To the Would-Be Poets:

A Study in Poetic Formation through the Lens of W.H. Auden

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*A young poet must discover who he is, he must create himself as a poet. Even a genius must do this. It's a painful process, splitting your own skin and squeezing your soul and body out of it, even, sometimes, before you know the shape or color of the new self you are going to become.*

--Daniel Hoffman

Poetry is, unfortunately, an almost indefinable term. Attempts at defining poetry (or creativity, even) too often seem terribly cliché or undeniably incomplete. This definitive ambiguity, however, does not lend itself to defining poetic formation. In other words, the process that a young person enamored with words endures to become what the literary public deems *poet* is describable and, fortunately for the young person, wholly attainable.

As long as there have been jobs to do (that is, crafts to be made, art to be created, or government positions to be held) there have been professionals teaching apprentices to do those jobs. People from the earliest recorded times have mastered their craft and subsequently formed and molded others in those perfected crafts. The poet, too, like the blacksmith, was once taken under the wing of a specific master and taught the craft of writing poetry. W.H. Auden writes about this process in his essay "The Poet and the City." "In a culture like that of Wales in the Middle Ages,” he writes, “which regarded poets as socially important, a would-be-poet, like a would-be dentist in our own culture, was systematically trained and admitted to the rank of poet only after meeting high professional standards” (Auden 76).

This training, however, has become less and less like that of the Middle-Ages, adopting in place of this static model a much more fluid and flexible one, one that is ultimately dependent on would-be poets’ willingness to educate and train themselves. Of course, as Auden also writes, "He (the poet) may be in a position to go to a first-class school and university, but such places can only contribute to his poetic education by accident, not by design" (76). Of course, this was written before the time of the university workshop, a luxury that writers today can indulge in, but which writer’s in Auden’s time and before had no notion.

Auden, on the next page of this prolific essay, records what he deems the "Daydream College for Bards:"

1. In addition to English, at least one ancient language, probably Greek or Hebrew, and two modern languages would be required.

2. Thousands of lines of poetry in these languages would be learned by heart.

3. The library would contain no books of literary criticism, and the only critical exercise required of students would be the writing of parodies.

4. Courses in prosody, rhetoric and comparative philology would be required of all students, and every student would have to select three courses out of courses in mathematics, natural history, geology, meteorology, archaeology, mythology, liturgics, cooking.

5. Every student would be required to look after a domestic animal and cultivate a garden plot.

Unfortunately for aspiring poets, Auden’s "College for Bards" is nothing but a daydream, with the writers having to rely on themselves in determining version of Auden's college that works best for their particular formation, and then supplying their own adequate motivation to see that plan followed through. While this may seem detrimental to poetic formation in comparison to that of the structured and mediated formations of other crafts, it isn't. Rather, this lack of most social structure allows would-be poets a certain freedom that other apprentices don't have, such as the freedom to choose their master. While it is true that apprenticed blacksmiths may choose between a few different masters of their trade, they are limited by a) their geological location and b) by the number of master blacksmiths.

However, as Auden writes in one of his most well-known essays "Making, Knowing, Judging," "He (the would-be poet) is well aware of how much poetry there is that he would like but of which he has never heard, and that there are learned men who have read it" (47). In Auden's middle 1900s' world, the only ways for the would-be poet to access this poetry, to find more of the "poetry there is that he would like but of which he has never heard," would either be to ask one of the learned men mentioned above or wade through a sea of library books. Neither was necessarily effective. This process, however, has changed with the advent of the internet, the portable computer, and smart phones. Finding poetry is now a click of a mouse button away, making it easier for young poets to study and enjoy the works of masters of their choosing, even if they are not in direct contact with these more established poets.

Another difference in the formation of would-be poets is that, unlike in mathematics, architecture, or most other occupations (if poetry can be considered an occupation), there is no formula for writing a poem. Sure, there is, as Auden writes, "only one word or rhythm or form that is the *right one"* (38), but finding that right one is not as simple as looking at a list of formulas and choosing which to apply in any given case. Rather than showing young poets a list of formulas from which to choose, they must mark some displays of original talent within the craft. A genuine talent within the writer is marked, as Auden notes, by an interest "in playing with words than in saying something original" (22). An interest in language, in the way it moves on the page and rolls off the tongue, is what distinguishes the would-be poet from someone who may be interested in the art, but has no business in the poetic world. This interest is not marked by formulaic expression, but by a willingness to play with language.

There are many writers, especially those who have written after the World War Two era, who have written books on poetic formation, such as Flannery O'Connor's *Mystery and Manners,* Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird,* and, among others, Jeffrey Skinner's *6.5 Practices of Moderately Successful Poets!* Common themes emerge from across these texts, ideas that seem to hold true, at least to some extent, for all would-be poets trudging through their formative years and even well into their years as established poets. There are practices that could be beneficial to the formation of all would-be poets, practices such as staying in touch with their childhood, both literally and figuratively; finding a liminal space, like the one present in between states of waking and sleeping; keeping literary friendships, such as friends that would both encourage and criticize the would-be poet's work; and finding a poetic voice, usually accomplished by writing hundreds of poems until the lines that appear sound original and authentic to that particular poet.

While all of these practices and ideologies are, in a sense, set in stone and appear in the formation of every poet, they manifest themselves in different ways depending on the poet. While it is true that every poet must find their poetic voice, it may take one poet months while it could another years of writing throw-away poems before stumbling on to anything authentic. This paper will serve to discover markers of poetic formation poetic formation by describing both practices and ideologies that other, established writers have observed in their own formations and in the formations of their peers. After these practices have been discovered and described, it is important to see how they manifest themselves in an already-established writer. In the workings of this paper, that writer is W.H. Auden, one of the most prolific and widely-acknowledged masters of both English and American poetry in the mid-20th century.

*On the Childhood of the Poet*

All people are influenced by their life experiences. These experiences, however, directly affect the poet’s work, thus the universally known maxim, “Write what you know.” Childhood experiences are particularly forming, as a child is much more impressionable and open-minded than an adult. Childhood is especially useful to poets, as these experiences can directly affect their work. There are two ways that poets utilize childhood. Firstly, they translate these experiences directly to the page. The great American Author Flannery O'Connor was savvy to the power that childhood experiences held over the writer, how these adolescent moments always seemed to find their way into an author's work.

She felt so strongly about this idea that she once wrote "Anyone who has survived childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days. If you can't make something out of a little experience, you probably won't be able to make it out of a lot" (O’Connor). This idea can be seen manifested in O'Connor's work. She lived most of her life as an infirm recluse on her family's farm, having little contact with any other world than the one she knew as a child on the farm. And yet, despite her limited scope, so many different characters, settings, and plot lines grace her pages. This is the power of a childhood realized on the page.

On a literal level, moments taken from childhood (such as a mother’s loving touch or the way a father smells like cigarette smoke) can be applied directly to the page. This idea was present in the mind of artists and philosophers as far back as the Ancient Greeks. Socrates, at his trial for impiety and the corrupting of Grecian youth, was the first to discuss what it means to live an examined life. He claimed "The unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato). Part of living this type of life is to look in retrospect--taking the time to relive past experiences, searching for those enlightening moments. These are the moments that are particularly helpful to the writer, the ones where life becomes bigger than everyday occurrences, but these moments can only be identified in retrospect, out of the scene in which they originally occurred. These can manifest themselves in different ways to different poets, but, no matter the manifestation, they can have a lasting impact on a poet’s work.

Secondly, poets can utilize childhood not through the use of any particular experience, but by adopting a childlike curiosity. This adoption is more a way of *being* in the world and less a way of utilizing specific childhood scenes. While nobody is born cynical, many people (writers included) may become so as they grow older. Whether this be due to a heartbreak, a betrayal, or any other equally scarring experience, as people grow older, they tend to lose their zest for life. Children, on the other hand, are full of positive curiosity about the world that they have yet to experience. It is this sort of curiosity that marks a poet from a non-poet. One cannot begin to live an examined life without first being curious and invested in his or her surroundings.

It is consequently the poet’s job to notice, to observe, and to record, even if the scene in question is seemingly mundane. For example, while one may have seen a pine tree a thousand times there is always something new to be said about one, if only the tree is approached as a child would see one for the first time. This is the mindset that the poet must adopt to excel in the craft. In Jeffrey Skinner's guide book *The 6.5 Practices of Moderately Successful Poets*, he writes on the necessity of staying in touch with one's childhood. A part of shaping one's life around the poetic art involves tuning in to a certain way of being in the world. He writes "Stay young. I don't mean the body--that's going to hell one way or another. I mean, when we first started to write we were a child sitting on a kitchen floor, playing with words. We must guard against ever getting too far from that child" (Skinner 19).

The key phrase in this passage is *playing with words. Playing* is what separates the poets from, say, the computer engineers. While poetry is meant to shed light on reality, human nature, and the notion of the self, it has the flexibility to do so in indirect ways. In other words, poetry, while grounded in reality, can take certain liberties when portraying that reality. Computer engineering and other professions like it (ones outside of the arts and many of the humanities) are limited in their professional scope. They are, unlike poetry, fully invested in reality.

Unlike adults, children are free of the trappings of this world. They have no bills to pay, no adulthood cynicism marring their character. They are undeniably pure by definition. That is, a hard life has yet to taint their jovial and quizzical natures. Skinner does concede that poets cannot escape the drabness that marks the everyday life of an adult, even the poetic adult. Instead, he implores his readers to "live in the world as it is, with all its drudgery and material necessity. Don't sneer at the world outside poetry. That's where most people, including most of the kind-hearted ones, live" (5). However, he also implores his readers to distance themselves from this ordinary world, at least to a moderate extent, and to be much more in touch with their inner child compared to those outside the poetic arts.

Children are curious by nature as they have yet to experience much of the world around them, and are, therefore, naturally attentive. Practicing attentiveness is a way for would-be poets to unlock their inner-child. There are two ways that Skinner asks his readers to channel this attentiveness, the first being this: "When you are awake, be fully awake. Try to be present and alert even when in the midst of boring or painful tasks." This level of alertness will, according to skinner, open up an entirely new reality for the poet, both increasing the volume of the poet's life and adding sharpness to the poet's writing (17).

The second act of attentiveness is a simple one, yet maybe most important to a writer of any genre: keep a notebook. Write anything in that notebook that could possibly tie in with poetry. Titles. Ideas. Ruminations. Philosophy. Anything that could help the poet reflect on and understand the past day. This allows the poet to reach a level of attentiveness lost on those not willing to write out their reflections. Journaling more often than not leads to revelatory discoveries. Many poems have been written about the ordinary and the mundane, but after necessary reflection, the poet will have gleaned more than was originally perceivable from the experience. If T.S. Eliot has made a masterpiece out of coffee spoons, then what else can be translated in poetry? Jeffrey Skinner would have his readers believe the answer is everything, so long as the poet stays attentive and, like a child, "fully awake."

The poet Clayton Eshelman, while not associating his ideas specifically with childhood, still writes on the notion of experimentation in poetry in his long essay "Novices: A Study of Poetic Apprenticeship." He writes:

EXPERIMENT: the poetic engagement with the sustaining mesh of experience-research-self-regulation. One's eyes bouncing off one's sheet of typing paper, one's mind against the trampoline, hurling one's self-in- process at it again and again, aware that often one smacks and loses balance, falls through a hole and probably wrongly scrambles to get back to what one knows (Eshalmen 41).

This type of experimentation refers to all aspects of poetry: form, rhythm, content, titles. Eshelman encourages his readers to, like a child, bounce and ramble down the aisle ways of the mind, finding new and exciting ways to transcribe the world on a blank page. He has labeled the term “Imaginative Awareness,” and, with practice, this state of imaginative awareness brought on by reflection and experimentation is instrumental in the development of a young poet’s work.

W.H. Auden has also touched on the “poet-child” image in his collection of essays *They Dyer's Hand.* As Auden writes in the opening pages of this collection, "To read is to translate, for no two persons' experiences are the same" (3). Translation is what occupies most of a child's time. In much the same way that adults read and interpret a text for the first time, so too does the child experience, say, a milking cow for the first time. The child sees the cow thinking he or she has discovered it. This makes the child enamored with the cow. While the adult reading a new text may not act to this extreme, the experience is similar.

"A child's reading," Auden writes, "is guided by pleasure, but his pleasure is undifferentiated" (5). While this pleasure with which the child reads may be incomplete, or, "undifferentiated," it is what those poets in their later years should yearn for. In other words, people in the literary world should strive to read for pleasure much like a child would. Auden, however, understands that reading solely for pleasure is a difficult process and one that not everyone can perfect. However, he does concede that it is possible, "After Forty, if we have not lost our authentic selves altogether, pleasure can again become what it was when we were children, the proper guide to what we should read" (6). Our "authentic selves" are, as Auden concedes, more akin to children than to what contemporary culture largely labels as mature. Reading for pleasure is, at least in Auden's mind, a noble endeavor.

Auden describes the iconic poet-child in more detail in his essay "Making, Knowing, Judging:"

The impulse to create a work of art is felt when, in certain persons, the passive awe provoked by sacred beings or events is transformed into a desire to express that awe in a rite of worship or homage, and to be fit homage, this rite must be beautiful. A Nurse, let us suppose, says to a child, 'Look at the moon!' The child looks and for him this is a sacred encounter (57).

Much like the cow in the earlier example, the child looks, in awe, at the moon for the first time. This isn't to say that this is the first time the child has seen the moon (although that may be the case), but it is the first time the child has *looked* at the moon, studied its eerie whiteness and saw for the first time the crater-faced smile etched on its surface. To the child that moment and that object are held sacred. And while the child may not know it, "It is from the sacred encounters of his imagination that a poet's impulse to write a poem arises" (59).

Auden is aware of the necessity to view the world with a sort of awestruck wonder like a child would. As he writes, "Whatever its actual content and overt interest, every poem is rooted in imaginative awe" (60). Auden’s own poetry is deeply rooted in this imaginative awe that he describes as necessary to poetic formation. While much of his early work draws heavily on particular childhood experiences, his later poetry is marked by his childlike attentiveness to the world around him. Auden was much like a child, enamored with objects that he held as sacred. Before looking closer at his poetry, however, it first important to take some biographical note of his birth in 1907 through the end of his Oxford years in 1928 as it was these years that greatly influenced his early work.

Auden was born February 21, 1907 to the middle-class George and Constance Auden in the English city of York. However, soon after Wystan's birth, the family moved to Birmingham in order for George to pursue a career as the school medical officer for Birmingham University. As World War One broke out in Europe, George Auden enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps, leaving the Auden's without a home, forcing them to move around the country, staying with relatives, friends, and in boarding houses (Sharpe 1). Auden enjoyed these nomadic years, and, while visiting friends and family in Derbyshire, was given his first experience in lead-mining country. It was this trip that led Auden to be so fascinated with the subject of lead-mining (2).

Auden was so entranced by the mining world that his "nursery library" (as he called it) was filled with books about the mining community and the process of mining itself, books with titles such as *An Account of the Mining Districts of Alston Moor, Weardale and Teesdale, Mines and Miners;* and *Underground Life, Machinery for Metalliferous Mines,* and *Lead and Zinc Ores of Northumberland and Alston Moor.* Certainly Auden also had the more common nursery books of the time, ones like Hoffman's *Struwwelpeter* poems and tales by Hans Christian Andersen, but it was the books on mining that captured the mind of young Wystan Auden more than the others.

In Auden's *A Certain World (*1970), he wrote, "Most of what I know about the writing of poetry, or, at least, the kind I am interested in writing, I discovered long before I took an interest in poetry itself." Auden was referring in part to the first three books listed above, which helped him in his childhood to create a fantasy world that, although preceding his knowledge of poetry, he regards as directly linked to it in his later years. More interesting to Auden than working, operational mines were the abandoned mines of Alston Moor he visited in 1919 as a child. He wrote in his 1940 "New Year Letter" that he "was never so emotionally happy as when I was underground." He so loved the abandoned mines of Alston Moor (amid the few working, and, to Auden at least, less interesting operational mines) that he begged his family to make a return visit there a few years after their 1919 excursion.

Auden continued to visit these mines and others like them (so much so his family believed metal-mining to be his likely profession of choice) throughout his adulthood and evoked them throughout his writing career. He, as he wrote in his later years, "greatly preferred the mute pathos of abandoned machinery to the clatter of an operational mine" (32). Auden described his fantasy world full of rusted and unused machinery as "autistic" in its self-sufficiency and its peculiar tendency to be unshareable. His made-up world significantly and distinctly lacked the presence of any humans, including Auden himself. Having friends or maintaining a healthy relationship with his family did not interest Auden until his adolescence.

Nowhere is this fantasy world more readily described in Auden's writing than in his 1927 poem "The Watershed." This was the earliest Auden poem to survive the multitude of cuts Auden made to his own literary canon. He was notorious for disliking his early work, going so far as to call it "trash," which he was "ashamed of having written.” Auden wrote “The Watershed” in the basement of his parents' Harborne home. The poem evokes the lead-mining landscape of the North Pennines which Auden has fondly dubbed "Rookhope."

It begins with the famous lines:

*Who stands, the crux left of the watershed,*

*on the wet road beneath the chaffing grass*

*below him sees dismantled washing floors (The Watershed).*

The "Who stands" portion of the opening line is misleading and works in part with the poem's deceptiveness. Instead of what the reader originally sees as an apparently challenging interrogative, "Who stands" is rather used as an abridgement of "(he) who stands" or even "Who(ever) stands."

This distinction is important to the reading of the poem as it establishes the whereabouts and immediate agency the character (although not the speaker) has in relation to the setting of the poem. Instead of being one of the miners working in the lead mines Auden describes in the lines that follow, the character is rather an onlooker to the abandoned, rusted machines and "dismantled washing floors" beneath him. He has no immediate agency on the mine, but is rather a passive onlooker, much the reader himself. This lack of agency allows Auden's fantasy world, the one he created as a child and evokes in this poem, to remain sacred and untouched by human hands. The character in the poem may even be Auden himself as he looks over the manor of Alston Moor as a child with his family on vacation. The mines and manor of Alston Moor were one of the most important lead mining areas in the country at the time of Auden's writing.

The poem continues with more imagery describing the mine and the equipment therein with the lines:

*Snatches of tramline running to a wood,*

*An industry already comatose,*

*Yet sparsely living (The Watershed).*

These are the images that predominated his childhood, images of the Alston Moor mines. He calls the place comatose, a nod to the fact that it was once awake and fully alive, but now is, in a sense, dormant and asleep, the only acting eyes those of the observer in the distance.

The rest of the first stanza continues in much the same way as the lines before it, reading in part:

*And, further, here and there, though many dead*

*Lie under the poor soil, some acts are chosen,*

*Taken from recent winters; two there were*

*Cleaned out a damaged shaft by hand, clutching*

*The winch a gale would tear from them; one died*

*During a storm, the fells impassable (The Watershed).*

These lines and those the finish the rest of the first stanza serve to describe the scenery through the eyes of the unknown person revealed in the opening line. It isn't until the start of the second stanza where more about the scene in question is revealed. Here the mysterious figure is labeled as "stranger" and is implored to "turn back again, frustrate and vexed:"

The second and final stanza begins:

*This land, cut off, will not communicate,*

*be no accessory content to one*

*aimless for faces rather there than here.*

*Beams from your car may cross a bedroom wall,*

*They wake no sleeper; you may hear the wind*

*Arriving driven from the ignorant sea*

*To hurt itself on pane, on bark of elm (The Watershed).*

There is a distinct emphasis on the "stranger" in these lines. The land beneath him is an enigma where neither it nor those who reside there (as few as those may be) will collaborate with the stranger's desire to see the sights in picturesque retrospect (68). Auden himself can be seen as this stranger, excommunicated from the world he desperately desires to be in communion with. During his semi-frequent trips to the mines, Auden was exposed to the worsening conditions of the coal miners. The General Strike (consisting of the coal miners seeking better working conditions) had resulted in a worsening of the coal miners’ pay. And, despite the sympathies Auden held for these oppressed workers, he would always be seen as an "outsider" due to his ability to drive a car around the mine. Most every miner in the area at the time, unlike the Auden’s, couldn't afford the luxury of an automobile (69).

While “The Watershed” draws heavily on the experiences that Auden had as a child and, to some extent, showcases his knack for childlike attentiveness, his curiosity and willingness to experiment can be showcased further in his poem “In Praise of Limestone.” This poem, while still preoccupied with the abandoned mine setting of Alston Moor, focuses more on how an actual landscape can pass as an analogy for the human body and human love. It was his obsessiveness and attentiveness to this landscape that led him to the writing of this poem in the first place.

The form this poem takes is itself a testament to Auden’s willingness to experiment. The first few lines read:

*If it form the one landscape that we, the inconstant ones,*

*Are consistently homesick for, this is chiefly*

*Because it dissolves in water. Mark these rounded slopes*

*With their surface fragrance of thyme and, beneath,*

*A secret system of caves and conduits; hear the springs*

*That spurt out everywhere with a chuckle (In Praise).*

The entirety of the 94-line poem is written in the same way as the 6 lines above. This form alludes to, as Auden critic Tony Sharpe points out, the form’s dissolution, into formlessness or informality. This casual form serves to lighten the mood of what is otherwise a serious subject.

The poem’s subject matter, that is, a limestone landscape as analogy for human love, culminates itself in the last nine lines of this long poem:

*But if sins can be forgiven, if bodies fries from the dead,*

*These modifications of matter into*

*Innocent athletes and gesticulating fountains*

*Made solely for pleasure, make a further point:*

*The blessed will not care what angle they are regarded from,*

*Having nothing to hide. Dear, I know nothing of*

*Either, but when I try to imagine a faultless love*

*Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur*

*Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape (In Praise).*

As the poem alludes to, Auden views the epitome of human love as analogous to a limestone landscape, one that may have its faults, one that may change and erode overtime, but one that is nonetheless breathtaking and beautiful in its own right. Auden’s ability to play with form in this poem as well as the poem’s subject matter both have arisen out of Auden’s ability to reflect on the world around with childlike attentiveness, without which “In Praise of Limestone” and most of Auden’s poems would never have been written at all.

Like the child transfixed by the moon that Auden described in "Making, Knowing, Judging," Auden was completely transfixed by abandoned mining equipment. He did not look on the mines of Alston Moor with the gaze of a passerby. Instead, he studied the machinery as if the watershed and limestone hills were either members of his family or a part of his home, as if they were halls he walked every day or doors he opened frequently. Auden had other sacred objects in his life, subjects he wrote on that evoked his "imaginative awe," but the abandoned mines were the first subject that bade him to transform his sacred object "into a desire to express that awe in a rite of worship or homage," and, as Auden continues, "to be fit homage, this rite must be beautiful" (57). Much like children, the poet begins his or her poetic expression in imaginative awe, but the poet is able to transcribe that awe into a beautiful rite.

Much like the child, "All poets adore explosions, thunderstorms, tornadoes, conflagrations, ruins, scenes of spectacular carnage." This love of all things gory and the ability to both study and transcribe those things is what distinguishes the poet from other professions, and why, as Auden puts it, "the poetic imagination is not at all a desirable quality in a statesman" (84). It is this poetic imagination that is showcased in all of Auden’s poetry, including “The Watershed” and “In Praise of Limestone.”

*On Finding a Liminal Space*

Jeffrey Skinner writes in his book on poetic self-help about the need for the poet to occupy a liminal space when writing. Liminal means a) of or relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process or b) occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold (“Liminal”). The liminal place for the poet can take a number of forms, but the most common (and easiest to achieve) is the state between waking and sleeping, where the mind is, in essence, both shut off to the outside world and melded as one with it. The blank page becomes the red roses of the painting hanging above the dining room table and also becomes absolutely nothing at all, an almost transient, out-of-body experience.

Skinner describes this sensation as follows: “One only hopes for two things: first, to begin. And then: to find that flow, that angelic rift of song so irresistible one *must* follow, and anxiety is rendered moot, and disappears" (Skinner 31). Finding this liminal place is much like losing oneself to the melody of a song, where the listener can't help but sway to the music and tap his foot to the beat. Skinner again describes finding this sought-after space, one that often eludes the young poet, at the end of his chapter on liminality: "And, as they did when I was a kid in a classroom and it was forbidden to look out the window, my eyes unfocus, my mind loosens and drifts. Far off, I hear the blood begin to hum" (32).

Another, maybe easier, way to describe the poet's liminal space is to compare it to a runner's high. Many runners (especially those of the long-distance variety) will describe a sort of *letting go* half way through their run, where they can no longer feel the burning of lactic acid building in their calves or thighs, where the sweat dripping from their pony tails may just as well be a light sprinkle, and where they may as well be running through an impressionist painting. It's this same high that poets seek, only they do so with the use of their fingertips and not the use of their legs.

However, poets, like runners, must *practice* to reach this high and enter into the liminal. As many runners will admit, it wasn't until they ran miles a day when they felt their first letting go, as if they were the observer and someone else was making use of their legs. One doesn't wake up in the morning and decide that day to run the Boston marathon. Rather, one trains for months in order to prepare. The same goes for poetry. One doesn't write a book of poetry in a day without ever writing a poem in his or her life. However, entering into this liminal space, or *writer’s high* as it could be called, would-be poets must learn to make friends with the solitude that is the by-product of every writer’s life. While this is, of course, not the only way to reach a state of liminality (as liminality can mold into a number of shapes), it is the most universal and applicable to the greatest number of would-be poets.

Solitude is a commonality that all poets must learn to live with, as countless hours spent huddled in front of a typewriter, notebook, or lap top screen will leave the poet essentially alone. Rainer Maria Rilke writes extensively about this poetic solitude in his turn-of-the-century letters to his friend Franz Kappus. In his first letter, Rilke urges Kappus to “Go into [yourself]. Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots to the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write" (Rilke 1). Later in this first letter, Rilke goes on to write "Out of this immersion in your own world, poems come" (Rilke 1). In other words, Rilke believes that only by turning inward, by accepting solitude, can the poet find the words to fit on the page. He would have Kappus believe it is out of the self where poets find their will to write, where they find the key that unlocks the door to that in-between space that is so pivotal to the writing process.

While Rilke does insist on the poet being immersed in his own solitude (so much so he labels it a support and home for the poet in his fourth letter), he does admit that the giving of oneself over to this solitude is a difficult task, one that leaves the poet in a pain almost unimaginable (which is, in some writers’ opinions, a bit melo-dramatic). In his third letter to Kappus, Rilke describes the process of giving oneself away to solitude as an eternal struggle, and, if not eternal, at the very least a long and arduous one. He writes:

"In this [the cultivation of solitude] there is no measuring with time, a year doesn't matter, and ten years are nothing. Being an artist means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn't force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come (6).

It takes a lifetime to master the art of solitude, and "it comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them" (6). An eternity. that is the time it takes for the poet to master his solitude, to shake hands with it, to give it a cordial "hello" and embrace it. As Rilke writes in letter four: "Almost everything serious is difficult" (4). And solitude, in every sense of the word, is a serious endeavor.

For Rilke, what is difficult translates to what is most noble and, more importantly, most beneficial for the poet. As Rilke attests, "Most people have turned their solutions toward what is easy and toward the easiest side of the easy; but it is clear that we must trust in what is difficult” (Rilke 7). Poetry demands the attention of the poet, so much so that the poet must sacrifice a part, if not all, of himself to his craft in order to succeed in it. "We know little," Rilke writes, "but that we must trust in what is difficult is a certainty that will never abandon us; it is good to be solitary, for solitude is difficult; that something is difficult must be one more reason for us to do it" (7).

While solitude is important for the poet, it takes a certain necessary selfishness for poets to attain this sought-after and often elusive state. In many cases, poets must sacrifice time that could be spent elsewhere to practice their craft. Many writers have written on the necessity of selfishness in the writer's life, despite what obligations writers may have to the world, their friends, or even their families. Poet Jane Hirshfield writes on the subject: "Cultivate Necessary Selfishness. The world--even the literary world--will ask you to do everything except write a new poem. That, you must ask of yourself" (11). In other words, obligations will always be present in the writer’s life, obligations to everything but the art. Poets must prioritize their work, even if that means sacrificing a potentially fulfilling moment elsewhere.

Poet Stephen Dunn perfectly captures what poets must sometimes do without in pursuit of their craft: "Selfishness has helped a lot over the years. That is, if you have a spouse and a family, the claiming of time and space to work. Of course, as we the selfish know, there's a cost for selfishness, but that's another matter, perhaps the stuff of memoir" (11). Birthday parties. Ball games. Commencements. These are but a few of the events that may be missed, or rather sacrificed, in order for poets to make time for writing.

Skinner too writes about ways to practice this selfishness and combat the pressures the outside world places on the poet to do anything but write a new poem. The first and most reliable way to cultivate necessary selfishness, as both Hirshfield and Dunn allude to, is to carve out specific times in the week for writing, and, as Skinner notes, "let nothing short of a medical emergency for you or your immediate family interrupt such times" (17). Along these same lines, Skinner urges his readers to keep a notebook. Not only will this notebook be a form of writing, even if that writing isn't poetry itself, the writing in that notebook can often lead to interesting images and ideas that can later be used in the poet's work (19).

Most important to the writing process, as all writers will attest, is the most obvious: the act of writing itself. It is better for those attempting to write poetry to banish the idea of poetry altogether before sitting down to write. It is better for the poet to simply fill a page with words and trust the impulse to meander and digress (39)."Doing," as Skinner writes, "leads to discovery. Thinking about doing rarely does" (40). Poets often have to forget about the existence of the muse when they sit down to write, because "it gets them nowhere, and they have to write regularly, with or without inspiration" (41).

The liminal space that the poet seeks is more often entered into when poets carve out time to practice their craft. The eventualities of this practicing will often lead to uneaten dinners, missed dates, baseballs left unthrown. These are, at least for the serious poet looking to both perfect and experiment, unfortunate side effects of a life devoted to the art. These are, however, the most attainable catalysts for the would-be poet to enter into a liminal state, to achieve that all-elusive writer’s high.

While Auden did not always occupy the type of liminal space prescribed by Skinner and Rilke (that is, it wasn’t that space between waking and sleeping that counted as liminal for him) it was in this solitude so eloquently and poetically described by Rilke that W.H. Auden spent much of the second half of his poetic career and, ultimately, his life. Previously, while still a British citizen, Auden had explored much of Europe and parts of Asia with his childhood friend Christopher Isherwood. At the end of his travels with Isherwood in 1939, Auden wanted to continue exploring his sexuality (as he had multiple relationships with other men, and even some women, during this time, including with Isherwood) both in his poetry and in his personal life. However, he wasn't able to do that in a close-minded England where homosexuality had been labeled as illegal (although homosexuality, especially in a man as prolific as Auden, was largely ignored). Auden returned from his exhibition with Isherwood in China via New York, and it was in New York where both he and Isherwood decided to settle in America and seek U.S. Citizenship.

Auden made this choice to forgo England because, as critic Richard Davenport-Hines writes, "he was chafing at his celebrity as the cultural leader of young English partisans, which he found distasteful and creatively inhibiting” (Davenport-Hines 19). This creative inhibition is what ultimately led to Auden's moving away from Europe to America, where he could more freely give himself over to his poetic solitude and explore the desires that largely kept him occupied.

This self-imposed exile, however, was not taken lightly by the English literary elite. Many of his young English admirers felt betrayed by his departure, with this feeling of betrayal being magnified at the onset of war in Europe nine months after Auden's departure. Both journalists and politicians alike tried labeling Auden a coward, claiming that he had "deserted Britain during a dangerous crisis," leading to an enduring hostility between Auden and the people of England that would last for the rest of his adult life (Davenport-Hines 19).

This urge for isolation and solitude is present in Auden's poems as early as 1932, when he wrote an unpublished poem that begins "The month was April” (which, unfortunately, cannot be disclosed in its full version as it was unpublished). This poem expresses a powerful urge to leave the world the speaker of the poem (which can be identified as Auden himself) knows behind. The world that the poem inhabits is described as "a world that has had its day." The poem, however, ends with a hint of defeatism, the speaker arguing that one must "go down with your world." There is, as this unnamed poem says, "no use turning nasty and no use turning good." The speaker is identified with his world and must live or die by it. Auden's world was marked by his underlying homosexuality that in many cases turned overt. This homosexual tendency was, as is described in the above paragraphs, frowned upon in England during the early decades of the 1900s. It was in this poem that Auden first confessed his wish to move from England, writing "I'll book a berth on a liner / I'll sail away out to sea." Auden’s world was marked by an underlying homosexuality which was, as the above paragraphs describe, frowned upon in England at the time. He moved to America six years later thus fulfilling, at least partially so, his desire expressed in his unpublished poem to start over, away from his left-wing credentials and those who sought to persecute him for his practices (Dean 25-26).

After moving to America, Auden became a tenant at a literary and musical household located at 7 Middagh Street in Brooklyn. While this house was notoriously lively (not what one would expect the living conditions of a man seeking solitude to choose for his abode) Auden had some of his most productive literary years living there.

His time spent living in this Brooklyn tenant building lended itself directly to the writing of his 1941 book *The Double Man* (titled *New Year Letter* in the U. K.). While Auden himself often attended the parties thrown in his apartment building, he was often searching for poetic inspiration and subject, as evidenced by his group of poems titled “The Quest” that appeared in his book *The Double Man.* The poems present in this sequence examine the existential choices of different human types, types that made themselves present during his time at the tenant house. He drew heavily on his experiences there in order to write this sequence of sonnets.

The solitude that Auden experienced in his American years also led him to regain his Christianity and make Auden choose to label himself a "Christian poet." In his early years, Auden chose to reject Christianity and instead draw poetic inspiration from his interpretations of Lane, Freud, and Marx, which he read heavily during his college years. However, in 1941, Auden befriended Soren Kierkegaard, a German protestant theologian also exiled in the United States, and began drawing from theology as a poetic source (Davenport-Hines 20). "For the Time Being" was his first explicitly Christian work. Written between the years 1941 and 1942, the poem describes the birthing of Jesus through his spanning use of chorus, narrative, dialogues, songs, and prose. The long poem was well-received as Auden chose to approach the momentous subject matter with a light tone, giving the poem a hint of frivolity, irony, and camp incongruities that was unique to religious poetry at the time (21).

While Auden's solitude cannot be described as matching what Rilke deems as the ideal poetic solitude, Auden was able to distance himself enough from the people around him in order to gain both poetic insight and inspiration about the subjects that presented themselves in his life. While many of his nights in the tenant house were spent writing in his room, he also made sure to make friends with the people around him, drawing inspiration from their personalities and their friendships in general. By doing this, by partaking both in the physical world around him and the quiet world of his mind, Auden was better able to access a classically poetic liminal space, and, as a result of this entering, write many of his still-recognized works at the tenant house.

While Auden did, at least to some extent, partake in Skinner’s and Rilke’s private version of poetic liminality, he did not limit himself to that alone. Liminality by definition can take a number of forms as it simply means a place between two things, whether those things are physical or abstract. Along with the waking-sleeping state associated with solitude, Auden was in between many different worlds that led to the creation of his poetry. Auden writes about the work of the young writer in the prologue to his collection *The Dyer's Hand* where he writes:

The work of a young writer--Werther is a classic example--is sometimes a therapeutic act. He finds himself obsessed by certain ways of feeling and thinking of which his instinct tells him he must be rid before he can discover his authentic interests and sympathies, and the only way by which he can be rid of them forever is by surrendering to them (Auden 18).

Auden in many ways took this to heart, writing about the varying states of liminality he found himself in throughout his lifetime. In a way, this surrendering to the passions is a form of necessary selfishness would-be poets must allow in order to write authentic poetry. Auden himself was no stranger to surrendering to his passions that often led him to some sort of liminal space separate from one found solely in solitude. It was often within these liminal spaces that Auden found inspiration for his poetry.

Auden often travelled between countries, especially right after his college years when, along with his friend Christopher Isherwood, he travelled much of Europe, living in or visiting close to fifteen European countries during the 1930s (Sharpe 4). This travelling itself places Auden directly inside a liminal space in the physical sense of the word. While he was always in between cultures, he was never so much nestled in one. This state of cultural fluidity influenced many of Auden’s writings, including ones still studied by scholars today.

One of the most famous from this era was Auden’s collaborative with writer and friend Louis MacNeice titled *Letters from Iceland.* This rollicking book consisting of both prose and poetry contained the long poem "Last Will and Testament," which was written in Auden's witty, gossipy style. The poem itself ends with a prayer, which reads:

*We pray the power to take upon themselves the guilt*

*Of human action, though still as ready to confess*

*The imperfection of what can and must be built,*

*The wish and power to act, forgive, and bless (Last Will and Testament)*.

This prayer started a trend that would follow in all of Auden’s long poems and prose, as they were all capped with a prayer (although the prayer itself was not addressed to God until 1941 when Auden again became a practicing Christian) (Davenport-Hines 19).

Along with this physical sense of liminality, Auden was also forced into a world between homo and heterosexuality, particularly in his British years. This constant sexual struggle is a form of liminality in which Auden drew much poetic inspiration. Auden first became aware of his homosexuality during his time at Gresham’s school from 1920 to 1925, and further explored these urges throughout his studies at Oxford. Auden, however, had believed his sexual orientation to be what he considered “wrong” with him. This culminated itself in August, 1928 when he underwent a sort of psychoanalysis at Spa, Belgium intended to correct this “wrongness.” Although Auden had most likely already lost his heterosexual virginity during a trip to Austria in 1926, he was always haunted by his homosexual urges. He tried to rid himself of these by becoming engaged to be married, like his father before him, to a nurse (Sharpe 2).

This engagement did not last long. Auden had, after returning briefly from Belgium, moved to Berlin until July, 1929. Christopher Isherwood had visited Auden frequently during this time, eventually leading to reemergence of Auden’s homosexual urges. These urges were acted upon in Berlin, leading to Auden’s subsequent disengagement to the nurse upon his return to England (3). There would be later occasions where Auden either proposed marriage to or slept with a woman, but never again did Auden question his sexuality as he did on his trip to Belgium (2).

This space between homo and heterosexuality that Auden occupied led to many of his writings. Leading critic on the subject of Auden’s sexuality, Richard Bozorth, writes, “Read as allegories of ‘the closet,’ poems like ‘control of the passes was, he saw, the key’ and ‘from scars where kestrels hover’ imply Auden’s fascination with the idea that sexual marginality can lend itself to a subversive detachment from mainstream culture” (Bozorth 182). Auden’s most in-depth look at this subject comes from “Journal of an Airman,” Book Two of *The Orators.* While it is never stated implicitly, the airman’s homosexuality is strongly implied and has long been assumed by Auden critics.

In this chapter, the Airman is portrayed as a practical joker but is at war with an ever-present enemy. This juxtaposes with Auden’s own homosexuality, and can be read as Auden indulging and critiquing his own pretensions as a homosexual poet. The Airman’s eventual suicide in the chapter is a result of his complicity (which the airman refers to as an infection) to the unnamed ‘enemy’ present in the text. This can be read as Auden’s disgust with his own homosexuality at the time (he later came to accept and embrace his orientation, but that wasn’t until his American years) (Bozorth 182). This poem and others like it only arose out of Auden’s own dissatisfaction with what he thought of as his dysfunctional personality and his liminal battle between his hetero and homosexuality.

Auden, while in between physical countries and metaphysical mental states, also found himself stuck between the religious and the secular worlds which was for him another form of liminality in which he drew poetic inspiration. Auden had grown up as a member of the “High Church” Anglicans (who, as Auden recalled, looked down on less elevated forms of Protestantism). The Auden family would both start and end their days in prayer (Sharpe 1). Both of Auden’s grandparents had been distinguished members of the clergy (Davenport-Hines 15). Much of Auden’s childhood was then subsequently centered around church life, and many of his childhood thoughts were anchored on God.

This however, did not last throughout Auden’s early years. He took to reading books by Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. It was books like these that influenced his early poetry, and the ideas that these books held that ultimately led Auden away from his Christian upbringing. During the 1930s, he was known as a poet “who celebrated new technologies” as opposed to adhering to the principles that had guided the previous generation (Davenport-Hines 15). This falling away from the church did not, however, worsen his relationship with his parents who remained cemented in its traditions.

Auden saw a return to his Christian roots when he moved from Britain to the U.S., where he started reading and drawing poetic interest from Soren Kierkegaard’s books on Christian theology. He also befriended Protestants Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, with both helping to convince Auden that social justice (which Auden was writing extensively on at the time) and Christianity were mutually related. It was in 1941, two years after his arrival in New York, when Auden labeled himself a Christian poet, and began writing works like “For the Time Being,” “The Sea and the Mirror,” and the self-portrait poems “The Fall of Rome” and “A Household.”

While Auden may have, to some extent, explicitly partaken in the poetic solitude described by both Skinner and Rilke, he was still drawing from his liminal experiences in other places to write most of his still-recognizable poems. Without these various states of in-between, Auden would have been a much different poet, one who drew less on his own experiences and, therefore, one who would be much less memorable. Auden was, as all poets are, indebted to his experiences, with most being driven by some varying state of in-between.

*On Literary Friendship*

While it is certainly necessary and important for young and developing poets to both embrace their solitude and enter into a liminal space in order to write successfully, it is also equally (albeit a bit paradoxically) important for these poets to build a community of working writers with whom they can share their work, critique each other, and ultimately grow into poetic maturity. As well-known contemporary author Anne Lamott writes:

And all the while you are writing away, editing, revising, trying new leads, new endings, until finally, at some point, you want some feedback. You want other people to read it. You want to know what they think. We are social animals, and we are trying to communicate with others of our species, and up until now you have been alone in a hole getting your work done (Lamott 151-152).

While writing is obviously one of the first steps in the poetic process, it is far from the last one. The entire point of writing poetry (or anything, for that matter) is not to exercise some personal demon or, as many budding writers say, “to write for the self.” Rather, poetry is meant to shine a light on the human experience, to subjectively point to an objective truth.

And if this is the point of writing, to engage with both the literary and nonliterary world, then the would-be poets need to have their drafts read after sitting down to write them. “The poet who wishes to improve himself,” writes W.H. Auden in “Making, Knowing, Judging,” “should certainly keep good company, but for his profit as well as his comfort the company should not be too far above his station” (Auden 37). This company to which Auden refers is, to the young poets, a circle of literary peers, people who both care about their work but are able to critique it nonetheless. The young poets seeking this help must also be willing to reciprocate the care that their friends took in their poetry by both reading and critiquing their friends’ works as well. It is a community that these poets are attempting to build, and for a community to be successful, every one of its members must contribute. “You are the kind doctor” Jeffrey Skinner writes to describe those seeking to better their peers’ work, “determined to remove every trace of infection, painful as the process may be” (Skinner 127).

The process, as Skinner alludes to above, could very well be a painful one. While many scholars and acclaimed writers alike have debated the usefulness of university creative writing programs and of, more specifically, workshop classes, it is in these very classes where the aspiring poets can begin to build a base of peers that both care about their work and want that work to be the best version of itself. Of course, university workshops have only risen in popularity over the past few decades. Therefore, poets like W.H. Auden would not have attended a workshop like the one described below. Anne Lamott compares attending these university workshops to “putting your head in the lion’s mouth” (lamott 153). As a teacher of workshops herself, Lamott knows the risks that writers (especially those of the young variety) take in sharing their work, essentially a part of themselves, with people who could be strangers. “You may find yourself,” Lamott writes in regards to workshops, “sitting around a table with a number of other writers who feel morally and aesthetically compelled to rip your story to shreds” (Lamott 153).

While these classes could very well be as cut-throat as Lamott describes, they are the pressure making coal into diamonds. They work to make the poems, stories, and essays that budding writers submit into the best versions of themselves. And while writers may be of the sensitive sort when it comes to their writing (and who could blame them as every piece of written work is essentially a part of their soul broken off and offered to others), writing workshops are a place for thick skin. Besides, as poet Clayton Eshleman writes in his *Study of Poetic Apprenticeship,* “It is natural to feel competitive with one’s peers. But one is essentially not in competition with other poets. One is essentially only in competition with one’s own death” (Eshleman 4). While a morbid thought, it does remind the poet that what matters most is not who can write the best poem, but rather that the ultimate goal of the poet is to write the best poems possible.

If, however, the young poet does not feel ready for the possible hostilities that could be present in a workshop, the poet could consider starting his or her own writing group, but with other writers around the same skill level. This is the process more familiar to poets who came before the modern workshop. Auden writes about the importance of this in “Making, Knowing, Judging,” writing “It is by no means clear that the poetry which influenced Shakespeare’s development most fruitfully was the greatest poetry with which he was acquainted. Masterpieces should be kept for High Holidays of the Spirit” (Auden 37). While it is also necessary for young poets to acquaint themselves with established writers, it is almost detrimental to a writing group of young poets to have a more established author demanding the attention of the group dynamics.

While the writing group would act like a pseudo-workshop (in fact, they would be doing the same things as a workshop class: sharing work, critiquing, making the poetry as good as it can be) they would meet outside of an academic setting, thus shedding some of the pressure and anxiety sometimes associated with joining a workshop class. Not only do these writing groups give writers the support and feedback needed to produce a good poem, it also gives them a sense of accountability. In other words, it makes them write more, especially if the group agrees to meet once a week (or with similar constraints). Starting a writing group is as easy as asking two or three people whose work the poet admires to meet every so often to discuss the art of poetry and to read and critique the drafts written by the members of the group.

Sometimes, however, the young poet doesn’t need a group of people to discuss his or her work, but rather requires one trusted individual to read his or her work, someone who truly understands who the poet is and what his or her work is aiming towards. Someone who is willing to read the poet’s drafts and mark them up with useful suggestions, even if that person may not always have the answer to what is missing from those drafts in particular. As Lamott writes, “There are probably a number of ways to tell your story right, and someone else may be able to tell you whether or not you’ve found one of those ways” (Lamott 163).

Beginners need encouragement even more so than the established “professional writer,” to keep their hands moving across the page. The process for finding this person is much the same as establishing a writing group, the only difference being the poet in question is searching for a singular person to read the work produced. Of course, this person should understand poetry, and could also write poetry. But this person, whoever it may be, must be trustworthy, someone who will not lie about poetry, whether the truth be joyous or hard to swallow (Skinner 126). However, the person should not be overly harsh with the beginner’s work. Lamott writes extensively on this in *Bird by Bird,* particularly in the chapter “Someone to Read Your Drafts,” “You don’t want to spend your time around people who make you hold your breath. You can’t fill up when you’re holding your breath. And writing is about filling up” (Lamott 170).

While finding this friend who doubles as literary critic is sometimes hard, almost every writer has either one friend or a group of friends who are willing to read through and critique poetic drafts. Anne Lamott writes of two friends (which she leaves unnamed) that she sends her work before letting her editor or agent see a copy (164). Jeffrey Skinner had his (now ex) wife Sarah read over his drafts (Skinner 135). Clayton Eshleman had a number of poets with whom he kept up a correspondence, including such names as: Gary Snyder, Jack Hirschman, Thomas Merton, and Jerry Rothenberg (Eshleman 68). All of these poets and writers, now established and respected in the literary field, first began by showing their drafts to people they trusted.

Wystan Auden, too, was a man who kept a close literary circle, albeit an ever-revolving one. Auden writes, in regards to the sincerity of literary friendships:

Sincerity is like sleep. Normally, one should assume that, of course, one will be sincere, and not give the question a second thought. Most writers, however, suffer from bouts of insincerity as men do from bouts of insomnia, the remedy in both cases is often quite simple: in the case of the latter, to change one’s diet, in the case of the former, to change one’s company (Auden 17).

It was this sort of thinking, that to better oneself one simply had to change company, that led Auden to befriend many literary figures during his lifetime, men and women that both helped Auden in developing his own work and even collaborated with Auden on joint pieces. This collaborative effort that Auden often found himself in with varying writers made him peculiar to the average poet. While his literary friends certainly helped him in his own drafts, drafts that only he was credited with creating, Auden was often more interested in creating works in conjunction with his friends.

The first of these friends Auden met in 1915 at preparatory school in Surrey, seven years before Auden realized his preferred profession was in fact poet, and not mining engineer. His name was Christopher Isherwood. When Auden moved on from Surrey to Gresham’s school and later to Oxford, the two had remained friends, but had for the most part been separated from one another due to their geological locations. During his time at Oxford, Auden became acquainted with other aspiring poets whose names he would later be associated with, names such as Cecil Day-Lewis, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender. It was during these years, his Oxford years, that Auden began to explore his homosexuality more deeply. He eventually would reunite with Christopher Isherwood (a rising poet in his own right) in London, where he would also be introduced to Isherwood’s friend, Edward Upward (Sharpe 2).

Shortly after graduating from Oxford, despite George Auden’s (Wystan’s father) willingness to pay for a post-university year, Auden chose to move to Berlin, partly because he was allured by the German capital’s reputed sexual adventurousness. Auden left England in early October, and stayed in Berlin until late July of 1929. It was there in Berlin that Auden’s friendship with Christopher Isherwood blossomed into a literary one (although not exclusively so). Auden had visited Isherwood during this time in England over a Christmas break, and had persuaded him to live in Berlin for a time.

Since this meeting over Christmas, the pair’s friendship had deepened greatly. One of the most well-respected Auden critics, Tony Sharpe, writes, “Auden regarded Isherwood as an important literary counsellor to whose judgment he deferred, submitting drafts of poems for his approval” (Sharpe 3). Isherwood acted much like Gary Snyder did for Clayton Eshleman, as a literary catalyst, someone who Auden could trust to both show his work and, ultimately, make that work better.

After returning to England in 1929, Auden had taken a teaching job from the beginning of the school year in 1930 until the summer of 1935 in order to provide for himself financially. In the Autumn of 1932 Auden succeed his Oxford friend and fellow poet, Cecil Day-Lewis, as teacher of literature in the Downs School at Colwall near the Malvern Hills. However, Day-Lewis had taken a teaching post in Cheltenham, close enough to Malvern Hills for the two to visit each other. This they often did, and thus another literary friendship was born in Auden’s life. In fact, Auden’s consistent meetings with Day-Lewis had a great impact on his second book of poetry published in 1932 titled *The Orators* (Levy 141). This time at Colwell School marked Auden’s happiest years in England and possibly of his entire life, and is commemorated in the 1933 poem, “A Summer Night.”

Between the years of 1930 and 1938, Auden was also writing drama in addition to his collections of poetry, spurred by his association with Rupert Doone’s “Group Theater,” a group which directed its artistry towards small-scale experimental productions. It was with this group that Auden’s first play, *A Dance with Death,* debuted alongside T.S. Eliot’s *Sweeney Agonistes.* This work with Doone’s group led directly to Auden’s collaboration with Isherwood on subsequent plays (Sharpe 3). With Isherwood’s help, Auden wrote plays such as *The Dog Beneath the Skin, The Ascent of F6,* and *On the Frontier,* With all three premiering with Doone’s theater group (Levy 141). These plays are still shown in many theaters today.

The latter part of the decade saw Auden involved in further collaborative adventures. He left his teaching job at Downs School to work with the GPO film unit in London where he was principally a writer for documentaries, but also starred in a few other roles. The most memorable result of this venture was Auden’s collaboration with the young music composer Benjamin Britten on the short films *Coal-Face* and *Night Mail.* Britten was increasingly smitten with Auden’s work as both poet and screenwriter, working closely with Auden to write both the music and dialogue in the films mentioned above.

Further collaborative adventures include the travel book *Letters from Iceland*, written by Auden and the poet Louis MacNeice during their travels to the country in 1937. Auden also wrote another book in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood titled *Journey to a War*, which features Isherwood’s prose alongside Auden’s poetry and photography. This book details the pair’s brief stint in Spain, where they sought to show sympathy and give support to the anti-Franco forces seeking to free themselves from the fascist regime taking over the Spanish government at the time (Sharpe 3).

Eventually Auden and Isherwood, after travelling through much of Europe during the 1930s, decided to settle down in America. In January of 1939, the pair set sail to New York City where they arrived a few weeks later (4). While Auden avowedly went to New York seeking anonymous solitude (discussed in the last section), he soon fell in love with a man named Chester Kallman, a blonde college boy from Brooklyn. Like his relationship with Isherwood, Auden’s relationship with Kallman was not purely motivated by literature, but also by sexual desire. During the Summer of 1939, the two men exchanged vows to each other during a honeymoon to New Mexico.

This sexual relationship, however, did not last. Kallman’s sexual fantasies did not coincide with Auden’s. Auden critic Richard Davenport-Hines describes the relationship as follows: “Kallman had an undeniable aesthetic sensibility, but was selfish and willful; Auden (while regarding Kallman as a sacred being) was possessive, invasive, and overbearing” (Davenport-Hines 19). This clash of both sexual desire and differing personalities led to a crisis in 1941, when Kallman declared that their sexual relationship must end. While this tension severed any sexual connections the two shared, it did nothing to hamper their creative collaborations in the future (or, for that matter, even their relationship as literary friends). They shared Summer homes in Europe between the years 1948 to 1973 and New York City apartments between 1951 and 1963.

Their creative collaborations first came about in 1947. Still romantically struck by Kallman (and still viewing him as a sacred being) Auden sought to rescue Kalmman’s creative career from obscurity. He did this by arranging their collaboration on the libretto for Stravinsky’s opera *The Rake’s Progress.* The pair also collaborated on a few more librettos, including ones for Hanz Werner Henze’s *Elegy for Young Lovers* and, arguably Auden’s (and, in turn, Kallman’s) best libretto to Henze’s subsequent opera *The Bassarids.* The last two operas did not premier until the early 1960s.

Auden also had other literary and artistic acquaintances and friends during the second half of his life. His first home away from Kallman was in a tenant house in Brooklyn, which housed the likes of Louis MacNiece (whom Auden had previously befriended), composer Benjamin Britten (also already friends with Auden), and, among others, the singers Peter Pears, Paul Bowles, and Carson McCullers. He collaborated with many of the writers running around this tenant house, and used them as inspiration for his own work (20)

Later in his life Auden began letter correspondences with the poets Edmund Wilson and Marianne Moore, enjoying fruitful friendships with both throughout the rest of his lifetime. They both sent each other drafts and encouraged each other’s literary endeavors throughout the course of their friendships. In 1951, Auden began collaborating with Jacques Barzun and Lionel Trilling in managing a well-respected book club aptly titled Reader’s Subscription, and he contributed regularly (often in collaborative efforts) to its circulating magazine *Griffin.* Also during the 1950s, Auden served as a judge for the Yale Series of Younger Poets, where he chose for publication the first volumes of such renowned poets as Adrienne Rich and John Ashberry. He was also able to give other aspiring poets his notably generous and shrewd advice (22).

While Auden did keep a circle of literary friends, ones that helped him nurture his own work, it was his ability to write in collaboration with other poets that made him stand out from many of his literary peers. Without Christopher Isherwood, there would be no *The Ascent of F6* or many of Auden’s early collections of poetry. Without Louis MacNeice, there would be no *Letters from Iceland.* Without Chester Kallman, there would be no *The Rake’s Progress.* Without all of these people, many of Auden’s recognized works would look drastically different, and one could assume that they would be poorer off without the encouragement and help of his friends.

*On Finding a Poetic Voice*

The aim of every poet, as Auden writes in “The Poet and the City,” “is to produce something which is complete and will endure without change” (Auden 85). The best, and arguably the only, way for the poet to accomplish this is to develop his or her own poetic voice. That is, to write something original, to sing from within a cacophony of other voices, ones that may have been singing for hundreds of years, and be heard. Auden writes again, “Originality no longer means a slight modification in the style of one’s immediate predecessors; it means a capacity to find in any work of any date or place a clue to finding one’s authentic voice” (80). This, however, can seem a tall task for young writers, ones who are essentially just beginning to dip their toes in literary waters.

Poet Jeffrey Skinner believes that the mark of naturally talented poets (ones who have somewhere deep inside them a voice to be heard) are ones who, while they may not have written much previously, write pieces showcasing “a freshness and ease with language, a startling honesty, an offbeat beauty” (Skinner 3). However, young poets often showcase these talents by imitating other poets, by borrowing voices that are not their own. While this may seem like folly on the part of the young poet, it is nevertheless a step in the right direction. That is, a step towards discovering a poetic voice that has yet to speak.

In “Making, Knowing, Judging,” Auden concedes this point, writing “His [the young poet’s] censor, however, has still not yet been born. Before he can give birth to him, he has to pretend to be somebody else; he has to get a literary transference upon some poet in particular” (Auden 37). Young poets will often write in the style of their favorite established poets, or even the poets that they are currently reading. Again, this isn’t necessarily detrimental to finding an authentic voice. The voices borrowed by young poets, the voices and styles of their favorite authors and writers, are, however, only on loan. They are something that young poets will eventually have to give back to their rightful owners.

Anne Lamott writes on the topic, “It is natural to take on someone else’s style. It’s a prop that you use for a while until you have to give it back. And it just might take you to the thing that is not on loan, the thing that is real and true: your own voice” (Lamott 195). As Lamott concedes, it is natural for writers to adopt the style of the poets they hold in high regard, but these styles are only on loan. When adopted by the young poets, it is difficult for them to write anything true. That is, true to themselves, written in a way that only that poet in particular could write it.

As many writers who have written on finding a voice will concede, assuming someone else’s voice is a necessary evil that all young writers will experience. “A poet cannot read another poet,” writes Auden, “nor a novelist another novelist, without comparing their work to his own” (Auden 5). While the established poet is not immune to bouts of imitation, young poets will often adopt the masks of their favorite writers because they themselves have yet to experiment with their own voices. Their poetic cries have yet to be heard, and they so desperately want to be heard that they write what isn’t necessarily true to themselves. They default to adopting someone else’s voice, whether that be in style, in phrase formation, or even in subject matter.

Again, this adoption is a necessary evil, one that will point adoptees in the direction of their authentic voices, but why, one may ask, is it necessary to drop the charade in the first place? Anne Lamott’s workshop students asked the question that many young writers, even those too nervous or too lazy to ask it themselves, have thought at one time or another: “Why are we supposed to tell the truth in our own voice?” (Lamott 199). In other words, why do we, as young poets, have to give back the established voices? If those voices work for other poets, wouldn’t they work the same for us? The answer is, unfortunately for the young poet, a simple one: no. T.S. Eliot’s voice won’t work for the young poet the same way it does for him. Lamott writes in answer to her budding students:

The truth of your experience can only come through in your own voice, if it is wrapped in someone else’s voice, we readers will feel suspicious, as if you are dressed up in someone else’s clothes. You cannot write out of someone else’s big dark place; you can only write out of your own (199).

When young poets write in someone else’s style, the stories and poems they are writing never ring true.

Auden similarly writes in his essay “Writing:” “One characteristic that all men, whatever their culture, have in common is uniqueness—every man is a member of a class of one—the unique perspective on the world which every genuine poet has survives translation” (Auden 24). This unique perspective that every poet has on the surrounding world is what should be and needs to be translated into poetry. Every poet, every man, even, has this unique perspective. The problem, and, ultimately, the solution for young poets, is realizing they too have this perspective, and they too are able to translate it into a voice all their own.

Poets (and all writers alike) write to expose the unexposed, to dig deep within themselves and write those dastardly thoughts off of and out of their hearts. Fortunately for the poets trying to find their voice, there are tips and tricks to finding that voice that many established writers have written about to help along the way. Firstly, writers just beginning their poetic journey must start by writing what they know. In Rainer Maria Rilke’s first letter to Franz Kappus, he advises his young friend to “write about what your everyday life offers you; describe your sorrows and desires, the thoughts that pass through your mind, your belief in some kind of beauty” (Rilke 1). While this may first assume the voice of another, writing out of experience will help guide the poet to his authentic voice.

“Prime or first matter is to be found in yourself” writes poet Clayton Eshleman in regards to finding a poetic voice (Eshleman 4). “In practice,” he continues, “to believe that one is the words others have found in the struggle to say themselves, is to screw one’s [self] onto the nozzle of a hose through which only others are pouring” (9). Like Rilke, Eshleman believes that only through the exploration of the self can a truly authentic voice be found in the young poet. Only when the poet screws a nozzle onto a hose wholly her own can she begin to develop a solo voice that distinguishes itself amongst the choir.

Truth and reality are the poet’s home. These are, as Anne Lamott puts it, “the bedrock of life” (Lamott 200). Finding this truth is the way for young poets to find their voices, but truth and reality are, as both Rilke and Eshleman alluded to, entirely personal. In other words, no two poets share the same truth or the same reality. Within each young poet lies a dormant mine that waits to be sifted for little nuggets of truth. “But you can’t get to any of these truths,” writes Lamott, “by sitting in a field smiling beatifically, avoiding your anger and damage and grief. Your anger and damage and grief are the way to the truth” (201). All of these are found only within the self. And while many young writers may fear what may arise out of this exploration, what gets exposed is not people’s baseness, but their humanity. And that is the aim of poetry, to discover, piece by piece, despite how excruciating the process may be, humanity in its most basic form.

Another way for practicing poets to find an authentic voice is for them to learn as much as they can about the craft of writing poetry itself. “I no longer believe that there is any one aspect of writing poems,” writes poet Jeffrey Skinner, “which is detachable from all other aspects” (Skinner 61). In other words, practicing all aspects of the craft can often lead to poetic discovery. The knowledge of prosody (that is, the knowledge of poetic forms, rhythms, etc.) is one way for the poet to both experiment and find a form that best fits the content of his writing.

Lastly, young poets can be led to finding their authentic voice by trusting their impulses to meander and digress in their writing. As the poet Robert Frost once wrote, “No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader” (Frost). Following this impulse can lead poets, especially ones just beginning their poetic careers, down paths that they would not have found otherwise. While this meandering may lead to nothing more than deleted words, “you may be led as if by accident” concedes Skinner, “to a voice you didn’t know lived in you, and to images, statements, remembrances, syntactical moves—all raw and shocking as just-opened oysters” (40). That is what leads to the discovery of a unique poetic voice, one that could be heard through the rebounding echoes of poets past and the ever-loudening shouts of poets present. And while this voice may be nothing but a squeak at first, it could just as easily grow to a scream.

Even Auden himself was not immune to the trappings of imitation that every young poet must endure. Much of his pre-Oxford work (which Auden disowned later in his life as being “trash” of which he was “ashamed of having written”) was profoundly influenced by psychoanalytical and Marxist theory (Davenport-Hines 15). He was enamored with the work of Sigmund Freud and other psychologists like him. As Auden critic Richard Bozorth writes, “Little of his [Auden’s] writing from the 1920s and 1930s does not involve desire, even restricted to its psychological meanings” (Bozorth 175).

However, Auden did eventually find his authentic voice, one that became both entirely recognizable and exemplified in the 1930s. It was in 1927, in between Auden’s second and last years at Oxford, where he matured poetically. Auden himself reflected on this maturity late in his life:

At nineteen, I was self-critical enough to know that the poems I was writing were still merely derivative, that I had not yet found my own voice, and I felt certain that in Oxford I should never find it, that as long as I remained there, I should remain a child (Mendelson 27).

He was twenty years old at the time, and this was five years after he first discovered his vocation as a poet. It was this transition from childhood to adulthood that led Auden away from his derivative imitation and into the discovery of his poetic voice.

And it was in this formative, self-revelatory year of 1927 when Auden wrote “The Watershed” and in 1928 when he wrote “The Secret Agent,” the earliest examples of Auden stepping into his own, mature voice, a unique idiom which sounded cryptic, ambiguous, and menacing, a voice that critics later deemed “Audenesque” (Davenport-Hines 16). Patrick Deane, another prominent Auden critic, describes these early poems as “set in a world suffused with threat and mysterious urgency” (Deane 25). Richard Bozorth describes Auden as being “incessantly fond of blurring distinctions between the unspoken, the unspeakable, and that which goes without saying” (Bozorth 177). The decline of England and the prominence of English landscapes were also trademark signs of Auden’s early poetry (Deane 26).

Most if not all of the above characteristics can be seen in Auden’s “The Secret Agent.” The poem itself is written as an unrhymed sonnet, with two stanzas of four lines and one of six, where, as Tony Sharpe describes, “the octave’s anxious purposefulness is replaced in the sestet by a mood of disengagement” (Sharpe 71). The poem begins:

*Control of the passes was, he saw, the key*

*To his new district, but who would get it?*

*He, the trained spy, had walked into the trap*

*For a bogus guide, seduced by the old tricks (The Secret Agent).*

This, however, was not the way the poem had originally began. Instead, lines 3 and 4 had preceded lines 1 and 2, thus opening with the spy’s entrapment. Auden quickly saw the better way to begin the poem. His first two attempts at this poem (as evidenced by his composing notebook) were only ten lines long, and did not take the form of a sonnet. The agent in the poem can be seen as one of two things, either Auden himself (as first suggested by Richard Bozorth, although he himself warns against reading the poem this way) or as metaphor for England. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Auden had the uncanny ability to read the signs of the times and express what was to become their meaning (Sharpe 14). This address to contemporary history set him apart from the previous literary generation, and can be applied to the way one reads “The Secret Agent.”

The poem continues with a landscape description, a technique that Auden used often in his poetry and contributed to his “Audenesque” style:

*At Greenhearth was a fine site for a dam*

*and easy power, had they pushed the rail*

*some stations nearer. They ignored his wires:*

*The bridges were unbuilt and trouble coming (The Secret Agent).*

Here Auden evokes an English lead-mining community (Greenhearth standing for Greenhurth, a Teesdale lead-mining community upstream from Cauldron Snout) as he did in “The Watershed” (discussed in an earlier section). This section serves to give context to the poem, or to give the reason that the secret agent is where he is, and why he was tricked and trapped (Sharpe 71).

The last six lines of “The Secret Agent” read:

*The street music seemed gracious now to one*

*For weeks up in the desert. Woken by water*

*Running away in the dark, he often had*

*Reproached the night for a companion*

*Dreamed of already. They would shoot, of course,*

*Parting easily two that were never joined (The Secret Agent).*

Also unique to Auden’s signature voice and style were his dealings with themes of separation and broken or ineffectual contact. This poem sees different levels of separation and longing, the first and most prominent being between the secret agent and those for whom he works (the pervading “they” of the poem). The agreement between the two parties had been dishonored when the agent had seen himself trapped and eventually shot by the same people who hired him in the first place. The poem also sees a physical separation between the agent and the lover he is leaving behind (“reproached the night for a companion / dreamed of already”). He longs for the one he will leave behind, but knows that he can do nothing to change his imminent and impending departure from the world of the living. He is thwarted in his desire for emotional reciprocation, being met instead with deception, with betrayal, and, ultimately, with a bullet (Sharpe 71).

Auden’s style and poetic voice matured as he matured, going from a rather experimental form (at least, for the time it was written) in “The Secret Agent” and poems like it to adopting more established styles later in his life. While Auden was opposed to biographical approaches to an author’s work, biographical scholarship has made it clear how much the events of his own life have informed the poetry he wrote (28). This can be easily seen in his first American poem, “In Memory of W.B. Yeats.” This poem also showcases Auden’s ability to translate contemporary history into his body of work and supplement traditional forms with his unique voice. While the pair were not exactly friends (as they often disagreed with each other’s poetics) Auden uses this poem not only to commemorate the poet, but to commemorate poetry itself.

The poem is broken down into three distinct sections, with each section emphasizing something different in regards to Yeats and poetry as a whole. The first section, while also commemorating the wintery landscape and weather that gripped New York upon Auden’s arrival in America, serves to showcase Yeat’s physical transition from life to death. Skipping the first few stanzas which serve only as markers of setting (the wintery, New York landscape) the third stanza begins:

*But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,*

*an afternoon of nurses and rumours;*

*the provinces of his body revolted,*

*the squares of his mind were empty,*

*silence invaded the suburbs,*

*the current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers (In Memory)*

The next stanza goes on in much the same way, commemorating Yeats’ death, claiming that he is “scattered among a hundred cities / and wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,” referring to Yeats’ poetry spread amongst his readers (Auden). However, there is a shift in tone in the next stanza. This poem is as much a commemoration of Yeats as it is Auden’s evolving debate with himself about the role of poetry in the modern world (a theme that would remain present in later poems and would also serve as a marker of Auden’s maturity as poet) (Sharpe 94). The next stanza reads:

*but in the importance and noise of tomorrow*

*when the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,*

*And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,*

*and each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,*

*a few thousand will think of this day*

*as one thinks of a day where one did something slightly unusual.*

*What instruments we have agree*

*the day of his death was a dark cold day (In Memory).*

This stanza shows how the world will continue in much the same way even after it has lost a well-respected poet. The poor will continue to be poor and the rich will continue to be rich. This is where the reader sees Auden struggling with poetry’s place in the modern world. If, even after a loss as poetically tragic as Yeats, the world continues to beat almost ignorant of what it has lost, then what is the point of writing poetry at all?

The second section of this poem serves to both reflect on the generative power behind Yeats’ verse and shows how poetry itself survives in the midst of calamity, not causing anything but instead flowing from a place of isolated safety (Sharpe 94).

*For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives*

*in the valley of its making where executives*

*would never want to tamper (In Memory).*

This is a grim image of poetry, for although it survives the ages, it has no agency itself. It cannot make anything happen despite the urgency that may underline its language. It is this downtrodden image that pervades Auden’s later poems.

The third and final section of this poem consist of six stanzas in AABB verse. The last three stanzas, and the most important to the context of the poem, read:

*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 fountains start,*

*in the prison of his days*

*teach the free man how to praise (In Memory).*

These stanzas give a lighter, somewhat happier vision of poetry, despite man’s curse and his imminent death. The poet can turn his curse, as the poem suggests, into a vineyard, where poetic drink can form. And while the poem concedes that there are in fact “deserts of the heart,” there are also “healing fountains” which, in Auden’s mind, only the poet can conjure. A poet like Yeats (or any of Yeats’ standing) can, as Auden writes, “teach the free man how to praise.” In essence, his poetry lives on, and with it that fundamental spark of existence, of humanity in its most basic form that is present in poetic verse (Sharpe 71).

Auden’s poetic voice, the one that is present in both “The Secret Agent” and in “In Memory of W.B. Yeats,” was one that dominated much of the early twentieth century, with its ability to evoke contemporary history, Auden’s personal history, and a mysterious tone that enthralled his readers. “The most interesting writing,” writes Jeffrey Skinner, “however the writer accomplishes it, proceeds from personal obsession or passion” (Skinner 75). Auden’s poetry, and all those poets who have found their authentic voice and have utilized it time and again, have only done so by writing from their personal passions, by meandering, and, ultimately, by writing enough poetry to figure out for themselves how their voices may be heard amongst so many.

*Closing Thoughts*

Poetic formation is a process, a series of defining moments and events that develop potential poets in their crafts and in their personalities. The process is long, it’s hard, and it takes a great amount of patience and effort. The aspiring poet cannot flirt with the craft and expect to be successful. Rather, as Jeffrey Skinner describes, “I’m afraid that the long view is a marriage, of poet and poetry—a commitment to a life with the making of poetry at its center, come hell or high water” (Skinner 170).

Much the same, Clayton Eshelman writes, “Get serious about poetry or forget it” (Eshelman 67). Established poets do not dabble in the craft. They do not sip from the cup, they take full-bodied gulps. Eshelman describes an encounter he once had with a Japanese bonsai gardener. The gardener he encountered was sixty years old and introduced himself as an apprentice still learning his craft. His master was a man in his late-seventies. The apprentice told Eshelman that he would soon be going off on his own, and then would have about a decade to develop the craft he has learned (65).

Much like this apprenticed gardener, developing poets will take their whole lives learning their trades, and sometimes they will never become masters. So why is it that some people aspire to be poets? Why do people want to subject themselves to such a long, arduous process that can take decades to come to fruition? Poets neither make much money nor do they become widely recognized. And so, what is the point of wanting to write poetry in the first place?

I think Skinner may give the best reason that people (and young people in particular) continue to write poetry although it offers little in worldly gain. He writes, “Real poetry is the human sublime, and young people see that truth. The young intuit that there is more to our business on this planet than jobs and the acquisition of the material. They have not yet begun to wall off their souls” (Skinner 152). In other words, poetry is meant to subjectively point to an objective truth, to a shared commonality within humanity, to shed light on the human experience.

While Auden writes in “In memory of W.B. Yeats” that “Poetry makes nothing happen,” he also writes later in the poem, “In the deserts of the heart let the healing fountain start. In the prison of his days teach the free man how to praise” (In Memory). It is with this final view of poetry and its effect on the surrounding world that many aspiring poets cling to. Poetry is the song of the human soul, a beacon light in the prison of our days. While poets may take most of their lives perfecting their crafts, I believe, as I assume all poets do, that the end result is well worth the effort.

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