W. H. AUDEN'S "ANOTHER TIME"

by Joost Daalder

The title-poem of Auden's volume Another Time (New York, 1940) has received very little critical attention, and the few comments there are are unfortunately not particularly helpful. Very recently, John Fuller, on p. 176 of A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden (London, 1970), wrote: "Those who live in the past, respecting the established forms which are in fact breaking up around them, are living a lie; though it is not ‘as if they were wrong / In no more wishing to belong’." The words I have italicized would indicate that Auden concedes that although we should not live in the past, we are not wrong in no more wanting to belong to the present. In this interpretation, Auden modifies his main argument in the poem to the extent of virtually contradicting it.

"Another time has other lives to live" (stanza 5) summarizes a natural as well as a moral law. The moral law follows from the natural law. The "lie" against natural truth leads to the inevitable disasters of grief, loneliness, and death, and if we can judge it dispassionately we do not believe or like it. But Auden emphasizes that the untruth is foolish because we cannot be lost in history (stanza 2).

The fact is that "it is to-day in which we live" (stanza 1); conscious of time, unlike the flowers that cannot measure it or the beasts (as we see animals) that are not burdened with memory because the "past" is no existing concept to them, we like to forget that we are as much engulfed in time's inexorable sweep as they. But of course we are wrong. Our conscious, religious decision should be "I Am," just as the flowers and beasts unconsciously are. Stanza 5 shows the consequences of the false creed "Not Now."

The "many" who do not have faith in an unconscious living in the present, therefore morally shunning the fact of their being part of it, live in the past when they insist on a ceremoniousness more striking than the patriotism it is meant to display ("a proper flag in a proper place"). They are "ancestors": belong to the past, are like old men, and like standard-bearers. The fact that they "stump upstairs" not only suggests their childish anger, but also a refusal to face up to the facts of life. Their fondness of possession, individual ("Mine and His") or communal ("Ours and Theirs"), is a substitute religion, as the capitals show.
These people unwisely think they can "own" time also. In the past, a period which now seems to them "gifted with possession" (stanza 4), they "will"-ed time to become different, just as, in reverse, they do now. Having betrayed their former ideals, held when they no longer wished to belong to their time (now the past), they think, in their romantic nostalgia, that they were wrong in what they wanted yesterday. But, of course, they were right; as Auden says, they act as if they were not.

So Auden does partly seem to contradict himself. However, the contradiction is not that which Mr. Fuller sees: at no stage is Auden advocating an appreciation of any time other than that of the poem's composition.

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