem to me that the Doctrine of the Incarnation implies the co-inherence of spirit and flesh in all creatures, and that materialism and manicheism [*sic*] are mirror images of each other.”¹⁸¹ Spirit and flesh form a unity rather than a dichotomy, giving the lie to theologies that deny the spirit (materialism) or that posit an unending conflict between flesh and spirit (the Manichean tradition).

Auden’s Simeon thus suggests a sacramental, relational, tradition- and revelation-based approach to ethical deliberation in the following way. If God’s taking on flesh

¹⁸¹ Kirsch, *Auden and Christianity*, 28.

alters flesh in the way Simeon describes—and if first (a) the real presence of God in the Israelites and then (b) the supernatural event of the incarnation teach us to see that flesh and spirit co-inhere—then it follows that we cannot read “nature” or “creation” at face-value. Rather, story and sacrament, friendship and worship, have to direct our reading. Put differently, Simeon articulates a fundamentally responsive epistemology that shores up virtue ethics (as opposed to deontological, consequentialist, or pragmatic ethics). Not “pursuit” but “surrender to” and “following” God determine what we know and how we act (*CP* 390). Hence, as Simeon concludes his reflections on the implications of the incarnation for science and the arts, the chorus of *For the Time Being* proclaims that God’s love saves “[o]ur lost appearances” and forgives the “errors” of “our Vision” (*CP* 390). Simeon’s meditation thus speaks to the quest of the third wise man (the philosopher), who, having found reason and empiricism poor ethical guides, follows the star of the nativity “[t]o discover how to be loving now” (*CP* 369-370).

Lest the narrative ethic of grace without nature that I have pulled from *For the Time Being* seem, because of its insistence on maintaining a relationship with the past, no less inimical to the construction of a queer theological ethics than Elshtain’s free-floating signifier “nature,” remember that, although the story *begins* with a divine encounter, it *continues* in lives formed by the virtues constitutive of grace. More precisely, it continues through intersubjective recognition: people learn how to carry on the narrative in an intelligible way. And carrying on the narrative means engaging in an ongoing argument with a concrete history that began at a particular moment—not swallowing non-negotiable, abstract, static, universal truths. Moreover, the community of storytellers

clarifies the thrust of the story through conversations with other communities that tell rival stories about the world.

Think, for example, of my discussion of “In Praise of Limestone” and “Ischia” (1948) in chapter one. The Englishman on Ischia—prompted by the landscape’s similarity to his native Pennines—rereads his Anglicanism through the lens of the island’s “mad camp,” its homosocial culture of Catholic pageantry, hot springs, and transactional sex (*SP* 190, *CP* 542). He fully inhabits the island’s decidedly un-British life: it “correct[s]” his “eyes” that have been “injured” by the liberal ethos of the “soiled productive cities” from which he and his “dear friends” come (*CP* 541). And, to put it in the language of “New Year Letter” (1941), the Englishman develops a creative “synthesis” of his Anglicanism with his experience on the island (*DM* 17). Gnosticism is the Englishman’s besetting sin: his “greatest comfort is music / Which,” unlike sex, “can be made anywhere, is invisible, / And does not smell” (*SP* 191). But *The Book of Common Prayer* in all its vivid incarnationality—where “bodies rise from the dead” and blessedness consists not in perfection but in shameless innocence (*SP* 191)—starts to come alive in a queer way for him as he superimposes the limestone statues of beautiful men on the creeds.

Thus the process of intersubjective recognition by virtue of which a community carries on its story about the world works dialectically, via ethical improvisation. Which is to say that, when mutual recognition breaks down and one member of the network of agape culpably fails to recognize another (e.g., when, as I mentioned in chapter two, Paul Dean phobically insists that Auden “ended in” spiritual “darkness”),¹⁸² the disrespected

¹⁸² Paul Dean, “Mr. Auden & Miss God,” *The New York Sun* (13 October 2005), <<http://www.nysun.com/arts/mr-auden-miss-god/21439/>>.

person can (a) appeal to the trajectory implicit in the story itself to call into question the disrespector's candidate continuation of it¹⁸³ or (b) incite a new tradition that branches off of the old story if the appeal fails (thus we see that traditions always already proceed by adaptation and innovation).¹⁸⁴ The dialectical ethical improvisation involved in carrying on a tradition (or starting a new rival tradition) becomes clearer when we examine the parallel between Auden's and Alasdair MacIntyre's conceptions of tradition.

David Toole offers an excellent account of MacIntyre's notion of "dialectical reason" in *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo* (1998), one that helps explain the dialogic and dynamic quality of communal, sacramental, tradition- and revelation-based approaches to ethical deliberation:

Dialectical reason makes no claims to be an ahistorical foundation that grounds the universality of truth and goodness. Rather dialectical reason always commences at some particular historical juncture and is contingent upon a host of historical particularities: a set of authoritative texts, a particular geographical location, neighboring communities with rival interpretations of the world, and so forth. Here reason emerges not as an abstract universal but as a dialectic enterprise always already underway—

¹⁸³ This is the subject of Kevin Hector's *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). See especially the last chapter, "Emancipating Theology" (245-293).

¹⁸⁴ Hence Dennis MacDonald, writing about the the Gospel of Mark—the earliest of the four canonical Gospels (c. 70 CE) and a resource for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke—arrives at a general definition of a tradition as continuous chain of transvaluative hypertexts. In *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), MacDonald argues that Mark polemically rewrites the Homeric epics to replace Greco-Roman values with Christian ones. Mark is thus a "transvaluative hypertext"; *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are the "hypotexts" that Mark rewrites to promote new values (2). Mark bases his portrait of Jesus on Homer's epic heroes in order to "mak[e] Jesus more powerful than Odysseus and Hector" (3). Mark thereby rewrites heroic virtue as self-sacrificial.

These Markan myths became constitutive of early Christian reality, just as myth is constitutive of the reality of every major religious tradition. Such traditions are not fixed and static but externally porous, internally plastic, multiple, and continuously renegotiated clusters of texts, symbols, and practices. By replacing ancient Greek myths with his own, Mark was doing what he was supposed to do: adapting cultural monuments to address new realities. Religious transformation is in large part a competition of myths. (190)

People continue a tradition through adaptation—arguing with prior texts and practices, revising them for new contexts, rewriting them in light of insights from interlocutors outside the tradition.

as individuals and communities engage with one another, with texts, and with the world. Dialectical reason emerges concretely, in the midst of historically contingent events, and is from the beginning not a blanket assertion of universal truth but an argument. As this argument is extended in time it becomes what MacIntyre calls a tradition, and the reason it embodies is thus tradition-constitutive and tradition-constituted: no tradition existed before the argument began, nor was there reason, until parts of the argument were settled.¹⁸⁵

“Dialectical reason” describes Auden’s and MacIntyre’s conceptions of tradition. A tradition begins as a conversation with others—an argument. It emerges out of a concrete situation. No tradition can claim universality. Moreover, every tradition develops “as an endless engagement with difference, as a truth that, by definition, exposes itself to the critique of ceaseless argument, gesturing always to other traditions and the world.”¹⁸⁶

The continuation of a tradition depends on the continuation of challenges to it. When challengers stop dialoguing with a tradition, the tradition dies (irrelevancy). And when a tradition stops its dialogue with challengers, it becomes unreasonable (fascism).

Through the concepts of “skepticism in belief,” “double focus,” and “co-inherence” that (as we saw in chapter two) drive the cosmopolitan project of *The Double Man* (1941) and various essays of the early 1940s, Auden articulates a theological ethics strikingly similar to MacIntyre’s notion of “dialectical reason.” Consider the overlap between the following two passages about adjudicating among rival traditions, the first from Auden’s “A Note on Order” (1941):

In a civilized society, that is, one in which a common faith is combined with a skepticism about its finality, and which agrees with Pascal that “*Nier, croire, et doubter bien sont à l’homme ce que le courir est au cheval,*” orthodoxy can only be secured by a cooperation of which free controversy is an essential part.

¹⁸⁵ David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 10.

¹⁸⁶ Toole, 10.

For what at the time appears to be a heresy never arises without a cause. Either it is a real advance on the old orthodoxy (for example, the Copernican cosmogony was an advance on the Ptolemaic) or it is an unsatisfactory reaction to a real abuse (for example, Manicheism [*sic*] was an intellectual heresy caused by the moral corruption of the relatively orthodox church). (*Prose ii* 103)¹⁸⁷

And the second from MacIntyre:

A necessary first step would be for [the members of one] tradition to come to understand what it is to think in the terms prescribed by [a] particular rival tradition, to learn how to think as if one were a convinced adherent of that rival tradition. To do this requires the exercise of a capacity for philosophical imagination that is often lacking. A second step is to identify, from the standpoint of the adherents of that rival tradition, its crucially important unresolved issues and unsolved problems—unresolved and unsolved by the standards of that tradition—which now confront those adherents and to enquire how progress might be made in moving towards their resolution and solution.¹⁸⁸

MacIntyre goes on to suggest the third step of asking (a) whether the tradition lacks the resources to solve its own impasse and if so (b) whether some other tradition can supply resources for overcoming the tradition's predicament: in other words, cooperative controversy. Thus MacIntyre and Auden alike position themselves against the excarnational Enlightenment conception of rationality as an exercise of pure reason unmediated by historical contingencies and disengaged from bodily particularities. Note how dialectical reason / cooperative controversy—which involves learning how to reason the way a rival tradition does, excavating its presuppositions, and so on—differs from Elshtain's facile cherry-picking of appearances of the word "nature" in writers from rival traditions. Note also the conceptual compatibility of MacIntyre's and Auden's analysis of tradition with Foucault's sense of gayness not as a psychological state but as a genre, a

¹⁸⁷ The Pascal translates, "To deny, to believe, and to doubt are to a person what running is to a horse."

¹⁸⁸ MacIntyre, xiii.

socially and culturally transformative practice that a person takes up and has to work at.¹⁸⁹

The similarity between Auden and MacIntyre is no coincidence: they share the same key influence, namely, the British philosopher R. G. Collingwood, who in *An Essay on Metaphysics* (1940) defines philosophy as the study of absolute presuppositions embedded in social practices. MacIntyre writes that he “owes” his “greatest debt” to Collingwood for teaching him “the situatedness of all enquiry, the extent to which what are taken to be the standards of truth and rational justification in the contexts of practice vary from one time and place to another.”¹⁹⁰ Auden lists Collingwood’s *Metaphysics* as one of the “Modern Sources” to “New Year Letter” (*DM* 162), quoting it generously in the “Notes” to the poem—to the effect that any metaphysical tradition exhibits the muddy complexity of legal or constitutional history, not the timeless clarity of math (*DM* 112). In addition, Auden’s lectures and reviews of the early 1940s frequently cite Collingwood to defend a political version of the theological ethics of cooperative controversy that *For the Time Being* suggests (*Prose ii* 67, 79, 100, 198, 529-530).¹⁹¹

VI. CONCLUSION

¹⁸⁹ Foucault, *Ethics*, 136, 139-140, 148, 163.

¹⁹⁰ MacIntyre, xii.

¹⁹¹ Auden argues in one of the notes to “New Year Letter” that, unlike in closed (i.e., organicist or totalitarian) societies, in open (i.e., democratic) societies, it is “necessary to live by Faith” (*DM* 122-123). The aforementioned note alluding to Collingwood defines “faith” as “an absolute presupposition” (*DM* 113). The essay “A Note On Order” (February 1941) borrows the vocabulary of “New Year Letter,” arguing that “[t]he cohesion of a differentiated and open society” requires, first, “a common agreement upon a small number of carefully defined general presuppositions, from which each individual can deduce the right behavior in a particular instance,” and, second, “[a] recognition [...] that these presuppositions are not knowledge” but “faith” (*Prose ii* 102).

In the concluding chapter I will argue for the urgency of gesturing toward a queer theological ethics, indicating how queer theory and literary studies could benefit from reflecting seriously on current discussions in academic theology. But I want to end the body of this study by returning to Lee Edelman and Heather Love, and reading George, the gay soldier in *For the Time Being*, through and against them. George clarifies the difference between queer theory's antisocial turn and Auden's queer ethic of responsibility.

Robert Caserio offers a brilliant reading of George. As Auden tells the story, the soldier "cruised" his way back into Herod's army "[j]ust in tidy time to massacre the Innocents," which makes him, traditionally speaking, the most repugnant character in Auden's retelling of the nativity story after Herod (*CP* 295). With George the queeny murderer-for-hire as its lone queer figure, *For the Time Being* (1944) stands in marked contrast to Auden's queering of the holy family in the epistolary prose poem that he gave Chester Kallman on Christmas Day in 1941. (Auden told a friend that he intended Joseph's barroom anxieties about Mary's faithfulness in *For the Time Being* as a coded account of the demise of his romance with Kallman, a reading that has become available to the general public by virtue of archives and posthumous biographies.)¹⁹² Caserio smoothes out the conflict by noting that George's "public villainy reaches its apex" when he returns to the army after considerable "wandering, and enrolls himself as a solid citizen."¹⁹³ By contrast, Joseph and Mary feel at "home" only in exile and "insecurity" (*CP* 398). The takeaway? A solid citizen makes for a callous queer.

¹⁹² Auden identified "The Temptation of St. Joseph" as one of his works depicting "the Crisis" in "l'affaire C," ALS to Alan Ansen, 27 August 1947, Berg.

¹⁹³ Robert L. Caserio, "Auden's New Citizenship," *Raritan* 17. 2 (Fall 1997): 101.

To Caserio's marvelous reading I will add that, in Auden's modernized account of the Christmas story, enrolling as a citizen and serving Herod specifically identifies George as a good liberal. In the biblical version, Jesus poses a threat to Herod's power (Matt 2:1-20). In Auden's version, Jesus poses a threat to Herod's values of rationalism, impeccable hygiene, progress, and capital. The self-styled "liberal" king predicts that once people start worshipping the "absurd" idea of a "finite" god-man in the form of a "wretched infant" (*CP* 394), the occult darkness that he worked so diligently to drive away will engulf his empire (*CP* 391-393). To put the takeaway more precisely than Caserio, then, liberal assimilation turns queers into villains. Better to stay in the wilderness and prophesy against nationalism and imperialism.¹⁹⁴

Thus the queer theo-ethic of responsibility that characterizes Auden's post-emigration, post-conversion poetry rejects the liberal ideal of the hyperrational sovereign subject. And it shares Edelman's and Love's suspicion of liberalism's secular theology of progress and positive feelings. But Edelman and Love resemble "the either-ors" whom "New Year Letter" (1941) decries: *either* negativity *or* assimilation, *either* abjection *or* transfiguration (*DM* 42). Auden, on the other hand, describes concrete ways of life whereby marginal queers redefine the future for themselves, calling into question the assumptions of "the Great Powers": Ischia's "mad camp," a shamelessly eschatological practice that betokens a green world, a great good place (*SP* 190-191).

¹⁹⁴ Or better to participate in a post-war bombing survey of Germany than fight as a soldier for America. Auden made a point of not hiding his homosexuality in his interview with the draft board in 1942; as a result, the army rejected him. After the war, however, he joined the United States Strategic Bombing Survey as a uniformed civilian. See Humphrey Carpenter, 324, 334; and Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 207, 285.

CONCLUSION | WOOING MISS GOD

“A chaste fidelity to the Divine Miss K? Miss God, I know, says that, but I haven’t the strength, and I don’t think you, sweetie, have the authority to contradict me.”

—W. H. Auden¹

I will now argue for the urgency of gesturing toward a queer theological ethics, indicating why queer theory and literary studies ought to reflect seriously on current discussions in academic theology. In addition to the obvious fact that such reflection facilitates more sophisticated engagement with deeply theological writers like Auden, I am interested in how theology—particularly Auden’s own Anglican tradition—might answer David Halperin’s call to find alternatives to the scientific, pathologizing, disciplinary language of psychology and psychoanalysis for thinking about and describing gay subjectivity. Though I here take inspiration from Halperin’s remarks about the role of Catholic kitsch in gay men’s creative resistance to social trauma, it will soon become clear that I am talking about something different: not “an outmoded, fairytale brand of religiosity,” but earnest religious practice.² As evidenced by the camp spiritual style that Auden cultivates in poems like his Christmas Day letter to Chester

¹ Quoted in Dorothy J. Farnan, *Auden in Love* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 158. “The Divine Miss K” refers to Chester Kallman. As his correspondence with friends reveals, Auden frequently referred to God as “Miss God.”

² Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?*, 38.

Kallman (to which I will briefly turn in a moment), Christianity can, I submit, serve as the basis for a non-psychological queer language of love.³

Early in his career, Auden took a serious interest in psychoanalysis. In the late nineteen twenties, for example, Auden embellished the psychological theories of his friend John Layard to explain homosexuality as a psychosomatic disorder.⁴ He even went so far as to seek a cure for his “disorder” of homosexuality from a psychoanalyst at a Belgian spa in 1928.⁵ But, as I have hinted throughout the preceding chapters, Auden began to reject psychoanalysis as an explanatory framework for sexual desire—and for subjectivity in general—after he converted to Christianity.

In one way or another, many of the poems we have discussed throughout *Queering the City of God* indicate Auden’s rejection of psychoanalysis as an explanatory framework for desire. “In Sickness and in Health” (1940) pokes fun at the notion of sublimation, calling it a “sin of the high-minded” (*SP* 122). The annotations to “New Year Letter” (1941) include a dismissive squib that likens psychoanalysis to Puritanism: “Why, like the old Puritan, / Do you separate in man / Pleasure from reality?” the squib asks the “dear psychoanalyst” (*DM* 95). “In Praise of Limestone” (1948) replaces Auden’s early, earnest Layardian search for a cure to homosexuality with a lighthearted camp Freudian gesture, relishing rather than pathologizing the gay cultural trope of mother-love.⁶ *For the Time Being* (1944) asserts that science can yield no answers about “how to be human now,” because the fall damaged our epistemic faculties; and the poem

³ David M. Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 104.

⁴ Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 91.

⁵ Humphrey Carpenter, 82-84.

⁶ See Richard Bozorth, *Auden’s Games of Knowledge: Poetry and the Meanings of Homosexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 245-246.

calls into question the idea of a natural law, or any construction of nature as revelatory of ethical principles. *For the Time Being* thus challenges the ethical norms implicit in the pseudo-science of psychoanalysis. And in *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), Malin argues that inasmuch as we (a) privilege the episteme of the present, and (b) remove God from the center of our epistemology, we remain “quite in the dark” about loving and living well (*Age* 104-106). That is because we ourselves “have no mean,” which is to say that our “mirrors”—our main conceptual tools and ethical frameworks of psychoanalysis, the market, and the police (*Age* 104)—“distort” (*Age* 7). Malin’s arguments suggest that to talk about subjectivity, we need theology.⁷

It would therefore seem that Auden’s later oeuvre merely trades one disciplinary regime for another—the medical language of aberration for the theological language of sin. It is certainly true that Auden’s later poetry frequently insists on the belief that we are all sinners under judgment. But Auden’s appeals to the Kierkegaardian notion that before God “we are always in the wrong” (*SP* 121) have mostly to do with a kind of Niebuhrian pragmatic political gesture, e.g., Auden’s critique of pacifism on the grounds that it of necessity involves a spurious moral high ground. Thus Auden’s Kierkegaardian pronouncements about sin do not represent an attempt, say, to democratize the sinfulness of sexual desire, so that straight people and gay people alike can castigate their own loves and longings.

Moreover, I submit, it is a mistake to read the treatment of Christianity in Auden’s later poetry merely as a replacement disciplinary regime, for even if Christian theology (particularly in its scholastically inclined Anglo- and Roman Catholic varieties) includes,

⁷ A point that reveals Auden’s influence by the twentieth-century Lutheran existential theologian Paul Tillich.

among its many riches, a substantial lexicon of sin, the fact remains that Auden's later poetry uses Christian theology as a means of creatively resisting the aforementioned disciplinary regimes of the market, the police, and psychoanalysis. The syncretic ecclesiology that underpins the apology for friendship in "New Year Letter" (1941), for example, provides a means to resist the neoliberal "*Verbürgerlichung* of / All joy and suffering and love" that turns everyone into "Empiric Economic Man" (*DM* 57, 55). The Christian account of art in *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944) treats art as a means to pursue queer self-fashioning safely in a world that polices queer desire. And *The Age of Anxiety* (1947) shows ordinary people resisting the false mirrors of the market and the police through religiously inflected artifice (*Age* 87). One last look at *For the Time Being* (1944) will show how Auden's later poetry provides a means of creatively resisting the pathologizing regime of psychoanalysis.

The Christian epistemology of *For the Time Being*, as I argued in chapter five, gestures towards a narrative ethic of grace without nature. In other words, it articulates a responsive epistemology—we respond to God and to the network of agape that carries on the story of God—that shores up a virtue ethics—i.e., the network of agape, rooted in the story of the incarnation of God. According to this responsive epistemology, we cannot read "nature" or "creation" at face-value. Rather, story and sacrament, friendship and worship, have to direct our reading. (The poem makes this argument primarily through Simeon and the three wise men.) In chapter five I described this epistemological emphasis on narrative, sacrament, and friendship as a process of intersubjective recognition, through which a story about the world unfolds in conversation with rival

stories about the world, and sometimes changes or splits off into newer rival stories through prophetic critique.

The narrative virtue ethics of grace without nature that *For the Time Being* articulates gestures towards a means of creatively resisting the pathologizing regime of psychoanalysis, then, because it propounds a Christian epistemology based on communal self-fashioning rather than constructions of the natural. Norms arrive, not through unquestionable pseudo-scientific pronouncements, but through embodied relational practices. Looking at Auden's reliance on the British philosopher R. G. Collingwood, chapter five established the link between the relational Christian epistemology of *For the Time Being* and the contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's definition of a tradition as a historically contingent ongoing argument with the past. To defend the claim with which I began this paragraph, then, I submit that there is a crucial similarity between gay epistemology and Christian epistemology (as Auden and MacIntyre and Charles Taylor present it) and that, as it looks for new models of subjectivity, queer theory ought to explore this similarity. In his late essays, Michel Foucault describes gayness in terms that look quite like MacIntyre's account of tradition. Gayness is not a psychological essence but an ethical practice. And just like the sacramental network of agape, gay culture requires initiation and ongoing relational training. It is a way of life.

Expanding on the work of a poet like Auden, and putting his insights in conversation with MacIntyre and Foucault, enables us to see that contemporary Christian theology and practice—not just outmoded gothic fairytale kitsch—could have a constructive place in the ongoing story of queer ethics. Certainly we can see from Auden's own spirituality—as evidenced by the epigraph to this conclusion, and from my

reading of Auden's Christmas Day letter to Kallman in the introduction—how the very serious camp erotics of wooing Miss God marks one alternative way of thinking about gay male subjectivity. In addition, by (a) refusing to privilege the episteme of the present, (b) reaching back to discourses of apophaticism and askesis that predate the social sciences, and (c) its emphasis on following Christ as an *aesthetic* as well as *ascetic* craft, Auden's Christian poetry indicates how queers might riff on Foucault's insights about the epistemology of gay sociality in a distinctively and intelligibly Christian way, inventing new relational forms in the process. It is certainly a project that current theological work in Auden's own Anglican tradition could enrich,⁸ and one that I hope to take up in a future study.

⁸ See Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Susannah Cornwall, *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010); Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford, Blackwell: 1999); and Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).