

Andrew S. Gross

Individualism, W. H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*, and the Group

"Civilization must be saved even if this means sending for the military, as I suppose it does. How dreary [...]. I've tried to be good. I brush my teeth every night. I haven't had sex for a month. I object. I'm a liberal. I want everyone to be happy. I wish I had never been born."

Herod's speech, "The Massacre of the Innocents," in Auden's *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* (Collected 116-17)

W.H. Auden published *The Age of Anxiety* in 1946, the same year he became an American citizen. The verse drama dared to name an age; as a reward for its presumption it was made eponymous, but at the price of being misunderstood. Postwar critics invoked the title as a talisman for individualism. Auden himself was seen as exemplary for rejecting his earlier radicalism in favor of a more liberal - which is to say individualistic - poetics. A few dissenters pointed to other poems, such as the Herod-as-liberal speech cited above, to argue that Auden had veered too far towards conservatism. However, both Auden's supporters and detractors missed his actual and persistent concern: the group.

The Age of Anxiety represents group dynamics in dramatic form. Postwar critics had trouble seeing this because their political bias was simultaneously a genre bias. They opposed collectivism in the name of liberalism and made the lyric paradigmatic for individual expression. More recent criticism reads Auden in terms of identity rather than individualism, but its bias is still lyrical. Individualism and identity-based criticism translate Auden's drama into a series of competing lyrics in the same way they understand community in terms of its antagonisms. Auden's group poetics, consistently repressed, marks the space of what might be called the liberal unconscious - not in a strict psychoanalytic sense, but in

a sense that criticism has been haunted by a vision of community just beyond the horizon of its political commitments. This vision is a literary chimera but the postwar years made it an institutional fact. Universities became safe havens for the ritualized protest Harold Rosenberg called "the tradition of the new," in the book by that title, but also for the kind of international association Auden praised.

1 An Age Takes a Name

1945 brought an end to hostilities but not to wartime anxieties. The battles were over, but the individual seemed to be under siege. This formulation is as vague as it was pervasive. Individualism played a key role in the first act of the cultural Cold War, although there was only a loose consensus about what the term meant. John Dewey argued that it was impossible to consider the individual in isolation from society, and that if anything "society" was the concrete and "individual" the abstract term (2-3). The majority of intellectuals, however, considered Dewey to be a left-over from the radical 1930s; even if they couldn't define "individual" precisely, they were convinced that subordinating individuals to the group led to communism or fascism, considered more or less equivalent under the emerging theory of totalitarianism.

The American left was particularly adamant about individualism because many of its members felt guilty for erring on the side of collectivism in the 1930s. Rosenberg, who was critical of the flood of ex-radical confessions following Whittaker Chambers, nevertheless touched a nerve when he criticized Auden (and Stephen Spender) for the collectivist fallacy of deriving the lyrical "I" from the abstract "we" ("The Heard" 248). Rosenberg undoubtedly had in mind Auden's *Spain*, and probably poems like *Letter to Lord Byron*, which named the age in an ironic way - "Our age is highly educated" - in order to come to "the rather tame conclusion / That no man by himself has life's solution" (Auden, *Collected* 89, 112). Such calls for solidarity did not seem so tame by the end of World War II.

The Age of Anxiety seemed to represent Auden in a new, more mature phase. Jacques Barzun announced the verse drama's relevance with his enthusiastic review in *Harper's* (1947): "It is the

fate of certain poems to become shorthand notes on history" (back pages). Barzun's prediction about the poem's exemplary historical status has not been borne out by scholarship, but *The Age of Anxiety* did become the 1940s token to itself. The title was on everyone's lips when the poem won a Pulitzer Prize in 1948. (Leonard Bernstein, for instance, called his second symphony *The Age of Anxiety*). The age was anxious because individualism was at risk. Auden described anxiety as a general social condition, but this seemed to be society in aggregate, as the sum total of individual symptoms, rather than imagined as a collective "we." Critics were nearly unanimous in acknowledging Auden's anabasis, although what they made of it had more to do with their politics than with Auden's poetry. Randal Jarrell thought Auden had abandoned psychological and social concerns for an empty rhetoric of religious guilt (450). Robert Gorham Davis accused Auden of betraying liberalism and feared his shift to the right was indicative of a general trend (514). The conservative poet Peter Viereck embraced what he saw as Auden's mid-century turn towards religion and conservatism (285). Joseph Warren Beach and Frederick Buell dwelt on Auden's rejection of his earlier ideological commitments, the former skeptically and the latter (twenty years later) enthusiastically. Karl Shapiro argued that Auden's inconsistency was characteristic of "our age of moral expediency and intellectual retreat - the age of Auden" (85).

I'm not convinced Auden changed as much as the critics thought he did. However, he was useful for marking a cultural turning point. The 1950s told a story about the 1930s - Alan Filreis calls it "the 50s 30s" - that represented modernism and radicalism as partners in crime (xi, 27, 40). Avant-gardism was taken to be a telltale sign of communism and / or fascism, and midcentury critics, shocked into moderation by the war, turned to the subjectivist lyric as a tame alternative. The early Auden stood for the collectivist 1930s. The mid-century Auden stood for lyricism and individualism. He was so central to the arguments being articulated on behalf of democratic culture that a number of influential thinkers borrowed the title *The Age of Anxiety* to describe what they saw as the fundamental Cold War plight. Three appropriations of Auden's title - anti-communist, existential, and new critical - sketch out the contours of postwar individualism.

Arthur Schlesinger's foundational statement of Cold War liberalism, *The Vital Center* (1949), begins with a chapter entitled "Poli-

tics in an Age of Anxiety." The age is anxious, Schlesinger argues, because social reform has not kept up with industrial progress: "The liberation of the individual [...] set the Industrial Revolution in motion [...] [but] industrialism drives the free individual to the wall" (4). Corporate capitalism and communism, the two most developed forms of industrial economy, threaten individual freedom. Both are "impersonal" systems, marshaling vast materials and energies, and both are indifferent to the personal relationships that once formed the basis of traditional societies (Schlesinger 5, 8). It is natural for individuals to feel anxious under the conditions of industrial modernity, or guilty for wielding power they cannot control (Schlesinger 6). It is also common for many to seek refuge from their feelings in the false security offered by totalitarianism, in either its communist or fascist versions (Schlesinger 9, 58). Schlesinger argues that "the flight from anxiety [...] at the bottom of the totalitarian appeal" has transformed "the twentieth century, which began as the century of democracy" into "the century of the totalitarian revolt against democracy" (58, 59). Nazism and Communism replace the "anxious man" with the "totalitarian man" who refuses - violently - to face the uncertainties characteristic of the modern condition (Schlesinger 59). Schlesinger's attempt to steer a middle ground between unbridled capitalism and communism, against totalitarianism and for free society, places anxiety at "the vital center" of liberal thought. Anxiety marks the precarious place of the individual in a vast, impersonal system whose velvet glove is the false security of mass conformism and whose iron fist is political repression.

Schlesinger does not mention Auden directly, but a long footnote in a subsequent chapter provides a clue to the role played by *The Age of Anxiety* in the genesis of his argument. The footnote contains an excerpt from Samuel Greenberg's review of Auden's poem for *Masses and Mainstream* (June 1948) and is meant to illustrate the dangers of turning away from anxiety to the false certainties of totalitarianism (Schlesinger 53). Greenberg argues that Auden is an existential, and therefore a bourgeois, poet; he contends that "[t]he City of Man will be built by those who speak with the voice of Maxim Gorky, not with the whine of W.H. Auden" (qtd. in Schlesinger 57n*). Greenberg was wrong about the glorious communist future, but he was right about Auden's appeal to the existentialists. One of the dominant trends in Auden criticism,

from the 1940s through the 1970s was to describe the poet as an existentialist or Christian existentialist (Bahlke 145-46; Blair 50; Buell 67).

Auden himself was ambivalent about existentialism, but the title of *The Age of Anxiety* did provide a stage for the American encounter with the philosophy. In 1947 William Barrett published a "Dialogue on Anxiety" in *Partisan Review*. It begins with an imaginary Heidegger saying to an imaginary Freud: "It is now the Age of Anxiety, I have read somewhere" (151). Barrett uses Heidegger to represent the position that anxiety is a basic human experience. One must face it to be authentic. This is why the Freudian model of working through anxiety is misguided: "Perhaps the more neurotic the individual (more clinically neurotic, that is), the more definite becomes his delusion and its accompanying anxiety, and the less capable he is of that generalized anxiety that I find to be of the human essence" (156).

Barrett gives the final word to Freud, who advocates reducing anxiety by tracing it back to its origins in family life ("Dialogue" 159). His career, however, would move in the other direction, "On the Way Toward Heidegger," as he titled the last chapter of *What Is Existentialism?*, the book that grew out of a series of essays on the topic. Barrett became existentialism's great promoter in the United States, in part due to his growing skepticism that psychoanalysis could adequately account for the anxieties that drove one man to become "a Nazi functionary" and another "a Stalinist official" (Cotkin 144-47; Barrett, *Existentialism* 108-09). Psychoanalysis seemed to trivialize totalitarianism by reducing anxiety to family drama; it was only by exploring the ontological basis of anxiety that one could begin to understand the human urge towards complete control.

Barrett never addressed Heidegger's own links to Nazism, but those who followed him on the way towards existentialism voted with their feet and turned to Sartre and Camus instead. Existentialism in the United States was primarily a "French affair" (Leitch 166). It was seen as a philosophy of resistance, and, through Sartre and Camus, as the philosophy of the French resistance (Rice 201). The French existentialists, however, understood themselves to be individualists first and partisans second; the primary problem was not the occupation but self-deception (Barrett, *Existentialism* 67). Most people denied their own freedom and this made them sus-

ceptible to coercion (Rice 211). Sartre argued that the individual is "condemned to be free," and anguish, in the words of Sartre's translator Hazel Barnes, was "the reflective apprehension of the Self as freedom" (*Being and Nothingness* 799-800; see also Sartre's definition on 51 and Leitch 171). Anxiety, in existential terms, is not an emotional response to an impersonal economic or political system; it is a fundamental expression of the human condition.

Despite its fundamentally apolitical definition of anxiety, the existential emphasis on individual freedom, apprehended through anguish and dramatized through choice, resonated with Cold War fears about communism and the atomic bomb. It also proved useful for defining the difference between totalitarian and free societies, and for articulating the ambivalences of a rapidly professionalizing American intellectual class. Sartre was interested in communism and wrote two books trying to reconcile freedom with dialectical materialism, but most of his American readers argued that communism denied freedom by forcing people to subordinate their desires to those of the class or state (Sartre, *Method* 34). Existentialism, against Sartre's will, became the philosophy of anti-Communism, and anxiety, through figures like Barrett and Schlesinger, the anti-red badge of courage. Indeed, the philosophy provided an entire pallet of related terms (ranging from authenticity to alienation) that proved useful for updating the classic American rhetoric of independence and self-reliance. One defender of the American origins of this line of thinking went so far as to argue that the French existentialists were "parvenus to absurdity" (Rice 219).

Whatever existentialism's provenance, its vocabulary helped bring together the hopes of intellectuals with the disappointments of the downtrodden, as in Norman Mailer's accounts of the white Negro and the existential hipster (273). Anxiety replaced class consciousness as the binding element in the old avant-garde dream of a coalition between intellectuals and outsiders. That this coalition existed only on paper was hardly a deficit in an age worried about the totalitarian potential lurking behind all groups.

Former radicals like Barrett turned to existentialism for their anti-communism. But the philosophy also proved surprisingly compatible with the more conservative assumptions of the new criticism. Sartre and John Crowe Ransom both believed that "the disengagement and alienation of criticism and art were the keys to their cultural centrality" (Carton and Graff 313-14). Ransom

is an interesting figure in the context of my argument because he too appropriated Auden's title without attributing it. In a lecture at the Library of Congress in 1958, "New Poets and Old Muses," Ransom praised contemporary poets for turning away from avant-garde innovation towards traditional meter and metaphors (Ransom, Schwartz, and Wheelock, *American Poetry* 10-14). He likens regular meter to "the reading of an ecclesiastical service by the congregation" (13). Metaphor he describes as a species of anthropomorphism that works by attributing moral order to nature (9- 10). It too is religious. Ransom invokes Auden's title to explain how poetry can serve as the modern proxy to religion. The ritualistic rhythms and moral metaphors "lend us morale; it is an excellent effect in the Age of Anxiety; and so far as we know every age is an age of anxiety. The poets are responsible public functionaries for doing this service [...]" (11).

Ransom saw poets as modern priests, but he did not really believe that every age was anxious. Like Schlesinger and Barrett he diagnosed anxiety as a modern phenomenon, which he likewise linked to industrialism and modern technical developments. He differed from his liberal counterparts, however, in seeing the root of the problem in the modern lack of faith. The origins of this argument go back thirty years earlier to his *God without Thunder*, which attacks science for setting itself up as a new religion. The only alternative to the anxieties produced by science and industrialism is the kind of transcendence enabled by poetry (Ransom, *Thunder* 140, 324, 327-28). This is a post-religious concept of faith. Ransom wants to bring his readers the good word, but the closest he can come to faith is the willful suspension of disbelief. Poets tell stories they know to be false in order to reveal that all stories we tell about the world - including scientific ones - are false. Ransom thinks poets tell better stories than scientists. An anthropomorphic divinity like the Old Testament God is preferable to a chaos of colliding atoms. The problem is that most people lack the aesthetic judgment to recognize the better stories (Ransom, *Thunder* 87).

Ransom was not ignorant of the fact that many people do believe in the God of the Pentateuch. However, he was careful to distinguish his Old Testament aesthetics from Judaism, which he dismisses as "secular and commercialized" (326). The prejudice seems gratuitous but it is not. Ransom projects his suspicion of collectivism onto Judaism as an organized religion. He is neo-ortho-

dox in the same way Eliot is a classical modernist, and in fact "New Poets and Old Muses" invokes Eliot as the alternative to Pound in a way that would become increasingly common in the post-war years. Pound wants to innovate; Eliot wants to preserve, but what he preserves turns out to be more individual than avant-garde innovation, which is just an artistic version of technical innovation anyway (Eliot 14). Ransom's poet-priest and Eliot's classicist are not members of a congregation, and certainly not of a minyan, but lone defenders of a lost cause. They offer a conservative version of individualism, one articulated not through struggles for political or metaphysical independence but in the equally bitter fight to preserve a disappearing tradition. Ransom, like his liberal counterparts, invokes Auden's title in the name of the individual. His religious individualism is compatible with liberal anti-communism in its application, but more than a little anti-Semitic in its origin.

Auden's *Age of Anxiety* was a constant reference in the emerging discourse of postwar individualism. Ransom's conservative individualism had some affinity with reactionary modernism; but what brought together the new criticism, existentialism, and liberal anti-communism was not a common culture but a common principle. Auden's title was appropriated to dramatize the struggle of the individual against totalitarianism, or with his own metaphysical freedom, or towards the personal leap of faith that would give that freedom meaning. Auden's name, however, was hardly ever mentioned. This may have indicated a lingering suspicion that he was not as individualistic as his poetry was made out to be.

2 Auden's Anxiety

The *Age of Anxiety* is a poem full of deliberate anachronisms and incongruities. It was Auden's last verse drama and his final effort to represent group dynamics in dramatic form. Auden had been interested in groups since his involvement with the Oxford Group Movement in the 1930s (Mendelson, Early 24-26). *Paid on Both Sides*, the "obscure charade" that established his reputation when Eliot published it in *Criterion* in 1930, was the first in a series of poetic experiments intended to dramatize the conflict that Auden saw as part and parcel of group cohesiveness (Mendelson, Early 15-16). That verse drama, as Mendelson points out, reports

its off-stage murders in the alliterative style of old English prosody (Early 48). *The Age of Anxiety* is composed almost exclusively in archaic meter: accentual, alliterative, and four-beat. The alliterations are often deliberately bathetic ("Come, peregrine nymph, display your warm / Euphoric flanks in their full glory / Of liberal life; with luscious note / Smoothly sing the softer data [...] [Auden, *Collected* 483]), but the cadences are meant to evoke Anglo-Saxon verse. These were not new devices for Auden; in fact the poem shows a great deal of continuity with his earlier work, especially in its group theme and its archaisms. Most contemporary critics ignored the former, and some saw the latter as a betrayal of Auden's earlier style.

Jarrell, for instance, described the poem's repetitive consonant sounds as a kind of automatic poetry machine (Burt and Brooks-Motl 60-61). His argument is simply the obverse of those made by Barzun, Schlesinger, Barrett, and Ransom. They see Auden as the diagnostician of an anxious age, and Jarrell sees *The Age of Anxiety* as "the best example of the disease that it diagnoses" (Burt and Brooks-Motl 63). Almost all mid-century critics agreed that Auden had changed in a way that was representative (or symptomatic) of the times. The mainstream thought Auden had become more of an individualist; Jarrell thought he had become less of one; but they agreed that individualism was paramount and lyricism its appropriate form.

The Age of Anxiety runs counter to the paradigm; it is not about individuals but their roles in the collective. Indeed, I would agree with Mendelson that - mid-century critics to the contrary - the group remained Auden's great theme throughout his career, although his ideas changed radically about how groups functioned (Early 16-19). In his youth he was fascinated with strong leaders, then with the rigid fairness of communism; later he developed a theory of social love or "agape," which plays an important role in *The Age of Anxiety*, as do his mature speculations about the freedom to be achieved through the structure of the polis and its poetic correlates, genre and form (Auden, *Dyers Hand* 85). The repetitive cadence that Jarrell criticized for sounding automatic was in fact intended to suggest the standardizing effect of social pressure, but also the archaic cultural resources that can "forbid automatic responses, / force us to have second thoughts, / free from the fetters of Self" (qtd. in Mendelson, Early xiv-xv). Groups can be oppres-

sive but they can also be liberating. Auden tends to focus on the way they open up roles, relations, and possibilities to characters who would otherwise be imprisoned in routines, such as the mid-century routine of individual rebellion.

The *Age of Anxiety* is a drama, and it emphasizes its theatricality in the subtitle: "A Baroque Eclogue." Criticizing an eclogue for its artificiality, as Jarrell does, is like impugning nobles in shepherds' garb for only pretending to care about sheep. The prose stage directions and commentary, added by Auden after he completed the verse dialogue, make the significance of acting clear:

[Only animals who are below civilization and the angels who are beyond it can be sincere. Human beings are, necessarily, actors who cannot become something before they have first pretended to be it; and they can be divided, not into the hypocritical and the sincere, but into the sane who know they are acting and the mad who do not. (Collected 518)]

This is a performance theory of identity. Sincerity is self-deception; the theater an allegory for life. Elsewhere in the poem Auden deliberately draws on Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and in this passage on Jacques' famous monologue "all the world's a stage," to stress the scripted nature of all social roles.

The setting is a New York City bar (the low pun on "bar" probably explains one meaning of the "baroque" in the subtitle). The characters who gather there are outcasts, but the poem makes clear that "in war-time [...] everybody is reduced to the anxious status of a shady character or a displaced person [...]" (Auden, *Collected* 449). Anxiety is a personal feeling but it is also the status marker of the social group. Auden would echo this language of general exile in his introduction to the first English language anthology of Kierkegaard's writings. "The ubiquitous violence of the present age," he wrote, has produced "an amorphous, despairing mass of displaced persons and paralyzed Hamlets" (Kierkegaard 16). The *Age of Anxiety* begins with an amorphous mass and dramatizes its transformation into a collective. The poem does not follow Kierkegaard's advice that individuals change themselves first, nor does it follow a representative Hamlet through the pathetic steps of his tragic downfall. Instead it represents Hamlet as a class, bringing together four variations on the type.

Malin, Quant, Emble, and Rosetta are solitary drinkers with vaguely allegorical names. Contemporary critics tend to see them as embodiments of Jungian archetypes who - as archetypes - work

counter to the existential anxieties they articulate. Malin is the intellect of the group, a medical researcher with the Canadian air force who is often described as a stand-in for Auden. Quant is the civilian, an aging widower who is overqualified for his job as a clerk and drowns his cynicism in alcohol. He is said to represent intuition. Emble is a young sailor who is proud of his attractiveness to both sexes but afraid he will amount to nothing and therefore overly-critical of other people's failings. He is considered the personification of sensation. Rosetta is a buyer for a department store who grew up in England and is often taken to represent compassion (Mendelson, Later 247).

To my mind the Jungian coordinates of the characters are of secondary importance. Their coordination is the central theme. The characters begin as interchangeable members of the most loosely defined kind of public - an audience listening to the radio (Auden, *Collected* 454). The "matter and manner" of reporting, and its seamless continuity with the advertising, moves them to common disgust and Malin to buy the first round (Auden, *Collected* 462). Facing each other over drinks, they cease being members of an anonymous public and constitute themselves as a collective; their first common act is a linguistic one, agreeing to talk about something more meaningful than the radio broadcasts.

Very little happens in the drama beyond conversation, and the progression of topics, which are as allegorical as the characters' names, provides what amounts to the dramatic arc. The conversation commences with a collective lament of aging entitled "The Seven Ages of Man" (borrowed from Jacques in *As You Like It*). The fifth age, roughly corresponding to Auden's at the time of writing, epitomizes the characters' existential concerns: Malin talks about success in the eyes of the "Generalized Other"; Emble voices his fear about "Not [being] wanted at all"; Quant worries about becoming a commodity in a consumer society; and Rosetta "refuse[s] to accept / Your plain place, your unprivileged time." (Auden, *Collected* 475). Her protest against the regimentation of the workaday world is the poem's most convincing manifesto for the lyrical individualism that Auden's contemporaries took to be his message. Ordinary people, she says, are "Driven like Danaids by drill sergeants / To ply well-paid repetitive tasks [...] In cosy crowds. Till the caring poet, / Child of his chamber, chooses rightly / His pleased picture of pure solitudes [...]" (Auden, *Collected* 474-76). The crit-

ics who emphasized the poem's individualism (e.g. Schlesinger), or its individualism manqué (Jarrell), were echoing Rosetta's plea for an isolated artist to redeem the lonely crowd.

After the "Seven Ages" runs its course to dust and death, Quant asks Rosetta, as the only woman present, to lead them on a return journey from tomb to womb (see the "Come, peregrine nymph" passage cited above). This is an infantile fantasy, a "regressive road to Grandmother's House," but it enables the kind of group rapport which Auden had been describing in poetry and prose since the 1930s and which he would denote with the term "agape" (Mendelson, Early 164-76).

For it can happen [...] that members of a group [...] establish a rapport in which communication of thoughts and feelings is so accurate and instantaneous, that they appear to function as a single organism.

So it was now as they sought that state of prehistoric happiness which, by human beings, can only be imagined in terms of a landscape bearing a symbolic resemblance to the human body. (Collected 484)

This passage leads into the section entitled "The Seven Stages," in which the characters dream a common dream of exploring, and becoming parts of, an anthropomorphized geography. The temporalized body of "The Seven Ages" and the spatialized body of "The Seven Stages" are complementary aspects of the same "single organism"; this organism exists through the characters and can only be said to extend itself in space and time as a function of their interaction. The body is the personification of their interaction, and they are its members and its explorers. This seems like a strange innovation, but it is actually anachronistic. "The Seven Ages" and "The Seven Stages" constitute an example of dream-psychomachia. Auden had turned to the device before, but it puzzled critics. The linked sequences are the heart of the poem, bringing together the performative aspects of identity with a drama of incorporation and dispersal.

After the characters awaken from their collective dream, which lingers only as a vague memory, Rosetta invites them home, half hoping that the older men will decline. They accept, however, and become spectators to the flirtation that constitutes "The Masque." "In times of war," the stage directions tells us, "even the crudest kind of positive affection between persons seems extraordinarily beautiful, a noble symbol of the peace and forgiveness of which the

whole world stands so desperately in need" (Auden, *Collected* 519). What passes for affection in Rosetta's apartment is the parody of a fertility ritual, which goes unconsummated when Emble passes out drunk in her bed. Alone with her unconscious hero, Rosetta soliloquizes on loneliness, juxtaposing reflections on her inability to fit into a Christian society with what one critic argues may be the first poetic reference to the extermination camps in English (Auden, *Collected* 529; Gottlieb 19). Rosetta is Jewish, living isolated from the Jewish community, and she ends her monologue by invoking a central Jewish prayer, the Shema Yisrael, which apostrophizes that community with its opening "Hear O Israel Earlier Rosetta called for the lyrical protest of lonely poets, but she responds to her own loneliness, and locates it in relation to genocide, by invoking the scattered community of the Diaspora.

The moment of sublime lyrical reflection is reserved for Malin, who seems to both redeem and contradict Rosetta's earlier call for a poet of "pure solitudes" (Auden, *Collected* 475). His final thoughts reveal him to be a Christian struggling with faith:

Yet the noble despair of the poets
Is nothing of the sort: it is silly
To refuse the tasks of time
And, overlooking our lives,
Cry - "Miserable wicked me,
How interesting I am."
We would rather be ruined than changed,
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die. (Auden, *Collected* 533)

Early critics saw Malin's reflections as central to the poem's existential theme. The age is anxious, the poem seems to suggest, but a leap of faith, poetic and religious, can provide meaning (Blair 50; Spears 231; Fuller 200-01; Greenberg 157-58). This reading resonates with Schlesinger's anti-communism, Barrett's existentialism, and Ransom's concept of individualized religion. The drama becomes the frame for a moment of hard-won transcendence that replaces automatism with personal anxiety, and perhaps with faith. Faith is individual but it is supposed to be more than lyrical, defining itself against the solipsism of the poets. However, it expresses itself through an alternate lyricism - that of prayer - which is marked by Malin's shift in diction. The lines ending "poets" and

"moment" distribute their stresses in iambs and anapests and just miss a feminine rhyme. Most of the poem reads like *Beowulf*; but this recalls Hopkins and his struggle for belief.

This reading is in some ways persuasive, although it simply assumes that Malin's sprung rhythm reflections differ from the self-absorbed poetry he criticizes. It also soft pedals Auden's oft-repeated reservations about existentialism's suspiciously articulate despair. In fact, in a poem read at Harvard the same year he published *The Age of Anxiety*, Auden echoes Malin's lines to criticize not the poets but the existentialists who are in despair "yet go on writing" (Collected 338). Malin's confession might be little more than a religious variation on the existential theme: 'Miserable, wicked me, how unregenerate I am.'

The Christian-existential reading also has some uncomfortable political implications. It suggests that only Malin's personal struggle with Christianity can redeem Rosetta's Jewish exile. Auden's introduction to Kierkegaard does suggest a parallel between crucifixion in the ancient world and genocide in the twentieth century, turning Jews into the types of Christ and Cavalry into the antitype of Auschwitz {Kierkegaard 12-13, 16}. Does this hold true for the poem as well? The crux of Malin's soliloquy is the "cross of the moment." Is Rosetta, in her lyrical expression of Jewish suffering, stuck in a precarious collectivism that only Malin's personal appeal to the universal can resolve? More pointedly: Is Malin's Christian leap of faith the answer to Rosetta's Jewishness in the same way Ransom's Pentateuch poetry is the answer to Judaism?

Contemporary critics do not think so (Mendelson, Later 259). Anxiety has become less individual and more communal, less a symptom of 'the human condition' and more the expression of concrete political repression. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb's *Regions of Sorrow* (2003), typical of the newer trend, links Auden's anxiety (and Arendt's) not to personal alienation, or the pathos of belief, but to the collective experience of the Holocaust (31-32). Poetry speaks for the victims of modern atrocity; it does not afford personal transcendence or invoke the divine but "stutters" displacement (128) from "holes of oblivion" (67). Gottlieb's reading places Rosetta's Jewishness at the center of the poem (122), and concentration camps at the center of modern experience (21). The poem is not a prayer in any doctrinal sense, but it expresses an "anxious hope" for a weak messianism that would offer a literary space, and

a voice, for the victims and witnesses of genocide (Gottlieb 22, 135). This reading turns Auden back into a social poet whose own exile enables him to formulate an elegy for the dispossessed. The Christian-existential reading of Auden links anxiety to personal belief; Gottlieb attempts to re-territorialize anxiety as a post-national space of trauma, memory, and diasporic identity (66).

I think both interpretations - the Christian existential and the traumatic - are wrong, but juxtaposing them reveals how criticism has shifted its emphasis from individualism to identity over the past fifty years. Anxiety used to be a marker of individuality; now it is taken to express the experiences of people denied individual rights, including - at its most extreme - the right to exist. Individualism is a form of humanism that is at least potentially pre-national; being true to oneself is more important than being true to one's country. Identity is post-humanist and post-national, testifying to the experiences of those groups denied a place in the nation-state for reasons of race, gender, ethnicity, or creed. Identity was widely hailed as the radical corrective to liberal individualism, which can be blind to the systematic denigration of minority groups. A few dissenters have begun to argue that if identity politics is post-liberal, its agenda is actually a conservative one, gesturing towards multiculturalism in the same way multinational corporations sponsor heritage festivals (Michaels 24).

Perhaps the rise of identity over individualism marked a shift in literary politics. However, it did not challenge the reigning conception of what makes literature political. Both individualism and identity are committed to a lyrical conception of voice, understood to be the authentic expression of an individual or group. Kenneth Burke's analysis of the lyrical bias of individualism is helpful here, and it illustrates the difference between lyrical models of individuality and identity on the one hand and Auden's dramatic rendition of community on the other. Individualism, according to Burke, adheres to a romantic script of rebellion, but it is so invested in its own performance that it tends to forget it is playing a role. Similarly, the lyric believes in the originality of its own voice, which actually emerges in relation to the multitude of voices that make up the literary tradition. Burke argues that voice is dialogic, lyricism a species of "monodrama," and individuality part of the larger theater of social roles (306-07). In other words, individualism is identity that ignores itself as such, if identity is defined as a performance that situates itself in relation to a group (Burke 306, 310-11).

Burke is primarily interested in corporate identities that reinforce the myth of individual self-determination by aligning themselves with ruling interests. Criticism would take a different turn, pursuing identity politics in the name of those minority groups systematically denied individual rights. This approach would seem to be closer to Auden's concerns, but it has led to a surprising theoretical chiasmus. The marginal group has taken on the familiar role of the rebellious outsider, expressing its experiences - and its anxieties - through the more broadly defined subjectivity of ethnic lyricism (Gross). The 'fifties responded to the 'thirties by opposing individualism to collectivism. More recent criticism treats the collective - and especially the disempowered collective - as if it were a composite individual, i.e. a coherent locus of experience and a unified voice.

Mid-century criticism made Malin a figure of individualism; recent critics make Rosetta a figure of identity. Both reveal their lyrical bias by reducing the *dramatis personae* to a roster of competing voices. But does Auden the dramatist give us any reason to believe that he favors Malin over Rosetta or vice versa? *The Age of Anxiety* is not a song contest but an eclogue; it embodies the broader drama of social relations in its form.

It also adapts formal devices, and the verse drama's assessment of wartime society has much to do with Auden's innovations (or anachronisms). The most obvious of these is the setting. The eclogue does not follow its characters through arcadia; it incorporates them into a universal body and then turns them loose in a dreamscape reminiscent of the human anatomy. The temporalization and spatialization of what the characters have in common - a body politic - allows for the kind of telescopic satire invented by Swift but not unknown to modernists; as the mock-heroic giant of Paterson shows (Auden, *Forwards* 207). It also invites the allegorizing characteristic of medieval morality plays. "The Seven Ages" is a secular version of psychomachia, with individual characters personifying chronological periods rather than virtues and vices. "The Seven Stages" is psychomachia in reverse, transforming the personifications back into actors by turning them loose in the allegorical topos that in a sense generates their roles. This is allegory turned into itself, personification transformed into place, and it suggests the metafictional device of characters talking back to their authors. It also suggests a complicated form of metalepsis, in which the dramatic form, meant to embody social structure, gener-

ates a series of related figures that represent their own generating matrix. The effect is abstract, but the impulse is historicist. Elsewhere Auden complained that "The allegorical morality plays are concerned with history, but only with subjective history; the social- historical setting of any particular man is deliberately excluded" (*Dyer's Hand* 181). The social-historical setting of this poem is the mid-century group, which emerges as a symptom of but also an alternative to displacement.

Can a society of displaced persons form a group? Displacement renders individualism, with its stark division between self and other, obsolete. As Auden put it in 1948: "The division of which we are aware is not between Reason and Imagination but between good and evil will, not between objectivity and subjectivity but between the integration of thought and feeling and their dissociation, not between the individual and the masses but between the social person and the impersonal state" ("*Yeats*" 110). This argument is constructed around a modernist commonplace ('dissociation of sensibility'), and Auden, like many modernists, is nostalgic for a unified community that would encourage more integrated ways of thinking and feeling. He does not, however, subscribe to the conservative nostalgia for a prelapsarian collective, nor does he pursue the liberal utopia of confederated individualism. Rather, Auden is a proponent of the more ad hoc solution of neighborliness. Mendelson says that *The Age of Anxiety* began as an exploration of isolating guilt but, taking hold of the reins, became an expression of "an almost instinctive wish for a shared community we can imagine but never achieve" (Later 242). Adam Gopnik argues that Auden "travels the cosmos to come back to the dinner table" (xiv).

The Age of Anxiety is not as comfy as a dinner party, and the characters do go their separate ways. However, they establish common ground by performing as an ensemble, although those performances are based - necessarily - on misrecognitions. Malin's leap of faith is not a corrective to Rosetta's Jewish tribalism, nor is Rosetta's identity an alternative to Malin's Christian individualism. In fact, their religious gestures imply each other and overlap: both invoke God as a witness to community, and both privilege belonging over personal faith. Rosetta's final lines, as I have already pointed out, invoke the scattered community of the *Shema Yisrael*. The passage that is consistently (mis-)read as Malin's monologue of redemption proceeds from the diatribe against poetic solipsism

("the cross of the moment") to a general critique of religious narcissism: "Yet the grossest of our dreams is / No worse than our worship which for the most part / Is so much galimatias to get out of / Knowing our neighbor, all the needs and conceits of / The poor muddled maddened mundane animal / Who is hostess to us all [...]" (Auden, *Collected* 534).

Malin's neighborliness is not interchangeable with Rosetta's Diaspora. In fact, his invocation of the "hostess to us all" just misses Rosetta, who condescended - but only for a short time - to play "Momma Earth" for her male guests (Auden, *Collected* 528-29). Also, while he invokes a redeemer to speak for human suffering, he fails to heed Rosetta's cry (Auden, *Collected* 535). Nevertheless, both figures invoke a He to authorize community, and those communities - for all their divergent articulations - intersect. Given the abrupt emergence of He in both of their soliloquies - *Deus ex machina* - it would be reasonable to interpret the capitalized pronoun as one in a series of roles assigned to the shifting psyche behind the psychomachia. The pronoun has divergent meanings, but it marks the location of their togetherness. Ultimately no one speaks for anyone else, but they all speak in the name of the collective, which they refer to in analogous ways.

Arendt argues that theater is the most political genre because it is the literary form of the public sphere (186-88). Concepts of the divine - from Platonism through Christianity to the Invisible Hand - she understands as attempts to explain social drama by modeling a creator after the actors. In her view it is not God but the public sphere that makes social action possible (Arendt 185). Auden brings the creator back into the public sphere as *topos*. What the characters invoke to authorize their lyricism is the drama they have in common. The politics of the drama can be summed up in a word: inclusion. We owe it to Auden to take the modesty of this proposal seriously, if only because it motivates such a complicated poetics. His assessment of displacement does not lead him to side with individuals or identify with a specific group of outsiders. He is a partisan of the social drama that constantly redefines its boundaries and its membership, drawing those who are excluded into a dialogue that continually redefines the center. Auden described his

ideal in a 1951 interview as a "beneficent anationality" that reflects "a social longing, a desire to join with other men to form associations" (Griffin 578). One place this institutional "anationality" would be realized - as the future Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets perhaps realized - was the academy.

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