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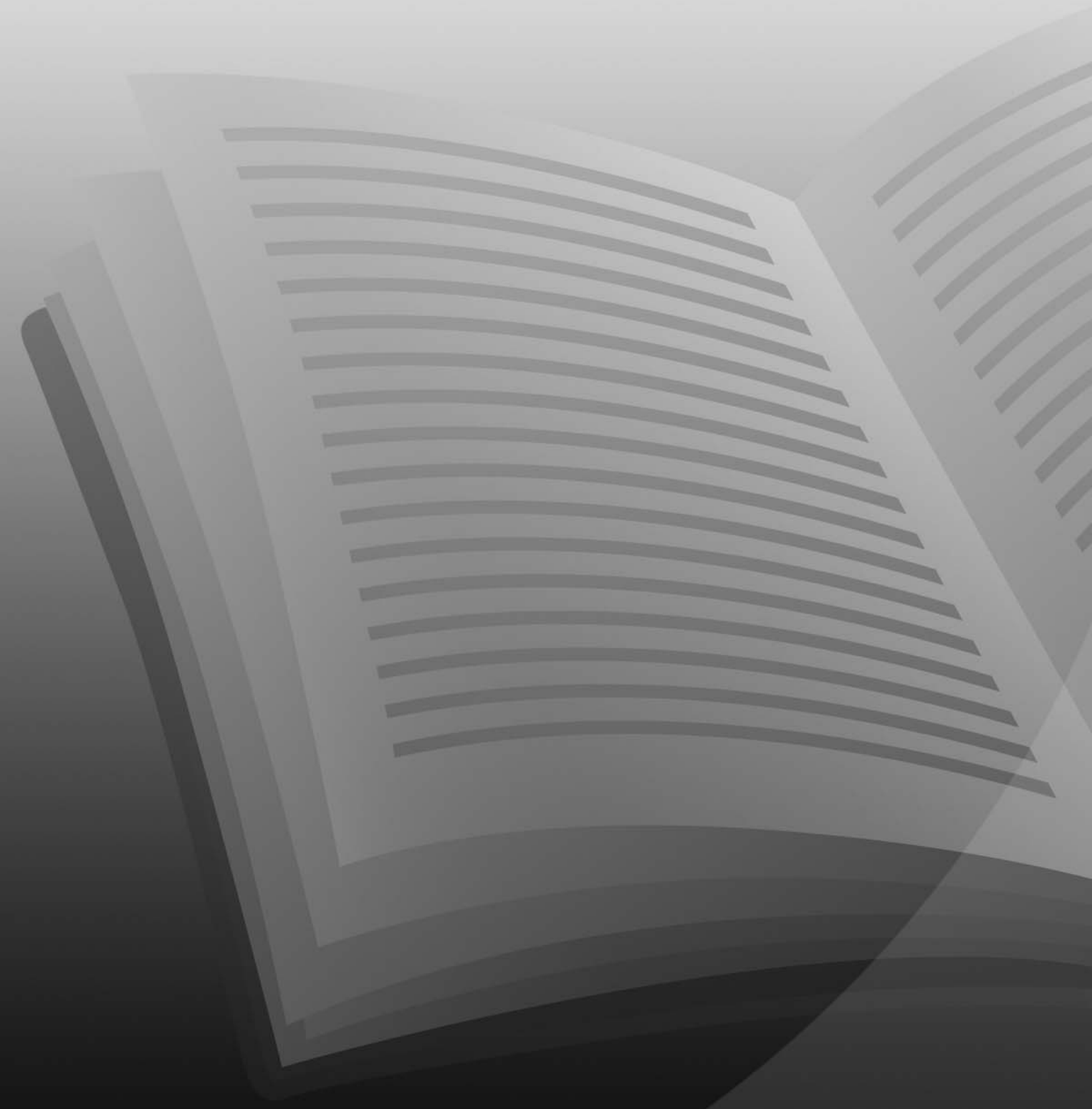

Auden

Richard Davenport-Hines

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PROLOGUE

‘What goal but the black stone?’

‘Life, as I experience it,’ Auden said, ‘is primarily a continuous succession of choices between alternatives.’ He depicted himself as a voyager. ‘The journey of life,’ he wrote in 1944, ‘is infinitely long and its possible destinations infinitely distant from one another, but the time spent in actual travel is infinitesimally small. The hours the traveller measures are those in which he is at rest between the three or four decisive instants of transportation which are all he needs and all he gets to carry him the whole of his way.’ The decisive instants in his life after he began writing poetry in 1922 were his visions of love and of violence in 1933 and 1936, his decision in 1938 to emigrate to the United States, the conception of his lifelong passion for Chester Kailman in 1939 and his return to Christian beliefs shortly afterwards. There was an element of arbitrary choice in each of these decisions. Later there were lesser moments of transportation, as when he settled in New York in 1946, or bought his house in Austria in 1957, or returned to live in Oxford in 1972.

Always the destination of his journey was exceptional. ‘From this nightmare of public solitude,’ he asked in his great prose poem on the limitations of the artist, Caliban’s speech in ‘The Sea and the Mirror’, ‘what relief have you but in an ever giddier collective gallop . . . toward the gray horizon of the bleaker vision . . . what goal but the black stone on which the bones are cracked, for only there in its cry of agony can your existence find at last an unequivocal meaning and your refusal to be yourself become a serious

despair?’ This biography of Auden is an account of a traveller who thought his goal was the black stone. Its subject drove himself as hard and ruthlessly as a tycoon.

It is also a book about gratitude and even a tract against twentieth-century self-pity. Auden was suspicious of creeds of personal development and distrusted the introspective tendencies in himself and other people. He thought their result was too often to make people sorry for themselves and to diminish their powers of free choice. Neuroses, he decided in 1929, should be welcomed as a potential source of strength and originality; they could vitalise people rather than weaken them. Suffering (so he believed after his return to Christianity) was integral to God’s love and the forgiveness of sins. But both neuroses and suffering were useless if they were not received with gratitude rather than self-pity. In his elegy to Yeats of 1939, Auden wrote:

> Follow poet, follow right
> To the bottom of the night,
> With your unconstraining voice
> Still persuade us to rejoice.
>
> With the farming of a verse
> Make a vineyard of the curse,
> Sing of human unsuccess
> In a rapture of distress
>
> In the deserts of the heart
> Let the healing fountain start,
> In the prison of his days
> Teach the free man how to praise.

These lines, so his friend Hannah Arendt commented, are ‘praise that pitches itself against all that is most unsatisfactory in man’s condition on this earth and sucks its strength out of the wound – somehow convinced, as the

bards of ancient Greece were, that the gods spin unhappiness and evil things to mortals so that they may be able to tell the tales and sing the songs'. Auden expected himself to be brave enough to bear intensities of pain. One sign of courage is the suffering persistence of the lover whose feelings are unreciprocated, or impossible to match and satisfy: this was a role that Auden repeatedly chose for himself. Arendt thought Auden's sacrifices were not only exceptional but ultimately excessive. 'God knows,' she burst out to Mary McCarthy on the day that Auden's death was announced in 1973, 'the price is too high, and no one in his right mind could be willing to pay it knowingly.'

Auden distrusted biographies of poets because they were so often studies in personality. 'Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not an expression of personality, but an escape from personality,' T. S. Eliot famously wrote. 'Of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things.' Auden wanted to escape from the detestable celebrity that had surrounded Shelley, Swinburne and the *fin de siècle* poets. He instead dedicated himself to producing work which at its strongest was impersonal, never confessional. In 1942 he quoted a phrase of Kierkegaard – 'Genius has only an immanent teleology, it develops itself, and while developing itself this self-development projects itself as work' – and then added his own explanation: 'Self-development is a process of self-surrender, for it is the Self that demands the exclusive attention of all experiences, but offers none in return.' Auden put passionate energy into his self-development, but detested the cult of personality with its vulgar rites of credit and fame. His efforts were not a connivance to become a permanent character in the *dramatis personae* of the twentieth century, though that was certainly a result. All his journeying – his emotional and sexual choices, the necessity of religious faith, his changes of domicile – involved self-transformation. He did not

transform himself in an escapist spirit, to hide himself from others, strike poses, attract newspaper profiles, but in order to improve his poetry. ‘If biographies of writers are justifiable,’ he wrote in 1942, ‘it is because, in their case, the ways in which they accept and revolt against their immediate situation are peculiarly easy to watch, and the acceptance of and revolt against the immediate is the central human problem of free will.’

There is a character in Alan Bennett’s play *Kafka’s Dick* who has not read a word of Auden but knows that the poet never wore underpants. Auden rightly mistrusted this outlook that reduces aesthetics to gossip. He loathed the trivialisation of literary biography into something less than a study of free will. He was particularly shrewd to mistrust sexual tale-telling. Though in private he enjoyed erotic speculation (‘I don’t think Browning was very good in bed,’ he told a friend in 1948: ‘Mozart, I suspect, was a oncer. Beethoven was certainly trade’), he did not tell dirty stories to drag people down. In a memoir published after Auden’s death Cyril Connolly described an incident during the Spanish Civil War in 1937 when he and Auden, having had ‘a good lunch’, went walking in some public gardens: ‘Auden retired to pee behind a bush and was immediately seized by two militia men.’ Connolly’s anecdote has since been conscripted and redeployed. A right-wing publicist, ostensibly offering *A History of the Modern World from 1917 to the 1980s,* has only one use for Auden: castigating the involvement of foreign intellectuals and communist leaders like Harry Pollitt in the Spanish war, he declares, ‘The poet W. H. Auden was saved by his “Pollitt letter” from a prison sentence when he was arrested for indecency in a Barcelona park.’ The implications are that writers are reprehensible, that Auden was lascivious while men were dying on nearby battlefields, that he was surprised in a sexual act, and that only political influence saved him from justice. This canard has been repeated elsewhere and more carelessly falsified.

In this biography I have never tried to vilify or diminish my subject; indeed I think that to do so is decadent and envious, like the stuntedness of the London crowds described by Wordsworth in lines admired by Auden:

> The slaves unrespited of low
> pursuits,
> Living amid the same perpetual flow
> Of trivial objects, melted and
> reduced
> To one identity, by differences
> That have no law, no meaning, and
> no end.

The private life of a poet (so often trivialised and reduced) is in any case the lesser part of his existence.

Auden was attentive to a short story by Henry James called ‘The Private Life’. Several English travellers, including a great author called Clare Vawdrey, are congregated in an inn by a Swiss glacier. The narrator is puzzled by the dullness of Vawdrey’s conversation in contrast to the brilliance of his books until he goes to spy on his manuscripts. He knows Vawdrey is downstairs, but finds his double in the bedroom writing intently in a dim light and oblivious of the intruder. He concludes that there are two Vawdreys: ‘One goes out, the other stays at home. One is the genius, the other is the bourgeois, and it’s only the bourgeois whom we personally know. He talks, he circulates, he’s awfully popular . . . for personal relations this admirable genius thought his second-best enough. The world was vulgar and stupid, and the real man would have been a fool to come out for it.’ Auden thought the insight of James into creative acts was unparalleled, and took up the image of Clare Vawdrey in the title poem of his volume *Nones*. ‘Our dreaming wills may seem to escape,’ he wrote,

Through gates that will not relatch
And doors marked Private,
pursued by Moors
And watched by latent robbers,
To hostile villages at the heads of
fjords
To dark châteaux where wind sobs
In the pine-rooms and telephones
ring
Inviting trouble, to a room
Lit by one weak bulb where our
double sits
Writing and does not look up.

That while we are thus away our
wronged flesh
May work undisturbed, restoring
The order we destroy, the rhythm
We spoil out of spite.

Auden, like Vawdrey, was a double man, and his poetry worked to restore the order and rhythm that the ordinary world marred from malice.

That is another great feature of Auden's thought and work: he was always striving for integration, struggling to unify experience and objects, synthesising the ideas of traditional religion and twentieth-century psychoanalysis. It was as if he hoped to heal the schisms of human knowledge and feeling. He wanted, in the end, an all-arching reconciliation. His chief means of attaining this harmony were literary, for he was a man who always felt compelled to write. 'Unless I write something, anything, good, indifferent, or trashy, every day, I feel ill,' Auden told his friend James Stern. 'To me the only good reason for writing is to try to organise my scattered thoughts of living into a whole, to relate everything to everything else.'

‘To mature means to become conscious of necessity, to know what one wants and to be prepared to pay the price for it,’ Auden noted in 1939. ‘Failures either do not know what they want, or jib at the price.’ Auden did not falter in his journey nor hesitate at the sacrifices which he thought Christians and artists were required to make. He wanted from boyhood to be a great poet; knew always that his goal was the black stone.

CHAPTER 1

‘A typical little highbrow and difficult child’

> My father’s forbears were all Midland yeomen
> Till royalties from coal mines did them good

Auden wrote, but his immediate roots were in the Church of England: the ‘gun-shy myopic grandchild of Anglican clergymen’ was his self-description. Originally the Audens were settled at Rowley Regis in Staffordshire. Three brothers, who were born into this family in the 1830s, were educated on the proceeds of the coal royalties and were ordained into the Church of England. This trio married three sisters called Hopkins from nearby Dunstall. The eldest of the brothers, John Auden, the poet’s grandfather, became Vicar of Horninglow in Staffordshire and was a typically fecund Victorian cleric who fathered a daughter and seven sons, the eldest of whom was sixteen and the youngest two when he died of heart failure at the age of forty-five in 1876. The second-youngest son of these children, George Augustus, who was four when his father died, was the poet’s father.

Many of those who have written about Wystan Auden have stressed the importance of his mother to the course of his life; but the influence of his father has been underrated. John Betjeman in the 1920s was one of the few to notice that Auden ‘much reverenced his father’ at a time when it was fashionable among his set to dismiss ‘their parents as brutal philistines’. Born in 1872, George Augustus Auden was educated at Repton School and Christ’s College, Cambridge. After taking a first-class degree in natural

sciences in 1893, he trained in medicine at St Bartholomew's Hospital in London, where he won several scholarships and medals. He was interested in children's medicine, publishing articles by the age of thirty on such subjects as diphtheria in the newly born or tuberculosis in children. It was at Bart's that he met Constance Rosalie Bicknell, a nurse three years his senior. She had been orphaned when young, and had been brought up by an unmarried uncle, with whom she was staying in Italy when he died suddenly. She was then eighteen, on her first foreign journey, and had to shoulder alone the arrangements for his burial. Evidently she was a redoubtable young woman. At a time when few women went to university, she studied French at Royal Holloway College at Egham, graduating with a gold medal in 1891. Unlike Wystan Auden she was a Francophile, and between the wars held soirées for those Birmingham University undergraduates studying French language and literature. She was a devout Christian, with High Church tastes, and qualified as a nurse with the intention of becoming a medical missionary.

Wystan Auden's maternal grandfather, Richard Henry Bicknell, was a Norfolk rector, and like John Auden a Cambridge graduate: he fathered six daughters and two sons in such 'rapid succession' that his wife (the daughter of a Suffolk clergyman, Henry William Rous Birch) 'retired to the sofa . . . which gave some degree of immunity from importunate demands'. He died suddenly of a heart attack in early middle age, and was 'evidently a sadist', Auden wrote, 'for his sons danced round the table for joy when they heard he was dead'. The Bicknells had finer associations than the Audens. Charles Bicknell had been Solicitor to the Royal Navy and to the Prince Regent, afterwards King George IV, and was rewarded with sinecures: the Prince Regent put him on a committee to administer the royal parks and forests, he was a commissioner of bankruptcy and a deputy bailiff of the City

of Westminster as well as treasurer of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. His daughter married the landscape artist John Constable in 1816, after a long and troubled courtship which had initially seemed detestable to the family because Constable's father was a miller at East Bergholt and therefore in trade. Intermarriage with the Birches was more attractive to the Bicknells, for the Reverend Henry Birch's mother was the daughter of Sir John Rous, fifth baronet and sometime MP for Suffolk, who had once been put on trial for the murder of his brother-in-law and 'lived under a cloud of suspicion which was only dispersed by a deathbed confession of a valet'. Henry Birch, whose uncle the sixth baronet was created Earl of Stradbroke on the occasion of King George IV's coronation in 1821, married Lydia, daughter of Daniel Mildred, of the prosperous Anglo-Spanish import–export firm of Mildred Goyeneche & Company. Their sons were high achievers. The eldest, Henry Mildred Birch, was captain of the school at Eton and a fellow of King's College, Cambridge before his selection in 1849 by Queen Victoria as principal tutor to her eldest son, afterwards King Edward VII. Henry's palace connections helped his brother Augustus Frederick, a housemaster at Eton who was consequently so favoured by the nobility that his house 'was called the House of Lords because of the great number of noblemen who boarded there'. The remaining Birch brothers were also successful. Ernest joined the Bengal civil service and ended his career as a judge of the High Court in Calcutta. Arthur entered the Colonial Office and was eventually appointed Lieutenant Governor of Ceylon with a knighthood. John went into the family firm of Mildred Goyeneche and was Governor of the Bank of England in 1880. He disliked procrastination as much as his great-nephew Wystan Auden. On the mantelpiece of his office there was a large, prominent card reading: 'Business. Call on a business man in business hours

only on business; transact your business, and go about your business, in order to give him time to finish his business.'

The Bicknells and Birches, then, enjoyed more worldly distinctions than the Audens, as Wystan Auden's mother reminded her family and friends: her obituary in a Birmingham newspaper devoted most of its space to listing the titles and offices enjoyed by her uncles. Wystan Auden knew of the Constable connection, and doubtless had much about his mother's family drummed into him by her. When she became engaged to Dr Auden in 1898, one of her sisters, a clergyman's wife, warned in the same exclusive spirit that had recoiled from a Bicknell marrying trade like John Constable, 'If you marry this man, you know nobody will call on you.' Medicine had a precarious social status which Constance Auden felt keenly. A physician took his standing from the class of his patients. Five years before Wystan Auden's birth Francis Laking and Frederick Treves, the two physicians most closely involved in operating on King Edward VII for appendicitis, had both been rewarded with baronetcies. If they were less lucky, physicians ended as sawbones on a level with the slum-dwellers whom they treated. But apart from the insecure social standing of medical families, Constance Auden deplored her husband's family as less polished than hers, despite the fact that his many Auden cousins were studious, precise and devout, shrinking from flamboyant behaviour or mercenary cunning. She was hardened in this view because, like the men of many medical familes, Dr Auden and his sons 'had a very earthy, low sense of humour which annoyed her', according to her granddaughter Jane Hanly.

The turns in Dr Auden's career were indications of his constructive and virtuous outlook. He held several medical appointments in London before settling at York, where he was appointed physician to the County Hospital and seemed set on a career of prosperous conventionality. But in 1908 he abandoned this steady, easy course for a more arduous

and unremunerative job as school medical officer for Birmingham. He was the first such appointment by the municipal authorities there: this was a job of high responsibility, suited to a practical reformer, who wanted to lay the groundwork of improved public health in Birmingham, then the greatest industrial city of the kingdom. It required talents as innovator, organiser and delegator, up-to-date ability in medicine and administration, as well as tenacity, patience and tact. He became a pivot in the administrative machinery that in the Midlands disposed of misery and dirt. As a colleague testified, ‘Dr Auden was extremely popular with his staff, always thoughtful and kindly, unassuming in his manner, with a strong sense of humour.’ He remained school medical officer until his retirement in 1937, and was also for many years Professor of Public Health at Birmingham University.

Despite their common background, the families of George Auden and Constance Bicknell were temperamentally dissimilar. ‘On the whole the members of my father’s family were phlegmatic, earnest, rather slow, inclined to be miserly, and endowed with excellent health, my mother’s were quick, short-tempered, generous, and liable to physical ill health, hysteria and neuroticism,’ Wystan Auden wrote in 1965. ‘I don’t know if it is a universal habit of children, but everybody whom I have asked about the matter tells me that he classified his parents as I did: one parent stood for stability, common sense, reality, the other for surprise, eccentricity and fantasy.’ His parents, who married in 1899, did not adjust their differences. There was an atmosphere of suppressed contention about their household, especially after their move from York to the sanitary Birmingham suburb of Solihull. Constance Auden was often ill, perhaps as a sign of her dissatisfaction: ‘the true index of a man’s character is the health of his wife’, as Cyril Connolly believed. Wystan Auden liked to dogmatise about other people’s marriages, just as he speculated about the causes

of psychosomatic illness, and his parents were not exempt from his analysis. ‘Ma should have married a robust Italian who was very sexy, and cheated on her,’ he said in 1971. ‘She would have hated it, but it would have kept her on her toes. Pa should have married someone weaker than he and utterly devoted to him. But of course, if they had, I shouldn’t be here.’ There was irony in this comment, for he had long known that, when he was aged about ten, his father had become involved with a nurse while on war service in Egypt; though Dr Auden remained close to his wife, his feelings for the nurse persisted in the 1920s.

‘He was the gentlest and most unselfish man I have ever met – too gentle, I used sometimes to think, for as a husband he was often henpecked,’ Wystan Auden wrote of his father. On a visit home in 1929 he noted a trivial incident involving his father. ‘My father goes to buy stamps. They give him halfpenny ones, and he takes them as he doesnt want to trouble the girl to change them.’ This very English diffidence typified Dr Auden’s non-professional dealings with the outside world. He disliked fuss or trouble, yet had married someone who seemed to excite them. Their home was a place of outcries and repressed disturbances. Wystan Auden also recorded a brief dialogue which revealed the tension at home, and Dr Auden’s weariness with histrionics: his brother caught in an accident, his mother starting to make a scene, and his father’s exasperated repression of the incipient drama:

> John (on the stairs) – I’ve knocked a hole in the wall.
> Mother (going out) – O John
> Father – For God’s sake, dont say anything.

This implies that Constance Auden said too much. Certainly she was excitable and domineering. ‘Taller than her husband, and a powerful personality, she had a refined and remote dignity,’ in the words of Wystan Auden’s

schoolfriend Robert Medley, who first met her in 1922. To Christopher Isherwood she was ‘this solemn, intense woman with her austere nose’. She was not malleable or aloof where her sons were concerned; she watched over them, and enquired vigorously. Nor was she a woman to evade difficulties or slur over duties. Years later, in conversation with the poet John Heath-Stubbs, Wystan Auden ‘spoke of Edwardian virtues and how his mother would punish him if he ever lolled about in an easy chair’. On another occasion he recalled:

> as a small boy . . . my elder brother repeated at a tea-party, where a certain lady was present, a remark of my aunt’s to the effect that the lady smelt. For the next few days, to all his toys, to his sponge and tooth-brush and all his belongings, he found a paper pinned on which were written the words, ‘Never Repeat’. As my aunt was an inveterate gossip, whose stories were often only remotely connected with the truth, we both thought this unfair at the time, but now I think the punishment was just.

His identification with maternal discipline became increasingly eccentric after his mother’s death in 1941. He turned the admonishing internal voice of guilt into a maternal voice. He would say, almost as her deputy, of some act, ‘Mother would never have allowed that’; as his brother John wrote, ‘he developed a fetish about punctuality which he attributed to an imaginary . . . image of gongs and peremptory summons to the table by mother’. John thought this behaviour was exaggerated, especially as their mother had not scolded about late arrivals at table. In fact it was Dr Auden who was ritualistic about time: as one of his neighbours wrote, ‘his was a strictly disciplined life, and his

day was methodically apportioned, beginning at 6 a.m. with breakfast'.

George and Constance Auden had three sons. The eldest, Bernard, was born in 1900. He and the youngest, Wystan, were not close as children, though Bernard remembered reading stories to him when he had bronchitis at the age of eight. (This childhood illness quickened Wystan's interest in industrial landscapes: the fumes of gas–works were then used as a remedy for bronchitis, and it was on such a cure that Auden added to the names on his 'numinous map' that of 'Solihull gas-works, gazed at in awe by a bronchial boy'). The Audens' academic ambitions for Bernard were foiled by the fact that he was not bookish. Perhaps partly as a result of their evident disappointment in this, Bernard was so lacking in self-confidence that he was not commissioned as an officer after being conscripted into the army in 1918 despite having served in his school's Officer Training Corps. Bernard loved animals, and wished to be a veterinary surgeon, but his parents considered this an unsuitable profession, and sent him on an economics course at Birmingham University which he flunked after a year. He then went to Canada, where he received a land grant and began farming. After he became engaged to a schoolmistress, Elizabeth Jeeves, his mother travelled to Canada to forbid the marriage on the ground that his fiancée 'wasn't out of the top drawer'. Bernard submitted to this interdiction for a time, and then rebelled. His mother's attitude thereafter was bossy and snobbish. As Bernard's elder daughter Jane Hanly recalls, Constance Auden 'told my mother that her clothes were inappropriate to her daughter-in-law, and they were all scooped up and given away to charity and substitutes in the style that my grandmother approved of were bought'. Bernard was afterwards persuaded to sell up in Canada, and briefly managed the estate of a Bicknell cousin in Monmouthshire. When this arrangement failed, 'his family, particularly Aunt Mildred

Bicknell, became exasperated and unsympathetic, and despaired of finding a course of action for him, so he ended up for the rest of his life as a farmworker'. There was, then, some unkind family discomfiture about Bernard. Perversely this may have given Wystan Auden a bond with some of his early friends like Christopher Isherwood, Edward Upward and others who also had brothers who were in greater degrees considered family oddities. Bernard was a gentle, hard-working, unresentful man who endured his reverses with passive dignity. Though there was no quarrel, Wystan Auden latterly tended to avoid Bernard, who died in 1978.

The middle son, John Auden (1903–91), was closer to the poet and resembled him in some ways. John, like Wystan, had a scrupulousness about his motives and actions that amounted almost to masochism. As a young man he hoped to write poetry, and suffered from bouts of depression. Cecil Day Lewis described him as 'an extreme neurotic' in the early 1930s, but he resolved many of his difficulties and was successful in a career which was as constructive as his father's, and required much of the solitary intellectual concentration which characterised Wystan. He was an intelligent and generous man, with quiet wit and shrewdness, strong and admirable without being smug. Landscape, which gave such delight to Dr Auden and fascinated his youngest son, was John Auden's life work. He read geology at Cambridge and then joined the Indian geological survey, working for ten years in the Himalayas. His explorations of the glaciers of K2 (Mount Godwin-Austen), the highest mountain in the world after Everest, which he first mentioned to Wystan Auden in 1929, inspired the title of *The Ascent of F6,* Auden and Isherwood's mountaineering play with its theme of lethal maternal love. The play was dedicated to John, who commented that when he was on an expedition near K2 in 1937, 'our anxieties were not then connected with Oedipus but with remaining alive between food dumps and the crossing of torrents

swollen every afternoon with glacier-melt water'. After learning to fly in 1939, he made reconnaissance flights over unmapped areas, and in the late 1940s undertook a survey of all major dam sites, hydro-electric projects, irrigation works and water-supply schemes in India – a vast and challenging task of far-reaching practical benefit. His first wife, Margaret Marshall, apparently made a decisive intervention in the life of Wystan Auden in the late 1920s (as described in chapter three). In 1940 he remarried Sheila Bonnerjee, granddaughter of the first President of the Indian National Congress, and daughter of a barrister who had been educated in England and knew Latin and Greek better than his native Bengali. John Auden converted to Roman Catholicism in 1951, rather as Wystan had returned to Anglicanism twelve years earlier. Later, during the 1960s, he worked for the United Nations, before retiring to Kensington, where he lived within walking distance of the Geological Museum. 'His fierce devotion to accuracy, his love for the precision of minutiae, were part of a larger respect for truth,' wrote an obituarist. There was a continued sympathy between John and Wystan, though they met seldom and spent most of their lives in different continents. In the early 1950s, at Ischia, Auden said to his niece Jane, 'I am very fond of my family, at a distance' (a remark which he often repeated); she afterwards reflected, 'but one doesn't avoid people one is very fond of.

Wystan Hugh Auden (named after St Wystan, a Mercian prince associated with Repton, where Dr Auden was educated) was born at York on 21 February 1907. He was always pleased to have been the youngest child and youngest grandchild in his family. He told his sister-in-law Sheila 'that, as in the fairy stories, being the youngest he was the most loved and was destined to find great treasure'.

I, after all, am the Fortunate One,

The Happy-Go-Lucky, the spoilt
Third Son,

he wrote in 1937. He believed in his luck, and when as an adult others had better luck in card games, he was, he admitted, ‘a very bad loser’. He was a clever child who was usually the youngest in his class, which experience implanted in him ‘the lifelong conviction that in any company I am the youngest person present’. Precocious as a child, until the 1940s he kept the manner of preternatural youth: ‘in our few meetings in after years, he seemed an adult boy’, wrote John Pudney, who knew him at school.

Though his personality as a child was memorable, his appearance also was distinctive. He was ‘a sturdy, podgy little boy, whose normal expression was the misleadingly ferocious frown common to people with very short sight’, Christopher Isherwood remembered him as a young boarding boy. There was a large brown mole on his right cheek. Another early schoolfriend gave a similar description: ‘A rather chubby, smooth-cheeked little boy, with very fair hair, who stared you in the eye and whose nickname, “Dodo”, didn’t suit him, being merely inherited from an elder brother, whom it did.’

His upbringing was bourgeois. ‘I grew up in a middle-class professional family’, he recalled in 1939.

> My father was a doctor, my mother had a university degree. The study was full of books on medicine, archaeology, the classics. There was a rain-gauge on the lawn and a family dog. There were family prayers before breakfast, bicycle-rides to collect fossils or rub church brasses, reading aloud in the evenings. We kept pretty much to ourselves. Mother was often ill.
>
> In one way we were eccentric: we were Anglo-Catholics. On Sundays there were services with music, candles, and incense, and at Christmas, a crèche was

> rigged up in the dining-room, lit by an electric torch battery, round which we sang hymns.
>
> There I learnt certain attitudes, call them prejudices if you like, which I shall never lose: that knowledge is something to seek for its own sake; an interest in medicine and disease, and theology; a conviction (though I am unaware of ever having held any supernatural beliefs) that life is ruled by mysterious forces; a dislike of strangers and cheery gangs; and a contempt for businessmen and all who work for profits rather than a salary.

He cherished these values. ‘Most of the best people are from the middle classes because it is a class without: an orphan class, with no fixed residence, capable of snobbery in both directions,’ he wrote in 1929. ‘From class insecurity it has developed the family unit as a defence. Like the private bands in the tribal migrations. It is afraid of its fortunate position.’ After his move to the United States in 1939, he redevised his English childhood as something as idyllic as a Thomas Hardy pastoral: ‘unsophisticated and provincial’, he wrote with pride in 1940, ‘a world still largely Victorian, in which one . . . did not know divorced persons or artists’ and ‘relied for amusements on family resources, reading aloud, gardening, walks, piano duets, and dumb crambo; above all a world which had nothing to do with London, the stage, or French literature’. This attitude hardened with age and its almost complacent expression exasperated his earliest admirers: near the end of his life he wrote a ‘Profile’ of himself which began,

> He thanks God daily
> that he was born and bred
> a British Pharisee.

He had few illusions about his character, except perhaps to think himself worse than he was. Writing of his schooldays for Graham Greene in 1934, he described himself as ‘mentally precocious, physically backward, short-sighted, a rabbit at all games, very untidy and grubby, a nail-biter, a physical coward, dishonest, sentimental, with no community sense whatever, in fact a typical little highbrow and difficult child’. He was a keen eater – ‘Your god is your belly,’ an aunt rebuked him as a child – and ‘always a thirsty man’, according to a paternal aunt. In most of these respects he changed little.

There were many advantages in his early life: not least that George Auden was such a discreet but accomplished mentor to the young. ‘His learning, his clarity of thought, his energy, and the simplicity – even austerity – of his life were known far and wide,’ wrote a younger colleague after his death. Dr Auden was a man of versatile interests. Unlike his clumsy youngest son, he was a successful wood-worker. His son recognised this peaceable and unneurotic hobby as the mark of a good man:

> But little crime we see in Quakers
> And least of all is found to be
> ‘Mongst those engaged in
> carpentry.

Dr Auden was punctilious and attentive, but never demonstrative, a lively and faithful correspondent, sending charming and knowledgeable letters to a wide circle of acquaintances in old age. His letters are both formal and affectionate, suggesting a proud, self-sufficient, kind and intelligent man, responsive to the beauty of high and remote places.

Dr Auden liked to relate his recreational reading to his work, so that for example in 1910 he published in *Nature* a reading of Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* which was endorsed by

the great physician Sir William Osler for its account of malaria in ancient Greece. His conjunction of medical and literary interests made him proud of ‘the long line of physician–poets, which includes Akenside, Crabbe, Goldsmith, Wendell Holmes, Keats’ and Bridges (who had also trained at Bart’s), and he ended his most ambitious essay on a psychological subject (published in 1926) with a quotation from Spenser which his youngest son might have endorsed:

> For of the soul the body form doth take,
> For the soul is form and doth the body make.

He was an amateur archaeologist who in 1910 excavated earth mounds near his old school at Repton in Derbyshire. These were believed to be a Roman camp or Saxon remains, but he in typically downright manner concluded they were a medieval refuge for cattle in time of floods. He translated into English the guide to the prehistoric collections of the National Museum at Copenhagen as well as a treatise on the preservation of antiquities: he was a devoted student of Norse antiquities, and persuaded himself that the surname of Auden indicated that the family had Icelandic origins. This theory tantalised Auden, who visited Iceland twice and developed a set of warrior myths about his ancestors. ‘I’m nordic myself,’ he wrote in 1952. Strangers also saw a Nordic look about him. During the Second World War some American neighbours denounced Wystan Auden to the Federal Bureau of Investigation as a spy (‘They obviously thought I’d come off a submarine’): the agent who came to interview him asked, ‘You’re a Scandinavian, aren’t you?’

His father’s love of Nordic history had an early and lasting influence on young Wystan’s imaginative development. He identified himself with northernness, and constructed a