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INTRODUCTION

The Shield of Achilles appeared in 1955, which for Auden was right on time: he tended to publish a collection of poems every five years or so, and the previous book, *Nones*, had appeared in 1951. The poems of *Nones* indicated the beginnings of a major transition in his work. Through the first half of the 1940s he had written long poems in which he worked through the implications of his newfound Christian faith for politics and history (*For the Time Being*), for art (*The Sea and the Mirror*), and for the psyches of people devastated by war and by the various dislocations of modernity (*The Age of Anxiety*). But in the major poems in *Nones* Auden began a reckoning with certain themes that, he came to realize, he had neglected: the embodied life that humans share with all other creatures, and the character of genuine human community. That he spent much of his time in these years living on the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples, around people whose language he knew imperfectly and whose habits he struggled to share, in a country that reminded him constantly of the complex relationship between Rome's empire and the great claims of the Christian faith, exercised a powerful influence on the course of his thinking. To Ischia he wrote, in 1948 when he was new there,

How well you correct
Our injured eyes, how gently you train us to see
Things and men in perspective
Underneath your uniform light.

If in *Nones* Auden inaugurated his new quest to “see / Things and men in perspective,” in *The Shield of Achilles* he provides a powerful report

on the fruits of that quest. It is the boldest and most intellectually assured work of his career, an achievement that has not been sufficiently acknowledged, in large part because its poetic techniques are not easily perceived or assessed. It is the most unified of all Auden's collections, and indeed—once its intricate principles of organization are grasped—may be seen as the true successor of those long poems of the 1940s.

The Shield of Achilles is an integral work of art, basically chiasmic in structure, in three balanced sections, with multiple echoes and resonances (linguistic and thematic) linking poems to one another both within the sections and across them. The book's integral coherence makes it, I believe, unique among Auden's collections. The best way to introduce this book is to describe this intricate organization and to explain how the individual poems fit into it.

The book is divided into three parts: Part I is a sequence of seven poems called "Bucolics"; Part II is a series of 14 lyrics called, collectively, "In Sunshine and in Shade"; Part III is another sequence of seven poems called "Horae Canonicae." The 14 poems of the middle section do not constitute a sequence in the sense, or to the degree, that "Bucolics" and "Horae Canonicae" do, but it seems clear that their order was carefully chosen.

The major themes of the seven poems of "Bucolics" center on the natural world but also contain contrapuntal reflections on living-in-history; the major themes of "Horae Canonicae" center on living-in-history but also contain contrapuntal reflections on the natural world. The first poem of the collection's central section, "The Shield of Achilles," is a meditation on the tragedy of history that anticipates the concerns of the "Horae Canonicae"; the last poem of that central section, "Ode to Gaea," is a meditation on the mythological personification of the Earth that casts a retrospective look back at the "Bucolics." The second poem of the central section, "Fleet Visit," depicts a peacetime visit of American sailors to the Italian coast; the penultimate poem of that section is called "Epitaph for the Unknown Soldier." In at least

one case—"Barcarolle," which had been written in 1948 as part of the libretto that he and Chester Kallman wrote for *The Rake's Progress*—the inclusion of the poem seems to have been decided on the basis of the chiasmic scheme, because that eloquent and moving love-lyric is paired with "'The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning.'" All this will be explored in more depth below.

In 1955—the year that *The Shield of Achilles* was published—Auden wrote an essay about his own religious development. (He probably wrote the essay in New York City, where he spent part of every year; he tended to write prose, by which he made most of his living, in Manhattan and poetry on Ischia.) "Much as I owe to Kierkegaard," he said, "I cannot let this occasion pass without commenting on what seems to be his great limitation." In short: "a planetary visitor might read through the whole of his voluminous works without discovering that human beings are not ghosts but have bodies of flesh and blood." Like most of Auden's criticisms of other writers, this is a self-critique. Under Kierkegaard's influence, the first decade of his life as a Christian—he had begun speaking publicly as a Christian in 1941, though the process of arriving at faith was long—had been excessively "spiritualized": he had conceived of the religious life too completely as an *interior* matter. But now he realized that he had previously neglected the vital Christian doctrine that God created the world with all its embodied creatures "and saw that it was good," which means that every Christian should realize that "the laws of nature to which, whether he likes it or not, he must conform are of divine origin." And this in turn requires the Christian to think of the human body not as an impediment to a "spiritual" life but rather a part of that world of nature that is "of divine origin." "And it is with this body, with faith or without it, that all good works are done."

"In Praise of Limestone"—a poem which Auden described, in the sleeve notes to his recording of this and other poems, as a kind of "prelude" to the "Bucolics"—is the first major poem in which he reckons

seriously with embodied life. It continues his lifelong fascination with psychological types, but it also includes among those types “we the inconstant ones,” whose “common prayer” is “not, please! to resemble / The beasts who repeat themselves, or a thing like water / Or stone whose conduct can be predicted.” That is, Auden and his fellow “inconstant ones” want to live in the ever-changing, ever-new world of history, not in the repetitive and predictable world of nature—the world not just of mind and will but also of body. And when Auden reflects on the hopes of the Christian faith, he specifies two in particular: “if / Sins can be forgiven, if bodies rise from the dead”—two items juxtaposed in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in . . . the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body.” For Auden, a commitment to the embodied life inaugurates the mending of his inconstancy. And this commitment entails increased attentiveness not just to the human body itself but also to the world of “beasts who repeat themselves” and things “whose conduct can be predicted.” His first major step towards this spiritual and intellectual discipline is the writing of the poems that he would call “Bucolics.”

But these are not merely descriptive poems, “nature” poems in a simple sense. Indeed, as he says in the sleeve notes mentioned above, the poems of “Bucolics” “have in common the theme of the relation of man, as a historical, or history-making person, to nature.” Thus the first poem in the sequence, “Winds,” begins with a meditation on Creation and the unique, unrepeatable moment of “holy insufflation” when the Lord God breathes life into the man he has formed from the earth (Genesis 2:7). Auden knew Owen Barfield’s 1927 book *Poetic Diction* and probably remembered Barfield’s note that in Hebrew (*ruach*), Greek (*pneuma*), and Latin (*spiritus*) alike, one word can in different contexts mean breath, wind, and spirit—and moreover, Barfield argued, at some point in the distant past surely meant something now largely inaccessible to us, a meaning that preceded our threefold distinction. The very distinction between the “physical” and “spiritual” is for Barfield an unnecessary violation of an “ancient unity.”

Auden also wants to blur the lines we have drawn, and especially those that neatly separate “history” from “nature.”

Similarly, the word “bucolic” itself derives from the Greek *boukolikós*, meaning “cowherd,” which suggests that a bucolic environment is not mere wilderness but rather a place with human beings in it. And humans tend to perceive landscapes in light of their own concerns and beliefs. The tradition in painting that embraces and elaborates this tendency is the *paysage moralisé* or “moralized landscape,” a term coined in 1936 by the art historian Erwin Panofsky, writing on Piero di Cosimo. Auden invokes that painter in the second of the “Bucolics,” “Woods”: “Sylvan meant savage in those primal woods / Piero di Cosimo so loved to draw” (p. 7), a tip of the cap to Panofsky—indeed, almost a quotation from that essay. In September of 1939 he reviewed for *The New Republic* a new translation of Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* and noted that “While Shakespeare, for example, thought of the non-human world in terms of the human, Rilke thinks of the human in terms of the non-human”; “Thus one of Rilke’s most characteristic devices is the expression of human life in terms of landscape”—a Panofskian insight. And when Auden was assembling his first *Collected Poems* in 1945, he took a 1933 poem that had been known only by its first line—“Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys”—revised it, and titled it “Paysage Moralisé.” But it was only a few years later, when he had begun his serious exploration of embodied life, that he began to grasp the full implications of this artistic tradition for his own thought. *The Shield of Achilles* contains many descriptions of landscapes, and all of them are moralized. This is Auden’s chief technique for illustrating how creatures who live in history understand and make use of their living-in-nature.

“In Praise of Limestone” serves as “a kind of prelude” to the “Bucolics” not just in its reckoning with the embodied life but also in its explorations of moralized landscapes. By associating certain personalities with certain landscapes, and with *aversion* to certain landscapes, it forms a kind of bridge between Auden’s earlier fascination with

Jungian “psychological types” and his coming portrayal of persons who dwell always in the material world. But this reorientation of the poet’s understanding of human life towards the embodied and material had another aspect, one that developed at the same time. About a year after writing “In Praise of Limestone,” Auden wrote a complex poem called “Memorial for the City”—the longest poem in the 1951 collection *Nones*—that outlined the different kinds of human community, the various ways we share a common life in a common space. From this point on, Auden figured our social world as the City. That we live in a City is yet another reason why a purely psychological or spiritual account of human life is inadequate. As embodied creatures we are part of nature and therefore subject to its laws, but we are also political animals and therefore must create the social laws by which we regulate our common life. We live in nature and in history, but we do so *simultaneously*. So Auden’s poetic portrayals of our double life are always shaped by this social dimension.

This is one of the key ways that the “Bucolics” mark a step beyond “In Praise of Limestone”: the landscapes of these poems are moralized in ways that reflect not just psychological types but also social order and disorder, social flourishing and dis-ease. Thus the claim near the end of “Woods”: “The trees encountered on a country stroll / Reveal a lot about that country’s soul.” By reading our interactions with the natural world we also read our history: “A culture is no better than its woods” (pp. 8–9).

Landscapes not only *reflect* our condition, they *shape* it, they nudge us in certain directions. Auden declares that “Sly Foreign Ministers should always meet beside” a lake, because should any two of them stroll around it, “The path will yoke their shoulders to one liquid centre”—walking thus will embody a “physical compassion” that “may not guarantee / A marriage for their armies, but it helps” (p. 12). He further speculates that the Christian bishops meeting for the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) were able to achieve agreement on the essentials of

Christian orthodoxy because of their setting: Nicaea stood at the eastern end of Lake Ascanius.

Often in “Bucolics” this emphasis on the character-shaping power of landscape is comically exaggerated into a topographical determinism: thus, if a lake encourages compassion and comity, an island (“a lake turned inside out”) promotes solipsism and even megalomania:

How fascinating is that class
Whose only member is Me!
Sappho, Tiberius and I
Hold forth beside the sea. (p. 14)

The Emperor Tiberius retired to the island of Capri at the southern end of the Bay of Naples, while Auden—a poet like Sappho of Lesbos—wrote these words on an island at the northern end of the same bay.

Another comic element of these poems: the landscapes of “Bucolics”—like those in “In Praise of Limestone”—also may prompt instinctive, irrational revulsion: “But I cannot see a plain without a shudder; / ‘O God, please, please, don’t ever make me live there!’” Indeed, “If I were a plainsman I should hate us all.” But meditation on this response leads to self-knowledge: it “goes to show I’ve reason to be frightened / Not of plains, of course, but of me” (p. 17). “Plains” practices self-dramatization in the service of self-deflation.

Everywhere in the “Bucolics” landscapes both reflect and instruct, and offer lessons usually deflationary or admonitory. For instance, the isolation of mountains might protect one from enemies, but for this sociable man, their sovereign privacy “would keep me happy for / What? Five minutes?” (p. 11). But winds and streams—subjects of the first and last poems in this sequence, the regions of the earth with which we cannot build and on which we cannot dwell—suggest mysteries beyond ready comprehension. A “faint susurrations / Of

pinetrees on a cloudless / Afternoon in midsummer” suggests a presence that makes one hope

That every verbal rite
 May be fittingly done,
And done in anamnesis
 Of what is excellent. (pp. 6–7)

And the poet perceives that somehow water is “Glad—though goodness knows why—to run with the human race” (p. 20).

The title of the book’s second part, “In Sunshine and in Shade,” has two highly relevant sources. The first is the final sentence of Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*: “They went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed, and made their usual uproar.” The distinction between the *acts* of two unique human persons who love each other and the *behavior* of the vast London crowd is one of the fundamental contrasts explored in *The Shield of Achilles*, especially in the final part, “Horae Canonicae.” The second source—and Dickens may have been drawing on this—is a passage from the first book of Wordsworth’s unfinished long poem *The Excursion*:

I roved o’er many a hill and many a dale,
With my accustomed load; in heat and cold,
Through many a wood, and many an open ground,
In sunshine and in shade, in wet and fair,
Drooping, or blithe of heart, as might befall;
My best companions now the driving winds,
And now the “trotting brooks” and whispering trees,
And now the music of my own sad steps,
With many a short-lived thought that pass’d between,
And disappeared.

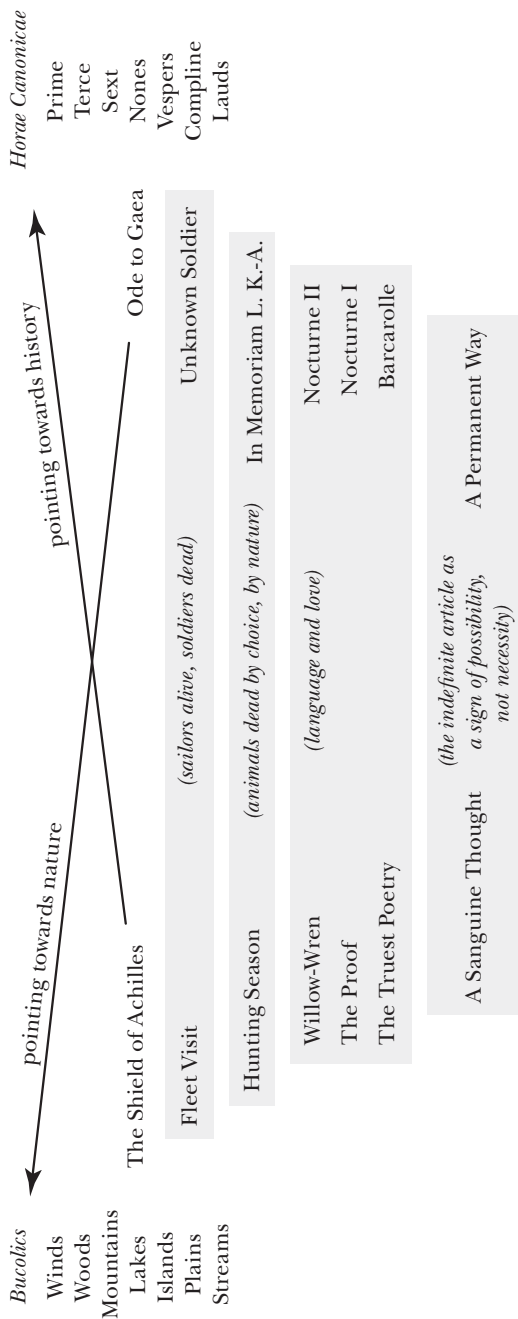
The topographical references here (“hill,” “wood,” “winds,” “brooks”) suggest the just completed topographical survey of “Bucolics,” emphasizing the idea of natural features as “companions” that share, shape, and reflect one’s interior state. So the title of the second section both looks forward to the third section of the book and looks back to the first section.

These two references suggest some productive ways in which to read the poems of Part II. The poems (as noted earlier) have been chosen and arranged in a certain pattern, one immediately suggested by the poem chosen as the last of this part, “Ode to Gaea”—or Gaia: the primordial figure, in Greek mythology, representing the Earth itself—which obviously points back to the “Bucolics.” This being so, the first poem, “The Shield of Achilles,” similarly looks ahead to the “Horae Canonicae.” The entire collection, like this middle section, displays a chiasmic structure (see chart on p. xviii).

Auden may have been drawn to chiasm as an organizing principle from a book that informed much of his work, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy’s *Out of Revolution: Autobiography of Western Man* (1938). Rosenstock-Huessy’s sweeping survey of the revolutions that, in his view, shaped the Western world begins with a series of chapters in reverse chronological order—the Russian Revolution, then the French, then the English, etc.—and then, in its second half, moves from ancient Rome back towards the present day. Auden’s debt to Rosenstock-Huessy will often be registered in the notes to this volume.

Because of this peculiar structure, the poems of “In Sunshine and in Shade” may best be explored not in consecutive order but in reference to the essential structural pattern, starting with the two light poems in the center and then working as it were “outward” towards the major lyrics that inaugurate and conclude the section.

“A Sanguine Thought” and “A Permanent Way” are the only two poems in the book that begin with the indefinite article, and the indefinite article is the sign of otherness and possibility. “A Sanguine Thought” considers an “If”: the possibility of “Our political orators” speaking in modes other than their habitual ones (p. 32). The poem



concerns public speech, and its moral mode is critique; this topic and this mode anticipate the political reflections of the “*Horae Canonicae*.” By contrast, “*A Permanent Way*” concerns a railway voyage through landscapes that prompt thoughts of a different life, “*Of a love and a livelihood / To fit that wood or stream*”—but of course the rider of the rails is “forcibly held to [his] tracks” and so may “safely relax and dream” (p. 33). The poem concerns private affections, and its moral mode is contemplation; this topic and this mode offer a retrospective reflection on the moralized landscapes of “*Bucolics*.”

Moving outward one level, the next three pairs of poems concern one of Auden’s most consistent themes throughout his career: the poetic languages of love, and their various rewards and shortcomings.

Throughout his career, Auden offered fiercely ironic reflections on the inevitable chasm between the extravagant beauty of love poetry and the homely, bumbling, ordinary humanness of the poet or singer. In “*As I Walked Out One Evening*” (1937) when an enraptured lover declares that “in my arms I hold / The Flower of the Ages / And the first love of the world,” immediately “All the clocks in the city” reply: “O let not Time deceive you, / You cannot conquer Time.” Similarly, in “*Dichtung und Wahrheit*” (1959)—a prose meditation that Auden included in *Homage to Clio* (1960)—he ruefully reflects that

As an artistic language, Speech has many advantages—three persons, three tenses (Music and Painting have only the Present Tense) both the active and the passive voice—but it has one serious defect: it lacks the Indicative Mood. All its statements are in the subjunctive and only possibly true until verified (which is not always possible) by non-verbal evidence.

Or, aphoristically: “Which is Tristan? Which Don Giovanni? No Peeping Tom can tell.” Thus the title of the meditation—in English, “*Poetry and Truth*,” borrowed from Goethe’s autobiography—indicates not a unity but an opposition.

In one of the love poems of “In Sunshine and in Shade” two skeptical birds comment on another exuberant lover: “*Did he know what he meant?* said the willow-wren—/ *God only knows*, said the stare” (p. 28). And in “Nocturne I” the poet’s heart cries out to the moon—“Adore her, Mother, Virgin, Muse”—only for his mind to reply:

“You will not tell me, I presume,
That bunch of barren craters care
Who sleeps with or who tortures whom.” (p. 35)

In “Nocturne II” the poet calls for the moon’s benediction—“Bless me, One especial / And friends everywhere”—but does so in order to ward off a misery: starting awake in the night “To hear his own fury / Wishing his love were dead” (p. 37).

The paradoxical and unresolvable tension between impassioned affirmation and ironic undermining is most thoroughly articulated in the long lyric that takes its title from a speech by Touchstone in *As You Like It*: “The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning.” After showing all the ways in which poetry can be used for manipulation and deceit, after demonstrating that the poet/lover has “no more nature in his loving smile / Than in his theories of a natural style,” the poem holds out hope that that very deceitfulness can “trick his lying nature” into the acknowledgment “That love, or truth in any serious sense, / Like orthodoxy, is reticence” (p. 32)—that what is most true is what the poet cannot say.

But in the midst of all this intellectual ironizing the poet’s heart continues to sing. Chester Kallman had introduced Auden to opera, which became a lasting passion (and one that always bound him to Chester, something that became especially important after they ceased to be lovers). Thus in “The Proof” the love of Tamino and Pamina in *The Magic Flute*, love that allows them to walk past rage and oppose spite, is held forth unironically; and in the glorious “Barcarolle” that Auden wrote and Stravinsky set for *The Rake’s Progress*, the undying love

of Anne Trulove for poor dying Tom Rakewell is presented with equal earnestness. Great beauty will always touch the heart, for good or ill, and silence the ironic mind.

The next two pairings are simpler. One of them serves as a reminder that the doubleness of living-in-nature and living-in-history complicates our relationships to animals: some we eat (“Hunting Season”) and some we love (“In Memoriam L.K.A. (1950–1952)”). And the other presents a contrast between a world at peace, in which a warship may be appreciated as a work of art (“Fleet Visit”) and a world at war, in which political leaders ask young men, young men to whom only the poet may give a kind of voice, to die (“Epitaph for the Unknown Soldier”).

Homer depicts the city of peace and the city of war on the shield that Hephaestus makes for Achilles in Book XVIII of the *Iliad*. And so we are led to Auden’s staggeringly ambitious revision of that famous scene. In Homer’s poem, the shield is complexly figured, but at the heart of its depiction is a simple contrast. First, there is a world of peace, in which the arts (both the *artes mechanicae* and the *artes liberales*) may be cultivated: dancers and acrobats and musicians appear there, well-cared-for fields of crops, vineyards full of ripe grapes, and herds of animals domesticated for human use. Evil things may happen in this world: two lions kill a bull; a man has killed another man. But herds-men watch over their cattle to limit the ravages of wild beasts; and in the city of peace judges determine a penalty for murder, a penalty that the angry family of the slain man agree to. Such agreements are what make a city peaceful. But none of these arts and agreements obtain in the second city, the city of war; there, all is sacrificed to the cultivation of a single “art”: that of killing.

All this Hephaestus sees from Mount Olympus. What he might see if he looks down on the mid-twentieth-century world is the question that generates “The Shield of Achilles.”

Even in the Great War of 1914–18, the distinction between the civilian world and the battlefield was relatively clear. On the Western front,

soldiers could walk just a few miles away from the trenches and find themselves in towns and villages where life went on almost as it had in the pre-war days. But the advent of aerial warfare, and especially of the bomber, changed all that—as Auden discovered when, at the end of World War II, he served in the United States Strategic Bombing Survey and saw up close the devastation wrought upon German cities. (In May 1945, from the ruined town of Darmstadt he wrote to his German-born friend Elizabeth Mayer, “I keep wishing you were with us to help and then I think, perhaps not, for as I write this sentence I find myself crying.”)

In “Memorial for the City” (1949) from *Notes*—a poem that like “In Praise of Limestone” serves as a prelude to *The Shield of Achilles* collection—Auden begins, “The eyes of the crow and the eye of the camera open / Onto Homer’s world, not ours.” So too “The Shield of Achilles,” for the eyes of Hephaestus are like those of the crow or the camera: they are not human. He sees with a terrifying clarity, but he does not see everything. What he sees above all is the reduction of living creatures to objects:

A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude,
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, waiting for a sign. (p. 23)

Among the writers who most influence Auden in this period was the Austrian thinker Rudolf Kassner (1873–1959), especially in his 1919 book *Zahl und Gesicht*. The German phrase of his title generally means “quantity and quality,” but literally means “Number and Face,” and in 1950 Auden wrote a poem, “Numbers and Faces,” that resonated with Kassner’s ideas. Kassner’s distinction becomes a way for Auden to reart-

iculate the distinction he made in his 1946 poem “Under Which Lyre” between the followers of Apollo and the followers of Hermes: the Apollonians of the earlier poem live in the later poem’s “Kingdom of Number,” while Hermetics are drawn to particular human faces. From “Numbers and Faces”:

Lovers of big numbers go horridly mad,
Would have the Swiss abolished, all of us
Well purged, somatotyped, baptised, taught baseball,
They empty bars, spoil parties, run for Congress.

Looking down from Mount Olympus, Hephaestus sees a world wholly governed by “lovers of big numbers,” for whom those in their charge are never more or other than numbers (“A million eyes, a million boots in line”); they prove “by statistics” the justness of their cause; their logic leads others, but not themselves, to grief. Thus the link between this poem and the “Epitaph on the Unknown Soldier”: in the Kingdom of Number *all* soldiers are unknown, faceless and voiceless and nameless.

It is in resistance to the Kingdom of Number that, in “Nocturne I,” Auden says that if “my face is real / And not a myth or a machine,” then “The moon should look like x and wear / Features I’ve actually seen”— x always being solved not for a number but a face. This small “counter-image” counterposes itself to “the private motor-car / And all the engines of the State” (pp. 35–36).

But this counter-image has a “lack of weight.” So total is the victory of the Apollonian lovers of big numbers that the arts Hephaestus portrayed in Homer’s world have no meaningful place in ours. That is why Thetis sees none of the beauty she looks for, and why she “Cried out in dismay / At what the god had wrought / To please her son.” But it is possible that neither Thetis nor the immortal smith see all that is true. When “three pale figures [are] led forth and bound / To three posts driven upright in the ground,” Hephaestus, with his eye like that

of a crow or a camera, is unable to entertain the possibility that one of those figures might be different than the other two; and while he understands perfectly well the “ragged urchin” “who’d never heard / Of any world where promises were kept / Or one could weep because another wept,” neither he nor Thetis can imagine that there might be such a world. And if Auden himself can, he keeps silent about it, because “orthodoxy is a reticence.”

“The Shield of Achilles” looks forward to the third section of the book, the “Horae Canonicae”; but it also converses with its companion bookend of this middle section, “Ode to Gaea.” This section-concluding poem also begins with a view from above: “From this new culture of the air” may be seen the form, not just of woods, mountains, plains, and streams, but the single image comprised of moving waters and “her realm of solids”: finally “we know how she looks,” which makes her “more mysterious” but “less approachable” (pp. 37–38). Seeing from the perspective of the “half-concerned / Gods in the sky”—here we must remember Hephaestus—we find ourselves haunted by “the spell / Of high places.” Why haunted? Because the Olympian view is not and cannot be natural to we who must always return (in the end permanently) “to the hard ground.” Those who see only from “an ungrieving sky” cannot feel the contours of our experience. “Earth, till the end, will be herself” (p. 41); but living persons live in history as well as in her realm, in more specific landscapes that will move and instruct them, in a history that—sometimes to their credit but often to their great shame—they continually make.

The Shield of Achilles opens with a dour epigraph in which Auden depicts himself moving from “bad lands . . . to worse” and managing only to produce “the right song / For the wrong time of year” (p. 1); this is followed by an epigraph for “Bucolics” in which he suggests that he (at 48) is but a grumpy representative of “Age” (p. 3); then comes an epigraph to the central section that laments the vulnerability of human excellence to ignorant violence. But this third section, “Horae

Canonicae,” begins not with Auden’s own words but with the words of an ancient hymn: “*Immolatus vicerit*” (p. 43)—“Having been sacrificed, he triumphed.” The hymn begins thus:

Pange, lingua, gloriosi proelium certaminis
et super crucis trophaeo dic triumphum nobilem,
qualiter redemptor orbis immolatus vicerit.

Or, in the translation by John Mason Neale that, as an Anglican, Auden would have known and sung,

Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle;
Sing the ending of the fray.
Now above the cross, the trophy,
Sound the loud triumphant lay:
Tell how Christ, the world’s redeemer,
As a victim won the day.

This hymn constitutes the one answer to Hephaestus’s vision: it alone, despite or because of its “lack of weight,” enables us to imagine a world in which, all appearances to the contrary, certain promises are indeed kept, and at least some people weep with those who weep. And that answer opens out from the curious moment in “The Shield of Achilles” in which “three pale figures”—to Hephaestus, indistinguishable—“were led forth and bound / To three posts driven upright in the ground.”

The *horae canonicae*, or “canonical hours,” form the schedule of prayer for many monastic communities. The Gospels record that on the eve of his crucifixion Jesus was praying “in agony” in the Garden of Gethsemane. “And he cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with me one hour?” So Matthew 26:40; in Luke (22:46) he says to them all, “Why sleep ye? Rise and pray, lest you enter into temptation.” The monastic

discipline of keeping the hours of prayer arose in obedience to this command. The scheme of time they employed was one that is also familiar from the Gospels, which report that as Jesus hung on the cross “it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour” (Luke 23:44)—that is, from noon till three. Not all of the hours of prayer are named according to this scheme, and indeed the names varied from place to place, but the most common early order, with the hour of modern clock time they very generally correspond to, was:

Matins (midnight)
Lauds (3 AM)
Prime (6 AM)
Terce (9 AM)
Sext (noon)
Nones (3 PM)
Vespers (6 PM)
Compline (9 PM)

The original ideal was for every monk to pray each of the hours, but this proved impossible, for reasons important to Auden: the human body simply cannot be forced to obey all the demands of the mind. It makes its own demands, and cannot thrive when its sleep is so regularly broken. So over time various concessions were made and hours combined: for instance, the rising of the sun might see Prime replaced by a combination of Matins and Lauds.

Auden first thought of writing poems based on these hours in 1947, when he began badgering his friend Ursula Niebuhr—a theologian, and the wife of the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr—for information. “Wystan wanted to know all about the church offices . . . and their historical origins. I started to tell him. He wanted more and more; he needed the exact texts, not only their history. These I got hold of for him.” The conversation continued for quite some time. “He would ask

searching questions about the development of worship, then suddenly would be entranced by some detail of ecclesiastical practice.”

Auden’s scheme runs from dawn to dawn: Prime (6 AM), the moment of awaking; Terce (9 AM), the movement from the private to the public world as people go to work; Sext (noon), life in the workplace; Nones (3 PM), a time of siesta; Vespers (6 PM), the return from the public world of work to the private realm; Compline (9 PM), winding down and preparing for sleep; Lauds (6 AM again), a new day. But it is essential to the development of the sequence that the initial dawn is given a simply numerical designation (“Prime”) while the second dawn is named for the act of praise (“Lauds”). It is as though the first has only a number but the second a face.

Moreover, the intimate connection between the *horae canonicae* and the Crucifixion—even now many Christian churches enlist ordinary believers in a sacred vigil during the commemoration of Christ’s death—should lead us to understand that the events of this sequence follow a threefold temporal scheme: they occur on the day of “our victim’s” sacrifice; they occur on a Good Friday; they occur every day. As the Letter to the Hebrews says of habitual sinners, “they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame” (6:6). (This awareness of layered—sometimes complementary, sometimes competing—historical patterns is something Auden would have learned from Rosenstock-Huussy.)

In “Prime” the speaker awakes from a night of uneasy dreams to find himself “without a name or history” and therefore without shame or guilt; thrown into a completed order of creation, into Eden, and thus existing only as the First Man, the representative in Christian thought of all humanity: “The Adam sinless in our beginning, / Adam still previous to any act.” This Adam lived in nature but not yet in history; history is what, alas, he will make. This holy moment cannot last: when the speaker draws his first conscious breath he assumes his own name, his own “historical share of care,” his own sinful tendencies; and thus is “Paradise / Lost” (pp. 45–46). The line break after “Paradise”

is historical and theological: It marks the moment of the Fall, the tragic division between the state in which Adam was created and the state to which he consigned himself and all his descendants.

Even at this point the speaker remains a general representative of humanity, because, as Paul wrote, “by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Romans 5:12); “in Adam all die” (I Corinthians 15:22). It is only as we emerge into the public world that our identities become socially distinct; and that is the subject of “Terce.” There Auden sketches a broad but provocative taxonomy of social roles, especially in relation to what “Prime” calls “the dying / Which the coming day will ask” (p. 46)—though “Terce” tells us that the central event of this day is not requested but determined, and determined not by us but by “our victim.” That victim knows “That not one of us will slip up, / That the machinery of our world will function / Without a hitch,” and that all creatures, from the deities on Mount Olympus to the dark gods beneath the earth, desire the same thing: this single death. It *will* come; and therefore “by sundown / We shall have had a good Friday” (p. 47).

And in this death everyone has a distinct part to play, though as we step across the threshold of our homes “At this hour we all might be anyone.” The three figures who appear in “Terce” are the hangman (the instrument of Justice), the judge (the instrument of Law), and the poet (the instrument of Truth). That tripartite division is further developed in “Sext,” which marks not the transition to the public world but that ordinary “machinery” in action. The hangman, the “agent” of the coming death, carries out his “vocation”; the judge is the “authority” who “commands” the execution; the poet merely observes and is charged with telling the truth about what he sees, faithfully recording the event for posterity (pp. 48–49). None of these is villainous; each is a figure of civilized order; without them we could live only in nature, like our fellow creatures.

In 1952 Auden published, for a series of similarly titled books, *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard*. In both his introduction and selections

he pursues lines of thought that are central to the “*Horae Canonicae*.” A key point here is the Kierkegaardian idea that Christianity brings into the world a new conception of personhood, a new demand for personal integrity, that when heeded makes us whole but when resisted drives us into new pathologies. From Auden’s introduction:

The multitude of ordinary men and women cannot return to the contented community of the Greek chorus, for they cannot lose the sense that they are individuals; they can only try to drown that sense by merging themselves into an abstraction, the crowd, the public ruled by fashion.

(He then illustrates this point by quoting from Kassner’s *Zahl und Gesicht*.) The first of seven sections of his selection is titled “Prefatory Aphorisms,” i.e., concise formulations of ideas that he believes to be central to Kierkegaard’s thought. One of them, taken from Alexander Dru’s selection of Kierkegaard’s *Journals*, is:

The crowd is composed of individuals, but it must also be in the power of each one to be what he is: an individual, and no one, no one at all, no one whatsoever is prevented from being an individual unless he prevents himself—by becoming one of the masses.

“Joining the crowd,” Auden writes in “Sext,” “is the only thing all men can do” (p. 52)—not what they *must* do. They do not join a crowd instinctually like the “social exoskeletons” (ants and bees): they choose to join by refusing the demand that Christianity makes upon them. One might also say that they refuse the personhood implied by having a face and retreat into the safety of a merely numerical existence, *willing* themselves merely to be counted among “a million eyes, a million boots in line.” They seek to escape history and retreat into nature; but this very desire, a desire which animals cannot have, exists in history—it is a form of self-disenfranchisement, what “Prime” calls “an historical mistake.” They become “the crowd” who merely observe this death—but in so doing “worship / The Prince of this world”

(p. 52). And the poet's only distinction among this crowd is that he can, and should, truthfully describe what he, with the rest, has done.

"And there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour." In "Nones," the poem of the ninth hour, the victim's blood stains the grass, the covering darkness has passed, and everything can be seen all too clearly: "The day is too hot, too bright, too still, / Too ever, the dead remains too nothing." And thus begins the desperate work of denial: "we have time / To misrepresent, excuse, deny, / Mythify, use this event," and we take advantage of the opportunity. If asked about the event just achieved, "our feat," each of us would insist that "It was a monster with one red eye, / A crowd that saw him die, not I" (p. 53). (The first-person plural dominates this poem, and indeed the remainder of the sequence. The "I" of "Prime" has given way to "we.")

But "we" know that "we have lost our public," we have lost the refuge of "joining the crowd." In this Italian fishing village—where this sequence of poems is set, though it is also set in Jerusalem, and everywhere—the siesta has arrived, and in sleep we seek to forget, but even in sleep we remember symbolically that which we have forgotten in its literal sense. Deeply embedded in our being now is the awareness of what we're capable of: even the collecting of stamps and birds' eggs, even "The mock chase and mock capture," hint of our *libido dominandi*. In spite of all our attempts at evasion, "wherever / The sun shines, brooks run, books are written, / There will also be this death" (p. 55).

But sleep makes possible a recovery that occurs in the body when it is blocked by the mind. Our corrupt or diseased will has made the history in which we now must live; but the embodied life we share with the rest of the created order is not responsible for "our feat"; rather, in our murderous rage we have wounded it. Yet as we sleep, it is in "our own wronged flesh" that the work of healing begins. Our innocent bodies busy themselves "restoring / The order we try to destroy"; the biological life that we share with "all the creatures / Now watching this spot" is where "the rhythm / We spoil out of spite" (p. 56) begins to reassert itself. Though we the sacrificers may deserve death, death is

not what we get. The immolation of “our victim” is the end of one story, but it is also the beginning of another.

This is, among other things, the beginning of politics in its deepest sense. In “Vespers,” the account in prose of a twilight meeting between two temperamental opposites, an Arcadian and a Utopian, the sacrifice of “our victim” is precisely what makes politics possible, because it is the ground of the first-person plural. The victim is neither “his” nor “mine,” but “ours.”

The Arcadian/Utopian distinction is among the most persistent in Auden’s thought. It appears implicitly in his long poem *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944), where the followers of Ariel seek the clean perfection of abstraction—“translate us, bright Angel, from this hell of inert and ailing matter, growing steadily senile in a time for ever immature, to that blessed realm, so far above the twelve impertinent winds and the four unreliable seasons, that Heaven of the Really General Case”—while the followers of Caliban, presented in one of Auden’s most delightfully comical passages, desperately crave a return to an idealized past:

Carry me back, Master, to the cathedral town where the canons run through the water meadows with butterfly nets and the old women keep sweet-shops in the cobbled side streets, or back to the upland mill town (gunpowder and plush) with its grope-movie and its poolroom lit by gas, carry me back to the days before my wife had put on weight, back to the years when beer was cheap and the rivers really froze in winter. Pity me, Captain, pity a poor old stranded sea-salt whom an unlucky voyage has wrecked on the desolate mahogany coast of this bar with nothing left him but his big moustache. Give me my passage home, let me see that harbour once again just as it was before I learned the bad words.

But in later years Auden increasingly formulated this temperamental distinction in biblical and theological terms: the Utopian, the would-be perfecter of society, is trying to bring about the New Jerusalem—the eternal city of the blessed described in the final chapters of

the book of Revelation—by force; the Arcadian, invincibly pessimistic towards political movements, wants merely to return to the Garden of Eden. Each of these tendencies, Auden perceived, is heretical. The Utopian manifests overweening pride, for the New Jerusalem is the gift of God, given in God's own good time, not the achievement of politicians; meanwhile, the Arcadian succumbs to despair, because there can be no return to Eden: the biblical future for humanity is in the City. For Thomas Aquinas, presumption and despair were the two opposing vices that equally evade the virtue of hope. And if there is hope for what "Prime" calls this "lying self-made city," it is to be found in our recognition that we are all "accomplices" in the immolation of "our victim." That admission of a universal guilt is the "cement of blood" which alone can guarantee the stability of our city's structures (p. 59).

The structure of "Horae Canonicae" repeats the structure of *The Shield of Achilles* as a whole—the volume is thus *fractally* ordered. The world-defining event, the sacrifice of "our victim," is unrepresented, interstitial: it occurs between "Sext" and "Nones," the former being immediately preparatory to it and the latter being immediately subsequent. "Terce" marks the transition from the private world to the public one; "Vespers" reverses that movement. "Prime" takes place wholly within the private world, as, now, does "Compline." In that first poem the speaker awakens from troubled dreams, ruefully acknowledges "Paradise / Lost," and, with only partial comprehension, takes on his "historical share of care" for "the dying / Which the coming day will ask."; in this sixth poem the speaker drifts from consciousness towards sleep, ruefully acknowledges his part in "In what happened to us from noon till three," and, with only partial comprehension, begins to suspect "That constellations indeed / Sing of some hilarity beyond / All liking and happening." If the mood of the first poem was anxious and fearful, the mood of this one is hopeful: it looks forward, with some trepidation to be sure, to "the youngest day" (the Day of Judgment) and the possibility of joining the ranks of the "blessed."

In “In Praise of Limestone” Auden had written that “The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from, / Having nothing to hide”; here he prays that he and “all poor s-o-b’s who never / Do anything properly”

. . . may come to the picnic
With nothing to hide, join the dance
As it moves in perichoresis,
Turns about the abiding tree. (pp. 60–61)

This invocation of the Day of Judgment marks one of Auden’s many debts to Rosenstock-Huessy, who claimed, in *Out of Revolution*, that the single most important revolution in European history was the inauguration, at the Abbey of Cluny around the year 1000, of the feast of All Souls. All Souls’ Day is celebrated on November 2, the day after the older feast of All Saints, and is its proper and necessary counterpart. As All Saints’ Day is a celebration of the spiritually victorious, so All Souls’ acknowledges everyone still struggling along the way of life. “All Souls established the solidarity of all souls from the beginning of the world to the end of time,” wrote Rosenstock-Huessy, and that solidarity is grounded in a common sinfulness: “The first universal democracy in the world was a democracy of sinners, united by their common confession of sins, in expectation of the last judgment.” This is “the Christian democracy of the dead and the dying,” and Rosenstock-Huessy believed that in the twentieth century it had been lost. “Modern man believes, perhaps, in equality of birth. But he fancies that everybody dies alone and individually.” If “*Horae Canonicae*” has a single overarching purpose, it is to revivify this “universal democracy”: to say that every society, every City, is comprised of “poor s-o-b’s who never / Do anything properly”—except immolate our Victim.

And so, in hope of forgiveness in the Youngest Day, sleep; and then the coming of a new day. The chiasmic structure of the previous six

poems in the sequence, coupled with the long-standing tendency to merge and combine the various “hours,” reveals “Lauds” not as a new thing altogether but rather as “Prime” reinterpreted: another ordinary day, but one no longer under the dispensation of anxiety and fear; rather, under the dispensation of gratitude and hope.

“Lauds” is a coda, not just to “Horae Canonicae,” but to the whole of *The Shield of Achilles*. It is a song of reconciliation and relation: those who were faceless members of a crowd, “a million boots in line,” are now “the People”; they are surrounded not by mere “others” but by “neighbours”; they are awakened to the new day by their fellow creatures (“the crow of the cock”) but also summoned to worship by the mass-bell (p. 62). However Gaea, who knows that “Of pure things Water is the best,” ranks wheelwrights, the People should be grateful to them, because they build mill-wheels that grind the grain that makes our bread. This is an eschatological vision of the whole of Creation (“this green world temporal”) in right relation, all living and inorganic things become “the Realm”—the place belonging to the King.