

POLITICAL POETRY AND THE SHAPING OF AUDEN'S CANON

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From deathbed commands to burn their manuscripts to the reclusive refusal to publish at all, authors have always had conflicted relationships with their work. Perhaps most intriguing, though, is W.H. Auden, who sought not only to publish his poems but to control them. Toward the end of his life, Auden constantly reconsidered his poems in an attempt to impose order and decide for himself which pieces would appear in his ultimate canon. While working on his *Collected Poems* later in life, Auden radically rewrote and even threw away some of his best-known poems, arguing that they were boring and dishonest. As a highly intellectual and methodical poet, Auden clearly thought through each of these exclusions, even revealing his rationale, yet this thought process cannot defuse the controversy of removing published work from the public sphere.

In his early years as a poet, Auden experimented with different political stances and poetic styles—something expected of developing writers. He later revolted against these political agendas, however, attempting to erase such poems from his past and, therefore, his future legacy. According to Auden's hand-picked literary executor, Edward Mendelson, in his essay "Revision and Power: The Example of W. H. Auden," Auden deemed these poems deeply revolting and revised an estimated three quarters of his canon. The current events and the needs of the political climate in which he wrote clearly influenced Auden, but he later expressed anxiety that such politically infused poems did not represent his own voice.

In addition, Auden theorized that the skills required to craft works of art are the same skills that pose danger in politics, leading to campaigns for beautification and sterilization. Thus, Auden felt compelled to revise his political poetry. In "Squares and Oblongs," his essay on revisionism, Auden writes that the "Orpheus who moved stones is the archetype, not of the poet, but of Goebbels," and poets should refrain from exercising control over their readers (180). This explains why he refused to include "Spain" and "September 1, 1939," two of his most famous poems, in his 1965 publication, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*. According to Mendelson in his aforementioned essay, Auden "did not drop these poems because he disagreed with their politics . . . but because he distrusted their power to convince his readers that he and they were on the right side in the great struggles of the age" (105). He did not want his poems to be "deceptive" or "flattering" and thus refused to include "September 1, 1939" precisely because he refused to leave open the possibility that his poems would be misused as propaganda (106). Thus, he preferred to destroy some of his most highly regarded poems rather than leave them to misinterpretation.

This problem of misinterpretation and misuse becomes especially interesting in light of the critical theories of Roland Barthes. In the 1960s and 70s, literary criticism underwent a radical transformation; until then, writing had been viewed as the output of a definite author, who shaped the text with his personal experiences and theories; however, this perspective disappeared with the so-called “Death of the Author,” Barthes’ essay on how the reader’s interpretation of a text matters most. In order to establish this reader, however, Barthes proclaims that the author must die and explains that society should not aggrandize the importance of the author because “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified [meaning], to close the writing” (147). In Barthes’ theories, the author and the work come into being together, and the author does not impose any secret meaning or intent on his text; rather, all meaning lies within the text itself, and “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (148). Barthes might argue that Auden’s wishes should stay disconnected from his poetry, and that the ultimate meaning of poems like “September 1, 1939” should be derived from their own content. The reader, whose birth Barthes calls for, presents his own troubles, however, since he too may impose questionable theories on the text.

Barthes seems to argue that a text stands alone, rendering all interpretations valid, yet anyone who has been through a high school English class knows that this cannot possibly be true. For instance, after reading Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, a student could argue that Dimmesdale really loves Hester’s daughter, Pearl, or that the scarlet letter itself is a gang sign, or any other number of absurdities. The student could probably even find a few quotations that, taken out of context, support his ridiculous theory. Ultimately, though, any astute reader knows that these interpretations are not and cannot ever be valid. While Auden probably was not thinking about misinterpretations of *The Scarlet Letter*, his fears followed a similar pattern. He refused to include “September 1, 1939” because he feared that politicians would misinterpret it as glorifying their personal goals and use it for propaganda. In fact, as Mendelson notes, President Lyndon B. Johnson used the poem in a 1964 campaign speech, and, in the 1980s, President George H.W. Bush adapted a few lines to one of his “most deceptive speeches” (110). Thus, with the death of the author, Barthes forgets that there remains the equally frustrating problem of the birth of the reader. Without a definite author who can reshape his work, misuse and misinterpretation become an imminent threat.

Yet, poetry is not a commodity to be owned, and, thus, author and owner can never exist together either. According to Barthes, the idea of the author and of writing as ownership emerged after the humanist movement of the Renaissance, yet Barthes urges critics to abandon these notions and view writing as an event that takes place in a “negative where all identity is lost” (142), so that it does not matter who specifically

is speaking. Since a definite distance emerges between text and writer, readers need not seek a final, attempted theme or goal in a work.

In his 1970 essay “What Is an Author?,” Michel Foucault responds to Barthes’ theories and poses his own questions about the idea of the author. Foucault challenges Barthes: “It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared” (105). He demonstrates the importance of the author’s name, which changes in accordance with his work; to explain this, Foucault argues that Shakespeare’s name would take on completely different connotations if historians discovered that he wrote Bacon’s scientific works in addition to his plays and poems. Foucault elaborates, “The author function is therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society” (108). Thus, the public’s conception of an author depends on the writings of his that they read. Foucault then addresses the difficulty in defining an author’s “work.” Barthes calls for the death of the author in order to transfer all meaning to the work itself, but Foucault complicates the issue, wondering how to define an author’s “work” and asking “What if, within a workbook filled with aphorisms, one finds a reference, the notation of a meeting or of an address, or a laundry list: Is it a work, or not. . . . How can one define a work amid the millions of traces left by someone after his death?” (103-4). This raises fascinating concerns about Auden’s canon, since, even though he has been dead for thirty-six years, no *Complete Poems* exists—only Auden’s personally arranged *Collected Poems* and the more recent *Selected Poems*.

In the new *Selected Poems*—released for Auden’s would-be centennial last year—Mendelson included many of the poems that Auden tried to erase. Mendelson has also edited Auden’s *Collected Poems*, the controversial publication from which Auden excluded “Spain” and “September 1, 1939.” In his introduction to *Selected Poems*, Mendelson explains:

The present selection . . . [reprints] the texts of Auden’s early editions and [includes] poems that he later rejected. A historical edition of this kind, one that reflects the author’s work as it first appeared in public rather than his final version of it, is not intended as an argument that Auden’s revisions or rejections were arbitrary or misguided; he had strong literary and ethical motives for choosing them. (xv)

Thus, it seems that Auden failed in his quest to permanently reshape his body of work. Currently, his fans and readers may understand his wishes to erase, but they will probably read “September 1, 1939” and “Spain” regardless. If Auden’s very name and reputation depend on the extent of his work, then he would seem to deserve the power that he tries to exert over his poetry. Foucault might argue that “Since literary anonymity is not tolerable,” Barthes’ ideas on the tyranny of the author are invalid, and Auden should be able to claim his own work (109). Foucault seems to support

this notion when he includes St. Jerome's criteria for imposing unity on a number of different works; however, Foucault ultimately concludes his essay by asking "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (120). But if it does not matter who is speaking, it certainly matters that someone is speaking and, consequently, poetry requires a blend between the critical theories of Barthes and Foucault. As Barthes observes, the author should remain distanced from the work, but, as in Foucault, instead of dying completely, the author should remain as a "function." As the coldness of the term suggests, however, the author function should not rely on any personal or autobiographical characteristics of the author; rather, it should depend on the complex division between author and text. Thus, Auden's motivations become irrelevant, but his insistence on revision serves to deepen the tension between crafter and craft. Perhaps William Butler Yeats, an important influence on Auden's work, best captures this relationship when he asks, "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" ("Among School Children," line 64).

Poet and poems clearly remain divided somehow, though. Whereas Auden's *Collected Poems* appeared exactly as he wished during his lifetime, the current status of his canon rests in the hands of his literary executor, who has restored some of Auden's prized poems now that he is dead. Yet, this raises the question of completeness, because exclusion seems to suggest a body of work that has not yet obtained its final shape. One must wonder which is the more complete: Auden's certified *Collected Poems* or the newly expanded *Selected Poems*. This distinction re-engages Barthes and Foucault, because Auden's revisionism surpassed the simple editing of words and line breaks and drastically altered the presentation of his theories to the world.

Barthes and Foucault address the question of whether the text exists as a separate entity from its author and, if so, whether Auden's re-ordering and discarding constitute valid processes. In "What Is an Author?," Foucault challenges the notion of possession, questioning the distinction between author and owner. In this essay, Foucault also details that "Once a system of ownership for texts came into being . . . the possibility of transgression attached to the act of writing took on, more and more, the form of an imperative peculiar to literature . . . thereby restoring danger to a writing which now guaranteed the benefits of ownership" (108-9). As Foucault suggests, the sole ownership of a piece of writing by its writer poses a danger; in Auden's case this danger is evident in the suppression of key poems. If Auden owns his poems, then he possesses the ability to decide when his canon is complete—or, more accurately, what constitutes his complete canon. Adding another level to the question of ownership, however, Barthes cites Stéphane Mallarmé, who, he claims, foresaw "the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner" (143). Thus, Barthes might argue that the poems themselves stand alone, and their language fulfills their purpose, which Auden does not own and cannot alter.

Auden tried to change the intent—or possible uses—of poems such as "September 1, 1939" when he tried to radically change his canon by removing already-published

poems from the public sphere. Barthes and Foucault address this idea of text existing in a space as well. In “The Death of the Author,” Barthes explains that “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative of all identity is lost” (142). For Barthes, the stanza is a room where the door is locked, and as soon as writing begins, a disconnect emerges between poet and poem. Although Barthes only speaks of an individual reader, this disconnect would logically increase when a text enters the public sphere (i.e., through publication). Once a poem has reached the public, can it be retracted? It certainly cannot be forgotten. In his introduction to Auden’s *Selected Poems*, Mendelson himself suggests a duality:

Probably the best way to experience Auden’s work is to read the early versions first for their greater immediate impact, and the revised versions afterward for their greater subtlety and depth. For most readers this book [*Selected Poems*] will be a First Auden, and the edition of his “Collected Poems” that was published posthumously according to his final intentions may be recommended as a Second. (xv)

Even though the *Collected* appeared far earlier than the *Selected*, Mendelson labels it “a Second.” This would seem to suggest that Auden becomes two authors: the poet who produced the political works of the *Selected* and the poet who compiled the more thematically unified *Collected*. Interestingly, Foucault defines the author as “a particular source of expression that, in more or less completed forms, is manifested equally well, and with similar validity, in works, sketches, letters, fragments, and so on” (111). Since Auden appears very differently in the two editions of his poetry, he seems to obtain two separate but related canons and, therefore, legacies. Foucault goes even further, claiming that the author function “does not refer purely and simply to a real individual, since it can give rise simultaneously to several selves” (113). Thus, the texts can stand without the true identity of the author who wrote them, and instead each can represent a new “self” for the author function. With the emergence of these selves, however, Foucault seems to represent an occurrence more akin to a birth than a death. Yet, even in this new birth of selves, Barthes’ “death” remains as well, because the texts alone represent these identities, allowing for the existence of multiple Audens. There is, of course, Auden the man, who dies within the poems, which themselves represent the Auden of the *Collected* and the Auden of the *Selected*—two very different authors. Thus, Auden’s exclusions failed to alter his canon; they merely forged a new body of work, which remains in conversation with his older poems.

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