**Read Ebook {PDF EPUB} The Sea and the Mirror by W.H. Auden**

The Sea and the Mirror by W.H. Auden.

Completing the CAPTCHA proves you are a human and gives you temporary access to the web property.

What can I do to prevent this in the future?

If you are on a personal connection, like at home, you can run an anti-virus scan on your device to make sure it is not infected with malware.

If you are at an office or shared network, you can ask the network administrator to run a scan across the network looking for misconfigured or infected devices.

Another way to prevent getting this page in the future is to use Privacy Pass. You may need to download version 2.0 now from the Chrome Web Store.

Cloudflare Ray ID: 6610350a9d5e4eb6 • Your IP : 116.202.236.252 • Performance & security by Cloudflare.

The Sea and the Mirror.

" The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest " is a long poem by W.H. Auden, written 1942–44, and first published in 1944. Auden regarded the work as "my Ars Poetica, in the same way I believe The Tempest to have been Shakespeare's."

Contents.

Part III "Caliban to the Audience" References External links.

The poem is a series of dramatic monologues spoken by the characters in Shakespeare's play after the end of the play itself. These are rendered in a variety of verse forms from villanelles, sonnets, sestinas, and finally Jamesian prose, the forms corresponding to the nature of the characters e.g. Ferdinand addresses Miranda in a sonnet, a form traditionally amenable to expressions of love.

Dramatic monologue , also known as a persona poem, is a type of poetry written in the form of a speech of an individual character. M.H. Abrams notes the following three features of the dramatic monologue as it applies to poetry:

The single person, who is patently not the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment […]. This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors' presence, and what they say and do, only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker. The main principle controlling the poet's choice and formulation of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker's temperament and character.

The poem begins with a "Preface" ("The Stage Manager to the Critics"), followed by Part I, "Prospero to Ariel"; Part II, "The Supporting Cast, Sotto Voce , spoken by individual characters in the play, each followed by a brief comment on the character of Antonio; and Part III, Caliban to the Audience , spoken by Caliban in a prose style modelled on that of the later work of Henry James. A "Postscript" ("Ariel to Caliban, Echo by the Prompter") closes the work. [1] The poem is dedicated to Auden's friends James and Tania Stern.

Henry James , OM was an American-British author regarded as a key transitional figure between literary realism and literary modernism, and is considered by many to be among the greatest novelists in the English language. He was the son of Henry James Sr. and the brother of renowned philosopher and psychologist William James and diarist Alice James.

James Stern was an Anglo-Irish writer of short stories and non-fiction. He was also known for his extensive letter writing and being a friend of the famous, Malcolm Cowley once remarked to Stern, "My God, you've known everybody, his wife, his boyfriend, and his natural issue!"

It was first published in 1944 together with Auden's long poem, his Christmas Oratorio "For the Time Being" in a book also titled For the Time Being . [2]

" For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio ", is a long poem by W. H. Auden, written 1941-42, and first published in 1944. It was one of two long poems included in Auden's book also titled For the Time Being , published in 1944; the other poem included in the book was "The Sea and the Mirror."

A critical edition with introduction and copious textual notes by Arthur Kirsch was published in 2003 by Princeton University Press. Auden's burgeoning relationship with Shakespeare's corpus can also be seen in his Lectures on Shakespeare , also edited by Kirsch, delivered 1946/7 and diligently reconstructed from student notes.

Part III "Caliban to the Audience"

Caliban to the Audience , the longest section by far of the work, is a prose poem in the style of Henry James. In it, Auden reflects on the nature of the relationship of the author (presumably Shakespeare) to the audience of The Tempest , the paradoxes of portraying life in art, and the tension of form and freedom. Edward Mendelson asserts that Auden took six months to arrive at its form but the result was a work the poet favoured above all others for many years. [3]

The Tempest is a play by William Shakespeare, probably written in 1610–1611, and thought to be one of the last plays that Shakespeare wrote

alone. After the first scene, which takes place on a ship at sea during a tempest, the rest of the story is set on a remote island, where the sorcerer Prospero, a complex and contradictory character, lives with his daughter Miranda, and his two servants — Caliban, a savage monster figure, and Ariel, an airy spirit. The play contains music and songs that evoke the spirit of enchantment on the island. It explores many themes including magic, betrayal, revenge, and family. In act four, a wedding masque serves as a play-within-the play, and contributes spectacle, allegory, and elevated language. Though The Tempest is listed in the First Folio as the first of Shakespeare's comedies, it deals with both tragic and comic themes, and modern criticism has created a category of romance for this and others of Shakespeare's late plays. The Tempest has been subjected to varied interpretations—from those that see it as a fable of art and creation, with Prospero representing Shakespeare, and Prospero's renunciation of magic signaling Shakespeare's farewell to the stage, to interpretations that consider it an allegory of European man colonizing foreign lands.

Edward Mendelson is a professor of English and Comparative Literature and the Lionel Trilling Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University. He is the literary executor of the Estate of W. H. Auden and the author or editor of several books about Auden's work, including Early Auden (1981) and Later Auden (1999). He is also the author of The Things That Matter: What Seven Classic Novels Have to Say About the Stages of Life (2006), about nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels, and Moral Agents: Eight Twentieth-Century American Writers (2015).

The poem itself is in three parts with a short introduction, where the "so good, so great, so dead author" is asked to take a curtain call, and being unable to do so, Caliban stands in his place to take the questions.

A curtain call occurs at the end of a performance when individuals return to the stage to be recognized by the audience for their performance. In musical theatre, the performers typically recognize the orchestra and its conductor at the end of the curtain call. Luciano Pavarotti holds the record for receiving 165 curtain calls, more than any other artist.

The first section is a meditation on the dramatic arts, in various personifications, the Muse for the dramatic arts, Caliban as the Real World, and Ariel as the Poetic world.

The second section is an address to Shakespeare on behalf of his characters, reflecting on the "Journey of Life" – " the down-at-heels disillusioned figure" and the desire for either personal or artistic freedom, with the disastrous results if either is attained.

The third section is a meditation on the paradox of life and art, with mutually exclusive goals, where the closer to Art you come, the farther from Life you go, and vice versa. Caliban says he "[feels] something of the serio-comic embarrassment of the dedicated dramatist, who, in representing to you your condition of estrangement from the truth, is doomed to fail the more he succeeds, for the more truthfully he paints the condition, the less clearly can he indicate the truth from which it is estranged." This owes much to Auden's reading in Christian (existentialist) philosophy at this time. The section ends with a coda of sorts, with the paradox is resolved through faith in "the Wholly Other Life".

It was important that the style be as artificial as possible to suggest Caliban's unnaturalness, neither able to leave the island with the others, nor, because the curtain has fallen in this meta-theatrical medium, remain put. He occupies a limbo of sorts which Auden identified in letters as specifically sexual, having been conceived as 'the Prick'.

Related Research Articles.

Wystan Hugh Auden was an English-American poet. Auden's poetry was noted for its stylistic and technical achievement, its engagement with politics, morals, love, and religion, and its variety in tone, form and content. He is best known for love poems such as "Funeral Blues", poems on political and social themes such as "September 1, 1939" and "The Shield of Achilles", poems on cultural and psychological themes such as The Age of Anxiety , and poems on religious themes such as "For the Time Being" and "Horae Canonicae".

Caliban , son of the witch Sycorax, is an important character in William Shakespeare's play The Tempest .

Poems is the title of three separate collections of the early poetry of W. H. Auden. Auden refused to title his early work because he wanted the reader to confront the poetry itself. Consequently, his first book was called simply Poems when it was printed by his friend and fellow poet Stephen Spender in 1928; he used the same title for the very different book published by Faber & Faber in 1930, and by Random House in 1934.

Letters from Iceland is a travel book in prose and verse by W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, published in 1937.

Journey to a War is a travel book in prose and verse by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, published in 1939.

The Orators: An English Study is a long poem in prose and verse written by W. H. Auden, first published in 1932. It is regarded as a major contribution to modernist poetry in English.

The Dance of Death is a one-act play in verse and prose by W. H. Auden, published in 1933.

On This Island is a book of poems by W. H. Auden, first published under the title Look, Stranger! in the UK in 1936, then published under Auden's preferred title, On this Island , in the US in 1937. It is also the title of one of the poems in the collection.

The Double Man is a book of poems by W. H. Auden, published in 1941. The title of the UK edition, published later the same year was New Year Letter .

Nones is a book of poems by W. H. Auden published in 1951 by Faber & Faber. The book contains Auden's shorter poems written between 1946 and 1950, including "In Praise of Limestone", "Prime", "Nones," "Memorial for the City", "Precious Five", and "A Walk After Dark".

About the House is a book of poems by W. H. Auden, published in 1965 by Random House.

Forewords and Afterwords is a prose book by W. H. Auden published in 1973.

" In Praise of Limestone " is a poem written by W. H. Auden in Italy in May 1948. Central to his canon and one of Auden's finest poems, it has been the subject of diverse scholarly interpretations. Auden's limestone landscape has been interpreted as an allegory of Mediterranean civilization and of the human body. The poem, sui generis , is not easily classified. As a topographical poem, it describes a landscape and infuses it with meaning. It has been called the "first … postmodern pastoral". In a letter, Auden wrote of limestone and the poem's theme that "that rock creates the only human landscape."

This is a bibliography of books, plays, films, and libretti written, edited, or translated by the Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden (1907–1973). See the main entry for a list of biographical and critical studies and external links.

Ariel is a spirit who appears in William Shakespeare's play The Tempest . Ariel is bound to serve the magician Prospero, who rescued him from the tree in which he was imprisoned by Sycorax, the witch who previously inhabited the island. Prospero greets disobedience with a reminder that he saved Ariel from Sycorax's spell, and with promises to grant Ariel his freedom. Ariel is Prospero's eyes and ears throughout the play, using his magical abilities to cause the tempest in Act One which gives the play its name, and to foil other characters' plots to bring down his master.

Arthur Kirsch is a literary critic noted for his scholarly writings on Shakespeare, Dryden, and W. H. Auden. He taught for many years at the University of Virginia, where he is now Professor Emeritus.

Bucolics is a sequence of poems by W. H. Auden written in 1953 and 1953. The seven poems in the sequence are: "Winds", "Woods, "Mountains", "Lakes", "Islands", "Plains", and "Streams".

The Sea and the Mirror by W.H. Auden.

In admission, this post is a little dependent upon that you have (or have had) the same experience with the text that I had. If not, just play along anyway.

I want to take a look at a moment in W.H. Auden's The Sea and the Mirror . The work, if you are unfamiliar with it, is, as the subtitle offers, "A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest ." It's various parts are written mostly in the voices of the characters of the play, set as though the play has just concluded and the characters have something more to say, comments that extend the play beyond its final curtain, and, even, beyond the stage. Through this Auden gives a philosophical response to The Tempest as he reads it.[FN]

*************************** [FN] The Sea and the Mirror is found in the Vintage Collected Works . It has also been published in an individual volume, edited by Arthur Kirsch (Princeton UP, 2003), which contains also a thirty page introduction that is worth looking up; not only for what it says about The Sea and the Mirror , but for how it puts much of Auden's work in a philosophical context. ***************************

The reason I'm re-reading The Sea and the Mirror , the reason I'm presently reading Auden, is because I've gotten my hands on a little critical analysis of Auden's career: Gerald Nelson's Changes of Heart: A Study in the Poetry of W.H. Auden (U of Cal P, 1969). Outside of some small familiarity with a here and there verse ("In Memory of W.B. Yeats" is a favorite), Auden has been something of a gap in my knowledge of twentieth-century verse in English. Nelson's book is in effort to fill that gap, however lightly. To note, it is a book that attempts to defend Auden against the major criticisms that has been leveled against his work: that he failed to live up to the promise of his early work, that his return to Christianity had negative impact on his work; that Auden's career was "without development as a poet" and as such "the success of any individual poem [was] pure accident." (ix) As for my own response to Auden, I don't consider myself familiar enough with him to speak to that criticism; though, I will say that my own experience with his work, my various times browsing through his Collected , does permit it.

That criticism has little bearing on what I want to do here. I have a different question to ask. It is a question that is applicable to the whole of The Sea and the Mirror , though I will use only the one small part of the work – concentrating on a single stanza – as example to the whole.

The Sea and the Mirror opens with a Preface in the voice of the Stage Manager – the only voice in the work that is not a character in the play – speaking "to the Critics." I will focus on the first stanza; but let me give you the first two (out of four), so that first stanza is not completely isolated. Though this is but two stanzas, they represent sufficiently the whole of the Preface, and even can stand as representative of the whole of the work, if only for the question I wish to ask.

Where this small sample is representative of the whole is in the difficulty of the verse. As Nelson describes, The Sea and the Mirror is Auden's most difficult and most complex work. "Many critics maintain that it is Auden's masterpiece, while others find it even more irritating than Auden found The Tempest " (21). And, in honest, "irritating" is one of the emotions I had when reading The Sea and the Mirror . It is, as you might see in the above, a dense work; more accurately a very condensed work – which is not the same thing. When something is condensed it can become dense, yes; but it does so through part of it being removed. Condensation is not in itself a negative thing. Indeed, I argue that it is an essential skill to sophisticated writing. However, being too condensed will have its negative effects. What is difficult can become obtuse; and what is obtuse can become impenetrable. Thus the irritation. When I read The Sea and the Mirror I feel as though Auden is skipping across his argument like a stone across water, making it extremely difficult to enter into the depths of that argument.

Let's look at that first stanza. It is readily noticed that it is not describing a performance of The Tempest but a circus. When I would read it (before reading Nelson) I would attempt to connect the circus to the play. After all, these are the first words of the The Sea and the Mirror , a "commentary" on The Tempest , so it is not afield to think the text would begin by connecting the reader to the play. In that way, it is natural to see "the nonchalant couple" as Miranda and Ferdinand. And as Trinculo is Alonso's jester, there is also a clown. Though, where in The Tempest to find a lady being sawn in half? There is a problem with the association of characters.

As Nelson reveals, connecting the opening stanza to the play is a false reading. In fact, the argument of the stanza lies not in the play (the circus) but in the audience. Let me give you the core of Nelson's reading, though I will present it in reverse order. There are at the end the children laughing at a lady being sawn in half. It is children laughing at death; and, children are able to laugh at such things because, being children, they have as of yet no real understanding of death. In the middle are the middle-aged audience, the "wounded," people who have suffered the pains of life, and as such people who experience not only the humor of clowns but also the pain and violence that so often underlies that humor. Finally (firstly), there are the elderly, the people nearest to death, who thus have the greatest fear of death, and who "catch their breath" at the tightrope walkers perilously high above the ground.

On one hand, once you see the structure it is fairly easy to see the structure. I can't now not read it so. But on the other hand, in order to see that structure I had to recognize that the description of a performance in a verse about The Tempest had nothing directly to do with The Tempest , and then shift the focus in a verse about a performance of The Tempest (remember, this is the stage manager speaking to the critics about a play just concluded) away from the performance itself and to the audience. On top of that, I had to negotiate condensed language: e.g., the whole of the relationship of middle-aged people to death is condensed to nine words, and one had to find middle-aged people in "the wounded." The sum effect is that the idea of death is so removed from the passage that it took someone saying "it's about death" for me to go "Ohhh! It's about death ." Not the most easily reached conclusion. Which brings me to my question:

When is a work too difficult?

Reading beyond the first stanza the texts asks,

O what authority gives Existence its surprise?

Even with Nelson's reading of the first stanza in hand, can you anchor that question within an argument? Can you make sufficient sense of that question? Does adding the rest of the stanza help to flush it out? To say, the third stanza offers no help to understanding the second; it moves on from the second stanza as quickly as the second stanza moved on from the first.

When is a work too difficult?

Now, I will say, Nelson's reading of the first stanza, of the Preface, and of The Sea and the Mirror as a whole did much to bring some life to the work as a whole. And I think that if a person can present a successful reading of a text, as Nelson did of that first stanza, it is sufficient argument against the accusation that a text is too difficult. Just because a text is difficult to me does not mean the text is universally difficult. Which is an important point. Difficulty, in itself, is not – is never – sufficient to the condemnation of a text. In fact, difficulty should be something expected in the realm of literature. Climbing the learning curve of literature is in part the effort of learning to master – and enjoy – the difficulties one encounters in texts. It is also true that learning to write literature is in part the effort of learning to master the difficult. Complex thought requires complex presentation. (Is it equally true that simple thoughts should be presented simply?)

Difficulty for the sake of difficulty – for example the use of obscure words solely for the sake of using obscure words – will fail a writer. The pay-off for the reader should exceed their effort. For example, there is a sense of play to be found in Wallace Stevens's use of rarified words. The added difficulty does not get in the way of the pleasure of his texts but contributes to it. This gets us to the other side of the coin: just as difficulty is not sufficient to the condemnation of a text, nor is it in itself the means to the redemption of a text. The text still has to work as a literary text, as a literary experience. Defending a text by saying "well, it's a difficult text" is meaningless. Difficulty is not justification for a text that does not work on its own.

The opening stanza of The Sea and the Mirror is difficult. In the four or five times I read it before looking into Nelson, I could not make sense of the whole of it. However, after Nelson's reading I can easily see the structure in the text.

But Nelson does not stop at that reading. Rather, he comes to the following conclusion as regards the first stanza.

This is the scene presented to the Critics by the Stage Manager; he is asking them to be aware of the audience as well as the show. What Auden is asking us to do is to be aware from the very beginning of The Sea and the Mirror of the possibilities inherent in the relationship between life and art, to be aware of the narrow boundary between illusion and reality. He asks us, in short, to try to place ourselves in the position of the Critics and to think about what we see. (26)

That is a lot gleaned from ten rather concise lines. Granted, it is a reading that is taking the whole of the work into consideration, but the reading must still be legitimated by the text itself. And, in working through the whole of Nelson's reading of The Sea and the Mirror , I was frequently questioning, however much Nelson's ideas may fit the text, whether those ideas could be said to have been generated by the text. A lot was often made of relatively few words. I cannot myself, even using Nelson's text, make the argument that above paragraph is to be found in that first stanza. And, as I said, The Sea and the Mirror is throughout a very condensed text. At every point Auden is continually asking the reader to make a lot out of very few words.

Which prompts my answer to my question. When is a text too difficult? When it is no longer difficult, but something else, be it poorly written or intricately inscrutible.

I myself in reading The Sea and the Mirror could not bring its various parts into a working whole. "What does this mean?", "What am I to do with this?" were frequent questions, that were rarely (if ever) answered by the text itself. It took an outside person to give me some sense of argument across the text. And I am not convinced that that argument can be found within the text. Nelson describes The Sea and the Mirror as "by far the most technically complicated of all of Auden's poetry, [. . .] also, perhaps because of its complexity, one of his most difficult works ideationally" (21-22). In contrast, those who were critical of Auden's work found his long poems "diffuse in thought and uncertain in technique" (ix). Which fits

more with my experience of The Sea and the Mirror . The first stanza of the Preface is a difficult stanza, but one out of which a structure can be revealed. However, as Nelson's reading may show, bringing that stanza into the whole of the text seems to involve something beyond close reading, something other than explaining the difficult. Take a look at Nelson's reading of the second stanza. To save you having to scroll back, I'll will give you again that second stanza before Nelson's reading.

O what authority gives Existence its surprise? Science is happy to answer That the ghosts who haunt our lives Are handy with mirrors and wire, That song and sugar and fire, Courage and come-hither eyes Have a genius for taking pains. But how does one think of a habit? Our wonder, our terror remains.

Once the Stage Manager has set the scene, he moves directly to the problem of man's existence. Since it is his job to eliminate real surprise [on stage] while maintaining the illusion of surprise [for the audience], it is only natural that he should begin his discussion of existence in theatrical terms. As a result, the scientist's nonaccidental, mechanical universe becomes one in which.

. . . the ghosts who haunt our lives Are handy with mirrors and wire.

This is a purely theatrical image of the universe and is applicable to what occurs backstage [. . .]. There is a solid natural order behind all things.

"But," inquires the Stage Manager, "how does one think up a habit?" How does rational order explain the completely irrational? The Stage Manager's notion of existence would seem to be this: the irrational, unconscious fears and needs of human beings, before which reason pales, permit only "our wonder, our terror" to remain.

So much for one answer to the problem of existence.

The connection between the reading and the stanza itself is not terribly concrete. (Is a habit "completely irrational"? What of the lines beginning "That song and sugar and fire"?) Nelson has a reading of the text, yes; but that reading does not come off as derived from the text in the manner that the base reading of the first stanza (that it is about death) can be shown within the text itself. Considering the nature of the reading, as you move through the second stanza and through the verse as a whole, Nelson's reading does not seem to be an explication of a difficult – or "technically complicated" – work. Rather, it seems to be someone drawing in the lines that connect the separate strikes of the stone upon the water, a layer of ideation set on top of the work. As such, given the apparently necessary nature of a reading of The Sea and the Mirror both in part and in whole, I am faced with the idea that The Sea and the Mirror cannot be called a "difficult" work. "Diffuse," or too condensed; but not "difficult."

Caliban's last sigh.

Although it is now standard practice in academic publishing, it seems odd that "advance praise" blurb should have been provided for a reprint of a poem that first appeared in the 1940s. Odder still that the dust jacket should then quote, from Sylvia Plath's Journals , a description not of the poem but the poet: "Auden. the naughty mischievous boy genius. gesticulating with a white new cigarette in his hands, holding matches, talking in a gravelly incisive tone about. art and life, the mirror and the sea. God, god, the stature of the man."

The publishers of this critical edition presumably sense that Auden's stature is not what it was; Plath, though, should attract the attention of a large contemporary readership. It is also an expertly revealing sketch: Auden the compulsive lecturer; the chain-smoking, roving don.

When Auden went off to America in 1939 his poetry, it is generally agreed, went off too. Philip Larkin's diagnosis, in 1960, seems accurate: by emigrating, Auden lost "his key subject and emotion - Europe and the fear of war - and abandoned his audience together with their common dialect and concerns". Instead, wrote Larkin disapprovingly, "he took a header into literature".

The first long poem to result, New Year Letter (1941), was a dud. Composed in sometimes heroically awful couplets - "The very morning that the war / Took action on the Polish floor" - it came with even longer "Notes", quoting chunks from the poem's implied reading list. Far from the action, Auden lectured his readers. The Sea and the Mirror (1944) - a long poem billed as a "commentary" on Shakespeare's The Tempest - retreated even further into the library. The result, however, was some of his most inventive and moving later poetry.

Shakespeare's strange final play presents a usurped magician, Prospero, who brings his enemies to their knees on an enchanted island, and then renounces his powers. It contains echoes of virtually every other Shakespearean work, and is a honey-trap for the critic seeking a neat allegorical map of Shakespeare's mind.

Auden, with his love of explanation by system and schema (Freud, Marx), was such a critic. In 1944, he was orienting his ideas by Christian philosophy. This edition reprints a huge chart of universal "antitheses" which he drew up while writing The Sea and the Mirror . It divides everything from "Physical Diseases" to "Political Slogans" along theologically dualistic lines (two flavours of Hell either side of existential vanilla). Auden found such dualistic oppositions everywhere in The Tempest : the otherworldly Prospero and his Machiavellian brother, Antonio; ethereal Ariel and earthy Caliban.

Shakespeare only hints at what Auden rigidly schematised. Arthur Kirsch, commenting on Auden, doesn't seem always to realise this. For example, Kirsch's introduction states that Ariel and Caliban (Prospero's non-human servants in The Tempest ) "cannot exist without each other". This idea is not substantiated by a single line in the play. It does, however, explain Auden's beautiful closing lyric, "Postscript (Ariel to Caliban. Echo by the Prompter)":

Never hope to say farewell, For our lethargy is such Heaven's kindness cannot touch Nor earth's frankly brutal drum; This was long ago decided, Both of us know why, Can, alas, foretell, When our falsehoods are divided, What we shall become, One evaporating sigh . I.

In other words (Auden's to Plath), Ariel, the "creative imaginative" spirit, is nothing without Caliban, "the natural bestial projection". Auden wanted to correct what he saw as Shakespeare's Manichaeism in The Tempest : that is, blaming the bestial for the imperfections of the spirit. In the theology of The Sea and the Mirror , man is equally imperfect in mind and body (the "falsehoods" of Ariel and Caliban). Consequently, he will be existentially anxious until death - when, the echo-rhyme fadingly suggests, the evaporating "I" will finally know wholeness.

This delicate technical conceit is typical also of the lyrics given to Shakespeare's characters in the book's middle section. Each is a discrete poem, particular in form and diction. Inevitably, they are not all equally successful - inconsistency is the price of predetermined schematic construction. Loveliest is "Miranda", Prospero's daughter, who speaks a villanelle of innocent adoration for her new husband, Prince Ferdinand - affirming, repeatedly,

My Dear One is mine as mirrors are lonely, And the high green hill sits always by the sea.

The real achievement of the poem, though, is in the two sections that enclose this lucky dip of lyric skill. The first is "Prospero to Ariel": a measured, unrhymed, touching speech of farewell, in which Prospero prepares to return to unmagical mortality and general disillusionment. Auden takes Shakespeare's sad little touch at the end of The Tempest - Miranda: "O brave new world / That has such people in't!" Prospero: "Tis new to thee." - and wittily expands it. "Will Ferdinand be as fond of a Miranda / Familiar as a stocking?" Prospero wonders, imagining himself "an old man"

Just like other old men, with eyes that water Easily in the wind, and a head that nods in the sunshine, Forgetful, maladroit, a little grubby.

(Kirsch's notes make public for the first time an amusing line that Auden - part-time mischievous boy genius well into old age - excised from the final draft: Prospero on adolescent masturbation, "the magical rites of spring in the locked bathroom".)

The second set-piece in The Sea and the Mirror is "Caliban to the Audience". This prose monologue breaks with the versified fictions of character and narrative to address the modern reader directly. Auden's Tempest characteristically leaves out Caliban's tactile nature poetry. Instead, the subservient savage is given the elaborate prose style of late Henry James, and is employed to evoke the topography of another enchanted isle, the musty, pagan-industrialised, storybook England which the young Auden (who once played Caliban in a school production) made his own: "Carry me back, Master, to the cathedral town where the canons run through the water meadows with butterfly nets. an old horse tramway winds away westward through suave foothills crowned with stone circles. to the north, beyond a forest inhabited by charcoal burners, one can see the Devil's Bedposts quite distinctly, to the east the museum where for sixpence one can touch the ivory chessmen."

The Sea and the Mirror succeeds because, despite its simplistic schematising, its imaginary worlds are solidly mysterious; only Auden could have dreamed them. Caliban's speech is particularly rich with brilliantly casual specifics ("sunset glittered on the plate-glass windows of the Marine Biological Station"). The wonderful writing remains subservient to a didactic end, however. This, it transpires, is a campy hellfire sermon. We are intended ultimately to gag on the over-egged nostalgia; as WH Caliban goes on to explain, we will never be carried back to Paradise in this life.

So, the poem is more than a "commentary" on Shakespeare; it is a lecture that deduces from its text an existential moral never stated therein. The Tempest , in fact, is a marvel of ambiguity about cosmological questions (count the number of different gods invoked in it). Auden recast the dramatic as the didactic. This luxuriously produced edition's exhaustive critical apparatus - which includes extracts from Auden's private explanations of his project, as well as from his criticism and working notes - makes the difference unexcitingly clear. New readers should go straight to the poem.

· Jeremy Noel Tod teaches English literature at the universities of Oxford and East Anglia.

Book Me…

Tag: The Sea and the Mirror W.H. Auden.

March 12, 2011.

W.H Auden: His "gift survived it all" and made intelligible "every human love"

Rummaging through my modest library I was surprised to find a beautiful Faber and Faber edition of W.H. Auden's works. It was given to me at Christmas last year and has remained untouched ever since. Spellbound by the magnificent hardback I sought to rectify this at once and turned the virginal pages to a poem called Musée des Beaux Arts which opens with the following lines: "About suffering they were never wrong/The Old Masters: how well they understood/Its human position; how it takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along. " The Old Masters were hardly ever wrong about anything, not least about the art of suffering.

I was quite young and still at school when I was introduced to Auden's work. Funeral Blues was on the Curriculum and thus we were expected to learn it and fathom something that, at the time, was beyond us. It took me about a week to memorise it, and funnily enough I can still recite it to this day. I didn't realise then and up to until quite recently that the poem was originally written as an ironic pastiche of an elegy to a fallen political figure, but even that does not detract from the fact that it must be one of the most eloquent exclamations of grief ever penned.

I have read Auden intermittently throughout my life, occasionally chancing upon his poems in a public library or more often a private one of some friend or acquaintance, and I have always admired his ability to mesh poetic vigour with intellectual gasconade and technical virtuosity. Above all I have always associated Auden with some of the most memorable and most quoted lines in the English language: "Stop all the clocks cut off the telephone/ Prevent a dog from barking with a juicy bone," or "I'll love you, dear, I'll love you/Till China and Africa meet/And the river jumps over the mountain/And the salmon sing in the street" or "Lay your sleeping head, my love/Human on my faithless arm" , or more controversially, the line

from September 1, 1939 , "We must love one another or die" —which Auden had removed from his own catalogue.

Flicking through the slender selection I was also reminded of his lesser known works such as If I Could Tell You ( Time will say nothing but I told you so/Time only knows the price we have to pay/If I could tell you I would let you know ), Walks ( I choose the road from here to there/When I've a scandalous tale to bear/Tools to return and books to lend/To someone at the other end ) and In Memory of W. B. Yeats ( You were silly like us: your gift survived it all/The parish of rich women, physical decay/Yourself: Mad Ireland hurt you in to poetry ) all of which display an overwhelming variety of subjects and ideas that pay homage to Auden's questing intellect. It would be facetious to say that all the poems in the selection are good, because Auden, like any poet, fluctuated from the superb to the obtuse. But even "bad poetry springs from genuine feeling" and what distinguished Auden from his contemporaries is the emotional tone; its resonance and potency.

Auden decided on a career as a poet in his early teens having abandoned hope of becoming a mining engineer. Speaking about his early years, he once confessed: "I was going to be a mining engineer or a geologist. Between the ages of six and twelve, I spent many hours of my time constructing a highly elaborate private world of my own based on, first of all, a landscape, the limestone moors of the Pennines; and second, an industry—lead mining… Later, I realized, in constructing this world which was only inhabited by me, I was already beginning to learn how poetry is written. Then, my final decision, which seemed to be fairly fortuitous at the time, took place in 1922, in March when I was walking across a field with a friend of mine from school who later became a painter. He asked me, "Do you ever write poetry?" and I said, "No"—I'd never thought of doing so. He said: "Why don't you?"—and at that point I decided that's what I would do. Looking back, I conceived how the ground had been prepared."

Poetry quickly became a vocation which Auden believed aligned itself with Freud's philosophy that art often manifests out of one's struggle with personal unhappiness. In Auden's case this often sprung from feelings of guilt over his homosexuality, documented as early as his adolescent verse. Auden was always very prolific, never wrote when drunk, lived by his watch and travelled extensively throughout his life to Belgium, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Portugal, France, Spain and even Hong Kong, which for a while complied with his desire to "live deliberately without roots" . Eventually, though, he settled in New York where he did some of his best and worst work. He became more contrary, more philosophical, more formally traditionalist and more openly gay; transforming into a boozy, wizened, loquacious Auden who wrote more journalism and composed the four poems that remain at the heart of his canon: For the Time Being, New Year Letter, The Age of Anxiety and The Sea and the Mirror . Auden's work has always been described as somewhat ambiguous; Edith Sitwell once noted that "the meaning of Mr Auden's poetry is frequently so obscure, that it defies detection, and it is this obscurity, I imagine, which has frightened certain critics into this excessive admiration." This lamentation was soon seconded by Philip Larkin who referred to Auden's later poetry as "rambling intellectual stew".

But even Auden's own attitude to his craft, as to his sexuality, was often a mixture of high and low – which is precisely why his work is difficult to sum up – but, as he himself once noted, understanding poetry is "not a logical process" but rather a miraculous one. For me personally Auden will always remain a true contrarian whose demiurgic vision sidestepped the norm, and more importantly a poet who understood and made intelligible "every human love" to a girl who spent hours in the school library reading his work.